

Chapter Eleven (continued)

Grace steered her Mercedes to the right. Heavy shrubs jutted from the alcove ten feet from the property's entrance. Ben had used it whenever his guest list exceeded space for parking. Grace wasn't a guest. Nor was she aware of the current owner's identity. It didn't matter. The Voice had compelled and here she sat.

“Now what?”

The mansion was nestled on a bluff overlooking downtown LA, The Santa Monica Mountain Range and the neighboring Hollywood Hills. Stucco rose ten feet encompassing the Spanish villa with its blossoming gardens and gushing fountains. Grace recalled there were two ways to enter from Mulholland Drive; massive hand carved doors from Barcelona to the left or a matching gate that allowed vehicle access to the right. Both were fastened with hidden security cameras so sensitive that even a buzzing fly was detected.

She chewed her lip. Tapped her nails on the steering wheel. “I'm here. So, Voice, what's the plan?”

To her left, Mulholland was beginning to bustle. European sedans and fancy sports cars zoomed by. A service truck ambled past in pursuit of appliance repair. The fifteen-minute drive was consumed with a method to gain access beyond those walls. What would she tell the current owner? Was she to press the ringer, smile, and state a Voice had told her to come? Not likely.

She glanced at her watch. Her nerves buzzed as if every limb had taken a snooze. Not wanting to draw attention, she attempted to hold still. But her muscles protested with a vicious sting and it was impossible not to wiggle. Sitting behind the wheel was not the

answer. She didn't know how – couldn't explain it if someone pressed – but somehow the house held the answer to Juliana's disappearance. Grace hadn't put much stock in most of her confession, but she believed Matthias was every bit the monster Jessica described. And precious time was ticking. The stinging wasn't letting up. She had to move.

She jumped out of the car, glanced around, and jogged toward the imposing door entry. The walls seemed to loom higher than she remembered. Felt thicker against her palm. She searched for something to support her weight. Maybe the owner received fresh milk service and she could hoist herself over the wall from the crate. But there was nothing she could use for leverage. Pilates had kept her strong and limber, but wouldn't jolt her over the ledge. Perhaps that was best. Maybe what awaited her on the other side of the barrier was Rocko the Rottweiler. More issues would arise if she had to beg the beast to unclamp his teeth from her leg.

She turned from the doors, plowed a hand through her damp hair, and half heard the red gravel crunching beneath her feet. Ben's home had never felt this way before. As if she stood at the entry of an impregnable fortress, not a place where she was once welcomed as if it were her own. The first tears, since the entire ordeal began, burned at the edges of her eyes. She had nothing to do with this horror. But she had been blind not read the underlying signals.

Jessica's background check was pristine and her professionalism during their initial interview impressed. But there had been a gnawing in her gut that all was not as it seemed. Ben had taken Jessica to lunch and phoned Grace thereafter singing the young woman's praise. What Ben wanted, Ben usually got. So, she had suppressed her misgivings, especially since she had nothing tangible to justify her uncertainty. Now, to

Ben she was a traitor. And that lie simply could not stand.

Her finger jabbed the buzzer before she could regret it. The thoughts jumbled in her head. It was her livelihood to persuade others with her words. But this wasn't negotiating a million dollar deal or touring prime real estate for a client. Someone's life was a stake. She looked up to the area where she knew the camera was hidden. And waited.

Her second push held for five seconds.

No answer.

She faced Mulholland and placed hands on her hips. This morning, the rains had driven away the smog and the panorama was breathtaking. But Grace saw none of it. She wanted behind that gate – needed to progress beyond the blasted barrier.

“I...what am I to do?” She placed her palm on the centuries old wood and dropped her head.

Enter as in the days gone by.

The Voice!

Grace bolted upright. Cars traveled up and down behind her, but the drive was vacant of pedestrian traffic. She shut her eyes to set her focus. Ben had given her a set of house keys, but those had been discarded after the sell. As days gone by? The words hummed through her head. Images crept from memory. Her eyes flung open. She raced to the right and halted in front of the larger entry she had driven her car beneath countless times. The steel panel was still there, protruding from the textured wall. She raised a finger. Could the code have remained the same after all this time? Surely the new owner had changed it. She sucked in a quick breath and pressed the first digit. Then the second.

Her eyes made a quick check around before she entered the third. Another sharp inhalation then she stabbed in the fourth. She expected a shrilling alarm or LAPD to tear down the lane. Her eyes widened as the door shuddered and disappeared into the wall revealing the house and the manicured grounds.

If discovered, no judge would grant bail twice. Her high-priced attorney was stellar, not magical. This time she would waste away in county lock up until opening day of her trial. Grace bolted up the driveway, her feet pounding on the gravel before common sense could convince her to tuck tail and run.

“Ben!” Juliana screamed.

“Baby, I’m here.”

She gulped and the sour air burned her lungs. Star bursts filled her sight. Her body felt suspended, weightless over a mysterious abyss. The impossible had manifested. Ben! He was here. And they could all be rid of the nightmare.

She felt him beside her. Heard his glorious breathing.

“Ben?”

Juliana groped at the zipper. She reached up, scraped at the metal, but her efforts were in vain. Her fingertips were numb, caked over by blood in effort to release the knife. Then, it struck her. Why wasn’t Ben answering? Why wasn’t he ripping the sack apart?

“Juliannnnnnnaaaaaa.”

No.

It couldn’t be. It simply could not be!

“Oh, my. Did Ben forget to tell you that I am also a master at voices? Picked his up the first month after we met. You wouldn’t believe how handy it is.”

Dear God!

NO!

Despite the inadequate space and dank air, Juliana thrashed within the confines of the bag. She flung her arms, thrust her feet, and screamed as if volts of electricity were surging through the sack. Matthias was shouting for her to stop – threatening to really give her something that would elicit screams, but she didn’t care. She kept whipping about, pounding at the sides, hoping, praying she would somehow harm him in the process. Until her screams became hollow. She convulsed, her back arcing in pain. Her lungs fought desperately for air, but found none.

Ben wasn’t there. Maybe never would be.

The mysterious abyss returned. Juliana allowed it to swallow her, tugging her into the deep.

She made it up the drive, crouching past the Phoenix palms, bougainvillea and gurgling fountains seemingly undetected. No security demanded she halt as they aimed a pistol at her head. Rocko hadn’t popped out, snarling, behind a shrub.

She mounted the front steps and peered through the transparent slats in the front door. It was as if the villa was locked in a time warp. Ben had built the home in 1986, resided there for fifteen years until he married Eternity, yet everything appeared as if he had never left. The same desk and chair rested along the wall. Potted palms stood on the opposite side, flanking yet another fountain. Even the rugs and wall hangings appeared

unchanged.

The property had been sold over six years ago to some real estate tycoon wanting to camp in on Ben's celebrity and turn it over for a massive profit. Ben had agreed to sell it fully furnished, barring his personal items, and ended up walking away with a hefty return. Obviously the new owner had no intention of reselling the property. It was creepy. But with Ben's celebrity, Grace had witnessed even stranger deeds.

Then she saw something that caused a wave of nausea to surge. No way. That couldn't be. On the table, smack dab in the middle, was a striking picture frame. And encased within the four sides was a photo of Ben. But he wasn't alone. Ben's arm was tossed across the shoulders of Matthias Kingston. Both were grinning, blissful, no trace of hate.

Okay. Acquiring Ben's furnishings was one thing, but a private photo was quite another. Grace knew with certainty that Ben had destroyed physical links between he and Matthias. She had watched him do so. Creepy. Creepy. Creepy.

Sure, she could ring the doorbell. But she had no plausible reason to be standing there. By now the security system had probably alerted of an entry through the front gate. If anyone was home, it wasn't likely they didn't take issue with her unlawful admission.

She jogged down the steps and clipped past the courtyard. Tugging open the backyard gate, her mind sorted through scenarios. One-by-one, the conclusion was the same. And it made her want to vomit. Grace believed if she accepted it, even more power would be given to the nightmare. But how could she deny what was glaring her in the face?

She rounded the corner and gasped. Her steps slowed as her eyes surveyed the

seemingly impossible. The yard was immaculate, lush, and precisely how Ben had designed it. From the alcove of oaks shading the stone bench on the far left to the gazebo to the far right. Every shrub, every planter, even the Lladro figurines peering from the grass remained.

A faint meow caught her attention. She moved toward the sound and discovered a calico perched on the tabletop of the patio set. He lounged in the shade the deck permitted. As she approached, he flicked his tail and a cup tumbled and crashed to the Spanish tile. The feline scrambled across the yard. Grace bent to gather the pieces, then stopped. Touching it would taint any evidence that remained. An amber stain had dried at the bottom, which meant someone had likely used it recently. She ambled upright and saw what wasn't supposed to be. At first, the gurgling had caught her off guard then the water gushing over the glistening boulders. The grotto.

Try as she might, denial was no longer an option. Her heart hammered in her chest. Kingston had somehow purchased the place and restored it as a shrine. To Ben.

The grotto!

Grace took two steps forward before the dread, enveloping and vile, swept over her. She attempted to inhale but ended up drawing deficient bursts. It felt as if a hand had gripped her throat. And the deeper she tried to collect her breath, the tighter it squeezed. The ground seemed to quiver beneath her feet and she found herself buckling. She reached out to break her fall but her chin cracked against the table.

The pain sliced through her skull like a blade. She groped at the tile, tried to sit up and collapsed once more. Wetness streamed across her jaw and gathered at the back of her neck. No matter how many times she blinked nothing focused. Something was

terribly wrong. It wasn't simply that she was standing one minute and plummeting the next. It wasn't that her lungs were robbed of oxygen. It was that her eyes saw nothing, yet she sensed utter horror. So pervasive, so vicious that she scrambled to rise, yet her body betrayed her. She had never prescribed to the notion of evil. That was for people who were afraid of their own shadows, afraid to take responsibility for their poor choices. There was simply energy – some good, some not so much. But if she lived, and if anyone cared to ask, she would describe what seized her as just that. Evil.

Darkness threatened to arrest her vision. But she couldn't black out. She had to warn someone. But very limb seemed paralyzed.

“Help me.”

It sounded foreign, but she knew she had said it. And that it had been a prayer.

She spread her eyes wide and maintained vision. The distant chirping wasn't recognized at first. It was coming from her breast pocket. Her cell! Twitching with spasms, her fingers crept toward her t-shirt. The tears sprang when her fingers gripped the slick surface.

“Hello.” She gasped, before she brought the phone to her lips.

Someone was responding, but the spasms jerked the cell away.

“Help!”

The phone landed inches from her head. Grace flung her body to the side, wobbled for a bit like a fish.

“I'm at 14220 Mulholland Drive.”

A flash caught her eye. Grace squinted. Behind the sliding door a red light blinked at her. It was encased within a black box mounted to the ceiling just over the doorpost.

With growing trepidation, she traced a blue wire that extended from the box and stretched out of her view.

Run!

The call came from her own soul attempting to preserve her life. But she couldn't run. She couldn't even pick up the phone!

“Call the police!”

She tasted blood. An intense heat coursed over her skin. And the red light kept winking at her.

“There's a bomb...”

Her battle to remain conscious faltered. There was the haunting darkness, then silence.

Chapter Twelve

Ben had endured the tests, the probing, the endless needles and laborious study of his face. They had turned up nothing but what could be expected from such a horrific attack. His headache, the sporadic twitching along his jaw, and slight swelling around his eyes would pass. The infection was swiftly diminishing. His maxillofacial injury was nearly disappearing as if the attack had been a mere nightmare. Still, the physicians refused to discharge him. Although healing miraculously, complications due to his HIV could crop up at any moment. They wanted him near. But Ben wanted to be on the hunt for those he loved. Now, he'd have to escape under a watchful eye and without permission.

“May I at least take a walk?” he asked.

The team concurred, but authorized for no more than ten minutes in length.

His family and friends swarmed in the room after his examination, rebelling against hospital policy. They could have cared less. He stared at the semicircle surrounding his bed, taking in their relief, their appreciative expressions. They were witnessing a genuine miracle and defied hospital personnel to chastise. No one did. The staff seemed just as elated at his remarkable recovery.

Sheila was smoothing her fingers over his cheek when the terror gripped. It hit like sledgehammer from hell. He lost his breath, tried frantically to regain it.

“Benny, what’s wrong?” She bolted from the bed.

The edges of his vision faded to black.

He saw a woman lying on her side. On tile, beneath a deck, blood marring her features and blonde hair. The vision tilted from the woman. Behind her was a fountain where the water flowed over massive boulders.

“Get the doctor!”

The image of the fountain edged forward as if tugged by Ben’s curiosity. It seemed indistinct, yet strikingly familiar. Then, Ben discovered it wasn’t truly a fountain at all. It was a grotto. His grotto.

He felt the room surge in around him. Someone touched his arm; someone shook his shoulder. The darkness that had shrouded his sight vanished as quickly as it had arrived. Ben felt a hand gripping his chest. Reached to remove it and discovered it was his own. Hunter was halfway through the door.

“Wait!” He wheezed.

“Ben, you need a doctor – ” Sheila began.

“Hunter!” This time his voice found strength. “No. I’m fine.”

Hunter warily rejoined the circle. No one seemed convinced. It probably didn’t help that Ben couldn’t stop the tremors.

“It’s been a long morning,” he attempted.

Sheila said, “True. But something just happened. You can’t even stop shaking.”

“I really don’t think we should just let that slide,” Colette this time.

“You looked as if someone was coming after you with a machete,” Hunter said, his eyes wide and alarmed.

“I’m just very tired.” Ben pushed into the pillow. He almost shut his eyes, until he realized that the unsettling image might return.

“Please,” he sighed. “Just give me a few hours.”

They trudged from his bedside, glancing over their shoulders; as if whatever had just occurred would do so again before they departed. Dionne was the last in line. He wanted to call out to her but didn't. If he did, those who knew him for decades would know something grave was up. They would question him and Ben wasn't certain he wouldn't cave.

Dionne turned and Ben knew instantly that she understood. He needed her to execute his break. If she refused, he would just have to make do. But it would take time that he knew none of them could afford.

He pretended to rest, his eyes staring up at the soft hue of natural lighting that filled his room. But every nerve prickled. The quivering still rattled through him. He had seen a woman injured on the back porch of his first home. Her face obscured by too much blood to discern her identity. That had been disturbing enough. But the image of the grotto, picturesque and fully restored had made him want to scream.

“Dear God.”

The grotto.

He couldn't go back and erase the shame or what he had done within those walls. When he had sold the property, he had been eager to leave every reminder behind. He wanted – needed desperately – to establish a new life with Eternity and forget the past.

The door swished open. Dionne walked in and without hesitation sat on the bed.

“I don't know what just happened,” Ben said.

“Describe it as best you can.”

“I don't know, Dionne. It's hard to explain.”

She took his hand. “Try.”

“I guess I had a vision.”

“Yes?”

“Of my old house in the hills. There was a woman on the deck, bleeding so badly that I couldn’t make out her face.”

Ben hesitated. First he had stated that Go’el Hadam had visited him. Now, he was seeing visions. He wouldn’t blame her if she forbade Juliana to marry him. He was losing it for sure.

“Ben, I’m listening.” She squeezed his hand. “Not judging. Just hearing you out. OK?”

He nodded, reluctant as ever to continue. “Remember when I visited and Juliana was attacked?”

“Yes.”

“You told me that you saw me as a mighty oak, planted by the streams of water which yields its fruit in season and –”

“Whose leaf does not wither,” she completed.

Ben shut his eyes. How was he to tell his future mother-in-law that he was carrying a death sentence? And why.

“I remember,” Dionne said.

He analyzed every conceivable reason to keep his mouth shut. It wasn’t imperative to divulge his past – certainly not to her. How would she view him then?

“I’ve done some things – I’ve made mistakes that...”

He felt her pat his chest. “Benjamin.”

He opened his eyes.

“Mistakes. They can be a catalyst for growth or despair. You seek forgiveness from another or from yourself. You mend the damage. You heal, and grow. But there is a flip side. Just as strong. Just as potent. When you cling to the mistake, use it to punish others, or yourself, it develops into agony, a tormenting prison. A soul cage.”

Ben believed that if she had any inkling how he had conducted his past, she wouldn't have been so gracious. Something along the lines of once a scoundrel, always a scoundrel, he thought. It had only been three months since he had turned his heart, his life, over to Christ. His manner of doing things, even his thinking, had changed dramatically. He faced challenges with a quiet assurance that he wasn't in control. Someone who loved him with a fierce devotion was. Which meant, ultimately, he had nothing to fear. Yet knowing this didn't always manifest in his walking it out. Ben knew that people would form their opinions, pass judgments rooted in bitter experience. And none mattered at that moment more than Dionne's.

She leaned forward. “If you insist on holding onto whatever brings you humiliation, guilt or regret, then you've locked yourself in. God has given you the key. He has granted you the power to release yourself.”

Was she real? Ben thought. There was no disguising the fact he had damaged countless lives. One of which had abducted his mother, best friend, and future wife in effort to extract revenge.

“You said that Go'el insisted you not attempt to do this of your own accord.”

Ben managed a weak nod.

“What do you think that means, Ben?”

He shrugged then didn't realize why he did. Numerous thoughts, some wild, some unbearable, were spinning in his mind. He sat upright and curled his hands into fists. "Not to tear from this room in my own time. But, I had no idea just how inconceivable that would be. I want to scour the city, searching like a mad man, because I can't stand to lie in this bed imagining what Matthias is doing to them."

She nodded, her chin dipping with deliberate measure. "Is there more?"

He stared at the ceiling for a beat. Met her fixed gaze again. "Dionne, I don't know that I can tell you this. It's hard enough for me to face it."

She leaned back. If he revealed what had ushered them all to this nightmare, there was no way she could remain impartial. But he needed her. He sucked in rapid breaths until his pulse decreased. Dionne kept looking into his eyes, her compassion solid.

"I saw what you've described. I saw my soul cage."

Jahanpur arrived first. She climbed out of the unmarked sedan and examined the perimeter. A silver coupe was parked by the side of the road. The front gate, wide enough to receive a van, gaped like a missing tooth in the stucco wall.

She had performed a squealing u-turn on Sunset Boulevard, phoned Northern and revealed the disturbing details of Grace Connors's call. He had barked implicit instructions not to disturb the scene until he arrived. Fine. FBI's LA Major Crimes offices were plastered with Kingston's profile. Education, physical, psych and religious summaries – all painstakingly compiled by Northern. She made no objection to following

his lead. This was his baby and everyone knew how he ached to bring it home. She knew what it felt like to track a killer and experience the thrill of locking them behind bars. Chauvinism she could let roll, but allowing a manic like Kingston to roam free was intolerable.

Jahanpur walked forward slowly, the soft crunch of gravel under her shoes. A blossoming courtyard flowed to her left and fountains and more vegetation thrived to the right. Tucked behind the abundant patch of shrubbery and flora sprung a guesthouse, fully constructed. The entrance to the home loomed ahead. Her hand instinctively thumbed her Glock, removed it from the holster, and flipped off the safety. Birds chirped, plunging from branch to branch. Bees traversed from one bloom to the next. Everything appeared normal. Yet, Jahanpur knew better.

Connors had been released on bail in the wee hours of that morning. Jahanpur reasoned that she had likely headed straight home. A woman of her status and means probably couldn't wait to get home, eat food from her kitchen, and sleep beneath her sheets. What Jahanpur found odd was that according to her neighbor, Connors screeched out of her driveway around six. Calculating the drive from lockup that placed her home for less than an hour.

Jahanpur entered through the garage, called out and found it peculiar that nearly every light on the main level shined bright. When she discovered the handgun on the kitchen counter, her senses erupted. Normal shrieked out the window. She phoned the bureau, achieved the manager's cell number, called, and heard Connors's frantic plea.

She climbed the front steps and rang the doorbell. When no one answered, she peered beyond the translucent slats. The foyer was immaculate with no signal of foul

play, no evidence of struggle. The rugs were set, the furniture upright, and the picture frame vertical. Her breath caught in her throat. She squinted and discovered that what she saw was indeed true. Jahanpur chambered a round, cocked her elbow at the ninety-degree angle. Her vision sharpened, the bird cries boomed, aromas from the abundant gardens nearly overpowered. This was it. Kingston had been here. Because the only time her senses went ballistic was when the killer either had been or was near.

A flash of white from her left grabbed her attention. She pivoted and aimed the gun at the backyard gate. Behind the boards something crashed. Hard enough that it rattled the bolt. A low moan, barely audible above the breeze, caused her to advance from the porch.

“F.B.I.” Jahanpur leapt from the porch. “Don’t move!”

Another moan, then a hand covered in red groped along the top of the gate.

“Remain where you are!”

From her peripheral view, tactical teams entered and navigated the yard. Northern and Blake jogged alongside, weapons raised. She signaled to them, indicating the gate. They formed a line and approached the prowler.

“Bomb,” the voice behind the gate whispered.

Northern cut across her path and proceeded toward the tattered voice. Blake followed, his firearm trained at the wooden panels.

“Not armed,” the woman sighed.

Northern’s left hand extended toward the latch, his right hand on his weapon.

Behind the gate, one palm stretched open. Then another. Blonde hair, desperate and pleading eyes within a face layered with blood ascended into view. A large gash

dripped blood from her chin onto her white shirt. Her eyes darted from one agent to the next. Jahanpur noticed that her pupils were dilated. Her speech slurred slightly and she seemed confused.

Northern swung open the gate, briskly checked the woman for weapons. Holstered his weapon.

Jahanpur moved closer as she replaced her weapon. “Grace Connors?”

Connors stretched her eyes then blinked. “Huh?”

“Are you Grace Connors?”

“Yes.”

“You have a injury on your chin. Did you hit your head?”

She nodded. “ On the patio table.” When she attempted to step forward, she lost her balance and smashed into Northern.

“Whoa. Easy.” Northern held her up and looked to the tactical team. “Check the perimeter.”

Absolutely delightful!

Matthias propped his feet on the table beside the bank of monitors that had afforded him views of the entire scene. He shoveled a handful of popcorn in his mouth. Munched happily for a few moments. This was riveting entertainment. From Grace’s comical collapse to the agents with their Heckler & Koch MP5’s stalking across the lawn.

His finger hovered over the detonator.

The party was just getting started!

“Looks like a concussion,” Jahanpur said.

Miss Connors leaned against Northern. He assisted her from behind the gate. She stilled their progress and stared over her shoulder. “Tell your men there’s a bomb. Rigged to the deck door.”

Blake nodded to Northern then rushed to the backyard.

“Yes, ma’am. That’s why they’re here. Now, let’s get you to a medical team.”

Connors didn’t budge. “I came because...well, he’s here. I can feel it all around.”

“What’s that?” Northern gently tugged on her waist but Connors resisted.

“Evil.”

Matthias circled his thumb over the detonator.

Three.

Jahanpur knew shock when she saw it. She moved to the woman’s left side. “That wound looks pretty nasty, Miss Connors. Why don’t you walk with me so we can get it looked at?”

Connors looked to Northern, then back to her. “There’s a picture.”

Jahanpur’s mind flashed to photo in the foyer as she gripped the manager’s side. “Ma’am?”

“In the hall – of them together – him and Ben. I’m telling you he has them here. Maybe even inside.” Her eyes darted to the residence. “What if he plans to blow it up?”

“Miss Connors, we have every intention of not allowing that to happen.”

She shook her head and reminded Jahanpur of a toddler refusing to eat vegetables.

“You don’t get it. I was led here.”

Two.

They propped her up on the rear of the ambulance a few feet down the road where it blocked in her vehicle. The African-American agent excused himself and trotted back to the house. Grace could tell by their looks that they believed the slash on her chin was to blame for her ramblings. How could she possibly explain what had brought her here?

The female agent asked, “You said you were led here.”

Grace winced as the paramedic examined her chin. “Yes.”

“How?”

Grace pretended she didn’t hear the question. But she could tell by the agent’s demeanor that she was confident, assertive and much too clever for that.

“Miss Connors?”

“Yes?”

“Explain something to me: You were just released this morning. Yet, you didn’t even spend an hour at home.”

“Who told you that?”

“Your neighbor.”

She was grateful the paramedic chose that moment to dab on antiseptic. Grace

wincing and carried on for a bit. Stalling.

“The best way I know how to answer that is to say I was compelled to come. I knew that peace was futile until I did.”

The agent matched Grace’s stare. It wasn’t combative or even intimidating. The woman seemed simply to want to know what motive had driven her here.

Grace shivered. “That animal is here. I can feel him.”

One.

Her body trembled within the dark sack. But it wasn’t just from fear. Something external had shaken the ground beneath her. Chains rattled, their intense chatter disturbing the menacing silence.

The air seemed tighter against the seams; the air darker. Had her outburst actually damaged the material enough to warrant Matthias to reinforce it? Juliana felt the grin before her mind recognized what had occurred. Any maneuver that created a wrinkle in his scheme served him right. She hoped it ticked him off. Because she had no intention of dying in this wretched bag and when she emerged she wanted him to fight her. Needed him to.

She raised her hand from her side and touched her throat. The glands protruded like winding rope beneath her neck. No doubt an after effect of screaming. She crept her

hand to the left. With every breath, her mind battled that any effort toward freedom was useless. But she refused to succumb to the panic. She had done that before. Given over to it completely. No more.

Her breath stilled when her fingernail caught on the material. She turned to her side and fingered the tear. An unfamiliar emotion, fierce and pervasive, twisted from her belly. It seemed primal and uncompromising and it fueled her to rip at the opening. Her swollen fingers worked at the fabric. She ignored the throbbing. Everything became secondary as more air and light penetrated. Her hands worked in frenzy, yanking and clawing until her hand finally scraped against the cool marble.

Juliana pressed her face forward and squirmed. No matter how long she lived, she would never forget the sound of the sack giving way below her thrusts. She shoved her arms through then wiggled until her head and shoulders contacted the floor. A strange thought hit. What if Matthias rigged the space with cameras? What if he was watching her struggle only to burst through the door and end it? How would he do it? A bullet to the head? A knife through her heart?

No, Juliana! He didn't give you life nor can he take it. The voice commanding, familiar and true pounded in her heart.

She flipped over on the floor. Stopped cold once more. Bruce hung like a battered puppet against the wall. Chained like a captured animal from his neck to his feet. She found a semblance of gratitude that he wasn't conscious. His chest rose and fell in steady tempo. Perhaps lost to the pain.

"We won't die here." She tugged her waist and legs free. "I promise."

She flung the carrier meant for death to the side. It slid to a stop near one that

looked identical. Juliana shoved her knees to her chest and felt for the knife. Her struggle had pushed the knife upward. Juliana closed her fingers around the handle, tugged and it released. She crashed backward, her head slamming onto the stone. She needed time. Time to catch her breath – time for the throbbing in her head to subside – time to wipe away the drenching. But she didn't have time.

She shoved forward. An earnest sting radiated from her leg. Leaning, she discovered a three-inch gash pooled blood from her shin. Pain or no pain, she had to free them from this hell.

As she sawed the rope, her eyes wandered over the candles, the ghastly walls, and finally to the body bag. She shivered. There was the repugnant sensation that someone was trapped inside. What sick pleasure Matthias must have encountered locking them in this sinister macabre to die. If cameras had detected her movements, they were impeccably concealed.

Was the body alive or dead? Joan or...Ben?

The rope snapped. She flexed her feet and stifled a cry. Searing pain coursed through her feet as if scored by a branding iron. No matter. She had to get up and see the contents of that bag.

She crawled, her elbows rubbing on the hard stone. You can do this, she comforted. Juliana clutched the zipper then shut her eyes and prayed. It hadn't been reinforced so it released with ease. Her hand moved forward and touched flesh. A belly. Juliana held her breath as she willed it to rise. It did. Barely. She opened her eyes and scuttled forward.

“We will not die here.”

Joan was unconscious. Her body saturated with perspiration and her complexion a deadly gray. Joan's shirt was also drenched with blood.

Juliana ripped off her own sweat jacket and tank top. She shoved the shirt into her mouth, clamped down and tugged. The shirt remained intact. She attempted to rip the shirt over and over. When her jaw threatened to unhinge, it finally split. Tearing it into pieces, she wrapped two strips around Joan's shoulder. She took the knife and cut a slit along the edge so that it wouldn't be easily detected. Then she smoothed the woman's cheek.

“Stay with me, Joan.”

Then, with immense aversion, she re-zipped the sack.

Juliana edged to the wall, clambered upward beside Bruce. “Don't let go.”

Then, she inched along the wall. The door seams were concealed, but she believed she recalled their position when Matthias had entered. Crouching to the floor, knife poised, she waited. He would enter. And Juliana would be ready.