

## Chapter Eight

Northern pushed open the door to James Walker's hospital room. Due to the fact that Blake had laid the groundwork, he requested his partner remain in the hall. Besides, after the last go around, Walker probably would refuse to open up with him in the room.

The bodyguard held a pen in midair over a set of papers. Northern saw the turmoil in Walker's expression as he shut the door.

"Untraceable." Northern said. "The line was digitally scabbled leading us into numerous false directions and ultimately nowhere."

"The woman at the morgue?"

"Justine Reynolds – the manicurist."

James rested the board on the bed and placed the pen beside it. "I'm ready."

The blood on the staircase and Walker's person was confirmed as B positive - Juliana DeLauer's blood type. Succeeding test samples taken from Mr. Powers and the accused eliminated the possibility it belonged to either of them.

Walker's phone was a savvy number capable of recording conversation. Northern and Blake had sat at their desks replaying the communication over and over. Their ears honed toward every nuance; background traffic, music, conversation, nature, even forms of water. Consistently all they came away with was Mrs. Powers's frantic pitch, Miss DeLauer's scream and the gunshot blast. It was the nature of the profession to receive leads, investigate them, then deem them advantageous or bunk. Sleep was disregarded as they combed through the litter of supposed sightings of DeLauer from Rodeo Drive security cameras to Monterey art galleries. The daily calls from the governor's office

(allegedly a personal friend of Powers), film industry moguls, and the local FBI assistant director in charge only tightened the burden around the agent's necks. It seemed everyone in the state of California wanted the case solved. Instantly.

He approached Walker who held out his wrists and said, "Let's not prolong this."

Northern didn't reach for his handcuffs. Instead, he said, "When did you first realize it?"

The young man frowned. "What?"

"That you loved Miss DeLauer."

Northern knew he had struck the correct chord by Walker's stunned expression. The bodyguard thrust his wrists forward. "I'm a professional."

"I've never doubted your professionalism. Until now."

"Sir?"

"I know you want her back safe and sound. Someday, you may even hope to regain her trust." Northern rubbed his chin. "But that's not nearly all, is it, son?"

Walker dropped his hands and gawked at the hospital floor for several moments. "It has eaten at me like a malignancy."

Northern remained silent and watched as the man wrestled to articulate his confession.

Walker looked up and said, "After my parents died, Gary and Abby raised me. From day one, I was treated as if their own. Uncle Gary lived for me and Aunt Abby and for his service to their Bureau."

The bodyguard shifted his gaze toward the ceiling. When his gaze finally met Northern's, he looked as if he might breakdown. "The man who sacrificed, saved me

from years in foster care, loved me like a son was assassinated. Protecting Juliana.”

Northern’s solemn expression softened. Not solely out of compassion, but to give ground for Walker to press forward.

“Because I agreed to take on Juliana’s care my aunt refuses to ever speak to me again.” The pain welled in the bodyguard’s eyes. “Aunt Abby is all I have.”

Northern rested a hand on the man’s shoulder realizing the touch would draw out the man’s admission. The bewildered man cleared his throat. “My ribs are broken, obviously from some sort of struggle. In that moment, did something latent surface? Did I truly fight to protect her? Or did I fight against her before Kingston arrived?”

“We heard Miss DeLauer scream in the background. How else would Mrs. Powers have known about the code words if Miss DeLauer hadn’t told her?”

Walker’s shuffle from side to side held the tension of a stiff wire. Maybe the man did feel as if he was trying to balance high above the ground, placing one foot in front of the other on a narrow tightrope. It was obvious to Northern that he was shaken, confused and visibly torn up about his feelings for DeLauer.

He added, “Which means she still trusts you.”

The shuffling stopped and the young man stared at him. “Let me help end this, anyway I can, then I’ll walk away.”

Northern removed the cuffs from his belt. “Wise decision, son.”

He recited Walker his Miranda rights, cuffed him and led him from the room.

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Jessica Kimura shifted on the detention center bed. Lightning flashed, stirring the pre-dawn sky. She stomped her feet on the flat mattress, flopped to her side and faced the drab wall. Her movement roused the stringent musk from the soiled bedding. She shifted to her other side and noticed the contents of the metal toilet had bubbled onto the tiled floor. Above, her cellmate belched then filled the cell with raucous snoring. Being locked in this forsaken place, with its food rations not worthy for swine, estrogen overload, and incessant grime was beneath her. She hadn't survived the streets, clawing out of that hell to end up here.

Matthias. Her attorney had brought her news that made her want to strike the walls. The old warehouse had been littered with mangled mannequin parts, filth and decay – The Virgin nowhere in sight. Matthias had altered the plan. Tricked her. She wondered how long he had planned his side scheme and why she hadn't seen it coming.

The State relinquished the deal and now she faced a life sentence.

She slouched against the bumpy wall. Jessica knew two things. She wasn't going to prison. And, no matter what it took, The Face had to die. An eye for an eye, Jessica reasoned. It was only fair.

Crossing her arms, she considered how to take care of Matthias.

Years ago, when The Face had taken away the only joy in her life, she had spent hours in a San Fran library, crossed legged on the floor of periodicals section. The copious articles regarding Kingston's arrest piled around her like a fortress. He had strapped a lethal bomb to The Face's little hot rod. In the subsequent photos of the media circus trial, there wasn't an ounce of remorse coloring his graceful features. Jessica liked

men who possessed mettle and Kingston had it a plenty. Research concluded that Kingston resided within the confines of Pelican Bay. She aligned her contacts, produced a fake marriage certificate, and met Kingston for “conjugal visits.” Beneath the grubby sheets, they performed for the security camera and during pillow talk Jessica proposed her plan. He stalled for weeks, until she agreed to incorporate his derisive subplots. It sucked to play second fiddle, but well worth it to avenge Aiko.

Her sister was the eldest Kimura child who had studied ballet, attended European boarding schools, conversed in five languages, and mesmerized with her ethereal beauty. The Kimura’s had mistakenly conceived Jessica and reminded her daily of their error. Aiko was the child of promise – Jessica the shameful mishap. Aiko was beauty and delight. Jessica was plain and inept. Somehow, her parent’s chagrin hadn’t tainted Aiko’s fondness toward her baby sister. She doted on Jessica, carrying her to playgrounds, zoos and museums. Aiko had been her singular joy. Breathing life into her otherwise staid, insignificant existence. Years later, Aiko had landed her first lucrative modeling contract in L.A. As they stood in the terminal, bidding tearful farewells, Jessica felt her heartbeat race. The sole source of her bliss was clutching a bag and moving toward a jet that would take all of that away. But, Aiko kissed her sister’s cheeks, and vowed to send for her for the summer where they would travel the world and adorn themselves in luxury.

Jessica had rushed home, dismissing the frivolous bustle of her classmates to consume Coke’s and pizza at the mall, in hopes that a letter from her sister had arrived. The details always sparkled; her sister’s words painted exquisite images of a life Jessica felt would always elude her. Aiko met Ben Powers and her awe of the actor reminded Jessica of the delight when tender seedlings burst from the earth. Aiko had never

discussed marriage, but Jessica had often fantasized the couple would shepherd her from her tedious existence and insist she reside with them.

Then the call had devastated with the dominance of a typhoon.

Aiko was dead. Killed in an automobile accident. Chased by the paparazzi.

The idiot actor had survived.

Her beloved sister was dead in a morgue.

She stared at the iron bars of her cell, and then extended her view down the hall, a dim stretch of gray leading nowhere. Abruptly, she sat up. Her body was confined behind those bars, but her boundless, cognitive power wasn't imprisoned.

Aiko.

The shadows chanted her sister's name.

Jessica stood from the bed and reached up to gather them in. One. Two. Six. Twelve. Their beguiling hymn to avenge her sister tingled through every limb. Their empowering essence dripped like liquid heat along her spine. Long ago, when she had been ignorant of their influence, she had been frightened. That was before they had demonstrated their authority to execute her desires.

"We must never relinquish." Jessica smiled, welcoming them to penetrate as they had so many times before. "Not until Ben is dead."

"Shut up, will ya?" Her cellmate growled.

Jessica turned and faced her. "What did you say?"

"You heard me, Troll. Shut your trap."

Jessica was upon the women before she could stand to her feet. It was simple. Deliciously so. Just touch them over their heart and...

The woman's eyes widened as she clutched her chest. Jessica knelt and grinned, watching the woman claw at the floor as if it could prolong her life. She thrashed and gasped and Jessica found the spectacle delightful. Empowering. Finally, the woman collapsed in a motionless heap.

Jessica stood, arms flung high in honor and exaltation, for the shadows had answered her plea.

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Ben opened his eyes and took in the dark, quiet room. Surprisingly, he discovered he was alone. The wall clock read 4:45. Predawn or afternoon, he had no idea. Ben looked to his left and right. There were machines that either pumped liquid into his veins or monitored the status of his blood pressure and heart. These artificial mechanisms meant to sustain life shackled him to this bed. And to the crushing despair.

Inch by inch he crept to the rim of the bed. Every increment seemed to hammer the throbbing in his jaw. By the time he reached the edge, his forehead was slick with perspiration that carried steams down his chest. Everything ebbed and swayed and pulsed with pain. He had no choice. He had to get out of that bed.

Lying there, watching the clock devour precious time, the maddening rhythm of helplessness simply became too much. He was sickened by the distressing images of his mother, his love, and his best friend in torment. Deep within, he was convinced Matthias had them. He had to confront him. Settle the discord. Forever.

He needed a plan. But none of substance came forward. No matter. He would get

out of the bed and something would come to him. It had to. Their lives were dependant on it.

*God, I am begging You.*

One foot touched the floor. Then, he forced the other to the cool tile and stifled a sob. Dropping his head, he gulped in ragged breaths. He clenched his jaw and pushed himself off the bed. His legs trembled in protest. The surging weakness threatened to drop him to his knees.

His hospital door opened. A man in plainclothes with a baseball cap partially concealing his olive complexion and ordinary features entered. At first, Ben thought he was a cop until he saw the ponytail protruding from the cap's base. Then, the man leveled his gaze on Ben and he became anything but mundane.

The man approached the bed. Ben tried to speak, but his jaw refused to release.

“In your dreams you cried out for assistance, did you not?”

Ben blinked at the stranger. “I think so.”

Wait. In his dreams he was fighting. Waging war that took him down in silence against a force Ben had never experienced. His enemies tore at him with invisible swords, pierced him with words that sliced like daggers. Ben ripped at the air, flailing his limbs and lashing out at the hollow air. The dreams always ended with him exhausted and weeping on his knees, crying out to something – someone – who possessed the potency to help him overcome.

Ben staggered and the man seemed to flash to his side. He eased Ben onto the bed. The blinding pain that had coursed through every limb ebbed away as if it had never been present; the agony, the fear, the anguish that his loved ones were being tortured

vanished like vapor.

“Fear not.” The man squeezed Ben’s shoulder.

Ben gawked at the stranger. He had been in the presence of the most acclaimed celebrities, dignitaries, even royalty. Yet none had exuded such supremacy as this man. His authority seemed to draw Ben in. Not with force, or coercion, but unbridled adoration. Ben sighed and every inch of him calmed.

“Do not resist my help, Benjamin. You cannot complete this task in your own strength.”

Shifting his jaw, he realized his mouth was remarkably unhindered. He worked it for a few moments before he asked, “How do I address you?”

“Go’el Haddam works at the moment.”

Ben nodded, slowly. “From Genesis – Whoever sheds the blood of man; by man shall his blood be shed.’ I studied that passage with Bruce...”

His celebrity had permitted him from attending Sunday service. Still, he hungered to know Christ. Three months ago, just after he had begun this new journey, Matthias had offered up his first tangible threat on Juliana’s life. Ben found it imperative to cling to the essentials and resist the enduring temptation to hunt Matthias and end his miserable life. He often declined sleep to examine scripture. It hadn’t been uncommon to bombard his bodyguard with questions before the man even rolled out of bed.

“What is it, Benjamin?”

Ben adjusted his focus to this stranger that felt anything but. There was much he wanted to ask, but his mouth betrayed him. “So this is real? The drugs haven’t... fabricated you in my mind?”

Go'el replied with a smile.

“You're here. Why?”

“Everything will be revealed in time,” Go'el answered.

Time. Didn't this man realize that was precisely what Ben didn't have? “I don't think you understand.”

“I do.”

“I can't lose them.”

“Heed what I say, Benjamin. Fear has no place in your heart. Neither does shame.”

Shame. What did this Go'el person know? Before Ben could respond, Go'el said, “Your life before Eternity, before Juliana. Who you were then.”

The man sat holding his hand not mutely judging him, but radiating compassion.

Tears blurred Ben's vision. “Women were for my amusement and nothing more. I never bothered to even ask most of them their name.” Ben chuckled, bitterly. “Matthias saw it all. He was barely out of his teens when we met. This mixed up kid who thought I was his hero. And there I was, using and discarding women with ease.”

Ben suddenly wanted to pound something. Over and over until the pain slipped away. But the fault was his alone. And no matter how desperate he was to change the past, nothing would ever erase the grief he had caused. “It was me. I pushed him over the edge.”

Go'el touched his shoulder. “Ben –”

Ben clutched Go'el's arm. “He's punishing me.”

Go'el pressed forward.

“Extracting the price of my repugnant past from those I love most.”

This time stillness seemed to seep through Go’el, shadowing every apprehension, quenching every doubt. “If you attempt to do this in your own strength, you will fail.”

Every protest rose and fell away like dust.

“You are not alone.”

Ben closed his eyes. The familiar peace that enveloped him after moments of gentle reflection descended. When he opened them, Go’el was gone.

## Chapter Nine

Matthias had returned to the guesthouse shortly after caring for his wound. His stitches nearly tore from the strenuous work to eliminate evidence that anything had occurred behind those walls except a recent remodel. Removing the women's bodies had been especially taxing. After, he had showered and heated milk on the stove.

Elated, he sat peering at the sky from the rear terrace. A dazzling scarlet was quietly overcoming the night. Matthias grinned and sipped the steaming remnants of his warm milk laced with honey. He had always adored the breaking of a new day. It was pleasantly unsoiled by yesterday's missteps. For to look back was death.

Birds fluttered, diving for breakfast beneath the moist earth. Inhaling the morning mist, he placed the cup on the small table, zipped his jacket and crossed the slick lawn. Whistling as he went, he strolled toward the immense garden grotto nearly fifty feet from the back door. He paused to admire the gushing water pouring over the massive boulders and the delicate flora garnishing the gleaming stone. Towering above the waterfall, oaks stretched providing shade on blistering days.

He maneuvered over the slick rock until he arrived at the largest boulder on the right and reached behind. To the uninformed, his hands seemed to raise a plain mechanical box that controlled the lights shimmering beneath the water's surface. He pressed a button and the water ceased to a trickle. Pressing another, a slim panel popped up. He punched in a series of codes.

Before Ben had changed his wanton ways, and sold the place, he had the grotto entrance concealed with slabs of concrete, excavated the greenery and reconstructed the grotto to resemble a rock wall. The first thing Matthias did after he signed the closing papers was to hire a landscaping crew to restore the cavern to its original splendor.

He turned and looked at the house. Third window from the right had been where he watched Ben and his famed buddies escort women in and out until dawn broke. Ben had deemed it the “The Pleasure Pit” had it constructed to accommodate the men’s illicit deeds. He wondered how many times his mother had been ordered to tidy up after their degenerate parties.

Back then they stumbled into the main house, patting backs, and relived the night over a morning feast. Matthias listened to every salacious detail. Not once had they invited him to join them. When he finally gained the bravado to confront Ben, he stated it had nothing to do with partaking in the hedonistic activity. He wanted merely to watch Ben receive and give pleasure.

There had been no discussion. No lengthy conversation to comprehend his manner of thinking. Ben stated he had signed for yet another film overseas and expected him to be out when he returned. Matthias hadn’t had the impulse to harm Ben until that moment. The bomb had been fairly fun to construct and plant beneath his former roommate’s hood.

The purr of his neighbor’s Porsche carried him to the present. Matthias crouched at the entrance and walked down the narrow stone corridor. He swiped droplets of water from his hair until he reached the Venus de Milo statue. Then reached up, grabbed each breast and watched her swing away. He stepped into the lighted entry and hit the switch

that resumed the waterfall. Once Venus twirled back into place, he descended the marble steps.

He flicked the light switch and marble sconces shed light on the textured walls and Travertine floor. Ben hadn't even bothered to remove the furniture. In what appeared as haste, every luxurious article had been covered by yards of uneven, mismatched cloth. This space, once replete with cobwebs, grime and musk Matthias had meticulously transformed into home.

He walked down the hall, beyond the opulent spaces and a mini kitchen stocked with plentiful provisions until he reached the French doors. His hand flew to his nose to veil the prevailing stench of human waste and sweat. He unbolted the door and stepped inside the pitch-black room.

The mounted wall candles had burned down to their base. Matthias removed a fresh set from a lacquered chest and busied himself with replacing and lighting them. After the last candle flickered to life, he clicked off the lighter and studied the elaborate array of chains, cuffs and shackles fastened along the expansive wall. The flames glinted across the metal and his mind dizzied at the secrets held within the ruby colored walls. As he reached out to touch the metal, a brash concerto of chains banged against the opposite wall.

Angered by the interruption, he stepped over the body bags containing the Matron and The Virgin and marched toward the ruckus. Each of them deserved to rot in this place of depravity and degradation. They meant everything to Ben and nothing to Matthias.

He studied the bulky chains that dropped from the 2x4 bolted into the ceiling. The

locks had been originally designed to secure some aspiring starlet; no doubt the heaviest part of her anatomy her surgically enhanced chest. Matthias nailed extra fasteners sturdy enough to hoist cattle so the hulking man's girth wouldn't cause the ceiling to cave in. The chains tracked from the sturdy beam and secured to the wall, raising his captive's arms above his head. Matthias bent and examined the steel buckles that shoved his ankles together and pressed his bulky feet to the wall. He draped an arm across his nose as the man's urine permeated from his trousers. The tailored shirt was wrinkled by hours of repetitive sweat that had moistened and dried and moistened again. Swelling along the dark jaw extended towards the temple. He stood. Matthias hadn't caused it. Well, not exactly. It had been the after effect of dragging the man over the vast lawn and down the grotto stairs. Dark splotches, Matthias surmised as dried blood, tainted the edges of the silk that cinched his mouth.

Amused, Matthias grinned. He smacked the inflamed jaw. Hard.

A primitive growl laced with disgust and fury exploded from the man.

"Protector," Matthias gagged. "You stink."

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Northern scratched the graying stubble along his jaw while he moved room to room of the Powers's mansion. Blake held back in the kitchen, interrogating the rep of Powers's home security company.

Jahanpur trailed him. It irked him. He wished she would find someone else to annoy.

Two days ago, he had shaken her hand and disliked her on the spot. She resembled no other female agent he had ever seen at the Academy or roaming the interiors of the Bureau. Jahanpur was the epitome of a Hollywood depiction of a strong, sharp, FBI agent; dark, and sultry with mysterious eyes that could fashion diamonds. Her age was hard to pin due to her taut skin and athletic frame. Although she spoke with authority and had been personally requested by the local Bureau head, Northern couldn't securely place the case's resolution in the hands of someone so synthetically manufactured. After all, she had received her doctorate then written two gripping bestsellers where the heroine ruled the Bureau. Blake had offered that tidbit after their meeting with Miss Leaf. Somehow he thought it pertinent information.

Northern pulled on a pair of latex gloves and moved through the house, taking mental notes, careful not to disturb forensic procedures. The unmade bed in the guest suite, the soiled tissues in the trash in the bathroom, a makeup bag, and some pricey perfume set called Amazing Grace. He picked up the bottle, sprayed the air, and noted the scent smelled like soap. On the nightstand was a pitcher of water beside a Tamiflu prescription inscribed to DeLauer.

He opened dresser drawers and noted women's clothing. When his hand brushed undergarments, Jahanpur cocked an eyebrow at him. He hid his chagrin by flinging open the closet and counting shoes – two dressy and two casual, including a pair of Adidas. Beside them rested a hefty designer suitcase.

Northern then headed to the office where a technician powdered the keyboard and monitor probing for prints. Her scrupulous efficiency and uncanny ability to detect the imperceptible had altered his preconceived notion she lacked the grit to get the job done.

He inquired, “Anything unusual?”

The tech looked up from the screen. “Nothing solid. Desktop, word documents, e-mail all seem innocuous.”

“Fancy words whiz by me like bullets.”

“So far, there are four sets of prints. I’ll send you the particulars in my report.”

“How long before you have the logistics from the hard drive?”

She shrugged. “Pretty backed up with all the recent layoffs. Maybe two, three weeks.”

“That doesn’t put a smile on my face.”

“Thought it was all wrapped up with Connors and Kimura. Now, this.”

Northern paused. Something about this disappearance niggled him. The variables pestered him like a swarm of newly hatched flies.

He backed out of the room and bumped into Jahanpur.

“What’s your gut telling you?” she asked.

“That I missed breakfast.”

“Agent Northern, it is in Miss DeLauer’s best interest we cooperate with one another.”

“I’d ask you to keep that in mind.”

She pushed back her shoulders. “My sole interest is returning Miss DeLauer and Mr. Powers to the life they were living before this nightmare began.”

“Glad to hear it.” He stepped around her and jogged down the stairs.

After his foot hit the last step, she grabbed his shoulder. He spun around and opened his mouth, but words were already pouring from her. “We have several victims

across two states. This case cannot be solved without assistance.”

“Your assistance no doubt?”

She stood two steps higher, yet seemed to tower over him. “You go rogue and you shatter the chances of getting a prosecution, let alone a conviction.”

“Is that your primary concern? Getting Matthias behind bars?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I also want him stopped.”

“Do you?”

“Before he kills again.”

“Really?” Northern turned down the corners of his mouth. “That’s great. How are you going to do that? Wait. I know. Maybe you could consult one of your novels.”

He saw it. Sudden wrath flashed in her eyes. She clenched her fists but held them at her sides.

Through tightly glossed lips, she said, “There is legitimate reason the bureau investigates the way it does. I have studied serial killers for decades. And, I’m certain you are well aware that those who crossed my path were caught and convicted. So, I’ll ask you, so we may finally get it out in the open and stop wasting time.”

“Ask me what?” Northern’s tone startled him. Even to his own ears he sounded like a brooding adolescent.

“Of the fifty-six domestic FBI field offices, only four are large enough to be managed by an assistant director in charge. LA happens to be one of those four. What irks you the most? My impeccable track record or the fact that a woman was specifically

requested to this case by that person— for your support?”

Northern wanted to do many things at that moment. He wanted to lash out with words. Knock her off that high horse. Put her in her place. It didn't help his case that a woman helmed Jahanpur's home office in San Francisco.

Again, he parted his lips to do so just before she interjected, “You have the uncanny ability to get into their minds. You don't merely analyze their moves you anticipate them. Then once they realize you have, it's over.”

He stood there. Clenching his jaw. The words seemed to vaporize through some unidentified hole in his head.

Again, Jahanpur. She touched his shoulder. Northern glared at her hand. “However, this conversation ends here. If you ever force me to use valuable time to bolster your ego when lives are at stake, I'll recommend you be removed without reproach.”

She stepped down, resuming her standard upward gaze. “And, you know my request will be granted.”

Northern harrumphed, turned on his heel and marched to the kitchen. Gratefully, she didn't follow.

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Matthias slammed the French doors behind him. He ran a hand through his hair and held the palms to his nose. The Protector's stench had permeated his attire, seemingly had crept beneath his skin. Swearing, he ripped the clothes from his body and rushed into the newly converted bedroom of the underground dwelling. He'd have to shower again when time was of the essence.

After he toweled off and redressed, he hustled to the elaborate display of monitors and computer equipment taking up the opposite wall of the bed. His fingers tapped in the code and various images of the house popped up: backyard, front entrance, main gate, and eastern and western views. He toyed with the toggle that controlled the clandestine cameras mounted in grotto's stone and bushes and it responded with a minimum touch. The neighbor's cat hopped on the patio table and licked the rim of his coffee cup. It always dragged prey into the yard and devoured the carcass on the back porch. The blood was a pleasing sight, but to leave a mess was rude.

Matthias grinned. He only hoped that cat was there when the F.B.I. figured out where he had taken them. They would flock to the property, invade the house and ...

BOOM!