

## PROLOGUE

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Hands. That's all she could feel. Hands around her throat, pressing her down, further and further...down...to a place she'd never been before, beyond all thought and memory...down to the precipice between life and death where nothing mattered except survival.

Her adrenaline-laced heart raced madly as she fought to free herself from the strong hands that pinned her to the bed. The hands were her only focus, her world suddenly limited by the feel of their strength and the certainty of the deadly intent that directed them. His face and body loomed above her, filling the entire field of her vision...mad eyes...blood lighting his countenance with red and purple hues...veins throbbing at the sides of his forehead...sweat dripping down his cheeks as he focused his concentration on the struggle that lay between them.

Consciousness began to ebb from her mind as he squeezed, pressing his right thumb into the front of her delicate throat centered directly above the place where the breath of life made its way into the human body. She felt herself becoming limp as her supply of oxygen diminished to nothingness, the world around her fading to black, her focus narrowing to the bridge between the dimensions of life and death.

Then, as she began to leave behind the possibility of continuing to live, he hesitated, lightening the pressure, allowing her to turn back from death. She drifted back and became aware once more of her surroundings, her dawning awareness like waking from a nightmare that filled her mind with a sense of confusion. With her peripheral vision, she noticed familiar objects around her, objects that usually invoked feelings of joy or at least appreciation. The horror that overwhelmed her was heightened by the familiar feel of her bed, her pillows and silken sheets, the things that most represented her place of safe refuge from the dangers of the world. At a very deep level, she recognized that even a bad feeling was preferable to no feeling at all, and she grabbed the feeling of horror like a life preserver, the only option to oblivion forever, something she wasn't ready to face. In what seemed like another lifetime, only seconds before, she'd loved the room where she lay, loved its close proximity to her backyard garden visible through a glass wall and French doors that stood open to the afternoon light. Her backyard haven was filled with life: brightly colored flowers, a mixture of colorful annuals and carefully tended perennials; birds playing in a concrete bath set in the shade of a stately oak; butterflies flitting from plant to plant pollinating seeds; sunlight filtering down through the fluttering leaves of green trees, photons bombarding

the planet with life-giving energy. It was a portrait of peace on Earth utterly indifferent to the violence occurring in its midst.

A tabuia tree she'd recently planted bloomed just outside the door, its golden flowers a bizarre background to an act of terror that she didn't understand; the tree's splendor lost in the immediacy of the nightmare that had come from nowhere, that made no sense to her. She knew she could end the danger to her life and the confusion that filled the room if she could just free herself enough to talk to her attacker.

She knew she could reason with him if she could regain the ability to speak her thoughts, to ease his mind, to make him understand there was no reason for her to die. She would submit to him gladly if he would simply leave her life intact, and she would seal the bargain for her life with a promise of secrecy. She's done that before, and she'd do it again. There was nothing for him to fear.

He began to squeeze again, and she struggled with a burst of adrenaline driven strength. The fear that drove her suddenly frenzied effort to escape violent death completely replaced everything that had ever meant anything in life to her. All of her thoughts and feelings, which had been scattered in so many confusing directions in the preceding hours and weeks, united in one surge of strength directed by one thought that did not waver.

She used all of her strength to follow her one guiding thought, a singularity which echoed in her mind over and over through every nook and cranny of her brain: "Live," she thought, "please let me live." Over and over, as she stared across the line that separates life from death, the mantra of desperate hope repeated itself inside her head. Without even knowing she was doing it, she tried to speak the words out loud, to beg her attacker for life, but the sound that emerged from her mouth was just a gargled moan of fearful nonsense, her voice lost in the ever increasing pressure of his hands.

The importance she'd placed on beautiful surroundings could be seen all around her, the walls covered with prints and photographs, pretty glass figurines lining the top of her dresser drawer, colorful rugs on the floor, a luxurious satin comforter on the bed. The wind blew through the open glass door, the long lace curtains that hung around it blowing prettily in the gentle breezes, revealing the patch of Eden just outside.

But the beauty with which she'd surrounded her life was lost to the woman's singular focus, which made everything around her a blur of meaningless stuff that mattered not at all. Her only desire was to fill her lungs with air, to feel the rush of oxygen that was suddenly finer than the finest bubbles of Dom Perignon, more beautiful than anything she'd ever imagined.

"Live," she thought with an intensity she hadn't known existed.

Her mind seemed to break free from fear for just a heartbeat, allowing in the sound of the wind chimes that hung in the trees outside, ringing in dulcet tones that sounded so peaceful. Perhaps the serenity she usually gained from the sights and sounds that trickled into her consciousness for just a second gave her the strength to fight, the determination to continue her life.

She pushed as hard as she could against the dead weight of the man lying atop her. Even her adrenalized surge of strength was weak compared to his well-developed upper arms, but she finally succeeded in breaking free from the hand he'd pressed into her throat.

He too had been distracted momentarily, not by the sounds filtering through the open glass door, but by the wild beauty of her animated face, her long dark hair spilling prettily back against the silken sheets, framing violet eyes and deep pink lips that quivered with emotion. These things had long influenced his ability to control his sexual urges, had led him to perform acts that had caused problems in his life many times before. But it wasn't her beauty that captured his attention on that day. It was as if he'd suddenly recognized her life force as a thing of beauty, separate and apart from the glory of her body. He was awed by the power he wielded over it, a power different from any other he'd ever known. He realized that taking her sexually wouldn't be enough to conquer the emotion, the strong urge, the heat that filled his being with desire for something new. He needed to take control of her life force and make it his own, rip it from her and make it live only inside of him in the precious place where he stored his secrets.

His gaze dropped to her perfect rose-colored nipples, and he felt another surge in his groin, shifting the focus of his concentration from the death promised by his hand around her throat to the act of creating life. He, too, became lost to anything but the intensity of the moment, forgetting all else that mattered in his life, the tide of death pulling forcefully toward the mechanism for continuing life.

He was startled by her sudden push, and she began to move away from him. She gasped greedily, understanding for the first time in her life the barrier that the very air around her placed between herself and her mortality. The threat of imminent death momentarily gone with the removal of his hand from her fragile air passage renewed her strength, and she pushed even harder against him, a feeling of triumph feeding the flames of her adrenaline high. As she succeeded in wrenching her upper body away from him, she recognized the sweetness of life as she never had before. She thought her mantra had been heard and pushed even harder, willing herself to fight, sure of her victory.

Her frenzied efforts to free herself caused a surge of adrenaline in him, adding to his strength, and he devoted himself with a singularity of purpose. Once he regained his focus, he

had little trouble subduing her. Her will to live was overcome by the certainty that death was only seconds away. She knew she was beaten.

Even so, she continued to struggle, grunting as she tried to pull away from him, but he held her firmly to the bed and positioned himself above her, lightly moving one hand back to her throat, caressing her skin with his other as he moved it slowly over her most vulnerable spots.

"Please, please," she begged, recognizing her last chance, "You can do anything, and I won't tell. I won't say anything."

He pushed her flat against the bed, and stared at her face as if contemplating her words. A look of almost whimsical desire passed across his face and he said ruefully, "I wish I could trust that."

Hope sprang in her heart, and she said, desperately, "You can...I promise you can."

He slapped her hard across her face, knocking her back against the pillow, and a trickle of blood seeped from her nose. He tightened his hand around her throat, his thumb finding the spot most vulnerable in the front. He pressed harder, cutting off her supply of air and her ability to speak.

He smiled down at her. "I really wish I could trust that promise...it's a shame to waste such a beautiful body." His voice was condescending, the edges raw with lust. One of his hands caressed her breast as if it were a great treasure.

She shuddered, her revulsion showing through the terror that animated her face.

He sighed. "But it would be foolish to trust you, wouldn't it?"

He raised an eyebrow, looking as if he expected an answer.

She tried to shake her head, but she couldn't move.

He laughed and stroked her body, watching her eyes display a mixture of revulsion and hope that he might decide to rape her and leave her alive, enjoying the power to play her like an instrument.

With a stony face, he said, "Oh, you don't really like that?" He continued to stroke and play with her breasts. His face became harder as he tightened his grasp. "How about that?" he muttered.

When her eyes were filled with pain, he moved his hand back to her throat, relishing her look as pain returned to fear. He continued coldly, "Or this?"

He positioned his hand carefully, the thumb above her larynx, ready to exert the pressure necessary to end her life.

Just as he began to squeeze, she pulled away in one last desperate attempt to escape and shouted, "Wait...there is a way you could be sure...and people saw you come in...I'm sure my neighbor saw you come in..."

He slammed his fist against her head and grabbed her by her breasts, throwing her back against the silken pillows. He punched her chest over and over as he screamed, "You bitch, you fucking bitch."