

Chapter Eleven

Northern took a swig from his cup. Stared at the forensic report on his desk. He had refreshed his coffee, used the restroom, harassed a green field agent on procedure and returned to the dented pine and hard chair dozens of times since the file arrived at four a.m. Still, the words remained the same and the images never changed.

“See if this helps.” Blake plucked a pastry from a paper bag and shoved it toward him.

He accepted it. “Kingston couriered Powers a piece of his fiancée – sliced from the back of her neck. I think the snake probably skipped out of FedEx after he sent it.”

“Not according to the surveillance tapes.”

Sugary glaze coated his fingers. He licked them. “There are at least 500 self-service spots in the LA area alone. How did you manage to pin Kingston down to one location?”

“The routing number is like a package’s DNA. From the time of pick up to the place of location, it’s all there. His packing slip remained true to form. Pre-printed with Alpha and Omega as the sender. But this was a drop box job. Got it on tape from the corporate office in Dallas.”

“Which just so happens to be where sister-in-law works.”

Blake shrugged. “Just utilizing every possible resource.”

Goosey filling streamed in his mouth and Northern closed his eyes. Moaned. It had been a solitary bit of delight since the Powers’s attack days ago. Meals were stuffed in paper bags obtained through a drive thru window; sleep and showers had been confined to a bureau break room. He hoped his maid service thought to feed the goldfish.

Northern chewed the last bite, wiped his mouth and tossed the napkin in the trash. “Acanthosis nigricans, or AN for short, is a skin disorder characterized by dark, thick, velvety skin in body folds and creases. It is usually fostered by an underlying condition.”

“Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome in some cases. Like what Miss DeLauer has.”

He waited, but his partner held back what they were both thinking. Like what Silvia suffered with.

Or had.

He felt it almost instantly. The misery that uncoiled in his gut and slithered around his heart. Five years had scarcely tapered the ache. His head knew how ridiculous it was to miss her this way. It held no promise or resolve of being her back to him. Yet, in moments like this, his soul was desperate enough to fashion a reckless deal with whatever powers that could restore her life.

“The body,” Northern began, but stalled. He set his jaw, cleared his throat. “It becomes desensitized to insulin so the pancreas just keeps producing more until the body finally responds and utilizes it. The excess insulin spills over into the skin causing the thickened ridges and discoloration, or dark, velvety skin in the armpits, groin, and neck.” Northern paused, glared at the photo taken of the contents of the plastic baggy sent to Cedars Sinai. The pain radiated like searing bolts of lightning from a storm cloud.

“Bobby?”

“I’m fine.” Northern snapped.

He knew that his partner was wise enough not to buy the lie. But he was also perceptive enough to know when not to push.

Blake's chair squeaked as he leaned back. He tapped the growing file of gathered info on the case. "Kingston likes to perform – to put on a show. According to ViCAP, his violent nature is purposed, compulsive. He knows right from wrong. But he is compelled to choose wrong. Yet a slew of victims aren't his goal. He meticulously analyzes, then picks those in close relationship with his intended mark. His killing is organized, premeditated, and clearly motivated to annihilate Benjamin Powers."

Northern looked around his desk for a distraction. He took a gulp from the paper cup and grimaced at the tepid liquid. It didn't lessen the sting, but slowly dragged him back to the case at hand. "The lab cross-checked evidence recovered from the Denver crime scenes through Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) and Kingston's DNA profile hasn't appeared in any other investigations outside of this string."

"So the FedEx employee five miles from DIA was killed as a cover to get onto DeLauer's property. And, Gary Winters's death was to prove his power – his competence – that he could kill DeLauer at will."

Morning light streamed through the LA field office windows. Beepers buzzed on agent's hips as they ambled through the doors looking more haggard than Northern felt. Cells or desk phones clamored to life. "You said something about it being important for him to perform."

"Like a leading man facing his third curtain call on Broadway."

Northern didn't see Jahanpur approach. But sensed something in Blake's sudden shift in focus.

A manila file dropped on his desk layering those already open. "Good morning, gentlemen. May I have a moment?"

Northern grunted. Blake offered her the chair to the right of his desk.

She sat smirking at them.

"You interrupted. Is there a point?"

"ViCAP allows law enforcement agencies to directly submit their cases, as well as conduct searches of the database in order to determine if there are similar cases in other jurisdictions."

Northern glared. Blake's shoulders jumped in a quick shrug.

The woman bounced a bit. Like a teenager presenting her stellar speech at nationals. "Since its inception in 1985, comprehensive case information submitted to ViCAP is maintained in the national database and automatically compared to all other cases in the database to identify similarities. Different organizations can facilitate communication and coordination between law enforcement agencies."

"Agent Jahanpur, we are well aware of the history," Blake said.

"Additionally," she chugged on. "Individual case submissions are analyzed by crime analysts through the application of analytical skills, education, specialized training, and research. It's a wonderful tool."

Northern shoved his chair backward and started to bolt from her drivel.

"Through ViCAP I discovered a break in the case."

Northern didn't break stride. The farther he distanced himself, the better.

"Kimura's sister plunged herself and Mr. Powers into the Lago Idrascalea."

Northern halted. Twisted to face her.

"Several years ago." Her eyes met his. "In Milan."

He returned to his chair and whipped open the file. "I know where it is."

Blake rounded the desk and read over his shoulder.

The details of Aiko Kimura's death unfolded before him while Jahanpur narrated, "Seems they were pursued by paparazzi. It came to a stand off on a bridge. She headed straight for them, swerved at the last minute, crashed through the railing and plunged herself and Powers into the lake. Powers recovered for a week in a hospital. Kimura died on impact."

Blake said, "I don't get it. Bruce Carter is Powers's shadow. Why wasn't he driving?"

"He was. Initially. According to Carter's statement, Kimura feigned illness. He climbed out of the vehicle to assist her. She slammed down the lock. Hopped into the driver's seat and, well, it's all there."

Sure enough it was. In simple black and white that mocked him. He wanted to slam his fist through a wall. Jahanpur had trumped him again.

Northern looked to his right. Out of fifty-six domestic FBI field offices only four warranted the volume to be directed by an assistant director in charge, or an ADIC, as opposed to a special agent in charge. LA was one of them. His ADIC blew spittle behind his office door at some freshly minted agent from Quantico for blowing a case. Northern didn't even want to imagine what inventive words he'd select for this screw up.

He knew better. Flat out. What about this case was making him blind to digging beyond the obvious?

Blake said, "I only see minor priors on Jessica. Shoplifting, one aggravated assault. So we've got a revenge alliance. Kimura for her sister's death and Kingston for rejection."

Jahanpur nodded. "I interrogated Connors after her booking. Supposedly the younger Kimura told her she met Kingston at a bar. Seemed a bit unlikely. Powers's friends never once saw him touch alcohol. My contacts at San Quentin informed that Kimura and Kingston became pen pals shortly after his confinement. Soon she was bestowing conjugal visits."

Northern raised a brow. Rotated his head to share a look with Blake. Based on every angle of his profile, it didn't seem likely that Kingston desired women for sexual gratification. Northern derived this nugget from the manner in which he handled Juliana. Each note scripted words of grace and elegance. True, their very nature was menacing – meant to elicit fear. Yet none described how Kingston planned to kill her. Simply that he could – at his whim. Even after he gunned down Gary in *Core's* garage, she described him as serene, focused on the task. He wanted her bracelet, an object that could be easily replaced, not her life.

He agreed with BAU, or the Behavioral Analysis Unit, whose mission was to provide behavioral based investigative and operational support by applying case experience, research, and training to complex and time-sensitive crimes, typically involving acts or threats of violence. Kingston had a fundamental reverence for women. Sex somehow sullied them. It was evident based on the analysis that someone in his sphere had sparked this belief. Someone he held dearer than perhaps his own life. Case after case proved that this concept usually pointed to one woman.

Northern said, "We know that Kingston's father's life was littered with disturbing the peace and grand larceny as a juvenile, then progressed to aggravated assault and armed robbery as an adult. He spent several brief stints incarcerated but was usually

released early on some technicality.”

“Stellar role model,” Blake said.

His mental wheels whirled. “Any record of domestic violence?”

Blake returned to his desk, divided the heap, and separated one folder from the pile. “Neighbors were often called, but whenever police arrived, Kingston’s mother denied any harm.”

He scratched at the stubble on his jaw while Blake scanned the pages, likely his brain dividing the pertinent from indifferent. “It says she disappeared a few years before Kingston moved in with Powers. ViCAP still shows her status as a missing person.”

“It’s like a textbook summary. Falls right in line with how Kingston shaped his worldview. Father was abusive, in-and-out of jail. Mother probably did what she could but probably failed to keep food on the table. Who was her last employer?”

Blake ran a finger down the report. “I recall it was some production company.”

“*Purpose Films.*” This came from Jahanpur before Blake found the answer.

Northern stilled, stared at her, his jaw slack. “Isn’t that owned by – ”

“Benjamin Powers.”

Several moments passed of them gaping at one another while thoughts churned. Northern was the first to speak. “And her job description?”

“A domestic.”

Northern cocked his jaw. He hadn’t realized just how comprehensive his conversation had been with Sam Powers the night of the bogus warehouse raid. Kingston had observed Powers and his buddies consumed with their nocturnal dealings and something snapped.

Northern verbally worked through his thoughts. “It’s likely Kingston’s father killed his wife. And it’s very likely that he did it in front of his son. Which would elevate her in Kingston’s mind as a sacrificial victim. A martyr. So the question is what role did Powers play in her death?”

“An affair?” Blake speculated.

“Based on Powers’s past reputation, that’s not inconceivable. He had women traipsing in and out of his life like New Yorkers through a subway turnstile.”

Jahanpur tapped a slender finger against her lips. “Did Powers or her husband report her as missing?”

His partner shifted some papers, scanned, and then met her eye. “Actually it was Grace Connors, the manager.”

Jahanpur again. “Then it isn’t likely that he had any responsibility in her disappearance. His notoriety was astronomical, even then. He would have set about lining up his PR people to establish a tight perimeter that refuted lines connecting them.”

Northern addressed her. “We need to know the response Connors received when she contacted Kingston’s father. Was he shocked, worried, or remote?”

A grin curved her lips. Northern had never noticed before how it brightened her features. “Is that a request?”

“Please.”

She stood and her perfume hovered like a delicate mist.

Just go, woman! Stop making a production out of it.

Northern slouched in the chair, propped his hands behind his head and forced his thoughts back toward their killer. “Kingston hasn’t sent any notes since Mr. Powers

arrived at Cedars. However, I'm certain the theatrics are far from over. There's only one feasible explanation."

Blake drummed his pen on the reports. "He's building up to the finale."

The tarp was thicker than she imagined. And darker. Her clothing adhered to her skin as if doused by a hose. Perspiration dripped from her scalp into her eyes and down her back. Her tightened then convulsed. She resisted the dry heave. Failed.

"We are not giving up." Was her proclamation. "Bruce? Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

The last time Matthias had entered he issued threats and attempted to humiliate Bruce with taunts. She couldn't see, but metal had rattled furiously above her and to the right. Then Matthias departed and all Juliana heard was sluggish, patterned breathing.

She blew air from her mouth over slick palms. The hours faded into days, but they could have actually been seconds. How long she had been trapped inside the musty bag, Juliana hadn't a clue. It was an unnerving confusion groping around in obscurity when daylight must have come and gone.

Time. She had time. Time to puff on her drenched hands and free the knife from her ankle.

She wiggled to the left. The bag hadn't been designed for flexibility or movement. She gasped to saturate her lungs with air. It tasted stale on her tongue. The half-inch rip in the seam allowed a minuscule slice of circulated air and a limited view of the bizarre area. Flickering candlelight gave the walls the appearance that they had been painted with congealed blood. Profuse chains drooped from the ceiling, slithered from the walls, and erupted from the floor. Straight ahead was a door that whispered whenever opened. If she hadn't seen Matthias enter, she would have believed the place held no exit or entrance. The seams flowed tight and smooth from jab to fortification. Which meant it was pointless to scream. No sound would escape the enclosure.

She rolled to the right and her shoulder caught on the zipper. A substance that was textured like rubber but resisted her scratching like cement had reinforced the metal. She bent her knees and clawed at her ankle. Pointed twinges throbbed through her joints. Pain surged through her fingers. Earlier, the dampness increased and eventually the bag filled with a scent that was cooery and a bit sweet. She battled the urge to raise her fingers to her mouth. Fought to believe it was simply a physiological result of her determined efforts. The realization that it was blood would have provoked panic. So she clawed and clawed until the temptation subsided.

How long? How long could she inhale before the sack filled with carbon dioxide?

How long before her captor tired of the game and –

Okay. Enough. Stop it!

You came here to live. You didn't come here to die.

"This is not my grave."

She inched her fingers to the top of the rope, curled them around her pants leg and yanked. Eventually it had to give - to surrender and tear from her diligence. But long

before she desired, her fingers cramped with jagged spasms.

“No.”

Just flex it, Juliana. But that did little to subdue the agony. So she massaged until her left hand trembled with fatigue. Then crawled her fingers down and resumed her struggle. This time it had only taken seconds before her hand collapsed and withered at her side.

Juliana blinked in the pitch-darkness. Her head pounded within her skull. For long minutes, she lay still, demanding the hurt to cease.

“I am not ready to die.”

A sob threatened to explode and she slammed her lips tight to suppress it.

“God, I know You hear me.”

There it was again. The whisper. Then approaching footsteps.

Juliana shifted onto her back trying not to gulp and deplete the air. She wanted to peer through the tiny slit but didn't know what reaction that might generate in him if discovered.

His footsteps were heavier than usual. Hurried.

Weight plunged beside her as if Matthias had dropped to his knees.

The area above her nostrils collapsed and rapidly popped away as she gasped for air. A hand groped around her head then trailed down the zipper.

“Baby?” Fingernails scratched against the adhered metal. “Can you hear me?”

Ben!