

Chapter Four

Night or day. Day or night. She couldn't discern. Still she worked against the rope securing her to the steel chair. Up one inch. Down one inch. Up. Down. Over and over she wiggled her wrists as her palms dampened from her blood.

Keys jingled. Joan flung her head toward the clinking and strained to pinpoint its precise location.

Stay calm. Breathe slowly. Keep focused.

But the blood pounded in her ears and no matter how she fought it, her breathing resounded through the darkness like rapid panting. A horrible thought bombarded. In defiance she shook it off. She hadn't come here to die.

Dear God help me overcome.

Light crept in as a figure entered the space. Joan squinted against the sudden brightness, but gathered details of the dank room: bare concrete floor, exposed water pipes connected from floor to ceiling, massive cement slabs that flowed long and into the dark.

The silhouette shut the door. Again, utter darkness. Joan blinked and minuscule stars flickered behind her lids. Approaching footsteps.

Be strong, Joan. To conquer evil you must remain resilient.

The figure's strides were calculated and precise. One. Two. Three. Straight forward. She wondered how long ago they had memorized the room?

Joan inhaled until her shirt felt tight across her chest. To succumb to the dread was lethal.

Flash!

The light beam felt like an explosion behind her eyes. She flinched and swung away.

“I always loved your Christmas ham,” Matthias said. “Remember how we’d traipse door-to-door bestowing goodies to those less fortunate?”

She faced him. “I have to use the bathroom.”

He smiled. “So?”

“You can’t expect me to use the bathroom in this condition.” Joan squirmed against the constriction.

He lowered the beam and circled behind her.

“Looks like you’ve kept yourself entertained.”

If only the chair weren’t bolted to the floor. Joan would have tucked her hips, raised up and used it to pummel him into the nearest wall.

“I’ll untie the rope from your wrists.” He stroked her hair. “But your ankles remain tied.”

She clamped down on her jaw. A tremor rumbled in her chest that threatened to rupture her resolve.

Dear God help me make it through this.

Cold metal touched her cheek. Matthias leaned to her ear and whispered, “Naturally, it goes without saying that if you try anything, you’ll be dead before your body hits the ground.”

He slit the cord and carried her like a sack over his shoulder. The bouncing flashlight allowed her to count the steps from the chair to the door. She’d need that

knowledge when he roped her back to the chair, and left her alone, submerged into darkness again.

He deposited her upright in a shadowy corridor facing a blank door. It was infuriating not to glance around, but she knew that would only lead to painful consequences. He kicked the door open. The room had undressed drywall, cement flooring, no windows, and a solitary commode. He flipped on the light and tucked the knife into his front pocket. Joan's mind raced with possibility. All she needed was just...

Matthias withdrew a revolver from his rear pocket and used it to wave her into the stark area. "Thirty seconds."

Joan hopped in, shut the door, and used the facilities. Her heart pounded at the possibility of failing. Too much was at stake – lives of those she loved. Suddenly, the tears burned at edges of her eyes. No! She swiped at them. They were counting on her, praying for her to remain strong. She would cry when they were all safe and sound and within her embrace.

"Twenty!" Kingston shouted.

The combination of bloody palms and the stiff binding around her ankles hindered the pruning shear's release.

"Fifteen!"

The clippers gave a few inches and stalled.

"God, please. *Please*," Joan whispered. She gripped the curved handle and pulled, feeling her blood pressure surge.

"Ten, nine, eight..."

The shears released and she swiftly frayed a few fibers. Then, she deftly tucked

them into her rear waistband.

Thank you, God!

“...seven, six, five...”

She hopped to the door.

“...four, three, two...”

Joan flung it open. “Finished.”

He studied her. “You look flushed.”

She held out her wrists for him to rebind. He gripped them and shoved her against the corridor wall. “You’re playing games with me!”

“No – ”

Matthias thrust his arm against her throat, crushing her larynx. Then, he placed the gun beneath her chin. “Take off your clothes.”

Outside the hospital elevator doors Northern said to Blake, “Let’s make a detour.”

“Where?” Blake asked.

“The E.R.”

They stepped inside the empty carriage. Blake pressed the floor button. A plastic rendition of Titanic’s love theme lulled them through the descent. Northern was sure Celine Dion would have been mortified.

Northern asked his partner, “You think they knew they were going to die?”

“Who?”

“The Titanic passengers.”

“Nobody wants to die on vacation. It kinda sours the memories.”

“Death by the force of the sea.”

“According to the movie, it was death by greed and pride.”

“That’s what I said.”

The men exited the elevator and introduced themselves to ER personnel by flashing badges. They strolled down the hall toward Walker’s room.

“If all is right, we just might scare the jeepers out of Walker,” Blake said.

“Jeepers?”

“I’m broadening my vocabulary.”

Northern asked, “Think Miss DeLauer will keep her name?”

“It ain’t as popular as it once was. Listen, with so many women clamoring after Powers, if I were her, I’d tattoo it on my forehead.”

“Since you’re in this broadening mode, you should read some of her articles.”

“I don’t read.”

“She inspires me to visit foreign lands to assist those less fortunate.”

“We already do that right here in the good ole USA.”

Northern grunted. “She’ll probably hyphenate it.”

“I just hope no idiot conjures up some brainless pet name. You know, where they combine the names of the couple. Like Benifer or Brangelina.”

They stopped outside of Room 9. “How ‘bout Benjiana?”

“You just proved my point.”

Northern and Blake flashed badges again to the agents guarding the door. Blake

said, "You taking the lead?"

Northern shrugged. "You think you got something?"

"A hunch."

Northern extended his hand to the door and they entered the hospital room.

"What happened, Walker?" Blake asked.

James Walker sat sideways on the bed, hulking legs dangling off the sides. "Agent Blake, I don't understand. I explained what I could remember back at Mr. Powers's house."

"Walk us through it again." Blake moved to the bodyguard's side. Northern hung back and looked at Walker's heavily bandaged chest. Although it was shrouded thickly, a canvas of livid bruising was still evident above the binding.

Blake asked, "How'd you end up on the floor?"

Walker grimaced and inhaled slowly. "I don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

"When you found me, all I remember is feeling like someone had poured sand down my throat and clanged my head against a curb."

"You know this because this has happened to you previously?"

"Sir?"

"How could you possibly know what any of that felt like unless you've experienced it?"

Walker stared at him for a moment. "The day I accepted this detail, and Bruce Carter discovered you had offered to work on Juliana's case, he told me you only joke when the situation is dire. It's your way to keep temperaments calm."

Walker tried to stand and immediately collapsed. Due to the bodyguard's muscular bulk, both agents assisted him back on the bed. Walker's pallor had altered to that of fresh concrete.

Northern moved forward and tapped the young man's right shoulder. "Look at me."

Walker complied. He leaned in and examined Walker's pupils. "Easy, man. From the looks of your eyes and stellar lack of coordination, someone slipped you a mickey."

Blake continued, "So, Miss DeLauer was sick in bed this morning?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Powers had to rush her to the doctor before he left for the studio."

"Any way she went out to run errands without you?"

"No, sir. Way too weak. And Mr. Powers insisted I be with her."

"So you've said."

Northern interjected, "What time did Mr. Powers leave for the studio?"

"Around seven-thirty. Usually he leaves earlier, but due to Juliana's illness and the fact that Bruce was due to meet him, but never showed delayed his departure."

"Go on, son."

"I checked on Juliana then stationed myself in the office beside the guest room in case she needed me. I didn't want her to have to call for me more than once."

"How many times did you help her to the bathroom?"

"Twice."

"Then?"

James stared at his bare feet, his expression growing more somber. "That's it. Then, I was being roused by you."

Blake and Northern eyed the bodyguard as he attempted to bridle his emotions.

Walker asked. "How bad is Mr. Powers injured?"

Blake barked. "Bad enough to warrant surgery." Then he asked, "Grace Connors and Jessica Kimura. Remember them?"

"Yes, sir. Connors was Mr. Powers's manager. Kimura, his personal assistant."

Walker frowned. "Why?"

"Miss DeLauer made it very clear to all in civil authority that the arrests were too neat. As if she herself couldn't have written a tighter ending."

Walker rubbed his jaw. "She said it was just too neat."

Blake narrowed his eyes. "I see they've cleaned the blood off your hands."

Walker looked down at his fingers and sighed. "I would give anything to remember what happened."

Northern saw some flecks of blood still stained his jeans and waistband.

Blake rubbed the back of his neck. "So let me get this straight: You're discovered unconscious in Powers's foyer by us with blood covering your hands, belt and boots with a few cracked ribs. Miss DeLauer is nowhere in sight. Yet, you have no recall as to what occurred."

"No, sir." Walker said.

Northern observed his partner place his lanky hands on his hips. "You and Miss DeLauer grew quite close during your stretch in the heartland."

"What are you suggesting, sir?"

Northern studied Blake. What Northern thought his partner "hunched" was settling in his brain. He and his partner had witnessed so much human depravity, little

caught them by surprise. “You two were shuttled off to an undisclosed location per Mr. Powers’s request. Almost three months of nothing but cornfields, four walls, and long nights. Things happen.”

“With all due respect, sir, I do not appreciate what you’re implying.” Walker snarled. “She’s out there, somewhere, injured and bleeding because I didn’t do my job.”

Northern watched as Walker winced and caressed his side. “Easy.” Northern said and sat on the bed’s edge.

It took the young man a few moments to calm. Then he said, “Sir, since I’m under investigation, would you please relay my concern to the families?”

“Certainly, son.” Northern patted Walker’s shin. “You take it easy. We’ll be back to check on you later.”

Blake strode through the door without a backward glance. Once Northern joined him in the hall, they walked through the ER and exited the building. The sky was dense with heavy cloud, but no rain.

Northern smirked, as they walked across the parking lot. “You play ‘bad cop’ pretty well for such a pious man. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“It’s never effortless. And, I’ve explained to you, I’m not pious. I’m spiritual.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Northern grunted. This hadn’t been the first time they’d had this discussion and Northern had no desire to indulge him at the moment.

Gratefully, his partner ignored the slight and asked, “Did you notice that he consistently used her first name?”

“Every time he said it, this haze came over him.”

They walked to the non-descript sedan. Blake unlocked the doors and they

climbed inside the muggy cabin.

As they tugged on seat belts, Northern said, “Tell me if we’re on the same page? Scenario one: DeLauer and Walker had grown exceptionally friendly during their stint in the West. During those long, isolated nights, bodyguard and fiancée had scripted their future sans Powers.”

“Potentially.”

“Scenario two: Walker, stung by DeLauer’s outright refusal, his depraved fantasy became overpowering. He partners with Matthias to imprison her.”

Blake backed out of the spot and exited the lot. “Having watched his response to my grilling, I’m not convinced Walker would ever hurt her.”

“Scenario three: Powers staged his own mauling and deliberate kidnapping of his fiancée.”

Blake shook his head. “Least likely. Powers isn’t in need of publicity and his adoration of DeLauer seems palatable.”

He tapped his fingers on his thigh. They had been partners long enough for him to realize Blake was undoubtedly for the kidnapping scenario. Northern agreed. He also agreed that Matthias was involved. He just wasn’t convinced that Matthias had worked alone. Kimura and Connors were mere pawns in the scheme.

Northern chewed on his lip. “The psycho has an insider that Ben Powers trusts without reproach. Suspect one: James Walker has a thing for Miss DeLauer. She accepts his love or rejects it.”

“Which takes her off the scene either way.”

“Suspect two: Bruce Carter. Hasn’t been seen or heard from since the attack.”

“Whose old Bureau partner and best friend, Gary, was executed protecting Miss DeLauer.”

“So, partner, who’s your pick? And, this one doesn’t require prayer. Just good old-fashioned deduction.”

They pulled up to a red light. Blake turned to him and did that freaky thing with his eyes. Even in dim light they seemed to pierce.

“That’s exactly what it requires. I’ll answer you once He answers.”

Chapter Five

“I won’t ask again.” Matthias steadied his aim.

Joan wiggled her ankles and the rope loosened in minute increments. “I can’t if you don’t back away.”

Matthias did so by inches.

Joan charily pressed the soles of her feet in opposite directions.

Her logic split.

She untucked the front of her shirt and the rope dropped an inch.

She could easily retrieve the knife and burrow it into the hand that gripped the handgun.

She slid one strap from her shoulder. Then, the other.

Or, she could render him senseless with a swift thrust from the base of her palm splintering the bones in his nose.

Down the hall, a deep-throated protest crawled down the murky hall. With fierce determination, Joan did not look.

His hand might still release the trigger.

Joan reached behind and gripped the shears.

Dionne DeLauer rushed down the hospital corridor. An auburn-haired woman and tall man in a cowboy boots and hat huddled outside the door of one room.

At the nurses’ station, Dionne said, “I’m Dionne DeLauer. Is Sheila Powers

nearby?”

The nurse pointed down the hall and before Dionne could fully turn, the auburn-haired woman was by her side. “Mrs. DeLauer, I’m Sheila.”

The man ambled over and met Dionne with pensive eyes. He extended his large hand. “I’m Sam. Ben’s older brother.”

Dionne quickly shook his hand. “Has there been any news on your mother?”

“None that has made a difference.”

Dionne nodded, sadly. If the agony of an abducted parent was anything like that of a child, her heart broke for him. During her supervised escort from LAX to Cedars, she hadn’t hesitated to grill the agents regarding the latest details of the investigation. They had eventually informed of the mysterious FedEx package that had arrived for Ben. “Agent Northern insisted I be officially escorted here from the airport. They seem to be putting serious effort in finding them.”

“That’s the hope,” Sam said. Yet, Dionne noticed his eyes betrayed his words.

Dionne spoke before she even realized she was speaking, “There is always hope.”

They looked at her as if stumped for an adequate response. Dionne filled the silence. “How is Ben?”

Sheila said, “He came through surgery well. Right now he’s under heavy sedation and not likely to wake up for another twenty-four hours.”

“Is that due to the trauma?”

“That and the plastic surgeon would like the gashes along his jaw line to have a unbroken interval of time to begin to mend.”

“May I see him?” Dionne asked.

They led her a few feet away from the nurses' station.

"My wife is in there, now. But, I can tell her you're here."

"Is Jacob also waiting to see Ben?" Dionne asked, referring to the middle Powers son.

"Uh, no." Sam answered. "He left two days ago for his 2nd tour in Afghanistan."

Dionne stopped at the door and peered into the dim room. Other than Sam's wife sitting in a bedside chair holding Ben's hand, plentiful tubes, machines and gloom seemed to dominate the area. Dionne instantly loathed the sight. The room seemed too still as if life had been aggressively purged. A wave of despair suddenly engulfed her. She closed her eyes to still her mind from the dismay.

This was her future son-in-law whom God had secretly proclaimed to her was as mighty as an oak. He was to live a joyous life beside her daughter. No matter what the circumstances or medical reports stated. Or what any one else believed. Despite what she saw in that room, or what the evil behind this vicious plot assumed, her trust had to remain in God.

"The last time I saw Ben we were paving my backyard path." Dionne recalled with a smile. "He was meticulous about measuring and plotting and leveling the sand." She looked up at Sam. "You taught him all of that, right?"

He lowered his head and shuffled his feet. He crossed his burly arms around his chest and seemed to clamp them down. Her words must have struck something in his heart, Dionne thought. Finally, Sam nodded, his eyes still locked on his boots.

Dionne touched his forearm. He cleared his throat and shuffled his feet more. When she realized the ability to make eye contact was beyond him, she assured, "You

taught him well.”

A sudden urge hit her. She wanted to remain near Ben and his family. Although they had just met, Dionne felt a sense of security around them. There was an essence of camaraderie. As though they were fighting the same battle, striving against the same malevolence. But the longer she internally clashed with the imploring it only increased.

She sighed and looked to Sheila and Sam. “Is it true that once your wife is leaves Ben’s side, the next visitor must wait awhile before entering the room?”

Sheila glanced down the hall at the nurses’ station, and then faced Dionne with a derisive smirk. “The night shift isn’t very flexible with the rules. So, yes, that is true.”

Dionne then asked for directions to the E.R. and took the elevator down. She explained her position to the stern looking men flanking the hospital door. All she needed was a moment with the man inside.

James lolled on the edge of the bed, chin to chest, caressing his side through his open shirt.

“Mrs. DeLauer!” Juliana’s bodyguard attempted to straighten.

She rested her hand on the handle until the door clicked shut then walked to the bed. “What’s broken?”

He tried to quickly button his shirt, but was visibly hindered by pain. “Three ribs. How is Mr. Powers?”

“The surgery went well.”

“That’s great news, ma’am.”

Dionne nodded. “There is always reason to hope.”

Again, she’d said it. Except this time, the words felt fully her own.

He nodded, winced, and seemed to labor to drag in air.

“The agents stated you were drugged,” Dionne said.

“Toxicology reports won’t be concluded for a few days. I have no other explanation as to why I have no memory surrounding that time.”

“Are they detaining you?”

He nodded, slowly. “There was blood discovered on my belt, boots, and beneath my fingernails.”

When his gaze slipped, she moved forward. “Speak it.”

She saw him struggle to keep whatever it was private. Dionne’s gaze didn’t waiver. She wasn’t backing down.

Finally, he said, “Ma’am, I failed.”

Dionne folded her arms across her chest and prayed the Father would reveal to her truth from fiction. His stare carried guilt, not premeditated or calculated cruelty, and his countenance humiliation.

She had no idea why the package suddenly flashed in her mind, but she had learned not to argue when the obscure pressed its way from the recesses of her consciousness. “Ben received a parcel this morning from an Alpha and Omega. Sheila signed for it.”

James rubbed his forehead. “Here?”

“Most peculiar isn’t it?” Dionne rolled the name around in her head. “Alpha and Omega.”

“That’s the same company that sent Juliana those notes.”

“And picked up Joan Powers from LAX.”

James hung his head. “No.”

Dionne wrestled with the angry swell rising in her heart. “I am God.”

His head shot up. “Ma’am?”

“Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end. I am God.”

James frowned. “That’s the manner in which every note was signed to Juliana. ‘Love, God’.”

She observed as he lowered his head, flattened his palms, and slowly stroked the length of his thighs. “How could I have allowed this to happen?”

“What makes you think you did?”

“She’s not *here*.” He rested his hand over his heart. Then, as if realizing his error, pointed toward the window. “I mean, she’s out there, bleeding, cut by someone who believes he’s a god.”

“You saw her blood?”

He looked to his hands, which were unsoiled. “I don’t know. There was blood all over my hands, belt and boots.”

Dionne uncrossed her arms. “It doesn’t matter what they believe. What matters is Truth.”

James shook his head and chuckled sadly. “I commend you, Mrs. DeLauer. If it were my daughter, I’d be ripping this city apart.”

“James, there are absolutes in which I trust. The first is that God is in control.”

His reaction was a slow blink.

“My fight isn’t against a flesh and blood man. It’s against a spiritual force that responds to spiritual weapons – not what I can do in my natural ability. I combat this evil

with prayer and a steadfast belief that no matter what, God will prevail.”

Dionne witnessed his internal struggle to comprehend her ideals.

He said, “I’ve always used my body and weaponry to overcome.”

“I know it may sound like foolishness to you. But if I doubt my God will bring us through this, then I’m serving the wrong God.”

“I don’t know what to say, Mrs. DeLauer.”

She touched his hand. “Why are you feeling as if you played a part in this?”

He shut his eyes and his jaw muscles jerked. “I can’t remember ...”

“What?”

“Anything.”

Again, she studied him. Internally, she felt as if he was being candid and that his part in this nightmare was innocuous. Another thought crept forward. “You gave Juliana a knife during your stay at the safe house?”

His dark eyes flashed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Did she bring it to L.A.?”

This seemed to ignite him to inch off the bed. “I watched her pack it.”

Dionne nodded, solemnly. “Somehow she *knew*.”

She followed as he limped to the door. Immediately, the agents ceased their conversation. James motioned to an agent that seemed to exude authority. He withdrew from the discussion and approached.

“In Juliana’s suitcase was a foldable, three-inch blade. Can you determine if it’s still there?” James asked.

The man’s stern eyes glimmered. “We’ll check it out.”

James turned to Dionne and remarked, “It’s a felony in California to carry and conceal that type of blade.”

They watched the man tap the shoulder of another agent and march toward the elevator.

Dionne rubbed her chin. “He strikes me as a reasonable man who isn’t distracted by trivial things.”

Chapter Six

“He knows.” Northern said, as Blake steered the car into the prison parking lot.

“Who?”

“Kingston. Since the beginning of this case, he makes his mark intentionally personal. Every move is to get under the victim’s skin. With DeLauer – who is devout and religious – he signed the notes ‘from God’.”

“What about the hit and run of Miss Powers’s little boy last year?”

“Falls right in line with everything else. Gratefully, the boy survived.”

Northern removed the evidence baggie from his pocket and held it up. “He probably aches for Ben Powers to see this. A piece of his fiancée cut off and packaged. Like her body is a slab of meat.”

“I get the connections. But what is it that Kingston’s knows?”

Northern tucked the evidence into his pocket. “Precisely what it takes to wholly destroy Ben Powers.”

The men walked into the county jail and endured the usual formalities. Shortly thereafter, they were escorted to a waiting area.

They watched the young woman enter the detention meeting room, shackled and cuffed. Her thick, black hair was crammed into an uneven ponytail. A fierce red rimmed her eyes. In person, she resembled nothing of the awe-inspiring beauty believed to have pasted her likeness beside photos of Ben Powers.

She plopped in the metal chair. Dabbed at her nose. “He said it was okay.”

Blood vessels, angry and swollen, protruded beneath the youthful skin. “He said Mr. Powers liked that sort of thing.”

Northern said, “Your statement said he called himself ‘Robert Lyons’.”

Fresh tears and more nose wiping ensued. “Yeah. But my lawyer isn’t able to locate him. And, I did not paste those sick photos at my place.”

Northern nodded to fuel her chattiness. “You first met ‘Lyons’ at your apartment, two weeks ago?”

More sniffing. “Yeah. I didn’t mean to hurt him, ya know? This Lyon’s guy said I should think of it as the audition of a lifetime.”

Northern looked to her fingernails, which were now stunted and free of polish.

She caught the direction of his gaze and clenched her fists. “Did Mr. Powers almost die?”

“His injuries are severe.”

She dropped her head on the table and wailed. They waited until she regained composure.

“Miss Leaf,” Blake patted the table. “You also stated Mr. Lyons insisted you receive a manicure the morning of the attack.”

“Clover.”

“Pardon?”

“My name,” she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “My first name is Clover.”

Northern chewed on his lip.

“My mom always said I was lucky and destined to be a star.”

Northern looked at Blake whose only response was to blink at her. “All right.”

“The lady who did my nails was Justine. I remember because Lyons insisted it be only her. She supposedly had this particular color of nail polish Mr. Powers liked. I should have known something was up. Her hands shook the entire time and she barely said two words. Manicurists normally just chatter on and on.”

Northern resisted the urge to say, “Like you.” Instead, he stated, “You received \$5,000.”

Her hands flew to her face and the wailing returned. Through trembling hands, she moaned, “I wish I’d never seen him or that money. To think it was all revenge!”

Northern eyed Blake before he asked, “Who told you that?”

She gathered her breath. “Everyone is divided in this horrid place. It so reminds me of high school.”

Again, she sobbed.

The report on Northern’s lap confirmed that she had graduated from San Gabriel High last year. Northern knew it was completely against protocol, unless you were legal counsel, to hand convicts any materials. Still, he reached into his pocket and handed her his handkerchief. The guard near the door held his position, but glowered.

“Thanks.” Clover sniffled. “Since I got here, she hangs out with me and protects me.”

“Who?”

“Jessica Kimura.”

“Mr. Powers ex-assistant?”

“Yeah.”

Blake raised an eyebrow. “No kidding?”

“She says it was all this huge conspiracy for revenge. She says Lyons is a cold-blooded snake.”

“I see.” Northern smelled the stench of a set-up.

Clover dragged the handkerchief through stiff fingers. “She said Lyons made her the bad guy. Made it look like she was involved. She’s meeting with her lawyer right now. She came to dinner in great spirits.”

“Do tell?” Blake smirked.

“She’s got information no one else has. The state should accept her plea.”

“Pardon me?” Northern leaned forward.

“She knows where this maniac took Miss DeLauer. She gave up the location in exchange for a lesser charge. Instead of conspiracy to kidnapping and attempted murder, she gets charged with criminal negligence. She’s such a saint not to hate Kingston. I really think I would.”

Northern glared at the young woman. He hadn’t seen such naivety since...Good God he couldn’t even remember. “And what do you get out of this?”

“Well, like I said, she protects me. She also said she’d have her lawyer talk to my lawyer about reducing my charge. She’s sharp as a tack and kinda, sweet, ya know?”

“No.” Both Northern and Blake stated in unison.

“People only see this rough side of her. But, she’s not as tough as she acts.”

“Uh-huh,” Blake grunted.

Northern’s pager beeped and he and Blake stood.

The guard moved in and grabbed Clover’s elbow. “I don’t guess you want this

back?”

Northern looked at the hankie. “They won’t allow you to keep it.”

The guard removed the hankie from her grasp, handed it to Northern and escorted the young woman from the meeting room. He and his partner stood staring at the drab door.

Blake rubbed his buzz cut. “You can’t make that stuff up.”

Northern glanced at his pager. “Naivety isn’t a crime.”

“How does a young girl like that get caught up in such a mess?”

“Ambition.” He removed his cell and punched in Jahanpur’s number.

“A place like this will eat her alive.”

“If Kimura doesn’t devour her first.” Then into his cell he said, “Special Agent Jahanpur, I’m returning your page.”

“A female body turned up this morning at the county landfill. African-American, long, curly hair, in her twenties. No I.D.”

She then confirmed the deal between the State and Kimura. “We have teams dispatched to the location even as we speak.”

He followed Blake through the door. “On our way.”

The throaty objection increased, yet Matthias didn’t take his eyes off of her.

Joan clenched the clippers in her right hand.

“Matron,” Matthias said.

Then, untucked with her left.

“Whom Ben will choose?”

She shrugged her shoulders and the straps fell to the creases of her forearms.

“This won’t end as you’ve conceived, Matthias.”

Her top dropped revealing the lacy trim of her bra.

He grinned. Then, just as suddenly the grin shifted into a snarl. “Ah! I see it in your glare, Matron. You want to be a hero. Do that and you will die.”

Unmarked cars surrounded the perimeter of the abandoned warehouse. Specialized units scaled the brick walls and encamped on the roof awaiting instruction. Four utility poles lit the vacant area. Northern gathered it all in as he headed for the main entrance, while Blake and Jahanpur raced to the rear.

The April night sky was opaque with broad clouds that shrouded the moon. Concrete cracked exposing vast fissures of arid dirt. The windows were either boarded or had been hastily painted a cheerless gray. Gang insignias were prominently scrawled on the main entrance.

A stiff wind rustled through the barren lot and stirred Northern’s pungent ensemble. He stumbled and held up the Smirnoff bottle as if saluting the sky. He had doused some of the actual liquor on his filthy jacket, shirt, and pants to enhance his credibility. Northern sang, vigilant to slur and stagger.

“I kint get no...”

He carefully glanced at his surroundings. No vehicles. No movement. His only

company the mournful wind.

“...satisfaction...”

The entrance was a bolted roll up gate.

“...but I try. I try. And I trrrrrryyyy...”

Snipers had positioned themselves on the adjacent roof.

“...I can't git NO!”

Northern stopped at the entrance and jiggled the handle.

“NO! NO! NO!”

In his ear, through a specialized device that resembled a hearing aid, he heard Jahanpur's order that everyone was in position.

“Dat's wat I say!”

Northern banged on the door with the bottle. He was determined to cause such an annoying ruckus the captors would either answer the door or shoot him point blank. The bulletproof vest felt dense beneath the heavily soiled garb, but if that was the price he had to pay to stay alive, so be it. He tugged the ragged Raiders cap lower to conceal the earpiece.

“Hey! Ray! You in dere?”

He backed off, pretended to stagger, but carefully listened for an indication of movement beyond the brick walls.

“I gotta go man. You best open up. Or iz gon be preddy wet at yo door.”

Nothing.

Agents confirmed they had audio reception within the building.

“There's a man and woman,” An agent stated. “In some sort of struggle.”

“On my mark,” Jahanpur whispered. “Three.”

Northern inhaled.

“Two.”

He exhaled and clutched the weapon concealed beneath the grime in his pocket.

“One.”

Joan pressed the release button on the clippers, propelled her full weight against him and dug the shears into his hand. His body smacked hard against the wall.

“One.” Jahanpur counted. Her increased breathing pulsated through his earpiece. “Teams one and two, you’re clear to enter the building.”

“They’re in a hallway,” Blake confirmed.

Jahanpur stated, “It’s hard to gauge what’s occurring. The lighting is poor. Northern, you’re clear.”

He removed the government issued rivet lock pick from his pocket. The tool contained five different heads in varying shapes and sizes. It took precise skill to apply just the right amount of insertion and pressure.

“It looks as if the female is removing her clothing,” Blake stated.

Northern heard the first click as the pins shifted. The lock pinged. He shoved the tool in his pants, grasped the handle, and cocked his firearm before diving beneath the door.

Chapter Seven

Ben coughed and reached for his face. He blinked at the dimly lit room. What was that beeping? *Where was he? Why was his face covered? And why did he feel as if he had been struck by a semi?*

Sudden movement to his right caught his eye. Sam bolted upright and the cowboy hat that covered his face while he dozed landed on the floor. More movement to his left as Sheila raced to the opposite side of the bed.

“Hey, Benny,” she whispered as she caressed his hand. “The doctor’s don’t want you to talk for another twenty-four hours.”

I’m in a hospital?

Sam leaned down and produced a steno pad. “If you need to communicate, just write.”

Everything ached. Ben felt as if his body had been thrown beneath a train and left to rot. It even hurt to blink. In jerky increments, he reached for the pad.

Sam handed him the pad, then a pen and said, “There’s over 500 pages. You shouldn’t run out of paper unless you’re feeling particularly chatty.”

Ben flexed his wrist and winced as he scrawled: *Why am I here?*

They looked to one another, then back to him. Their hesitation unnerved him. Made the pit of his stomach clench. He attempted to open his mouth, but a severe jolt of pain pitched through his jaw.

“There was an accident.” Sheila explained. “You’re recovering from surgery.”

Ben scribbled: *What happened to my face?*

When they didn’t immediately respond, he heavily tapped the pad.

Sam offered, “You were attacked. But, the surgeons are expecting the scarring to be minimal.”

Then, it all rammed to the forefront of his mind in harsh, violent bursts.

Lunch at Sarriette with Eternity. The stunning woman who caught his eye, then called his name as if they were dear friends.

Then, she brazenly flung herself upon his lap and...

Ben groaned.

“Listen,” Sheila leaned closer. He didn’t want to look at her. Didn’t want to see the pity he knew must be in her eyes. “The best thing you can do is rest.”

Ben allowed the pad to fall on his chest and closed his eyes. He realized at that moment he should pray. Pray until the words simply ran out. But the expressions that once flowed so effortlessly from his heart suddenly seemed as desolate as a wasteland.

He picked up the pad: *Juliana? Bruce?*

Sam said, “Everything is being done to answer that.”

Sinister images of the possible torment Juliana and Bruce were experiencing inundated his mind. Then, thoughts of another woman obtruded.

He scribbled: *Mom?*

Sheila shared a furtive glance with Sam. Then, she licked her lips. Ben recalled who she was a few months ago. That woman wouldn’t have hesitated to lie. Before Christ entered her life. Finally, she said, “Agents Northern and Blake are working on that as

well.”

No!

Ben shoved the pad aside and it plopped onto the floor.

His brother touched his shoulder. “I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you. I won’t be stupid enough to say I even know what you’re going through. But I need you to hear me when I say I am here. And I will do everything humanely possible to bring this nightmare to an end.”

All Ben wanted was to do was get out of that bed and find Matthias. And when he found him he would –

“Agents contacted us a short while ago and stated that Jessica informed them of where Matthias had taken Juliana.”

Ben stared at her. As if she read his mind, Sheila said, “They should be at the location right now. The agents outside the door promised to keep us updated.”

Ben felt as if he was a caged tiger, wanting to charge at the bars that enclosed him, until he either broke free or died trying. He needed to get out of this bed. He needed to find them. He needed to hear Matthias beg for mercy.

Ben attempted to move out of bed, but his head hammered and his vision hazed. Hot tears dampened the white swaddling on his face.

“Brother,” Sam’s baritone resounded near his ear. “You need to do all that’s required to secure that when the time comes, you’re ready to bolt through that door.”

Ben wanted to nod. Knew he needed to agree. But the images kept tumbling and the desperation clawed at his soul.

He had wasted so many years floundering through his existence as if he were

immortal. As if he commanded time. His disrespect toward anyone or anything not self-serving only amplified once he married Eternity. She was everything and so much more. A delectable prize to shower with his wealth, fame and power. Then, he had been struck with a flu he couldn't shake. And the diagnosis that had no cure.

Then, Juliana had entered his realm, and he had no idea one human being could so profoundly influence another. She was a sacred gift to him – one that had caused him to realize his manner of living had been careless, imprudent. She was his future and he had no intention of allowing Matthias to destroy it.

A timid knock captured the attention of brother and cousin. It was hospital personnel determining if the marked increase in Ben's vitals signs transmitted to the nurses' station were accurate. Ben focused on the first object his eyes landed upon. The clock. He stared at it as Sheila headed to the door and he kept staring when Sam rested a bulky hand on his head as if soothing a child.

Through Northern's earpiece, he heard Jahanpur's hurried breathing and the light thump of her rubber heels.

“Suspects are near.”

He removed his flashlight and quickly surveyed the dismal interior. Mutilated mannequins littered the dusty floor. Massive gaps decorated their disfigured forms. He stepped over arms, torsos, and legs shattered by what appeared were bullet holes.

Silvia's face drifted before him.

He rapidly blinked against the startling image.

On their wedding day.

Focus.

Then, on another day when they knelt side-by-side, their shoulders grazing as they dug into the earth of the backyard garden.

All before their copious attempts to conceive. And, the agonizing diagnosis. Endometrial cancer.

It had ravaged her in less than a year.

Focus, for the love of—

Present reality exploded through when Northern heard the blast of gunfire.

“Federal agents. Freeze!”

A female screamed and a male cursed. Northern dashed around a corner and saw Jahanpur, Blake and other agents descend on a couple locked in a fervent tryst.

“On the ground. *Now!*” Jahanpur hollered, advancing toward the couple.

“Suspects apprehended,” Blake stated, moving to Jahanpur’s side, weapon ready.

Northern marched toward the cuffed pair with their faces pressed to the cement floor. “Where is she?”

“Who, man?” The male suspect asked.

“Don’t play with me.” Northern crashed his knee into the male’s back. It was all bone and gristle.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“We’re here for target practice,” the female said. “We found this place a few months ago. It’s out-of-the-way, so we don’t disturb nobody.”

“Is that what they’re calling it now?” Northern grumbled.

Jahanpur nodded to Blake. “Check for ID’s.”

Blake patted them and retrieved their wallets. “Says here, Josh, that you’re sixteen. And you, sweetheart, aren’t carrying ID.”

“I’m old enough.”

“Doubtful. Unless you can produce documentation that you’re 21, you’re both in violation of illegally carrying weapons and breaking curfew.”

The male said, “Look, man, if we don’t learn how to shoot we’re easy targets for the whack jobs out there.”

“This doesn’t look good for either of you,” Blake said.

“Tell that to my friend who was gunned down after a playoff game for missing a championship shot,” the girl cried. “Where were you Fake Crusaders then?”

Northern removed his knee from breathing skeleton and stood. One of the various agents scoping through the desolate space hollered, “All clear!”

“Take them in,” Jahanpur said. Officers hefted the kids to their feet, read them their rights, and hauled the duo through the storehouse doors.

Northern returned his firearm to the holster, knelt on the cement and rubbed his eyes. “Kingston lied to Kimura.”

“He knew she’d give him up,” Blake added.

Northern ripped off the filthy jacket and flung it to the ground.

Jahanpur moved to his side. “This is personal for Kingston.”

“Ya think!”

She ignored his insult and continued. “This place is too austere. Too isolated.”

Blake seemed to continue Jahanpur's thought. "He'd take her to a private place of special significance to him."

Northern stalked through the bare warehouse, flinging aside every bit of the grimy attire except the undershirt and pants. He kept stomping toward the official vehicles outside and away from that wretched place.

He crossed the empty lot beneath a sky that produced a threatening mantle of rumbling clouds. When he reached his car, he pounded his fists on the roof. Then stomped a few feet away, stopped suddenly, bent from the waist and glared at the degenerated concrete.

He had no idea Jahanpur had followed him. When he felt the sudden movement from behind he advanced with instinctive defense. She planted her feet and neatly blocked him.

"Not smart, Agent," he grunted.

She held her position. "Tempers are high. Yes. But, it won't do either of us any good if I put you in the ER tonight."

He glared. "Say what you need to say and give me some space."

She relaxed. Slightly. "The common denominator in this nightmare is Mr. Powers."

"And?"

"His closest friends are waiting at the hospital. They were around when Kingston was in Mr. Powers' life."

He shut his eyes and the revulsion ruptured before him.

A body shrouded beneath a white sheet.

His hand reached out. The sheet descended unassisted.

He saw the brown curls and toffee colored brow.

Not Silvia. Juliana.

“Special Agent Northern!”

“What!”

She held up a hand cradling his cell. “It’s Mr. Powers.”

He pressed the space between his eyes in measured, tight circles. “Mr. Powers is heavily sedated.”

“Not Benjamin. Sam.”

The gun crashed to the ground and discharged.

Matthias pummeled Joan’s abdomen in a chain of swift uppercuts with his free hand. She staggered yet remained upright. He yanked the buried shears from his hand and hurled them at her. They sailed beyond her left shoulder. Ferociousness battered her senses sharpening her sight, keening her hearing, and invigorating her strength. She raised her knees and the rope slumped to her feet. She kicked it aside, bent her head, and charged him, her skull striking his chest. He gripped her shoulders and crashed a knee into her chin.

Blood flooded her mouth. Joan flexed her hand and raised it to his nose. He seemed to anticipate this move and before Joan could counter, he seized her forearms. She slammed her heel on the top of his foot and when he crumpled over, she clasped her

hands and smashed her fists into his head.

He grabbed her waist and shoved her into the wall. They lost balance and tumbled to the floor.

The concrete smacked against her head and she battled the beguiling darkness. Matthias landed two deep punches to her jaw. The pistol glimmered only inches from her hand. She knew to surrender to the gloom was death.

Matthias captured the shears and brought them to her throat.

Down the hall, as if cloaked by an immense distance, Joan thought she heard the whimpers of a female. It increased Joan's alarm like a disconcerting symphony of despair. She had to take him down. For her sake and the sake of her family.

Matthias hummed and straddled her. "I'll tell Ben how nobly you fought."

He touched the blade to her mouth and smeared the blood across her lips. A splendid surge tingled in her limbs. It pulsed from her feet. She knew she had to distract him with one of his favorite subjects.

"I saw right through you the moment you walked in my house."

"What?"

"You! You were nothing but a lovesick coward desperate for my son's affection."

"Maybe that bump on the head has —"

"Shut up! I'm talking now." She heaved.

He cocked his head. Still, Joan noticed, his grip on the shears was tight. "And when he wouldn't reciprocate, you sunk deeper into that pit of hell you call home. You repulsed me. You repulsed us all because you are nothing but a —"

The slap jolted her head to the right. She stretched her jaw against the radiating

pain. She pretended to blink as if dazed until she saw his grasp loosen on the clippers. He leaned into her face and this moved him closer, relaxing his straddle. Opportunity, Joan thought. Now!

She jerked her legs upward and whacked the back of his head with her boots. He released the shears and began to tumble off of her. Joan grabbed them and plunged the shears into his throat.

Matthias dropped. Blood gushed from him. It repulsed her to think of ripping the shears from his body, but she refused to leave him with a weapon. Joan leaned forward, and yanked. She grabbed the gun then raced down the shadowy corridor where she had earlier heard the moans.

“Juliana!”

In the center of the floor, bound up and drenched with sweat, Juliana rasped,

“Well, done.”

“I aimed for the artery. Just like Bruce taught.”

Joan noticed that Juliana was trembling, but wasn't certain it was only due to fear.

“Can you sit up?”

The young woman tried, but flopped into Joan's arms. “I'm sick. But also drugged.” Juliana pointed. “In the tool chest. There's a phone.”

Joan scrambled to the trunk and scoured the contents. Beneath an orderly pile of needles and dressings rested a cell phone. She held it up in triumph and punched in the numbers. Her fingers shook so that she had to start over. Twice.

“Walker.”

The code words, only to be conveyed if Juliana were in danger, rushed from her.

“Sangfroid! Scarecrow needs you. Matthias –”

“Joan!” Juliana shouted.

As she turned toward her, a loud blast resounded. Joan staggered and dropped to the ground. The cell skidded a few inches and rested near Juliana’s feet. Joan attempted to retrieve it, but found her potency ebb as if siphoned. She touched the fiery dampness engulfing her shoulder. The dark circle increased with fierce rapidity.

Beads of rain, hulky and persistent, thumped against the ceiling. Matthias’s pace was that of a wounded soldier who possessed no honor.

He clutched his neck and aimed the gun at her forehead. “Imbecilic woman.”

The shoulder pain burned as if set ablaze.

“Did you really think I only had one of these?”

“Father,” Joan cried. “Oh, Father.”

He shuffled to the phone and smashed it into the concrete floor. Then knelt beside her and shoved her to the ground. “You’ll implore me to end it. I’ll refuse and allow you both to bleed to death.”

“Agent Northern, Ben isn’t able to speak,” the elder Powers said. “Have you found them?”

Northern eyed the gloomy sky. “No.”

“The location was a set-up.”

“Yes.”

“What’s next?”

He looked to Jahanpur who seemed to be internally inspecting him as if he were a germ. “We’ll be there to question Mr. Powers’ friends. See if they remember anything relevant during the time Matthias lived with him.”

“You could do that,” Mr. Powers drawled. “But why waste time when you already have me on the line.”

He turned from Jahanpur and her concentrated scrutiny. “How much about Kingston do you remember?”

“So much that it’s impossible to forget.”

Northern opened the car door, rummaged through the glove box and produced a notepad. “Just start where you feel it’s relevant. I’ll stop you if I need.”

Matthias descended the stairs of the newly constructed guest quarters and staggered across the manicured yard. He flung open the main house door where he stood for several moments gathering his breath.

Jessica Kimura had kept her word and maintained pristine order of the place whenever it had been necessary for him to lay low in Venice. The furniture had been arranged as if by a professional decorator. The years distanced from this dwelling hadn’t sullied his memory. He could have maneuvered through the rambling house blindfolded.

He entered Ben’s old master suite and flipped on the bathroom light. The shears had embedded deeply, just missing his carotid artery. He removed his hand from the

wound. After thorough examination, he discovered that it pulsed blood, but wasn't fatal. His fingers weren't trembling as he unbuttoned the stained shirt and dropped it in the hamper.

He removed a medical kit from beneath the sink and with the proficiency of a surgeon, administered sanitation and stitching to the gash. Anesthetic was for cowards - those who lacked enhanced control over the senses. The mind was a powerful tool begging to be explored, esteemed and subdued. Matthias had learned as a child to control the anguish or it would have ruled him. He washed his hands and chest and tidied up the bloody mess.

He stared at his pallid reflection in the mirror. Memories of his residency here tumbled, rumbled and rolled, cascading like thunder. Until the woman loosely draped in a bloodied tarp appeared in the mirror.

"The task isn't complete," he said to her.

The woman stared at him, as always, with eyes of immeasurable desolation and misery.

"Don't fret. It will be soon."

The tarp dropped a few inches to her shoulders and time had done nothing to heal the gaping gashes inflicted upon her skull.

"Oh, Mama." Matthias longed to reach out to touch the airy image, but feared she would vanish if he did. "You didn't deserve what Ben made you do."

She never spoke. She simply stared. Her golden hair plastered in menacing patches against her head and battered face.

"Or what Papa felt was a necessary punishment."

Matthias placed his palms on the counter. “I tried to stop Papa. But, I was too young. And weak.”

More and more of the mournful stare.

“Did I bring you comfort? I tried to hold you while ...”

Matthias dropped his gaze. It ravaged his soul like a rabid wolverine. Papa had insisted he ride in the trunk with the bludgeoned woman. Matthias had been repulsed and intensely drawn to her all at once. He had failed her, failed to save her, and desired nothing in the end except to soothe and honor her.

“Papa never would have gone that far, been that enraged if Ben hadn’t made you do it.”

When he looked up, the image had vanished.

Matthias stood at the sink, his mind a tumult, until he knew she wouldn’t reappear. He filled a cup with water and gulped. From the walk-in closet he removed the tarps and laid them on the bed.

There were four.

Protector.

Virgin.

Matron.

And, finally, one for The Face.