

Chapter Ten

The pumps were the first to go. Grace Connors then stripped out of her Dolce & Gabbana blazer and skirt before her feet hit the staircase landing. The Toulouse-Lautrec and Cézanne paintings blurred as she mounted the steps, two-by-two, mentally anticipating the hot bath on her skin. Seventy-two hours, nine minutes and four seconds - too long to be caged with bad company, horrific food, and infinite decay. She flicked on the faucet and looped teardrops of bath soap beneath the gushing cascade. Grace knelt on the cool marble surrounding the tub, inhaled the intense bouquet of Chanel and could no longer resist. She plunged in the steaming water before it filled the tub.

Scooting until her hair became a blonde fan beneath the water, the previous hours began to uncoil from her muscles like a python from a branch. The handcuffed escort from her Bel Air firm, unsympathetic booking at the county jail, and subsequent lodging shifted her emotions from current panic to sour apprehension. It wasn't that she was unfamiliar with the robust punches life could throw. Not unless she could erase her bitter endurance some would have called childhood. But when Ben had arrived at her office, flanked by humorless F.B.I. agents, well, that little visit had blindsided her.

All thanks to the diabolical duo of Jessica Kimura and Matthias Kingston. How long had it taken them to concoct their plan to frame her? To make it seem she had penned the menacing messages to Juliana and composed an arrangement to take her out? She grunted. Despite their intentions, she wasn't about to allow Ben's mistrust to linger. In a town replete with con artists who maligned, stole and lied at will, Ben had proved to be the opposite. A good ole boy from Idaho who had hopped off of a John Deere tractor

and made good in Hollyweird - a charming hick who became her dearest friend. She had managed Ben's illustrious career since his first toothpaste commercial decades ago. Their professional rapport had shifted into the distinctive. She had earned from him what was as elusive as a leprechaun chugging around a pot of gold. Trust. Now, that was shattered.

The humiliation of being shackled in the presence of her employees wounded much less than Ben's contemptuous look as the agents shoved her into their vehicle. She would regain his trust. Soon. Yet, she had no idea how.

She jabbed her heel into the shut-off valve. The steamy waterfall ceased. She massaged the knots in her neck and shut her eyes. Oh, this was so sweet. No clanging metal, or communal showers, or desperate pleas in the night. Just her in her bathroom, submerged in sweet silence. Her body slid below the muggy aromatic waves until only her face was exposed. The disdain of the previous hours slowly ebbed.

Ben's grotto.

Go there now.

Her eyes snapped open.

What the...?

She hadn't heard a voice. That would have been impossible. Her ears had been submerged. Grace lifted her head and searched the room. The dim lighting revealed nothing other than the expected. She shook her head and palmed her damp face. *Three days in county lock up already I'm hearing voices.*

She was halfway immersed again when the words pitched her upright.

Go to Ben's grotto.

Her revolver was in her bedside table. Could she flung a towel around her and get

to it before—

Now.

That did it. She catapulted from the tub. The towel caught against the raised edge of the bar and she nearly yanked the entire unit to the floor. Maybe she could use the gilded rod as a temporary weapon. But it would make a massive clamor. Then there would be no doubt of her whereabouts. Now, that's a dumb thought, Grace. If the voice was lucid in the bathroom, the intruder already knows where you are.

She jogged from the bathroom, the contents of her bedroom faintly lit by the bathroom's vanity. Her eager pursuit of a glorious soak hadn't involved switching on any illumination. She snatched the gun from the pile of *Vogue* magazines. Then, flung open the bottom drawer, retrieved the clip and shoved it into the gun. Water dripped in her eyes. With a trembling hand, she shoved her hair away.

Standing in the middle of her room, it was hard for her to hear much over her frantic breathing. Stock still, arm poised to blast anything that moved, she keened her ear for the unfamiliar. Yet, only the distant rumbling of a jet engine, gentle patter of rain, and birds welcoming the dawn were heard. She moved toward her bedroom door, peeked around, and advanced down the hall toward the staircase. The doors to her guest bedrooms were opened and the contents just as she had left them. On her descent, she maneuvered around her clothing. At no other time would she have dreamed of discarding her garments in such a flippant manner. But, she had been desperate to rid herself of the grime. Now it seemed she had left a high-priced Hansel and Gretchen trail for a killer.

Room to room to room there was nothing but quiet and shadows. When she reached her kitchen, the oven clock read 4:45. She had been lunging in and out of rooms

Jack Bauer style for nearly an hour. Peeking around corners, flinging on lights, stopping, straining toward any peculiar noise to give her reason to pull the trigger.

“I need a drink.”

It was nowhere near noon and she didn't care. Her previous manner of calming her nerves had been abruptly disturbed. She grabbed a bottle from the fridge and filled a glass. Four gulps and the Chardonnay settled very nicely in her belly. The look of the empty glass disturbed her so she poured more. She set the safety and rested the gun beside the bottle on the counter. The stainless steel refrigerator became her support and she drew extended sips. But instead of the wine relaxing, it invigorated her, every sense stimulated. The sky through her window was a misty blue, not yet bright enough to cause streetlights to flicker off. But the sensation pressed and pressed. Like when you've held back a sneeze until it refused to be suppressed further. It was coming forth, like it or not.

Ben's grotto.

Now.

Grace ascended the staircase, plucking up her designer clothes as she went. This time she switched on every light she passed before she entered her closet. After she tossed the clothing in the hamper, she tugged on a pair of jeans and white t-shirt. And waited. The voice wasn't external at all. It was if someone had climbed in her head. No. Not exactly her head. Maybe she heard it in her head, but felt it in her heart. Grace wasn't certain if it was the result of slight intoxication or a sudden brain abnormality, but the voice no longer frightened. Was she truly losing it? There was an urge, a persuasive compulsion to leave her house and...

“Oh my God!”

She raced down the stairs and dashed into her garage. A plethora of curse words sprung from her mouth as she flung open her car door and it slammed into her knee. She limped into the sedan rubbing the stinging spot. Grace had never prayed a day in her life. Everything was chance. Lives swirled in a balance of time, energy and air. So it shocked her when she opened her mouth and said, “God. Don’t let me run a red light, hit some jogger, or crash into a ditch, or a tree or a cop.”

She started the ignition. Then added for good measure. “Please.”

Grace didn’t see her neighbor stoop to collect his *LA Times* as she tore down her driveway. She didn’t see him shake his head as she squealed into the street wondering what would cause someone such a fit at 5AM. He gawked at her long after her rear taillights blurred around the corner. Her garage door stood wide open. Nor did she hear him mutter, “Women!”

* * *

The ICU a.m. crew bustled up and down the corridor and streamed in and out of rooms. The clatter of metal trays echoed through the hall. Dionne’s belly grumbled with neglect. She glanced across the room where Coleen dozed on Sam’s shoulder.

“I must be starving.”

“Why?” Sam’s subdued baritone drifted across the room.

“Even hospital food smells appealing.”

He smirked. Coleen stirred and nuzzled her face into his neck.

“By the way, when was the last time you ate?”

Sam started a shrug, but considered his drowsy wife. “Not sure.”

Dionne stood. "I'll get us something from the cafeteria."

Halfway to the door she heard him. "No."

She turned and placed a hand on her hip. "Sam, if you don't keep up your strength
—"

"I meant that you haven't seen Ben since you arrived."

That was true. Last night, while her hands gripped were in prayer there was a sense that something had shifted. Every time one of Ben's friends or family streamed in and out of the waiting area doors, she held her breath in expectancy when they returned. Yet, none exclaimed what she hoped had occurred within Ben. She didn't want to intrude, but was anxious to witness if what she suspected was true.

"You probably feel slighted. Please go. I'll get us all something after Coleen wakes up."

Anxious, she wasn't looking up when she entered his room, but halted immediately after crossing the threshold.

"Sweet Jesus!"

Ben turned from the window. "Dionne."

She glanced at the door then stood blinking at him. "No one said you were up and walking."

"I wasn't. Well, not until after Sheila left."

She pointed to the door. "Does...have the nurses seen?"

He nodded, his blue eyes dazzling. "Yep. Thoroughly checked me out then scrambled for the doctors. Everyone left my room mystified."

She whispered. "You're...smiling."

Ben extended a hand. "Come closer." He tilted his head toward the machines. "I'm still shackled. The staff isn't as convinced that all is well."

Creeping forward, she wondered if the man was an apparition that would vanish as she neared. "How? When?"

He pulled her toward him and stroked her back. "I've missed you."

Just seventy-two hours ago he labored to move, couldn't even speak, battling pervasive despair. Dionne gripped him as if at any moment he would collapse back into devastation and misery. Yet, that was absurd. After Sheila had called and informed her of the horror she hadn't hesitated to bombard heaven. As she flung items into her suitcase, trudged through DIA security and nearly every moment since, she had asked God for this very thing. And, she knew He wouldn't bestow this gift and take it away. It simply wasn't in His character.

"You look surprised," Ben said.

Dionne shook her head. "It's ridiculous. We ask God for miracles, expect Him to answer, then when He does..."

He leaned back and placed her palm on his cheek. "Take a peek."

As if unveiling a prized objet d'art, she peeled back the swabbing with trembling hands. Beneath the sterilized layers the stubble grew. Below the extensive stitching was a pale, nearly imperceptible line. Gone were the jagged scarring, and the angry, red line. Back and forth her eyes darted from both sides of his jaw.

"Remarkable, huh?"

She gathered her hands to chest. "Jesus!"

His laughter filled the room like an exquisite orchestra. Faster and faster her tears

flowed.

“Jesus, indeed.”

The exhilaration to shout, to jump, to race around the entire floor exclaiming praise twirled heavy in her gut. But just as prevailing was the inclination to touch, and stare and marvel at God’s amazing act.

Ben grinned, “You look like you might burst.”

“Yep.”

Again, his delightful laughter! The room blurred behind a veil of tears. Before long, her weeping resounded off the taupe colored walls. Ben grasped her and the deep extols exiting her throat muffled into the fabric of his hospital gown.

It could have been moments, it could have been hours, where they stood, cried and basked in awe.

“I have something to ask you.”

Dionne nodded and pulled away from him. Ben tugged tissues from the box on the bedside table. He handed her a few, then wiped in gentle circles at his own damp cheeks. “Have you ever had an...encounter?”

“Meaning?”

“With the supernatural.”

Dionne raised an eyebrow. “Yes.”

Ben sat on the bed and tapped rapid fingers on his thighs.

Dionne joined him then touched his hand. “Tell me.”

He grinned at her, no doubt recalling the familiar phrase shared between she and Juliana. Then, his expression sobered. “In my dreams I’m fighting these...” His hands

twirled as he searched for the word, “beings. They taunt and menace. Their hands hold swords and daggers, but use them in such a strange way. They don’t cut me. It’s their words that slash deeper than any weapon could.”

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. The scripture reverberated through her mind. “Go on.”

“There’s a man in my dreams.” Ben lowered his gaze and palmed his knees in tight circles.

“A man?”

He heaved and seemed to exhale elements much heavier than air. “After I can no longer resist these beings, when I’ve collapsed, when I’m utterly overwhelmed, he grips my arm and lifts me.”

“Have you seen him before?”

“No.”

“Did you fear him? Was he a part of the beings harassing you?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. Just the opposite. He felt like the greatest friend I’ll ever encounter.”

“So he was there to help you?”

“Yes. It’s like...”

Dionne waited as he glanced toward the small window, at the beeping machines, out the sliding door. “He’s always been there. Anxious to help me conquer them.”

Countless thoughts rambled through her mind. Her heart raced in anticipation to share her experiences, especially those while her husband Quincy battled cancer from his

hospital bed. Yet, she felt the delicate tug to withhold for the moment. Judging by his lack of eye contact and bobbing knees, she knew it was more important for Ben to divulge his unease. “When did the dream start?”

“Just after my attack.” As if facing a psychiatric board, he looked in her eyes. “Does that sound crazy?”

Dionne smirked. “Perhaps to some. To me, no.”

He leaned his head back and sighed. Beyond the room, hospital personnel busied themselves with the routine, the practical. However, within these four walls, Dionne knew the supernatural had touched him. Perhaps even shattering previous misconceptions that rattled him to his core.

“Dionne, there’s more.”

She suspected as much. “Yes.”

He looked at her, his eyes seemingly gauging if she would deem him insane. “He’s also visited me.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

“Truly,” Dionne whispered. Not out of doubt, but astounding reverence at the immeasurable care God displayed. “I’m listening.”

“He said to call him Go’el Hadam.”

The glass door swished open and both turned to look. Doctor’s with expressions of self-importance rushed in. Ben held tight to Dionne’s hand. He said, “Can this wait?”

The lively team looked to one another in disbelief. “Mr. Powers, you must understand the significance of such a noteworthy recovery. You were originally slated to

receive numerous surgeries over the next year. Now –”

“Now,” Ben interrupted. “I am not. Yes. It is extraordinary. Trust me, no one is more elated than I. Understand I am happy to oblige your thorough probing. But you have chosen a less than desirable time to do so.”

“These physicians have altered their demanding schedules to witness this... healing,” The lead doctor said, gripping his clipboard as if it were a shield.

“I understand. All I’m asking for is a few moments.”

The doctor shrugged, grumbled and led his colleagues from the room.

After their noisy departure, Ben squeezed Dionne’s hand. “If I don’t get this out, right now, I won’t trust myself to do so later.”

“Yes?”

Ben straightened. “He said he’ll take me to them.”

“Them?” Dionne frowned. “I don’t understand –”

“Bruce, Mom, Juliana.”

Dionne flinched, but held tight to his hand. “How? When?”

“Tonight.”