

Lucky 13

T. James Reese



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For you, Mom, my inspiration...love you, miss you.

“You may not change the world, but you may change the person who changes the world.”

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PROLOGUE

September. Something stirs. The leaves aren't all that's changing; darkness grows, a deep despair, as the warmth of summer subsides and the gloom of impending winter looms in the storm clouds overhead.

Thunder cracks as lightning flashes. Rain falls in New York City. The dark streets glisten in the glow of passing headlights, reflecting the once celebrated beauty of this fading empire, a symbol of freedom, of man's triumph over disparity, the American dream. But memories are the only dreams now: nightmares lay ahead.

Still, it rains; a never-ending downpour of sorrow and decay. Day after day, like the heavens crying down on this forsaken place, it rains. The light is gone. Darkness shrouds the wicked and the righteous hide in shadows.

On the outside, the city is elegant, its massive architecture stretching high above the sprawling streets as millions of people march like ants across its beaten pavement. Whispers of the future echo from the rooftops. But there's a darkness lurking just beneath its surface.

In one hand, goodness resides. But evil hides in the other's clenched fist, a fist raised high in its own accomplishment, praising itself for its insecurities.

Even so, the goodness is still there, somewhere. Perhaps it's wandering the streets, hunting down evil and cleansing the city on a quest for redemption, or maybe the city itself is searching for goodness? But redemption will come: it always does...always.

I

THURSDAY NIGHT

The door creaked open, its hinges fighting against the age-worn frame. A placard on the wall read 7A, the paint faded and peeling. Dim light from the hall outside filtered into the dark entryway where a couple stood, their bodies close, her hands holding his, as the shadow of their goodnight kiss shown on the wall.

“See you at work tomorrow,” she blushed, her slender figure disappearing behind the door.

She leaned against it as it closed, the bottom grating over the old, cracked weather stripping on the floor. A smile stretched across her pretty face. The deadbolt clicked into place, followed quickly by the clattering of the sliding chain-lock. Hanging her purse and jacket on the coat rack that stood in the hall, she turned and headed for her bedroom.

She ran her fingers through her rain-soaked hair, pulling tangled strands from her dark green eyes, as she kicked her shoes off onto the old hardwood floor with a thud. A hairbrush rested on the top of her dresser. Happily, she picked it up, then stepped into the bathroom, brushing her long blond hair. Young, beautiful Kayla Rose stood flushed, feeling a bit

foolish, maybe in love, as she thought back on that evening's events: dinner followed by a quiet stroll through Central Park.

More foolish than in love, she told herself, setting the brush on the counter, then making her way back to the living room, picturing how funny they must have seemed running hand-in-hand through the park, in the middle of a downpour and no umbrella in sight.

Passing her fireplace, she glanced at the pictures displayed on the mantel. One was of her parents when they were young, nearly her age, just married and so happy. Another showed her brother and his wife, as well as their three children, playing in the backyard of their home just outside of Chicago. Two more pictures sat beside that one: the first was of her grandparents; the second, her oldest brother, wearing full police dress, the words "In Loving Memory" engraved in the silver frame.

The last picture was of a girl, just as beautiful as Kayla, but younger, her little sister Ashley. She'd started college that fall at Penn State, a stone's throw from their family's hometown. But when Kayla moved to New York, Ashley followed, transferring to Colombia. They were best friends, inseparable.

Kayla walked into the kitchen, thinking how lucky she was to have such a great family. She reached into the fridge for a bottle of water as her thoughts returned again to her date, recalling the long kiss under the shelter of a tall tree, its fall colored leaves rustling in the wind, moonlight shining through its crooked branches.

Definitely foolish.

She twisted off the cap of the bottle and took a long drink. Nothing could stop her from thinking about that night.

It was just a date, nothing special, she told herself, but it couldn't wipe the happiness from her face.

Yawning, she grabbed a handful of pretzels from a bowl on the counter and headed back to her bedroom, walking again past the fireplace. An oddly cool draft filled her apartment, like she'd stepped into a freezer; goose bumps ran up and down her arms.

Kayla's attention was drawn to the apartment door, now standing wide open. Her pretzels dropped to the ground, breaking apart as they hit

the wooden floor, her water landed just beside the pieces and spilled, spinning onto its side. Kayla froze; a faint tapping coming from over her shoulder. She looked back at the mantle; the frame with Ashley's picture in it was lying face down.

She blinked her eyes, trying to clear her head, as she looked back to the front door, now closed, the deadbolt locked, just as she remembered doing when she closed it earlier. Her smile had finally faded.

Kayla righted the fallen frame, but quickly stepped back, her hands shaking. The frame was empty. Where had the picture gone?

The shrill cries of a woman filled the crisp night air, the darkness shrouding an indescribable pain. Squad cars lined the street, *N.Y.P.D.* emblazoned on the doors, their red and blue lights dancing across the buildings' façades. A black-clad strike squad assembled at the foot of the crumbling cement steps that led into a rundown apartment complex.

“Keller.”

“Yes, Sir?” the Sergeant answered.

“You take Team One. I'll follow you through with the second unit,” First Lieutenant James Sykes grunted as they double checked their guns and walkie-talkies. “Make it a sweep and clear. My boys will mop up any leftovers, understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” Keller grinned. “Okay team, ready on my command. Let's move!”

Loud cracks of gun fire echoed out as the team smashed through the decaying front door and into the musty, dark building, floor tiles crunching beneath their boots, splintered wood flying through the air. Bursts of suppression fire rattled back from the enemy inside, their guns blazing, hardly taking time to aim.

"Clear!" a voice called from around the first corner, a man standing in his tactical gear, a bullet proof vest strapped across his chest, fallen bodies strewn at his feet.

"This room is secure!" echoed another man from behind the hazy visor on his helmet as he tramped down the dark hall, the beam from his rail-mounted flashlight illuminating segments of dust and wall.

Room by room, they searched for survivors, but found nothing. Again, they divided into two groups: Keller and his men trudged up the stairs toward the sound of the screaming woman, now silent, assumed dead; Syke's team headed for the basement.

"This could take all night," Keller muttered, the butt of his MP5 raised to his shoulder.

An old man sat alone in a dark room, flickers of candle light and flashes of lightning illuminating his face. He quickly scribbled in a small wrinkled notepad, the text filling page after page. Sweat rolled down his forehead as he transcribed the thoughts flowing through his mind, his memories spilling onto the pad. He was writing so fast, unintelligibly fast.

The pencil point snapped. The scratching of the lead on the paper was almost deafening. Then, silence.

The squads covered ground quickly, thoroughly, the way they were trained. As Keller led point, the rest of his men swept the dust-filled rooms that lined the darkened halls. The flashes of muzzle fire had subsided, but the smoke still lingered, limiting visibility, creating a gray haze that clouded the old building. There was no one left to counter. The aggressors were dead. The job had become search and rescue.

The upper floors were filled with trash, makeshift beds, and the memories of broken lives. Empty closets, littered with fallen plaster, tainted with the smell of mildew, hid no secrets.

Finally, they came to the last apartment, darker than the others, mysterious, evil. Sergeant Keller entered the room, his SMG slung across his back, panning the walls with the light on his Glock as his men took

cover positions around the door frame. Jagged shadows jumped across the dirty, torn wallpaper: a decrepit chair, a cardboard box, and finally, the raggedly clothed figure of a woman standing, slightly hunched, in the corner, deathly still, her back to the door.

"Ma'am!?" he called out, his light focused on her.

No reply.

"Clasp your fingers together and place your hands on your head."

A chill swept through the room. Pipes rattled from within the walls and the roof creaked above.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Ma'am," he assured. I'm going to step towards you!"

Silence.

"Ma'am!?"

Silence.

"Get on your knees and put your hands on your head," he urged, now standing just behind her.

Keller reached out, placing his hand on her shoulder. She didn't move. Tugging gently, he attempted to turn her, his squad aimed and waiting.

Suddenly, she whipped around, snarling like a dog as she bit deep into his arm, her skin ghostly pale, her eyes black as night. He cursed, looking into her face. The booming of gunfire shook the tiny room as her bullet-riddled corpse fell to the floor. Blood ran from the hole in his sleeve. Angrily, he fired one last round into her already dead body.

"Let's hope Sykes is having better luck!" he said wincing, nursing his arm as he headed for the hallway, his heavy boots clomping across the dusty wood floor.

A broken man sat slumped in a chair, his bloodied head in his hands. His elbows rested weakly on an old splintered table. Makeshift bandages hung from his brow, soaked, almost useless, his disheveled hair matted and sticky. He wore a dirt-smeared black suit with scuffed shoes, his tie pulled loose, the top buttons of his shirt torn away, lost.

Another man sat across from him, the darkness shrouding his face; a perfect antithesis, his suit freshly pressed and wrinkle free, his arms crossed arrogantly. He was like a shadow, pitch black, except for his eyes, glowing brightly, as if filled with pure light.

"What do you want from me? There's nothing I can tell you!" the beaten man cried out. "Do you hear me?!"

The man stared on silently, his head cocked as if disgusted by his prisoner. The room reeked of sweat.

"Why won't you answer me?!"

He uncrossed his arms, then set his hands palm down on the table, his gloved fingers fanned out, "What you don't understand is that you know something that you don't know you know. You believe a truth that isn't truth at all. And although you know that truth to be the truth, you do not embrace it, do not *live* by it, even though it is the *truth*. I despise the truth."

The spite in his voice resonated within the thickly walled room. Dim light cast weak shadows on the peeling paint that covered the space.

"Truth? What truth? I don't have any idea what you're talking about!" he shouted, his frustration beginning to boil over as his patience wore thin.

"You will," the dark figure replied, leaning into the light, his face hidden beneath a sadistic black mask, the mouth roughly stitched into a hideous grin stretching from ear to ear.

Syke's men tromped down the metal stairs to the basement, the sound of their quick footfalls bouncing off the narrowly walled stairwell.

The Lieutenant's radio buzzed to life.

"Sir," Keller grunted, "the upstairs is clear, we had an encounter, but no personal casualties."

"Copy that, head towards the lobby we're checking the bottom level now," Sykes replied in his gravelly voice. "Make a final perimeter sweep and call for cleanup."

"Ye..."

The reception on his two-way crackled out and disappeared. Sykes froze. These radios had never given him trouble before. He slammed the bottom of it against his palm.

Static.

A shadow moved across the far end of the hall. He squinted into the darkness, but couldn't see a thing. Still, it felt like he was being watched. Purposefully, he forced himself back to the task at hand.

Get your head straight, Jim.

His team stopped at a steel door, rusted from age, but still solid, its hinges frozen. A battering ram was brought up from the rear. With a deafening blast, the door was breached, the broken lock clanking against the worn cement floor. Slowly, they stepped into the darkness, a definite chill in the air as a cold draft flowed from within the splintered frame. The thick smell of blood and rot hit them like a wall. The men entered cautiously, scanning the room with their lights, their fingers uneasily resting on their triggers. It was sickening, incredible, beyond words. None of the team had ever seen anything this disturbing, nothing like...*this*.

Faint smoke from candles lingered at the ceiling; spiders crept across the exposed wooden beams as a rat scurried through a hole in the aged once-white brick walls. Thirteen bodies lay in a circle at the center of the room. The victims heads were still intact, but just barely, their throats cleanly slit, their blood drained into a pattern that had been gouged into the floor, a pentagram.

As the men stood in disbelief, a ghostly laugh, long and deep, echoed through the building. Sykes stepped back through the door and away from the carnage, his radio crackling again.

"Gary," he stuttered in nauseous disbelief, "you read me?"

Static.

"Gary!"

"Yes, Sir?" the answer finally returned.

"We need more than cleanup down here, Sergeant."

Keller was right. This would be a long night, a night they wouldn't soon forget.

Ashley woke suddenly, her heart racing. Peering into the darkness, she could see glances of her nightmare cast all around her. Cries for mercy still rang in her ears.

"So much blood," she whispered, "what an awful dream."

Climbing out of her warm bed, she stumbled into the bathroom and felt across the wall for the light switch. The fluorescent bulb mounted above her medicine cabinet hummed to life. Her bare feet slapped against the cold tile floor as she shivered, startled by her own reflection staring back in the mirror. She pulled her short brown hair into a ponytail, still unable to shake the horrific thoughts from her head, like they'd been burned into her, a part of her.

"I'll never get back to sleep now," she complained, flipping on the shower and getting undressed.

"*Jamie!*"

Kayla woke with a start. She'd fallen asleep on her couch, the television screen flickering in the darkness. She glanced at the clock that hung on the wall above her TV.

3:00 am.

Her ankles were cold. She looked down at the cuffs of her pants, still wet, soaked from the rain. Rubbing the stiffness from her neck, she made her way to the mantle and looked once again at the empty picture frame. It made no sense, and now this dream.

She stepped into her bedroom and pulled her sweater off over her head, neatly folding it and placing it in her top dresser drawer. Then, she slid off her khakis and hung them up to dry over the back of the chair that sat at her vanity.

Kayla slipped into an old sweatshirt and checked the time set on her alarm clock, then climbed into bed. The covers felt warm, reassuring. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, tried not to think about her dream. But as she lay there, images flashed through her mind: the missing picture, her perfect date, his warm smile, *her nightmare*, a shadow looming in the haunted, dark places of her mind.

Outside, lightning flashed and thunder boomed across the city, echoing off of buildings and down dark alleyways. Rain spattered down upon the rooftops. As the city slept peacefully, the world grew dark and cold, and in that instant, evil woke.