

Chapter 13

Ben's eyes opened and took in the room. There was hazy light, a faint tang of copper on his tongue and silence. No Dionne. He shot upright. They had been in the middle of devising his escape when what – he had fallen asleep? How long had he been lying there while Matthias ravaged?

He flung his legs over the rim of the bed. As his feet touched the floor, everything ebbed and swayed and pulsated as if he were being dragged undertow. The meds were no doubt designed to keep him flat on his back. He simply had no choice. He had to act now.

His hospital door opened and a plainclothes man entered. He carried a stack of men's clothing and placed it on the bed. "Ready?"

Ben's mouth gaped open. Wasn't this the moment he had ached for? To finally get within reach of his enemy. "Um, Dionne and I, we –"

"Uh-huh. I know."

Go'el carefully removed the IV as if it were his specialty. With little effort, Ben shrugged on the denim shirt, jeans and boots. Every fluid movement betrayed the fact he had been victim of a brutal attack. He fastened the buttons on his shirt and tied the laces on the boots as if it had all been mere fantasy. Stepping to the mirror hinged above the wall sink, he stroked the stitches along his level jaw. Gripped one and tugged. It came free easily.

"Leave them." Go'el moved toward him. "Give the doctors something to do."

Ben tipped his head toward the sliding door. “How do we leave undetected?”

“Fear not.”

The door swished open. Ben stood without breathing or blinking. Three nurses behind the station and LAPD shielding the door and not one of them looked his way.

Go’el crossed the threshold. “You are coming?”

Ben crept forward and looked to the floor as if eye contact with the staff or officers would shatter the illusion. Go’el touched his arm. “Do not resist my help, Benjamin. If you do at anytime this day, if you attempt to accomplish this in your own power, of your own strength, you will fail.”

They moved through the door and beyond the policemen as if their bodies were composed of air. Ben wanted to run which caused him to nearly drag his companion to the exit. Down the hall, a man with a lazy stride was headed straight toward them. Ben halted.

“Now, you slow down,” Go’el said.

Ben shuffled closer to the exit door and shoved his back against the steel. Sam stood four inches taller and carried muscle as hard as rebar. Ben would be no match against his older brother if he were determined to return him to his bed.

He turned, pressed his face into the cool metal and waited. Then glimpsed at Go’el. He stood with arms crossed, smirking. Ben asked, “You can overpower him if it comes to that? Right?”

Someone brushed behind him and the muscles in his arms flexed ready to ram the door handle and flee through the door. A chortle slipped past Go’el’s lips.

“Laughter. Seriously,” Ben challenged.

Go'el just stared at him with an amused grin. Ben dared a glance over his shoulder. The contours around his brother's mouth had deepened. His shoulders sagged as if weighted by decades of burden. When he walked past them, as if Ben and the nothing-out-of-the-ordinary man were invisible, Ben rushed through the exit door, down the hushed stairwell, and through a vacant alley. He didn't stop or turn around until the muggy morning air stormed through his lungs. Go'el ambled toward him as if lives weren't depending on their swift intervention. How could Go'el not realize that? Ben sucked in deeply. Bit back his frustration.

“Ben?”

“Yeah.”

“You have been warned about taking the lead.”

Ben looked toward the end of the alley, paced a circle on the grime. “What I have imagined him doing to them – forcing them to endure – I...it's just.”

“Unbearable.”

Hands on his hips, eyes unable to look into those of his companion, he said, “Yeah.”

“This is not a flesh and blood battle. How you wage war is essential. Not with your will or mind or emotions. Do you understand?”

Hating to admit that he was powerless, Ben shut his eyes and tapped his fingers on his hips. If Bruce, his mother and Juliana couldn't count on him then what did that make him as a man? One of vast wealth, words and rampant impotence? They were counting on him. He simply could not fail.

“Wait. Eternity drove my car here. She probably still has my car keys.”

Go'el reached into his pocket and produced the set. They rounded the corner and Ben saw the media crowd. They extended from the front entrance all the way toward the parking lot.

“No way they can see me, right?”

Go'el raised his eyebrows. “I was certain you believed time was of the essence.”

Ben resisted the temptation to unhook cables and smash every camera to the ground. Revel in the stunned reaction of the prying bunch. As he followed Go'el toward the unknown spot where Eternity had parked his silver sedan, he witnessed hundreds of fans with clutched signs or enlarged photos of him wishing speedy recovery. Strange how two divergent assemblies could occupy the same space.

Once Ben was behind the wheel, and his escort in the passenger seat, he asked, “Dionne? What will she think?”

“That you found another way out.”

Ben nodded, as if that was obvious, inserted the keys and started the ignition. He cleared the mist with the wipers and shifted the car into gear. Go'el asked, “You recall the way?”

“I don't think I will ever forget.”

Planning birthed preparation. Preparation led to execution. Execution summoned elation. Pure, delirious elation. He could nearly smell the perfume of mayhem two feet beneath the blast.

Matthias leaned forward and squinted at the screen. Ten pounds of strategically placed C4 had obliterated the mansion and obstructed a clear view. The luxurious structure was little more than flaming rubble and ash. Few bodies scurried, but many more lay eliminated on the darkened lawn. Matthias pressed the knob to zoom but found it difficult to make out one panicked figure from another. He hoped that piece of work Northern was somewhere twisted like molten metal on the ground. And he hoped Ben was watching.

* * *

Ben parked the car a mile down the road and they began the painstaking climb to the hill top house. In the distance, angry plumes of smoke rose and blackened the clear sky. Fire trucks blazed by. He wondered – then prayed – an errant cigarette had started a brush fire. Ben looked to Go’el. “What will I find when I get there?”

“What you’ve been looking for.”

Ben shivered; the morning breeze had penetrated his shirt and caressed the swiftly developing perspiration. There was much to ask and although he felt compelled to investigate, his mouth betrayed him. Until he saw the Mercedes parked within the alcove.

“Is that? Grace’s car?”

“Everything will be revealed in time,” his helper assured, as if attuned to Ben’s foreboding.

He couldn’t help the frenzied direction of his mind. What possible reason would Grace have to be there? Was he being lured here to confront both her and Matthias?

They mounted the hill and Ben halted. A barrage of fire engines, ambulances and police vehicles blocked the road. Official personnel created a human barricade to the property. Chunks of stucco and tree limbs littered the street. Ben craned his neck to see and his eyes caught towering flames of angry fire.

He lunged forward before his muscles had received the message from his brain to bolt toward the danger. Go'el caught him before he hit the ground.

“You are not stopping me!” Ben said, wrenching from Go'el's grasp. He roared into the center of soot-covered F.B.I agents, hectic firemen, and paramedics working feverishly over bodies covered with horrific burns. He wouldn't – couldn't look to see if any bore recognition. Instead, he pressed through the frantic activity toward the blaze and nearly collapsed from the sickening view. Nothing had been as he remembered. Nothing remained of the house or its outer surroundings. Before him was only rage, wrath and turmoil. Everywhere his eyes landed they took in death. How could this have happened? There was no way God hadn't known of Matthias's plan. No way He wasn't aware of the mayhem this would have created.

“Why?” Ben whispered, surveying the chaos. “You cannot be this cruel.”

Behind him, someone nudged. He turned and discovered Go'el.

“Why am I here?” Ben shouted.

“He will keep in perfect peace all those who trust in Him.”

“Are you blind!”

“He will not fail you or forsake you.”

Ben raised his fist ready to slam it into the man's skull. Yet, Go'el didn't move to defend himself. He didn't even flinch.

“Trust?” He tried to ignore the violent twisting beginning in his gut. “They’re burning and you’re asking me to trust?”

Sighing as if growing thin on patience, Go’el said, “The grotto.”

“What?”

“Go to it.”

“I had it destroyed!”

Go’el pointed in the direction where the grotto once stood. Ben could view little beyond the smoke. There were a thousand questions, but Ben wasn’t certain he wanted to ask. Nor was he certain he wanted Go’el’s answers. He shoved his finger near Go’el’s face. “I do this alone.”

“You cannot be serious!”

“I am,” Dionne sighed. She dropped her hands to her sides to eliminate any sign to the group that she was defensive. They all stood around Ben’s vacant bed gaping at his empty gown.

“In his condition?” Coleen asked. “He could barely maintain a conversation with us.”

“He’s improved. Significantly.”

For several moments, Dionne watched as the cluster worked to calm their anger.

She knew this moment would be difficult, but hoped they would understand Ben's desperation.

"But he didn't follow through with our arrangement."

Sheila rubbed the back of her neck. "What?"

"He left without the clothes I gathered from lost and found." Dionne pointed to the pile of mismatched attire on top of the chair. "And I was to drive him."

A barrage of "Drive him!" and "Where?" and "That's insane!" and "How could you even think of such a thing!" hailed down on Dionne.

"Listen," this time she held up one hand. "He was leaving whether I helped him or not." She took in a breath. "To the Mulholland Drive house."

"What!" All from Ian, Marcus and Hunter.

"Why?" Sheila said, closing the space between them.

Dionne looked to Ben's relatives. She wondered how much to disclose. If Ben hadn't shared what had occurred within the grotto, she certainly didn't want to be the one to divulge.

"He is convinced that's where Matthias has them," Dionne answered.

Ian, Marcus and Hunter slowly retreated to the corners of the room. Sam watched them, seemed to weigh their withdrawal, and then he looked to Dionne. Before he could ask her a question she didn't want to answer, the two LAPD officers that had been guarding the door burst in.

They were looking to speak with Ben. All Sam offered was that he wasn't available. Then, they delivered news none of them wanted to hear. Dionne barely heard them above the ramming of her heart. Words like: bomb, explosion and casualties

rumbled from their mouths. *Oh, God. Was I wrong to agree with Ben?* she thought. At the time, although incredibly risky, it seemed like a feasible plan. They had prayed and Dionne refused to comply until she felt peace. She dropped to the empty bed and agonized that they had been wrong. Dead wrong.

Chapter 14

Ben crouched behind the mangled shrubs framing the grotto and carefully groped for the control box. Chunks of metal from the blast had blown onto the boulders and ended up searing his hand. He punched in a series of numbers and the water ceased to flow. He had no hesitation as to what Matthias would have created for the code to open the entrance. He punched it in. The stone divider hadn't fully disappeared before Ben raced down the shadowy corridor. J-U-L-I-A-N-A. Not original, but tortuous nonetheless.

The Venus de Milo stared back at him. It was obvious Matthias had painstakingly recreated the structure. Every detail was as Ben had drafted and systematically demolished years ago. He reached up and touched the statue's breast. Instead of her twirling to reveal the staircase, he heard something. So faint Ben he had to strain against the stone bosom to hear.

“Ben?”

Was it?

“Ben?”

Juliana!

Then he heard, “It’s going to be OK, baby. I’m right here.”

He stumbled backward and nearly crashed to the wet marble. How could this be? He was hearing his own voice, crackling from the statue. When would he have said those words to her? When had she called out to him in such desperation?

Then, ““Juliannnnnaaaa. I see you.”

No. NO!

Then screams. Coming from Juliana. Ben beat his fists against the statue, and the surrounding walls until his fists split open.

“Let me in, you bastard!”

He pounded against the unyielding fortress.

“I’m here! You finally have what you want.”

Although the air was dense with smoke and ash beyond the grotto, it hadn’t affected him until that moment. He opened his mouth to demand Matthias face him and the stabbing in his jaw dropped him to his knees. Bent on all fours, he coughed and bile spilled from his lips. This wasn’t happening. Not to him and not right now. Pulling up from his waist, he straightened one knee and planted one foot on the marble. Venus seemed to bubble and melt before his eyes like neglected film. Perspiration rolled into his eyes. He lifted a hand to wipe, but his fingers hung in rebellion.

“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit...”

What had Matthias done to make Juliana scream in such unbearable agony? Had

he done the same to his mother? To Bruce? Had Go'el brought him here to simply witness their deaths?

He coughed and more bile trickled. The anguish returned as if the young woman had just sank her claws into his face. Except now something was different. He clutched at his chest. The deeper he tried to inhale, the tighter his lungs clamped down. This time he felt miserably alone. He wasn't wishing for Eternity. He longed for more than what flesh and blood could provide.

“Benjamin.”

Instinctively, he looked to the statue. Then, heard the rustle of clothing behind him. Go'el stood staring at him. “Did you bring all of us here to die?”

“Is that what you believe, Benjamin?”

“Yes!” It spewed out like venom. Before Ben could restrain the bitterness and despair.

“My intention is to turn what the enemy meant for evil to good.”

“Really! You may be a little late. I heard her screaming as if...”

Ben couldn't finish the sentence.

“Reason this out with your finite mind and you will leave here more desolate than when you arrived.”

For the first time Ben cursed. And didn't stop until his stomach released its contents. When the retching ceased, he turned his head toward Go'el. Despite how he had just behaved, there was nothing but compassion in his eyes. Ben turned away, forced his forehead to the damp marble, afraid he would break out weeping.

“I'm dying.” Ben choked out.

No response from Go'el except that look.

“Again.”

Not by might, nor by power, but –

Ben held up a hand. What made him think he could possibly battle such evil with his limited intellect and strength? Because. It had always been that way. Numerous boards, studio moguls and corporations didn't zealously pursue him because he lacked influence. He had proven, decade after decade, that he was a superior commodity. But, now, unable to even draw himself upward he suddenly knew better. Those were gifts given by the heavenly Father. For divine purpose. And Ben had grown so accustomed to them he had somehow believed they were his to bestow or withhold.

“F-forgive me,” he said.

Ben shut his eyes and the vision fluttered like feathers on a breeze. Of him. Three months ago.

“I can't.”

On his balcony covered by his robe feeling dismal and unbearably lost. Where he had finally grown weary of the never-ending pursuit that no matter what began as a thrill, habitually led to yearning.

“I cannot do this without You.”

He knew there had to be more; something that wouldn't leave his heart feeling as vacant as a cavern.

“Help...me.”

And the same Presence that had come in February that banished the sting of every disappointment, heartbreak, and regret came to him then.

Go'el touched his shoulder.

Ben raised his head. "We can't fail."

Energy seemed to crackle from Go'el's hand and Ben bolted upright. He attempted to keep his eyes open, but failed. How was it possible his heart could hammer this fast and not rupture? He saw no angels and the earth hadn't cracked open, yet this power surging through every inch of him expelled notions of lack and inadequacy. Pain melted into a remote memory. If Go'el suddenly broke away, Ben was convinced he would end up a quivering pile on the stone floor.

Venus shuddered and rotated, revealing a black hole. Lumbering to his full height, Ben squinted and flexed his limbs.

"It is time," Go'el said.

His muscles worked in perfected harmony. The angst was gone along with the fear. He stepped to the opening and rushed down the staircase. It wasn't until his foot hit the last step that he allowed his gaze to gather in the dwelling.

It was precisely what he had feared. And, precisely what he had prayed would never be true.

Speed, surprise, and power. Juliana didn't have the power to overwhelm Matthias. Speed and surprise, on the other hand, could be her allies. Assuming Matthias hadn't been watching.

How long had she gripped the blade, on her knees, her eyes darting from Joan to

Bruce? The reek of human waste and decay nearly overwhelmed. Nearly dragged her to dark places she wasn't certain she could later retreat.

Matthias had to enter soon. Surely his sadistic appetite compelled him toward frequent torment. If he expected an ambush, he could enter and shoot her from the other side of the door. She prayed he didn't. To catch him off guard would lead to a fight. And although she had no clear explanation as to why, a need to fight him burned inside. It was desperate and yearned to be satiated.

Juliana heard faint scratching at the door. She clutched the knife and crept upward, the wall pressed against her bare back. Light cracked like an aura as the door opened. Fresh air drifted inside and Juliana resisted the urge to gulp it in. His fingers wrapped around the door and he tugged it behind him, his profile in full view. Remarkable. If he were a stranger, she would grant him a smile at the market, nod to him while pumping gas, think little of it if they shared an isolated hallway. But he wasn't a stranger. Nor was he innocent. Kill him. That was it. Simple.

He looked to the bags, his back to her, and stopped. Angling his head to the right, he seemed distracted by a noise beyond the room. She had one chance. She bent her knees, lunged and thrust the knife forward. Within seconds, her hand was covered in blood. The dagger slid in easily, she hoped slashing muscle and nicking his kidney. He whipped around, his hand groping the injury, his face an uproar of agony. The sight of his blood should have sickened her. At least slowed her next move. Yet her hand plunged the knife into him again and again. Until he was a writhing heap on the floor. How singular her mind was. Vacant of every thought except annihilating Matthias Kingston.

Her hair blinded her, yet she raised the knife above her head. She didn't need sight.

He was there, defenseless. Begging. By law, this was clear self-defense. He was nothing more than a worthless piece of trash that deserved to be put out of his misery. She would hold nothing back. This blow, had to end it once and for all. She dropped to her knees.

“Juliana.”

The blade froze mid-air. She didn't turn around. Matthias had tricked with Ben's voice before. She clenched both fists around the weapon and rammed it toward Matthias's head. Above, a strike came down swift and deep and the knife flew from her grip. Skidded across the floor. She scrambled to retrieve it. This nightmare would not end, would not be complete, until Matthias was dead. Her swollen, slick fingers contacted the handle. Seized it. Strong hands tugged at her waist, pressing her against a powerful chest and thigh. She twisted and blindly sliced. The blade caught. Several times before she collapsed on her back. Shoving the hair from her eyes, she blinked at what could not be true.

Ben.

Slumped against the wall. His shirt drenched in blood.