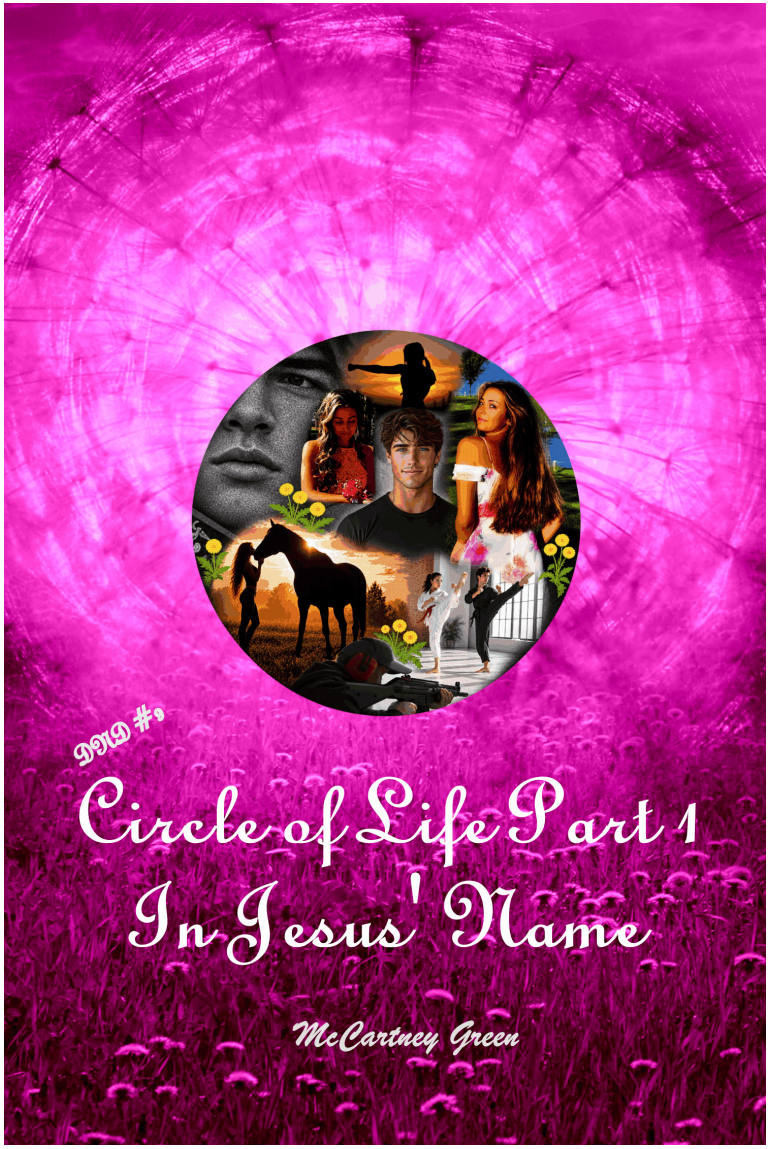

DVD #9
Circle of Life Part 1
In Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

DND #9

Circcle of Life

In Jesus' Name

McCartney Green

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I'm supposed to say that, but really, share, share, share. You may share this work in its entirety to any and all.

This is a work of fiction, or is it? Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are *used fictitiously*, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is either unintentional or a very cool synchronicity!

Important Note to reader:

Oh my goodness, there is so much to tell you, I don't know where to begin. I wrote the original 8 novels in this series in a very different way. How that all came about is such a blur to me. I received an angel visitation, (that part is not a blur and is described on my website,) and yet, unbelievably, I turned my back on God. Yet God didn't turn His back on me. He slowly led me around a giant circle that took me the furthest away, but then came all the way back— back to Him. He led me back. He knew it was the only way to show me all the errors of my ways. God is so good! He sure is smart. :) He knew just how to touch my heart.

Back in August of 2021, my rock, my best friend, my husband and I both got Covid. By the end of August, after struggling for weeks, we both ended up in the hospital. I was immediately in a coma and on a ventilator. I woke up, (a miracle in itself,) two months later to find that my husband had passed away. It took a while for it to sink in. He was/is such a good man and I love him and miss him so much. Here's the big deal: while I was in that coma, I was accompanied by an angel, who led me to see the Earth from high above, and called it the "Pinnacle of the Earth."

The angel showed me many important things, including how to heal my body, for while I was on the ventilator, I had a stroke. I would eventually have to learn to stand, to walk, even to breathe and to use my left hand and arm all over again. The angel showed me two things to eat in order to heal, but that is a story for another time.

I never intended to write any more stories, any more books. Yet, once I got out of the hospital, I began to hear from the Lord, strong, clear messages, visions, dreams, whisperings and even audible messages. First, the Lord commanded me to take all eight novels that I had previously written and re-write them in the way He had intended me to write them in the first place.

He'd actually told me to do this years ago, and I did take them all down off Amazon, I think it was in either 2016 or 2018, but I never re-wrote them. My reasoning was I had very little time because my husband was handicapped and I was his caregiver and there was just not enough time in the day to do it. I also simply didn't know how to go about the re-writes. I couldn't wrap my mind around it. It seemed just too overwhelming. Then, after my husband passed away and I was hearing from the Lord on a daily basis, He miraculously showed me the way to accomplish it, step by step. He made it seem so simple. He actually helped me begin through one of my beautiful teenage granddaughters. She called me and asked to read my books and God whispered to me, rewrite them with her in mind. It was like He opened my brain and the light went on. His light.

I complained a bit. (I'm such an Israelite.) I told Him I wanted to wait until I could get my left hand to work, because typing a whole manuscript with just one hand was extremely difficult, and tedious. His answer to me was clear. "Then you should have done it back a few years ago when you had the use of both hands. Do it now." Wow. Of course, He was right. I'd been slothful. So, I began. He showed me daily how to do it, and what to say to make the re-writes. He gave me confirmations ***daily*** *that I was still on the right track. It was a joyous time. I felt so close to Him every single day. It only took me about three months to re-write all eight novels, even with just one hand, which again, is a miracle, and all glory to God. Once I did the rewrites, something strange happened.*

First, God gave me a vision. It was like a scene from a movie. I could see clearly what was happening in the vision, heard clearly who was speaking and what they were saying. "Write this," God said. I was in tears. It was a new novel He asked me to write; ***this*** *book, Book # 9. But I couldn't. I just couldn't. It wasn't because I'd never had any intentions to add to the series, though that is true, I never intended to do that. It was because what He asked me to write was just too hard, too sad, too heart-wrenching. How could I write that? I didn't understand why God would ask me to write that scene. (You'll recognize it near the end of this book. It is the scene when one by one the whole family drops to their knees. That's all I can say right now so that I don't spoil the drama.)*

I literally cried over this for days. One afternoon, my son saw me sitting in the living room crying and tried to comfort me. I think he thought I was crying over missing my late husband. When I told him what I was crying about, he sighed and said, "Well, Mom, if God is telling you to do this, are you going to say 'no' to God? Are you going to just flat out refuse?" My eyes opened wide. No, of course not. I couldn't do that. I'd already made the promise that I will never turn my back on Him again.

So, that night, I prayed, sobbing to the Lord. I told Him how difficult this was for me. I asked for forgiveness for my trying to turn from this hard task. Then I told Him that I would write what He asked, but I pleaded for Him to please help me deal with the pain. Could He please somehow make it easier for me, take away the anguish I was feeling. Still, I told Him, no matter what, I would be obedient and write it. That night God did make it easier. He made it easier by giving me a new scene. He showed me a beautiful red-headed girl in handcuffs, sitting on a bench outside of a restaurant. There was a police officer standing next to her. Just a little ways away, there stood a young man wearing military fatigues, his face all scratched up, his canvas duffel at his feet, and another police officer speaking to him. The scene woke me up and I sat straight up in bed and I heard– "Okay, now— write."

I smiled. This I could write. I knew exactly who the characters were.

What was happening in the scene was up to me. It was like God had given me an improv. Here's the scene, now go. This is how DND #9 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name came to be. You will recognize the scene when you get to it in Chapter Two. God is so awesome. I knew eventually I would have to get around, or come around, to the first scene God had shown me and told me to write; the one that was so heartbreaking. You'll recognize that one too. He was doing it again, taking me all the way around the giant circle to eventually end up back at the beginning, to bring me back to Him, and this time bring all the readers with me. And when I got to that scene, He showed me another miracle and awarded us all for our faithfulness. How amazing is He? I love Him so much. Almost each and every day, as I wrote, I was given confirmations, miraculous confirmations, several of these I would share with my children, because I knew it would help their testimonies to grow.

Now, I've finally finished the writing of this book, this allegory, this — happening. I hope you do much more than enjoy it. Though it is entertaining, it was not written for your entertainment. We are not here on this Earth to be entertained. As I wrote and re-wrote these books, I realized God was giving us, through story, through allegory, through parable, an illustration of how to live, how to draw close to Him, and mostly, how to train to be His warriors in these last days. They are a blueprint. They show us how to take His Bible, His Word, His commandments and implement them and integrate them into our contemporary lives.... our daily, stressed out, trauma-ridden lives. We are surrounded with much violence, darkness, and evil in this world, but He has overcome the world.

Read these books and learn how to be the best husband, the best wife, the best teen, the best kid, the best friend, the best sibling, the best parent, the best person. Heal and receive blessings. Learn how to be God's warrior, and be blessed to know His true will for you. The books are also encoded, (Jesus' doing, not mine,) with healing words and prayers for any ailment, be it physical, mental, emotional or spiritual.

The Lord instructed me to put all of the Series up on my website for anyone to download FREE. They are in PDF form and have FULL COLOR PICTURES OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE BOOKS! Making those was so much fun! I am not making one cent on any of these books. Even the ones on Amazon are at the minimum price allowed which makes my royalty, $0.00. I am doing God's work and making money is not my intention. My intention is ONLY to serve God and to present these books to as many as possible. So.... share!

Sending you prayers filled with love, healing, and blessings,
McCartney Green [aka Susan Milner]

✝✝✝

“And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

Joel 2:28-29

✝✝✝

Keeping Tabs [Families and Ages]
In March, when Book #9 begins.....

West Coast Families

Kino Sr. Family
Eric will be 70 June 14
Shelley will be 65 Oct 27

Kino Jr. Family
Ricky will be 52 in May
Breanna Adams Kino will be 49 August 27
Eric III turned 20 Dec 14
Taylor turned 16 August 30

Adams Families
Mark Adams will be 40 Oct 29
Bella Adams turned 39 Jan 29
JoJo Adams will be 21 June 30
Logan Adams will be 20 July 17
Emily Adams turned 3 Dec 11

Joey Adams will be 38 Aug 22
Breez Adams will be 35 in April
Sophia will be 7 in May
Kelstyn turned 3 Dec 16
Ledger turned 2 Nov 23

Wallace Family
June Flower (Jeffy) Kino Wallace turned 28 March 15
Cameron (Cam) Wallace will be 30 July 17

Lee Families
Justin Lee turned 66 in Mar
Lori Lee will be 52 in April

Jason Lee will be 59 in April
Angel Lee will be 56 in May

Jensen Deal is 29
Kimberly (Kimmie) Lee Deal turned 26 in Feb

Davis Family
Jefferson (Jeff) Davis turned 43 Nov 8
MacKenzie (Mickey) Daley Davis turned 42 Feb 3
Daniel turned 12 Jan 8
Jeremy turned 11 Jan 10

East Coast Families

Marissa Daley Coley turns 29 Aug 2
Agent Christopher (Chris) Coley is 30

Smith Family
Tobias (Toby Nash) is 55
Caroline (Caro) is 53
Grace (Gracie Nash) turned 25 in Feb
Brody will be 22 in July

Stewart Family
Chaz (Charles Anthony III) Stewart is 49
Lisa Lewis Stewart will be 46 May 15
Melaynah (Laynahbug) turned 20 Nov 22
Charlie (Charles Anthony IV) turned 14 Feb 11
Matthew turned 12 Jan 20
Aralyn turned 7 Feb 9

Maddie Lewis (Lisa's grandmother) is now 87!

Appel Family
John is 50
Jodi turned 48 Feb 14
Jacob turned 21 Feb 28

Tanner Family
Keegan Tanner turned 49 Feb 8
Lizzy will be 42 April 10
Heather turned 24 Jan 10
Rose turned 23 Dec 25
Violet turned 23 Dec 25
Daisy turned 22 Dec 19
Lily turned 22 Dec 19
Gabriel (Gabe) will be 18 June 14
Iris turned 2 Dec 10

Murphy Family
Rebecca Murphy is 36, a teacher and motel maid
Peyton Murphy will be 18 in July, a HS senior and Gabe's best friend.
Lucas Murphy turned 14 Jan 9

Other Characters

Nolan Sawyer will be 28 in April and is a Tennessee rancher and a veterinarian

Agent CJ (Carson Josiah) Blackmon will be 28 in May

Mike Moreland, advertising entrepreneur, will be 25 in September

Agent Andrew Dalton turned 38 Jan 5

Agent Hart Akins
[Texas AIC] will be 31 Nov 12

More Stewart family:
Lisa's father, Joe Carter, is 62 and owns Joe's Bar and Grill
Shirley Carter is 60

Lisa's younger half-sister, Megan Carter Turner, is 40. She married Chaz' high school friend, Josh Turner, 49, who helps his father-in-law run Joe's.
Daughter Riley is 15
Son David is 13

Charles Stewart Jr., Chaz' father and owner of the Stewart Ranch
Patricia Stewart, Chaz' mother and retired cardiologist

Cindy Stewart Clark, Chaz' younger sister. Cindy's husband is Bo Clark. Daughter Kylie is 15

Dr. Stephanie Stewart-Ross is Chaz' youngest sister. Her husband is Parker Ross. Son Parker is 12

Tyson Stewart is now the Pine County Sheriff. He is Chaz' younger brother who married Jenny, the waitress from Book #3. They have no children.

✝✝✝

"For I know the plans I have
for you," declares the Lord,
"plans to prosper you
and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope
and a future."
Jeremiah 29:11

✝✝✝

✝✝✝

"So do not fear, for I am
with you; do not be dismayed,
for I am your God. I will
strengthen you and help you; I
will uphold you with my
righteous right hand."
Isaiah 41:10

✝✝✝

Who Are These People?

You are about to read book #9 of the *In Jesus' Name Series*.
If you haven't read the other books in the series yet, you may want to know...

Spoiler Alert! [For those who'd ***rather read the first books, don't read the explanation of characters below. (And I ***REALLY*** hope you do read the first 8 books, because they are smack full of beautiful stories of love, amazing messages, and life lessons from God and give you a better base to get the full effect of this powerful book.) Jesus wants you to show the faith it takes to go through the progression!

Therefore...

Go to mccartneygreen.org and click on the link for free books.
Any questions...Email me at:
mccartneygreen@gmail.com

Explanation of Major Characters

Kino Family-When he was twenty-nine, Martial Arts Grandmaster Eric Kino's first wife, Ann, passed away.*[Story found in the Prequel; Messages from God-The Memoirs of Grandmaster Kino.]* At that time their son Ricky, (Eric Jr,) was eleven. Ricky is a martial arts superstar and movie icon. Ten years later Eric meets Shelley Adams. *[Story found in Book #1- A Healing-In Jesus's Name.]*

Adams Family-Financially struggling, traumatized by a random sexual assault, divorced mother of three, 34-year-old, Shelley Adams' children include Breanna, 17, a wannabe actress, Mark, 8 and Joseph, 6. Shelley is asked by Grandmaster Kino to compete in the MART, an acronym for Martial Arts Recruiting Tournament, a very large martial arts competition. During the year of training they fall in love and marry.*[Story in Book #1.]* Together Eric and Shelley have June Flower, (Jeffy) a psychic high genius whose calling is to "Heal the World." *[Jeffy's story found in Book #8- June Flower-In Jesus' Name.]*

Lee Family-Justin Lee, an attorney with his own very large and very prestigious law firm, eventually finds trauma nurse Lori and falls in love. *[Story in Book # 4.]* Younger brother, Jason Lee, owner of Ameritech Security, finds wife Angel, *[their story in Book #1-A Healing-In Jesus' Name.]* They have daughter Kimmie (Kimberly.) The brothers have been Eric's best friends since he was in high school. *[Story in Messages from God (Prequel.)]*

Kino/Adams Family-Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams, though they become step siblings technically, they first met when both were already adults. They did not grow up in the same household. Ricky and Bree, (Breanna,) eventually admit they are in love with each other and marry. *[Gripping tale found in Book #4 Weeds Grow-In Jesus' Name.]* They have two children, Eric III, and Taylor. (Ages in the "Keeping Tabs" page above.)

Adams Family-Mark, Shelley's older son, becomes an attorney at Justin's law firm, and brother Joey, Shelley's younger son, becomes lead agent at Jason's Ameritech Security. They meet and marry the Sheridan sisters, Bella and Breez. *[Mark and Joey's story found in Book #7- Warriors-In Jesus's Name.]* Mark's wife Bella has Logan, a son from a previous marriage, whom Mark adopts. Mark also has a son, Joseph (JoJo) from a teenage relationship, *[story in Book #4,]* who is a football star and Heisman candidate at USC.

Together Mark and Bella have Emily. Joey and Breez have three children, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger.

Smith Family-Toby Nash (stage name,) country music star, met abused Caroline Jones when they were kids, and runs into her again as adults in New York. *[Their harrowing story is told in Book #2- Suffer the Children-In Jesus' Name.]* They have two children; Grace Nash (she took her father's stage name,) and Brody Smith, a D-1 all-star college baseball player for the Tennessee Vols.

Davis Family-Jefferson Davis is one of Ameritech's top agents, and a superb sharpshooter and sniper. He lives in the Los Angeles area and first meets the Kinos as Bree's bodyguard. *[Book #4.]* He meets the Tanners in *[Book #5.]* He finds the love of his life Mackenzie Daley, (Mickey,) under extremely harrowing and traumatic circumstances. *[Story found in Book #6 The Worth of Souls-In Jesus' Name.]* Mickey has a little sister, Marissa Daley.

Stewart Family-In Pine Forest, Georgia, when Maddie and Lawrence Lewis' only daughter, Louise (Lou) gets pregnant and runs away she gives birth to Lisa Lewis. After a horrifying discovery, Lisa comes looking for her home and finds her grandmother. She meets neighbor rancher, Chaz Stewart, they fall in love and after quite a roller coaster ride, they marry and have Melaynah, Charlie, Matthew and Aralyn. *[Their terrifying story told in Book #3- Finding Home-In Jesus' Name.]*

Appel Family-Jodi and John Appel, former students of Grandmaster Kino, come to Pine Forest at Lisa's request. Jodi met Lisa at Golden Hotels, where she used to work. Their desire is to turn Lisa's grandmother's old farmhouse into a beautiful and high end country inn. They have one child, Jacob (Jake) Appel. *[They are the rock-solid friends and Christians in #3, #5, #9, #10, #11, #12, #13, etc..]* They live in and are owner/operators of the *Pine Forest Country Inn and Cottages*. John, retired Marine Special Forces, who fought side-by-side with fellow Marine Raider Keegan Tanner, also has a line of Martial Arts studios with Brian, another Kino former student *[from Book #1.]*

Tanner Family-Former FBI Agent, Keegan Tanner and former ICU nurse, Lizzy Anderson meet under unprecedented circumstances. When in the north Georgia town of Tyler Springs, they fall in love and they have to jump many hurdles in order to end up a happy story. *[Story in Book # 5-Angels-In Jesus' Name.]*They have five daughters from Lizzy's first marriage to Bradley Anderson, Army Corporal who was killed in the line of duty. In their time of need, they go down to Pine Forest to be near Keegan's best friend, John Appel, and end up staying. Together they have Gabriel, 17, and Iris 2.

“Whenever there is bright light in this world,
the dark forces gather to put it out.
But don’t worry or fear,
God’s light is stronger than any darkness.”

~Grandmaster Eric Kino~

Chapter One

March 15th Friday Afternoon
Hollywood, California

Eric Kino the Third, known most of his life thus far as Young Eric, landed flat on his back, breath coming in huge gasps. His face registered pain, perspiration dripped from his hard body, a body that was currently covered with bruises and abrasions. The guy standing over him pointed a gun at his head.

“Say goodbye,” he said softly.

Eric closed his eyes in defeat. And then, in a flash, the gun was in Eric’s hand, his enemy stumbling backward. Eric took only seconds to drop the magazine, toss the gun aside and beat the guy unconscious.

“And cut.”

There was a murmuring on set. Choreographed or not, the Kino kid was impressive and everyone standing there was in awe.

Twenty-year-old Eric stood still and listened as the older guy he’d just beat senseless put his arm around his shoulders and gave him some direction. Eric nodded and then headed to the side while the next shot was being set.

“Whaddya think, Dad?” he said as he approached his father.

Ricky Kino smiled with pride at his son. “I don’t think I could be prouder.”

Young Eric nodded at him. “Thanks, but I meant, do you have any pointers for me?”

“Then say what you mean,” Ricky said with a smile.

Young Eric laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“You sound just like Granddad. You’re becoming your dad.”

“Well, there are a lot worse things to be, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would. I aspire to be like you and him, and I gotta say, it’s pretty tough.”

“My shoes are easily filled, my father’s shoes, not so much. But at least I just said something that he would say. Maybe there’s hope for me yet.”

Young Eric frowned. “I don’t think I like you being all humble and stuff, Dad.”

Ricky knew exactly what his son was thinking, but decided to draw it out of him. “Why not?”

The young man actually shuddered. “It makes me feel, uh, well, you know.”

“Again son, say what you mean.”

Young Eric blew out a long breath, took a minute to put his thoughts together. “Okay, it’s like, I feel strong and confident, and part of that is because I have so

much confidence in *you*, in everything you've ever said or taught me. So, it's like my confidence lies in you, like, you the big movie star, the martial arts champion, you can do no wrong, or like, there's nothing you couldn't master, nothing you don't know."

Ricky chuckled. "Well, just ask your Mom about that. But really, son, though I truly appreciate the honor, I think you have me on quite a pedestal. I am totally fallible. Granddad is fallible—though it's actually hard for me to say those words because I have so much respect for him. You need to take us down off that pedestal. Only God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ are all-knowing and infallible and that is where your confidence needs to come from. Don't let the fact that Granddad and I are imperfect shake your confidence, let that be a lesson that one can always keep learning and progressing, even when you get to be as great as my father." He rubbed his hand over the top of Eric's hair. "And if it will help you to gain back some of that confidence in me, I would be happy to kick your butt on the mats anytime."

Eric grinned. "Oh ho, Dad, you do know you're getting older, right?"

"Yes—and wiser. Wanna take me on?"

"Of course. I would never turn down the honor of facing you."

Ricky chuckled. "Well said. Good. We'll make that happen."

They bowed to each other just as young Eric was called back to the set. Ricky watched him go, sighed with pride, realizing he must be feeling what his own father felt all those years when he would watch Ricky perform. He thought about the conversation he'd just had with his son. Ricky had forced him to work through some emotions before they could turn negative and become a problem. Hmmm, maybe he WAS turning into his father because that is exactly something his father would do. The difference was, his father had a PhD in psychology, and Ricky most certainly did not.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to make some preparations for Jeffy's birthday dinner tonight. How's it going?"

Ricky turned and smiled at the man he'd been thinking of. He'd been his father for going on fifty-two years and Ricky still felt in awe of him whenever he entered a room. His presence was commanding. The sudden silence on the set and people pointing or nodding in his direction was proof that Ricky was not the only one that felt it. "Hey Dad, it's going really well. I think you'll be so proud."

"I am so proud." Grandmaster Eric Kino smiled heavenward. "And grateful," he added, always acknowledging the source from which all of his blessings flow. "The question is, how are you feeling about it? About, the change in plans?"

Ricky sighed, glanced at his father, then turned his head back to watch his son as he spoke. "I admit, I was pretty upset about young Eric's decision to take a hiatus from school. I'm not even sure why I was so upset."

"Let's talk about that, son. This is not the time and place for a deep counseling session, but while your heart is in that place, can you tell me just one reason that you didn't want Eric to take a break? I mean, you and I both have reservations about the space program, so, it would seem you'd be happy about it."

Ricky shrugged. "I guess I just didn't want him to quit."

"You mean because winners never quit and quitters never win?"

Ricky gave a short laugh. “Sounds silly, huh?”

“Sounds silly because it is. You know how we really hate the no-tolerance rules because they give an excuse for people to not use their brains to sort things out and therefore don’t have to take responsibility for their decisions?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the same way with that little ‘quitters never win’ saying. You can’t apply an aphorism blindly to every time someone changes direction. People give that little quote and think they’ve said something wise and told someone to put on their big boy pants at the same time. But it’s not so. It’s a lazy way out. People are different. Their reasons for quitting are different. If it’s laziness or fear, you could encourage someone by using that aphorism.

“But let’s say you’re traveling from one place to another, and you discover you’re on the wrong road. Of course, you would quit the way you’re traveling and change directions. It seems there are only two choices; either turn around and go back to the place you last knew you were on the right road, or keep going down the same road and hope you’ll eventually intersect with the correct road.”

Ricky nodded. “Okay, and you said ‘it *seems* there are only two choices,’ intimating there is a third choice?”

“Well sure. You can walk off that road right where you are, hack your way through the undergrowth, and make a new path to the place you want to be. It’s a little more difficult, and requires more faith.”

Ricky nodded.

“But, Rick, if you reach a little deeper I think you’ll see that’s not the real reason you didn’t want him to quit.”

Ricky drew a deep breath. “Can we talk about this another time?”

“Yes, absolutely. Yet, there is no... ”

“Time like the present.” Ricky finished. He thought a moment and heaved a sigh.

“Son, I can see you’re uncomfortable and that’s why you want to put this off, but putting it off won’t help.”

Ricky knew exactly what his father was doing. He’d seen him do it many times with his students, with his children, with his friends and with his wife. Ricky had just done the same thing with his own son. If his father thought it was important enough to talk about right this very minute, out of respect, he would dig deep and give him the answer. He was silent for a few minutes. “I don’t want him to turn out like me,” he finally said.

Eric senior’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but then he nodded and smiled. “Good. At least it’s an honest answer.”

When Eric didn’t say anything else, Ricky looked over at him. “Uh, that’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

Eric held his hand up, getting Ricky to slow down his mind, while Eric organized his thoughts. He finally spoke. “So, Ricky, tell me, which part of *‘you’* do you not want him to be like? The superb martial artist that became a star at the age of five in your very first movie role? Or is it the fighter that won that first Kino Challenge against great odds? Is it the amazing fight choreographer? How about the way you easily handle the public? Which part of you, huh? Maybe it’s how quick

your mind works, or simply how powerful your mind is. Maybe it's your tenacity. I guess it could be your strength and skills as a champion, or maybe your weapons training. Could it be you don't want him to speak so many languages, or have the knowledge of so many subjects inside one brain? Could it be your other skills, like you being a certified EMT, or a wilderness survivalist, or, maybe it's the you with two college degrees."

"Yeah, Dad, and with all that, what am I? I'm an actor. People idolize me based on some silly story put to film with movie magic."

"I sincerely hope you're not ashamed of the movies you've made, Rick. You've never made one that glorifies violence or was lewd and crude. Yes, fighting is violent, but there's always been a moral to the story. The actor thing though, was only a means to an end. The actor thing got people's attention, but it's who you are that people admire. An actor is the least of what you are. You are a light to this world, Rick. You are a leader. You do so much good in this world and I believe I've told you that before, many times. Obviously it hasn't sunk in. You haven't integrated it into your psyche. We definitely have some work to do."

Ricky sighed.

"Quiet on the set– and– action."

The two men stood silently, side by side, and watched young Eric Kino swing into action and mesmerize the film crew.

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March 27th Wednesday Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky Kino sat at his desk in his study in his home, just south of Crystal Cove, California. In front of him sat his only son, and namesake, Eric Kino III who would turn twenty-one in December. They were very much alike, in appearance, in skills, in their belief system and in temperament. Jovial, energetic, positive, they had much respect for each other.

Ricky, who would be fifty-two in a few months, would easily pass for thirty-something and would attribute that to his father, Eric senior, who had trained him since before he was old enough to walk. He'd never stopped training, and neither had his father. Ricky, though similar in appearance to his father, was very different in temperament. His father was always calm, usually serious and sober, while Ricky was pretty light-hearted and jovial. His father was always teaching. That was what he did. Ricky had never met his father's equal.

Ricky had become a martial arts superstar and movie idol as a child. By the time he was twenty-one he'd become a household name and hot commodity. He also went to college and worked for two degrees, traveled the world with his father, and learned five languages. But the most important thing he'd learned from his father was his connection to God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, his respect for family, and love, compassionate, true, unconditional love, the "be in service" kind of love. Ricky was an extraordinary martial artist and weapons expert and was very real and very lethal. He'd proven it many times. Yet, he felt inadequate to teach his own son all the things he needed to know. He felt that way because there was simply no way to fill his own father's shoes.

Now, as his son sat across from him, he searched for a way to reach out and

touch his heart like his own father had done for Ricky so many times.

Ricky closed his eyes and said a silent prayer, asking God for direction. He opened his eyes when he heard his son say, "Amen."

Ricky smiled. "Was I accidentally praying out loud?"

Young Eric chuckled. "No, I just knew you were praying and tried to time the 'amen' for the end of your prayer. How'd I do?"

Ricky nodded. "You were right on."

Young Eric couldn't hold back the grin. "Man, I'm good."

"Don't get cocky, kid," Ricky quoted.

Young Eric smiled. "So, Dad, if you're praying before you talk to me, I'm guessing this is a pretty serious discussion?"

"On the contrary, I pray every time I speak to you kids. I need all the help I can get."

"Oookaaay, so what have I done?"

"You're not being called down, if that's what you're wondering. Besides, you're a little too old for that."

"Dad, I'll never be too old for you to set me straight on *anything.*"

"Good, son." He had to clear his throat.

Young Eric smiled. "Gotcha, didn't I?"

Ricky nodded. His son was so like him it was scary, always ready with a light-hearted quip. "So, since you're so smart, do you know what I called you in here to talk about?"

"I have an inkling."

"You want to expound?"

"It's about me dropping out of college and the decisions I'm making about my future and, I'm guessing, about your disappointment in me."

"Well, two out of three are correct. I'm not disappointed. Not in any way. I simply want to see where your head is at, what your driving force is. I mean, all you talked about for years was going into space, astronaut training, your excellence in science and math."

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, it's all I wanted to do. It seemed so interesting. So fascinating. And I wasn't afraid of the hard work. I mean, I pretty much met all the requirements."

"Tell me, what were those requirements? I'm sure you've memorized the list."

Young Eric smiled. "You have to be intellectually at the top of your game, psychologically perfect, excellent physical shape, socially a team player, adaptable, coping well and thinking clearly in stressful situations, comfortable in the public eye, being capable of talking to reporters, good communication skills in English and either Russian, Spanish, or Chinese are a must, and it helps to be photogenic. Eyesight must be 20/20 and height between 4'9" and 6'3", and of course, the schooling including flight hours, which I had no doubt I could accomplish. I meet or would meet all of the above but two."

"And they are?"

"Well, I don't speak Russian, but I'm sure I can learn, though I don't really have to, it's an either or situation. Still, to be accepted I need to be exceptional, so, I'd learn it."

Ricky nodded. "And the other?"

Eric looked down. Shook his head. "The other is something I didn't know I had, and maybe I actually didn't, maybe I developed it as I got older."

"Okay, so, are you gonna tell me or are you gonna make me guess?"

Young Eric sighed. "I'm not sure that I want to even talk about it."

"Son, do you have a physical ailment that your mother and I don't know about? Because you're gonna have to talk about it."

"No, sir, I'm sure something like that would come as a surprise to you."

When he didn't go on Ricky sighed. "So, you *are* gonna make me guess?"

Young Eric smiled sadly.

"Okay then, I'll play. It would be something that's not outwardly evident but it isn't a physical ailment, which means it must be psychological, and you said you must be psychologically perfect. Please, son, tell me what you're struggling with. Maybe we can work it out."

Eric looked up, moisture in his eyes. "I've developed a phobia, Dad. I didn't used to have it, but it's become prominent."

"I'm still gonna need more information."

"It's *the* main phobia one absolutely CANNOT have in order to travel into space."

Ricky thought. "Claustrophobia?"

Eric's respiration increased just thinking about it. He nodded his head.

Ricky came from around his desk, turned the chair next to Eric's to face him and sat down. "We can work through this."

"I knew you would say that. And maybe you're right. But I don't feel like I can. I've tried. I've prayed so hard. I've tried everything. Hypnotism, EFT, acupuncture, I've researched it extensively. Online, there are lots of people who swear by certain things and I've tried them. Tried them all. It doesn't work. Not for me."

"Have you spoken to Granddad?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He hung his head. "I don't know."

"Yes you do. You've made a conscious decision to not speak with Granddad or even with me. Why?"

The moisture that had been gathering ran over onto his cheek. "It's a fear, Dad, it's a weakness, and I hate it and I hate that I can't shake it."

"Eric, fear is not a weakness."

"It is when you want to be an astronaut. It's a huge weakness. I never thought that some strange psychological ailment would keep a Kino from reaching for their dreams."

"Okay, hold on. Though I appreciate the respect for your family name, I think you're a little mixed up. The Kinos are not perfect people. They have ailments, and they have problems. The only difference is we try to work through our problems with love and understanding and without addictive crutches. And mostly, with God. And we adjust. We work with what we have. And we do not play victim."

"Well, I guess I don't have it. If I could just be like you, if I could just measure

up, then maybe I could accomplish something."

"Measure up? To me? Dear God, where have I gone wrong? Son, you have far surpassed me. How can you not see that?"

Eric shook his head. "I don't see it. You have no fear. You get into a ring with guys twice your size and come out on top."

"I have no fear in the ring. But I have fears, son, psychological fears."

"Like what?"

"I'm afraid of heights," he said quickly.

Young Eric looked up. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"But I've seen you stand at the edge of a cliff, remember, when all that happened with Logan, and Uncle Mark fell."

Ricky nodded his head. "Yes, I remember. Wish I could forget. At that point I did what I had to do."

"See, you faced your fear. I can't."

"I faced it when I had to, when I had no choice, out of love for my family. But I certainly wouldn't put myself into that position on purpose. You going out into space would be doing it on purpose."

"Well, you fly in helicopters and across the country in jet planes."

"Yes, and that's a little uncomfortable, but I would never purposely jump out of an airplane, or go parasailing, or cliff diving. I went rock climbing once. Won't ever do it again. Those guys in the military, or the athletes who do that kind of thing, I'm in awe of them. But I would never attempt it myself. Does that make you lose respect for me?"

"No, of course not. Just the fact that you're strong enough to admit that to me makes me respect you more."

Ricky nodded. "Keep going down that road."

Eric thought. "Sooo, me admitting I have this fear of closed spaces, it shouldn't make me feel like I don't deserve respect."

"Correct. Your self-respect is ultra-important, son. Satan is a liar, he's deceptive, and he knows if he can destroy your image of yourself as a strong man, as a warrior, as a child of God, then eventually, he can destroy you. If you don't mind my asking, when did you first start to realize you had this fear?"

"Remember a few years ago, when those boys and their coach were trapped in a cave in Thailand? When that was happening, I couldn't sleep, I could barely eat. If I'd been there I would *not* have been able to survive that."

Ricky nodded. "But you wouldn't have been there because you wouldn't have put yourself in that situation, right? You would never have gone inside that cave."

Eric shrugged. Smiled. "Well, you know, if the guys had dared me."

Ricky smiled. "Yeah, that's a pride thing and that IS definitely something you can change. But still, those boys in the cave, it was a difficult situation, but you'd be amazed what you can survive, when you have something to live for." He paused, frowned. "So, you started with this that long ago? That was before you graduated high school."

"Yeah, but I didn't think much about it at first. I thought I was just being

empathetic. But the fear grew as the past few years went by and I couldn't stand it anymore. I was gonna try to stick it out, stay the course. I knew you wouldn't be happy with my decision to change directions with my life, but my phobia finally got the better of me and became stronger than my fear of disappointing you."

"Wow."

"Wow?"

"Son, I have to apologize. First, I thought I taught you that as long as you try and give the best you can give, I'll never be disappointed. I know I've told you that many times. But if I've made you feel like you can't come to me and tell me anything, I mean ANYTHING, then I've failed as a parent. I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that I can go to *my* father with anything and he would understand, and help me figure out what to do."

"Did you tell him about your acrophobia?"

Ricky sighed, hung his head. "No, I never did."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm pretty sure it started when James Crane pushed me over the railing of that balcony twenty-something stories high and the only thing holding me up was your grandmother's tiny forearm. I thought my weight was gonna break her arm and I thought any moment she would be pulled over the railing with me. I was just about to let go to save her life. I was seconds away from falling to my death. Anyway, my father was already feeling guilty about bringing James into our lives. I saw no reason to tell him about my fears and add to the weight of that guilt."

Young Eric nodded. "So, you didn't go to him for his sake. I get that. Dad, I do know that I can come to you for anything. Anything. I didn't because I was ashamed and I didn't want to let you down. I wanted you to be proud of me."

"I am proud of you. Remember I said as long as you gave your best I wouldn't be disappointed? Well, I think years of working on this and trying to face it, is giving it your best. The only thing I wish you'd done differently is to speak with Granddad. He is your biggest resource, and I'm not saying that because he's a psychologist, but because he has a calling. Just him praying over you can change your life. And here's a fun fact, he has some experience with claustrophobia."

"He does?"

"Your grandmother is ultra claustrophobic."

"I didn't know that."

Ricky smiled, raised his eyebrows. "Right, so— call granddad, at least talk to him about it."

"I will."

"But now, I just want to know, why acting?"

He shrugged. "I remember being on some sets when I was younger, watching you do your thing, watching you create a scenario, it was like bringing your imagination to life. I just wanted to create something, and didn't realize it would be so much fun. I was approached for this movie while I was in school. I liked the story line of the script. It was inspiring. I felt like it had a good moral to the story and that anyone watching the movie might be inspired to step up and become a warrior. Especially if you would do the fight choreography, then I knew it would be

excellent. So, that's why. It wasn't a, 'I'm gonna do this for the rest of my life,' kind of thing like Mom. I mean, she's awesome and I would never be a great actor like her. I just wanted to create something."

"Well, so far, you *are* creating something inspiring. The film crew is talking about you and that's always a good sign."

Young Eric smiled. "That's good to know. It gives me some confidence."

Ricky shook his head. "The Eric I knew never had a problem with confidence. He always ran the fastest, climbed the highest, got the best grade, even sang on that video you produced with no qualms."

"Yeah well, now I'm out of my element."

"No you're not. You're just taking a minute to get your feet wet. I have no doubt that soon you'll simply dive headfirst into the water and swim with the sharks."

Eric laughed. "You know, speaking of that video, after we put it out, girls came at me from everywhere. That actually scared me."

Ricky nodded. "Now, that's something I can agree with. It's scary. And I guess I need to warn you, once this movie comes out, it's gonna be like that again, only on a much larger scale."

Eric grinned. "Well, I'm a little older and more experienced now. I can handle it."

"Really? Uh, so just how experienced are you?"

Eric's lips pressed together. "Oh, I, uh, well, let me put it this way, I'm no saint. I'm technically still a virgin, but I've come close a few times."

"Coming close and still resisting takes a lot of strength. Still, I feel like I should caution you to not allow yourself to even get into a circumstance that makes it even slightly tempting. Eventually, you will find it too hard to resist and you will succumb. In all of our talks about this subject I know I told you how I finally gave in and how unhappy it made me. I'm not judging you, but I know you've been taught about right and wrong, about moral strength. What you do is between you and God, Eric, so pray for strength. But also don't play with fire."

"Yes, sir. I understand. I will pray for strength. I do, every day. And I'll make better choices."

Ricky smiled at his son. "Good. Remember, we can't ask God to help us to not get burned and then go and play with fire."

Young Eric nodded in understanding. "So, back to my dropping out of school, I'm not disappointing you?"

"No, not at all. I admit, I didn't want you to waste your brains and talents on making some silly movies, but I see now, it's more than just playing make believe. I'm thinking, maybe God didn't heal you because space isn't your path. I've always had reservations about the space program. We've discussed that. Maybe, you can use what you're creating now as a springboard to teach and uplift the world in some way, and if so, then that is certainly a worthy cause."

Young Eric nodded. "Like you. I mean, people know you because of your movies and the Kino Challenges, but they hang on every word you say because you're wise and faithful and full of the light of Christ. And you're humble and funny and entertaining. You know Dad, you should accept more invitations to

speak. People are always asking me about you, about how you became who you are, about your daily routines."

Ricky sighed heavily. He was never surprised when his father was asked to speak, but it always surprised him when he was asked to speak. Both men looked up when sixteen-year-old Taylor burst into the study.

"Mom says come to dinner."

"Do you know how to knock?" Ricky asked sternly.

She smiled prettily, with a glint of humor in her eyes. "Well, if I didn't, I'm pretty sure I could figure it out."

Ricky's eyebrows rose.

"Sorry, Daddy, just kidding and I didn't know Eric was in here gettin' in trouble."

Eric laughed. "I'm not in trouble but you're about to be."

"In trouble with who?"

"With me."

"You have to catch me first."

He jumped out of his chair.

Taylor shrieked, slammed the door and ran off.

Young Eric turned back to his father. "I guess our discussion is over for now?"

Ricky stood and held his hand out to his son. They shook hands and pulled in for a hug.

"I love you, Dad," Eric said softly.

"I love you, son, and please know, you can come to me, no matter how big or how trivial it may seem. I will always be here for you."

"I do know."

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2 Samuel 7:14-15

"I will be a father to him, and he'll be a son to me.
When he does wrong, I'll discipline him in the
usual ways, the pitfalls and obstacles of this mortal life.
But I'll never remove my gracious love from him."

Chapter Two

March 28th Thursday Early Evening
Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Chaz Stewart pulled up on the reins, rose up slightly in the stirrups and pulled his phone from his hip pocket. "Hey Ty, what's up?"

"I'm gonna need you to come into town and pick up your daughter."

"What's she gone and done now?"

"Disturbing the peace."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Wish I was."

"Did you arrest my daughter? *YOUR* niece?"

"No, I arrived just in time to keep that from happening by my new deputy. Just come get her please. We'll talk later. We're in front of the new Sally's Steakhouse."

Chaz sighed. "On my way." He kicked Sugar into a gallop. His younger brother Tyson was Pine County Sheriff and usually played everything by the book, so Chaz realized the big favor he'd done by calling him instead of arresting Laynah.

Once Chaz got back to the house he made the decision to not tell his wife where he was going until he knew all the facts. Easier that way. Besides, Lisa was at the Inn going over reports with Jodi. He jumped into his jeep and took off.

What he saw when he pulled up was intriguing and a little bit infuriating. His beautiful daughter, Melaynah, lovingly called Laynahbug, was sitting on a bench just outside of the steakhouse. The infuriating part was that she was leaning slightly forward because her hands were cuffed behind her. Her tumble of red hair had come down out of the clip she usually wore and was blowing in her face. She shook her head, trying to get the hair out of her eyes. Chaz's gaze shifted to take in the rest of the scene.

Tyson's new deputy stood next to Laynah, looking a little uncomfortable, Chaz was sure, because he knew who had just arrived. His brother Tyson stood talking to Jacob Appel, who had several bright red scratches on his cheek and forehead. Ty looked to be writing a report. Chaz knew Jacob had been deployed and hadn't realized he was back, though from the look of things, he was just getting back since he wore his fatigues and had a duffel bag next to him.

Chaz approached the deputy. He was new, they'd only met once and Chaz was trying to remember his name. Something biblical. Levi. Yep, that was it.

Chaz nodded. "Deputy."

The deputy nodded back. "Mr. Stewart."

"Take the cuffs off."

Levi Moore swallowed hard. "Well, I'd like to, sir, but only if you can guarantee

she won't go crazy again."

Chaz's eyebrows rose. Well, the guy didn't flinch. Chaz had to give him that. "I'm not gonna tell you again. Take the cuffs off. I guarantee her good behavior," he said pointedly, glaring at his daughter.

The deputy did as ordered.

Laynah immediately stood, Chaz pointed at her. "Sit your butt down, young lady, and don't you move."

She slumped back down onto the bench.

Chaz approached his brother and Jacob. He nodded. "Ty."

"Chaz."

Chaz nodded at Jacob. "Jake."

"Uncle Chaz."

Chaz looked him over. The young man was not happy. His jaw was set, his eyes unblinking.

"Anyone want to fill me in?"

Jacob's lips pressed together. It was Ty who spoke.

"The way I hear it, Jake here just steps off the bus, looks around trying to see what's changed since he's been gone. He says it was kind of hard to miss Laynah and some guy fighting with each other. He says it wasn't playful. Says the guy had her pushed back over the front of the hood of his car with his hand on her throat."

Now it was Chaz' turn to clench his jaw. He looked at Jacob.

"You're sure they weren't just messin' around?"

"Pretty sure, sir. She was struggling, tryin' to sit up. He shoved her back down hard enough to smack the back of her head on the hood."

Chaz drew a deep breath.

Tyson continued. "So, Jake ran across the street and pulled the guy off of her. Punched him a few good times. Laynah threw herself into the mix and pulled Jake away. The guy jumps in his Camaro and takes off. Laynah starts screaming at Jake, stuff like, 'Why did you do that, you've ruined everything, how could you,' you get the picture. She's hitting him and scratching him. He's trying to hold her off but she's just gone crazy. Some bystander calls the cops. Deputy Moore is only a block away. He flies up here, tries to pull Laynah away from Jacob, but she turns and starts in on the deputy, so, he ends up having to cuff her just to settle her down. Then I get here and let him know that Laynah is my niece, and then I called you."

Sighing deeply, Chaz nodded at Ty and then looked to Jake. "Thank you, Jake."

Jacob nodded. "No need for thanks, sir."

"Do you know the guy?"

Jake shook his head. "Never saw him before, but it was a silver gray Camaro, tag number BGF 4665."

Chaz smiled. "Good work."

"Thank you, sir."

Chaz looked him over. He'd been gone about a year and seemed to have changed from a young boy into a man. Jake went into the Marines right out of high school and went immediately into Raider training. He smiled, nodded. "Well, welcome home, Marine."

Jake gave a soft laugh and stroked the scratches on his face. “Yeah, thank you, sir.”

“Strange that your folks didn’t say anything to me about you coming home.”

“I wanted to surprise them. As a matter of fact, I’m hoping to hitch a ride out to the Inn.”

Chaz looked over at his daughter who was still fuming. “Ya think you two can sit civilly in the same vehicle?”

“Well, *I* can, sir. What she can or can’t do is beyond me. Uh, no disrespect intended.”

Chaz placed a hand on his shoulder. “No worries.” Chaz looked at Ty. “Is she free to go?”

Tyson nodded. “I’ll just have a word with my deputy.”

They walked over to the bench where Laynah sat. “Let’s go,” Chaz ordered.

Pouting, Laynah climbed into the front of the jeep, but when she realized Jake was tossing his bag into the jeep, she spoke. “Whaddya think you’re doing?”

Jake didn’t have a chance to answer her before Chaz did. “Zip it,” Chaz ordered.

“But he... ”

“Not another word, young lady.”

Jake smiled as he climbed in the back.

Laynah adjusted her seat to push back as far as it would go. That was no problem for Jake because he had already moved into the other seat anyway, so that he could see it coming if she tried a sneak attack.

They rode in silence. Laynah still fuming, Chaz thinking of how to explain all this to Lisa, and Jacob thinking about his reunion with his parents. It wasn’t long before they pulled up to the Inn, the only home Jacob had ever known. His parents had come here before he was born to go into business with Lisa Lewis—now Lisa Stewart—and her grandmother, Maddie Lewis. Maddie owned the old farmhouse and willed it to Lisa. Lisa, with the help of Jake’s parents, turned the property into a high end country inn.

The people he called Uncle Chaz and Aunt Lisa were not actually related to him, but they were close enough. He’d never *not* known them and he’d seen them pretty much every day of his life. Lisa Lewis married Chaz Stewart, whose family owned the neighboring ranch less than a mile away. Uncle Chaz and Aunt Lisa had four children. Laynah, Charlie, Matt and Aralyn. Jacob himself was an only child. Jacob and his parents occupied the gigantic third story of the Inn.

They pulled into the gate, around the loading circle and came to a stop. Jake jumped out and went to grab his duffel but it wouldn’t budge.

“Laynah, your seat is on the strap.”

“Sucks for you.”

“Move your seat, Bugs,” he commanded, using the second half of her nickname.

“Move it yourself.”

He nodded. “Fine.” He walked up to the seat she was in, reached between her legs, grabbed the bar, pulled it up, and jerked her seat forward, as she gave a small shriek. He grabbed his bag. “Uncle Chaz, do you mind if I come get Santana in the morning? Been thinking about a sunrise ride for months now.”

"You know you're welcome anytime. Santana will sure be happy to see you."

Jake waved. "Thanks for the ride, Uncle Chaz."

Chaz couldn't answer before the loud scream. Jodi Appel, Jacob's mom, came running from the inn, jumped the steps and into her son's arms. A moment later John Appel emerged with Maddie Lewis just behind. John walked down the steps and patiently waited for his wife to let go of their son. When she finally did Jake turned immediately into his father's giant bear-hug.

Chaz sat in the jeep with his daughter, watching the scene with pleasure. Lisa is gonna be very pleased that Jake is home. Thinking of Lisa, he waved goodbye and headed home.

Jake let Grams fuss over him a bit, and then they all headed inside.

A few of the guests at the inn stood and thanked him for his service as he made his way to the kitchen, the place he loved to be the most when he was home.

They sat around one of two kitchen islands while Grams and his mom gathered goodies. By the time they finished he had a spread of apple butter muffins, chocolate brownies with cream cheese frosting, cut fruit, cheese slices, tortilla chips, salsa, sliced sausage and a peanut butter sandwich. He gobbled down the sandwich first and chased it with a cold glass of raw milk.

They chatted about his deployment to Germany, about his Raider training, about a few of his brothers in arms. Finally, John had to ask about Jake's scratched up face.

"So, you wanna tell me about the condition of your face?"

Jake sighed. "Yeah about that. I guess the answer to that comes with a question."

"What's the question?"

"So, how do you subdue someone without hitting them and without hurting them?"

John nodded, and gave a soft laugh. "Well, that is a difficult one for sure, because if the person has any physical strength at all, it's almost impossible. So, the next best thing to ask is, how do you subdue someone without hurting them–permanently."

Jake smiled, but then shook his head. "Yeah, no, that won't work."

"Are we talking about someone in particular?"

"Yeah, that little hellcat that lives next door."

Jodi's brows rose. "Well, I know you wouldn't talk about your Aunt Lisa that way, or Dr. Stewart," Jodi said. "So, I'm guessing you're talking about—Melaynah?"

"Yes, Melaynah."

"She did that to your face?" John asked.

Jake nodded and went on to tell them all about the incident. When he finished, his father only had one question and it was the same one that his Uncle Chaz had asked.

"Did you know this guy?"

"Never saw him before, but, I'll be sure to see him again."

"Uh, don't you go getting involved. Let her father handle it."

"I'm already involved."

"Yes, and it's a good thing the guy is still alive," Jodi said.

Jake snorted. "If I wanted him dead he'd be dead."

"I get it, son, but you need to dial that back. Special ops come with a huge responsibility. You need to find the maturity to not go around half-cocked."

"Yes, sir, of course you're right. It just makes me a little crazy to think of how he had his hands on her. I can tell you this, it wasn't the first time he's roughed her up."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, but she didn't have to."

"I'll talk to Chaz. Take a deep breath. How long do we get to keep you?"

"Looking at six months with some weeks of training scattered in there."

Jodi clapped her hands together. "Wonderful."

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Chaz looked over at his daughter as he drove the mile down the street to the ranch, turned in the gate, passed the main house and drove up the winding drive to their home.

"Ya think you were a little rough on Jake?"

She shrugged. "No, I don't. He just makes me so mad."

Chaz shook his head. "Where's my sweet girl? Huh? Where's the one who sat on my lap when I taught her how to ride a horse, the one who was so proud the first time she shot the AR, or the one who was so excited when she learned to rope?"

"Dad, the things you're describing are not what most people think of as 'sweet.'"

"Well, those are things that pop into my head when I try to remember times you smiled."

He reached out, touched her cheek. "My baby girl, what am I gonna do with you, huh?"

"I'm not a baby. Aralyn's the baby."

"Well, you certainly acted like one today, don't ya think?"

Before she could answer they pulled up to the house.

She turned to him. "Can we keep this little incident between you and me, Daddy?"

He grinned. "Oh, it's Daddy now, is it?" he quipped.

She shrugged.

He shook his head as they got out of the Jeep and headed in. "Absolutely not. Get ready, cuz we're heading straight in to tell your mom."

"Tell me what," Lisa Stewart asked as they came in the door.

"Where are the kids?" Chaz asked.

"Up in their rooms. Tell me what?"

"Let's have a seat. But first— " He grabbed his wife's hand, pulled her to him, kissed her on the mouth. "Hey sweetheart."

She smiled up at her big strong cowboy of a husband. "Hey yourself."

Melaynah threw herself down on the sofa in the front room. "Will you guys get a room."

Lisa laughed. "I can't tell you how many times we've been told that, but let's not change the subject." She sat next to her daughter and turned slightly so she could look at her.

Chaz sat in a nearby chair.

"So, I'm guessing she's done something pretty bad," Lisa started.

Chaz sighed. "Well, Ty called to have me come pick her up because she almost got herself arrested for disturbing the peace."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, but that's not the part that's so bad."

"Well, please go on."

"Apparently, some guy was roughing her up in the parking lot of Sally's Steakhouse."

"What?" Lisa grabbed Laynah's hands and squeezed them.

"But that is also not the part that's so bad. So, ya see, Jake got home, he'd actually just stepped off the bus and... "

"Jake's home? Oh, that is so awesome!"

Laynah rolled her eyes.

"Strange, Jodi didn't tell me."

"He wanted to surprise them."

"I bet Jodi about had a heart attack. Oh, I wish I could have seen it!"

"Yeah, they both were pretty excited."

"Unbelievable," Laynah muttered.

"Sorry, sweetie." She nodded at her husband. "Go on, Chaz, so Jake just stepped off the bus and . . ."

"Yeah, and he saw what was happening and ran across the street and took care of the problem."

Lisa sighed. "That boy, he's just grown into such a fine young man."

Chaz nodded with a smile. "Wait 'til you see him. There's not much boy there anymore, Lisa. He's much bigger, stronger, lookin' like a man." Chaz smiled at the look of disbelief on his daughter's face. "Anyway, after Jake hits the guy a few times, your daughter jumps into the fray, trying to get Jake to leave the guy alone, she succeeds and the guy jumps in his car and high-tails it outta there."

"Well thank goodness, she broke them up. I mean, with Jake being special forces he could've killed the guy."

"Well, 'could've' being the operative word," Chaz put in. "The guy was not in any danger. Jake has always been in control of his senses. He's not known for a temper, unlike your daughter," he said pointedly at Laynah.

"Hmmph."

Chaz smiled at his daughter who'd made the grunting sound.

"So, what did she do that was so bad?"

"She then goes after Jake. She attacks him. He's trying to get her to back off without hurting her. She scratches his face up pretty bad. Someone calls the cops, that new deputy, Levi, he comes, tries to break up Laynah and Jake and she turns and starts going after the deputy."

Lisa gasped.

"He ends up having to put her in cuffs. Tyson shows up and saves her from being arrested, and then he called me to come get her."

Lisa sat for a few moments, digesting the information. She looked up into Laynah's eyes. "Why, honey?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you go after Jake?"

"Because he ruined everything. Don't you see? He'll probably never speak to me again."

"Who? Jake?"

"No, Mom. Keep up."

"You better watch how you speak to your mother, young lady. How can she keep up if you're not making much sense. So, to be clear, this guy who was hurting you, you're worried that he'll never speak to you again?"

She looked down. Nodded.

"Why?" Lisa asked softly. "Why would you even care to speak to him when he was mistreating you?"

When she didn't answer, Chaz asked, "What's his name?"

"I'm not gonna tell you that, Dad."

"Why not?" Lisa asked.

"Because, Dad will go find him and do something to him."

"Yep, and I'm gonna find out his name easily enough, so I'm giving you a chance to come clean and tell me his name right now."

"How do you think you'll be able to find out his name? You gonna have me followed?"

Chaz shook his head. "I don't have to. Jake got his license plate number."

Laynah threw her arm up. "Well of course he did," she yelled. "Perfect. Mr. 'Can do no wrong' is just perfect."

Lisa decided to change directions. "Honey, why would it be okay for you to have someone in your life who beats up on you? I don't understand. That's not like you at all. I know I'd never allow anyone to mistreat me, and I know I've taught you the same thing. So, why do you accept it from this guy, whoever he is?"

"It's not like that really. I mean, that's just the way we are when we're together. He's a little rough, so am I."

Chaz closed his eyes, shook his head. "And how long have you been together?"

She looked up quickly, then lowered her head again. "Almost six months."

"What? Why have we never met him? Why have you kept this guy a secret?" Lisa asked.

Laynah shrugged. "Brett is not very sociable. He would be very uncomfortable meeting you." She looked up. "And now he'll never meet you because he'll break up with me."

"Oh, you and *Brett* can consider yourselves broken up for sure," Chaz said quickly.

Lisa put a hand on her husband's shoulder, shook her head at him. "Laynah, how happy do you think you would be to have a boyfriend who didn't want to meet your family, who isn't sociable, who already mistreats you? These are red flags in

a relationship. Big ones. I'm gonna guess that in the beginning, the rough treatment, as you put it, was not like it was today. It's probably grown increasingly worse. And now it's progressed to a point that he actually roughed you up in public without even thinking much about it. Let me ask you something, what started the rough treatment today? Did you have an argument?"

She sighed. "We had an early dinner at the steakhouse. Our server was Peyton."

"Gabe Tanner's friend."

"Yeah, Peyton Murphy. I mean, he's the same age as Gabe, seventeen, and he's a friend of our family and I've known him since he was a kid so I was nice to him and I teased him a little. But Brett thought I was flirting with him. I explained to Brett that he was like a little brother to me and that I was only being sociable, and then I said something smart alec, like, Brett couldn't understand being sociable since he didn't have a sociable bone in his body. I guess that made him mad. He said he was gonna show me he could be sociable and started pawing at me right there in the parking lot. I pushed him away and things kinda escalated from there."

Lisa began to wish Jake *had* killed the guy, but she drew a deep breath and silently asked God to forgive her and to direct her in helping her daughter. "Laynah, if you think about it, can you see how this guy is no good for you? Can you see that he has some kind of deep-seated mental problems? That he's not sociable enough to meet your family, and beats you up in public, do you see that these are issues that *you* are not capable of dealing with? I'm not saying he's a bad guy, just that he doesn't seem to be well emotionally. He needs help. But as far as you having a relationship with him, Laynah, it won't work. Tell me you can see it?"

A tear ran down Laynah's cheek. "I can see it. I'm sorry Mom, Dad. I didn't mean to cause you trouble, and I'm sorry Mom, for being disrespectful a minute ago."

"You're forgiven, honey," Lisa said. "But I'm more concerned with the reason you would even think about having a relationship with a guy you knew we wouldn't approve of and a guy who doesn't appreciate you. Do you not realize what a prize you are? What a remarkable young lady you are? Anyone would be grateful to have you in their lives."

"Hmph. Not everyone."

"Oh, that's just nonsense," Lisa said, dismissing the remark quickly.

But Chaz tucked that little piece of information away to ponder.

"Mom, Dad, I'm thinking of changing my major."

Chaz and Lisa both turned their heads in surprise. That had come out of left field. She'd always talked about being an English teacher. She was already a junior at nearby Gordon State College. She'd elected to go to school nearby and live at home. It was a fine arrangement, or so they thought.

"What are you thinking about doing now?" Chaz asked.

"I'm thinking I'd like to become a veterinarian."

"Okay, well, that's interesting," Lisa said.

"I mean, I love horses, and all animals really. Sometimes I think I spend more time with the horses than I do with people."

"How long have you been thinking about this?" Chaz asked.

"Since I went back after Christmas break."

"Would you have to go away to go to veterinary school?" Lisa asked.

"Well, of course there is always UGA, but Fort Valley has a veterinary technology program that could help me prepare for vet school. It's farther than Gordon College, but not too far. I could still commute for that part."

"Sounds like you've pretty much made your decision," Chaz said.

"Not really. I've just done some research. I wanted to talk to you guys about it first."

Chaz smiled. "Well, anyway, now you sound like the level-headed young lady I always thought you were."

Laynah shrugged. "Again, sorry. I don't know what's going on inside my head sometimes." She rubbed her hand across her abdomen, swallowed hard.

They all looked up at the sound of footsteps. Fourteen-year-old Charlie came clunking down the steps at a gallop. "Hey, Bugs!"

"Hey Rat," Laynah shot back.

Laynah looked her brother over. He was only fourteen, but he was already taller than her, which meant he had to be at least 5'11'. Everyone said he might end up taller than their dad, and their dad is a big guy. Charlie didn't end up with their mom's red hair, like she did. He had blond hair, like their dad and green eyes, like their mom.

"I just got off the phone with Lucas. He says you stiffed his brother."

Laynah's brow wrinkled. "We didn't leave a tip?"

"Yeah, Luke says Peyton waited on you and some other slick lookin' dude and you guys didn't leave him anything."

Chaz shook his head. "Laynah, you'll need to make that right."

"I will. I promise, but actually, right now, Dad, I'm not feeling so great."

"What's wrong?"

"Feeling dizzy and a little sick to my stomach, and I have a headache coming on."

"Charlie, will you run get me my bag?" Chaz said. "Lie down, Laynah."

Lisa helped her daughter to lie down on the couch, put her hand on her forehead, searching for fever. But Chaz was pretty sure it wasn't a fever. Jake had said she smacked her head on the car. He sighed. He was a former corpsman, and former paramedic with a couple years of pre-med under his belt. She probably had a mild concussion. Luckily, he could always call on his mother over at the main house, a retired cardiologist, if it was more than he could handle.

Charlie arrived with his father's medical bag. Chaz immediately took her blood pressure, shined a light in her eyes, listened to her heart.

Lisa smiled at her handsome husband. The first time they'd met he was examining her in much the same way. He was frowning right now. He lifted their daughter's head, ran his hand over it, laid her back gently onto a cushion.

"Blood pressure is a tad low. Definitely has a good lump back there. I'm thinking she has a mild concussion. Best thing right now is for her to rest." He ran the back of his fingers over her cheek. "You need me to carry you up to bed, or can you make it?"

"I can make it." She sat up, swung her feet to the floor.

Lisa put her arm around her daughter's waist and helped her up the stairs just as Chaz' phone went off.

"Whatcha got, Ty?"

"Car is registered to a William Adderman in Upton County."

"I got the name 'Brett' out of Laynah," Chaz added quickly.

"Yep," Ty said. "There are three children listed. Thomas, Charlotte and Brett. Ages, twenty-eight, twenty-six, and twenty-one respectively. Brett is the only one of the three living at the address. Mother's name was Evelyn. She passed five years ago. Two oldest are married and living in other states. Annual household income is over half a mill."

"So, there's a reason the kid is off-balance."

"There's always a reason, Bro," Ty said.

"I mean, youngest kid, all alone in a big house. Father maybe works a lot. Kid has no direction," Chaz thought out loud.

"What you just described may be part of it," Ty agreed. "But thinking he can slap a woman around, that's where the spoiled little rich boy comes in."

"Yeah, you're right, and that little girl you just mistakenly called a woman, is presently in bed. She started getting dizzy and nauseated, she has a mild concussion."

"Well that's just great." Ty thought a moment. "Do you wanna press charges?"

"I don't know. Good question. Let me talk to the girls and see what they have to say."

"And to Jake, because he's the witness," Ty reminded him.

"And Jake. Got it."

"Let me know ASAP."

"Will do. Thanks Ty."

✝✝✝

March 28th Thursday Late Afternoon
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California
Taylor drew a deep breath and began typing on her laptop.

❀❀ *Taylor Kino* ❀ *Thursday, March 28th* ❀ *Junior* ❀ *Age 16* ❀❀
❀❀ *Brookside High School*❀❀

Essay Topics:
Who has most inspired me in my life? Why? Or What path in life do I want to take? Why?
Chosen Topic: Both

When asked to choose a topic and write this essay we, the juniors of Brookside, were given three weeks to accomplish it. I have struggled with this for two weeks and six days. The reason for that is, it is impossible for me to choose just one person who has most inspired me. So, then, I thought, I'll do the other topic, what path in life do I want to take? But, the second topic, to me, has everything to do

with the first topic, and so I decided I would write on both topics. I'll begin by telling about my family, who are the people that inspire me most, and when I finish I'll ask you, the reader/Mrs. Allgood, to see and understand why I was unable to choose.

Grandmaster Eric Kino is my grandfather. He is my father's father. He is my mother's step-father. He has two biological children, Ricky Kino and June Flower Kino, and three step-children, Breanna Adams, Mark Adams and Joey Adams, but he says we should not use the word step-children, because as far as he's concerned, he loves them as if they were his own. His first wife died when he was just twenty-nine years old. Ten years later he met and fell in love with Shelley Adams and married her.

My grandfather is a black belt Hall of Fame martial arts instructor, a four-time MART Grand Champion, and the instructor of all of the Kino Challenge winners for over twenty years. He is a devout Christian who truly lives his religion. He has a PhD in psychology and helps counsel and heal people constantly, never charging anything ever for his services, though he spends many hours a day helping people.

Granddad is a gifted martial artist and is the founder of Kino Martial Arts, a worldwide organization. But a long time ago, he did not have money at first to start a business. He began by teaching his high school classmates in his backyard, moved to an old garage and finally to a real studio. It kept growing until he now has over four hundred locations. He attributes his success to God. Granddad always chooses the honest, moral right thing to do and never operates out of lack or need or jealousy or hatred. He is not afraid of hard work, and even at almost seventy years old, begins each day with prayer and then his own custom martial arts workout, which by the way, is VERY difficult. I know because our whole family does the same workout almost every day. Sometimes he is up by 4:00 AM and he goes all out, all day, every day. Granddad is also credited with the inspiration behind Jason Lee who is the owner of Ameritech Security, though he says that was all Mr. Lee.

Granddad has a strength about him, that people always talk about. If I were to write a few words that remind me of my grandfather I would say, powerful, wise, thoughtful and humble. He is a very cool grandfather. Sounds like I should just pick him. But wait. You'll see.

My grandmother, Shelley Adams Kino is my mother's mother and my father's step-mother. She has four biological children, Breanna, Mark, and Joey Adams, and June Flower Kino, and one step-child, my father Ricky Kino. She is a third degree black belt and was the MART Grand Champion thirty years ago when she was thirty-five. She was the oldest female competitor to ever win the MART. She has never stopped training and works out with her husband every day.

She's been through a lot of trauma, including sexual assault, kidnapping and even torture. But she's a survivor. An overcomer. And she never cries "woe is me." She is the sweetest, most compassionate person I know. She loves being married to my grandfather, (who wouldn't love that,) and she loves taking care of our giant family and really everyone she comes in contact with. She is strong, and beautiful and my grandfather says she is wiser than him. She loves her children and

grandchildren with a fierce love and she will tirelessly do anything for anyone for she is always in service. She is also a devout Christian and lives her faith daily.

My father is Ricky Kino, whom I know most everyone knows, but I will talk about him as if you didn't know him. His real name is Eric Kino Jr.. He is the eldest child of Grandmaster Eric Kino and stepson of Shelley Kino. He fell in love with my mother, Breanna Adams, but they didn't get together right away because their parents were married, though they were both already adults when they first met each other, so they didn't grow up as brother and sister. Anyway, finally they realized they loved each other and got married. He has two children. Eric Kino, III and me, Taylor Kino.

Ricky Kino was a black belt by the time he was nine years old. His mother died of cancer when he was just eleven years old. He worked so hard at his martial arts that people began to notice. They said he was a prodigy, but my father said it was just hard work. He is always humble like that. Some people think he's cocky, but he says he works hard enough to be confident, not cocky. The people who noticed him were stuntmen from Hollywood. They told people about him, and he ended up doing a few small parts in action movies. He has now made about eighty movies and is still going strong.

My father had to learn how to deal with being famous. He says it's not all glamor and fun. He says you have to be a super strong Christian to live in that world and remain faithful. He says he's fallen down a few times, but he gets up, repents and keeps learning and growing. I love that he is so honest and so humble. He too never stops training. He is always kind and loving to my mother and to me, and really to everyone. He is ultra-protective and he says it is a man's duty to protect his family. My Granddad says that too. My father is also a Grandmaster but hardly anyone ever calls him that. He doesn't mind. When I think of my father I think of the words honorable, strong, funny, noble and dependable.

My mother, Breanna Adams, is the biological daughter of Robert Adams and Shelley Adams Kino, and the step-daughter of Grandmaster Eric Kino. She is married to Ricky Kino and has two children, Eric III and me, Taylor Kino. Like everyone else in our family, she is a devout Christian. Unlike everyone else, she does not practice martial arts and that's cool because she is definitely her own person.

My grandma, Shelley Kino says, that when she and her first husband Robert got divorced it was a very hard time for her, and that her daughter, my mother, nickname Bree, was a huge help and source of comfort for her mom. My mom has always been very confident and strong. She always wanted to be an actress since she was a little girl. She knew what she wanted and she went after it. She achieved her dreams and even has a few Oscars, but she says that is not her greatest achievement. She says taking care of her family is her God-given calling and having a strong, loving, close family is what she truly strives for. She has turned down several movie roles because she chose her family over fame.

She is not just beautiful on the outside, she is beautiful inside. My father says that too. Honestly, that might be where I came up with that. She is always there for me, loving me, comforting me, disciplining me too, whenever I need her. I am

proud to be her daughter and I've been told many times that I am feisty just like her. Words for my mom; beautiful, smart, talented, strong, feisty, and humble.

My brother, Eric III, whom we all call young Eric, because like, there are three Erics in our family and it gets confusing, I could write a whole lot of stuff about him, but he's almost exactly like my Dad, except he's younger and he's only a 3rd Dan black belt, not a Grandmaster. He's super brainy and helps me a lot with math and science, and he takes time to talk to me and listen to me, and I know I can depend on him for anything. He's the best big brother in the world and he's super cute. The words I said about my father I could also say about young Eric, except sometimes I could add, annoying.

My mother has two biological brothers. The oldest is Mark Adams. He was a big football star in high school and was a Heisman candidate. He was gonna go pro, but he hurt his knee. Even though his parents could have paid his way through law school, he got a job and did it himself. He is now one of the top defense attorneys in California and is a full partner in his firm. He is also a devout Christian. He does pro bono work on a regular basis and is never too busy or tired to help anyone. I'm told that his personal relationship with his wife and how they met is too personal to tell the story, but I know the story and I know that my Uncle Mark is a true hero. Uncle Mark is a 6th Dan and seven years ago he won the Kino Challenge even though he was injured from falling off a cliff. He has a beautiful wife, my Aunt Bella, two sons, JoJo, who btw, is also a Heisman candidate, and Logan, who's an amazing singer and musician, and a little girl, Emily, who is three. Words for Uncle Mark; quiet, calm, funny, super smart, and kind.

My mom's and Uncle Mark's younger brother is Joey Adams. I know a lot of you already know about him because he did a few movies. But he is now second in command at Ameritech Security, which is a very big deal. He is a 7th Dan and has won the Kino Challenges for eight years, except for the year that Uncle Mark fought in his place. Uncle Joey is a lot like my dad, superfast and super strong. He's also funny and plays a lot of jokes on us. Like everyone else, he is a devout Christian. He helps people whenever he can. One time, he was at a restaurant and a lady came in and needed help because her husband was trying to kill her. He beat up the man and took the lady to a shelter. Later that same man shot my Uncle Joey, but he lived. Uncle Joey risks his life almost every day in his job, just as if he were in the military. He is married to Aunt Bella's sister, whose name is Breez. They have three children, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. Words for Uncle Joey; loud, funny, brave, strong and fast.

Last but definitely not least is my Aunt Jeffy, who the world knows as Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace. As everyone probably knows, she is a certified high genius, she was in college at the age of fourteen and had two doctorates by the time she was twenty. A bunch of people tried to kill her when she announced she had developed protocols to cure every disease, but she didn't let that stop her. She started the 'Heal the World Foundation' when she was only seven years old. She has worked with my family to bring medicine and hospitals and doctors to the most remote places in Africa and all over the world, and to feed and clothe poor children in every country including ours.

She is a devout Christian and is very close to God. She gets visions from Him, but that's all I'm allowed to say about that right now. She is a martial artist, a 5th Dan, and winner of the female division of the Kino Challenge for three years. Aunt Jeffy is married to Cameron Wallace who is an Ameritech agent. Words for my Aunt Jeffy; sick smart, gorgeous, athletic, fast, soft-hearted, talkative, and sad. My dad says she's sad because she knows so much.

So that's it. I could go on to talk about other aunts and uncles, or about my super cool cousins, or about some very close friends who are like family to me. There are just too many to pick just one person who has inspired me. They all are super amazing people who have inspired me to go for different goals.

I am a martial artist. I have a black belt and will continue progressing in that. I do teach some of the younger kids at Kino Martial Arts every once in a while on Saturdays, but I don't think that's where I'm headed. Though I've thought about going into acting because of the example set by both my parents and my brother, who is currently filming a movie, I don't feel the deep passion that they have for that career.

To be honest, I'm not sure that I want a career, or if I do, I have no clue yet. I've spoken with my parents and grandparents many times now, and they tell me that there is no need to force a decision while I'm still so young. Right now, the only thing I really know is I want to get married one day and have children and teach them about God and about Jesus. I do know that I like to dance, and to cook, and swim, (three things that are totally unrelated, I realize,) and I love to play with my little cousins. I babysit a lot for them and that's fun. I think I would love to have a bunch of children and be the best mom ever, because when I truly think about it, that thought is the only one that makes me smile.

I will conclude this essay with this: We all probably have many people who inspire us, and many options to choose as far as a path in life. The best thing to do is to talk to God about it. He will always let us know the correct path to take. Sometimes it requires just a little bit of faith.

~END~

Taylor read it over one more time, saved her work, attached it to the school email addressed to her English teacher, and hit 'send.' Well, she thought, that's that. It will be there on time, first thing tomorrow morning. She sighed. It felt good to have the assignment done and off her back. And when her father asks her again, she'll be able to say, "Yes, sir, I did it."

Her father. She thought over what she'd just written about him. She didn't say in the assignment what most of her friends at school said about her father. *He's hot.* Taylor didn't know about him being "hot," but he was a handsome man. They just thought that because of his movies. He was a mixture of native Hawaiian and white. Of course, native Hawaiian is also a mixture of many groups of people including Polynesians, Japanese, Chinese, white and many others. Her father had black hair, dark brown eyes, an extremely well-muscled body, light bronze colored skin and a gorgeous smile. Her mother was what everyone called drop-dead gorgeous. Taylor agreed with that. She was slim and toned, long, shiny brown hair, beautiful gray-

colored eyes, perfect lips. Taylor's brother was really cute, a perfect cross between her father and mother. As for Taylor herself, people said she was almost an identical twin to her Aunt Jeffy, who they say looked like a Polynesian princess. Only Taylor's skin was not quite as tan looking as her aunt's. Taylor's uncles, like her mother, were drop-dead gorgeous. They were total studs. Their hair was light brown and their eyes were also brown and they both had dimples. They reminded her of a young Zac Efron. She'd seen childhood pictures of the three of them, her mom and two uncles together, and they really were super cute.

Taylor closed her laptop and lay back on her bed. She'd done the only thing she could do for this essay, and that was to be honest. She hoped it was good enough because it was a large part of her final grade. She sighed. Here she was, sixteen years old, surrounded by beautiful, talented, ultra-successful people, and she had no idea what she wanted to do in life. Most of her friends at school at least had an idea if not a well-developed plan. She'd spoken to her mom a few times, and to her father, but nothing seemed clear. She will pray some more, and maybe do some fasting and see if she can get in tune with God's will for her. She was sure He had a plan for her too.

"Come in," she called at the knock on her door.

"Hey, TayTay," young Eric said. "Just checking in with ya."

"Hey. How's the filming going?"

"Going great. I'm really looking forward to the screening and seeing what you think."

"Why would it matter what I think?"

He frowned, came in and sat on the side of her bed. "Uh, because you matter. What's up?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Feeling a little out of place."

"Are you Taylor Kino?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have it on good authority that this is her bedroom."

"You're such a dork."

"No, really, Taylor. What's goin' on? Are you still mooning over Logan?"

She rolled her eyes. "Will I ever live that down?"

"I'm not trying to give you a hard time. Just really wanted to know if that's the problem."

She sighed. "No, it's not the problem. Look, I know it was silly to think I was in love with him, but he was always so nice to me. He was so kind, and like, treated me like a lady."

"I'm not nice to you?"

Taylor looked him over, smiled. "Okay, yes, you're nice to me too. But you're my brother and he wasn't related, at least, not at the time I first met him. How was I supposed to know he was gonna get adopted into our family and become my cousin."

"I get it, Tay, but if he's not the problem, then what is it?"

"I don't know. I guess it's that I don't know what I'm gonna do with my life."

"Uh, you're only sixteen. You have time to figure all that out. Just enjoy your

current age. Take time to be with friends, do fun stuff. What do you like to do for fun?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure you're sixteen and not sixty?"

She shrugged. "It's just that, I don't feel like anything I do makes me happy, ya know? Nothing that really sends me."

He smiled, and tugged on a lock of her long, dark hair. "I know that's not true, because I know you like to dance, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah, but it's not like I'm trained. And it's too late to start now anyway."

"It's never too late. You should talk to Mom about it. But still, I mean, you can dance socially. Like, spring break is coming up. Are you and your friends gonna have a party or do something fun and exciting?"

"Yeah, there's a big three-day at Laguna Beach, but I don't know if I'm going."

"Well, I know Dad won't let you stay for three days, but maybe you could go one day."

She shook her head.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Really, I guess I don't wanna go because all they want to do is drink, and then see if they can find someone to, well, you know. And I get tired of being hit on."

"What? Are we talking about guys trying to have sex with you?"

"That's all they seem to talk about. They're so shallow. I mean, I get it. I'd kinda like to do that too, but..."

"Uh, what?"

She smiled. "I just mean I'm curious too. But don't worry, I wouldn't. So, anyway, I don't wanna be around all that. They just make fun of me anyway. The guys and also the girls. They call me a goody goody."

"Wow, I can't believe they would make fun of Ricky Kino's kid," Eric said, only half kidding. He'd certainly gotten into enough battles for the same reason, because Ricky Kino was his father. "In that whole school, there's gotta be some good guys."

She gave a short laugh. "The good guys are the ones who won't approach me because of Dad. The others are just mean."

"Maybe I should meet a few of these mean people."

"What are you gonna do, beat 'em up?"

"No, I guess not. They're minors. But you could."

She laughed. "I wouldn't do that. It would only make things worse."

"Well, I know you wouldn't, but it might make you feel good just to know that you can," he said with a laugh.

"Oh yeah, that makes me feel great." She sighed. "I don't mean to act like some victim. It's not everyone. I do have some good friends who I think like me, just because I'm me."

"Hey, kiddo, I know all too well that it's hard growing up with famous parents. But really, we are so blessed, aren't we? I mean, a lot of people struggle financially. Some kids don't have enough food to eat. A lot of people don't have both their parents in the home."

Taylor nodded. “Like Dad, when he lost his mom.”

“Exactly. But you’re blessed, and whatever you finally decide you wanna do, whenever you decide, you’re gonna have every opportunity, every means to pursue it.”

“Yeah, and that’s part of what bothers me.”

“I’m not following.”

“Since I’ve been given so much, what am I gonna do with it? You know, what Dad and Mom are always saying and what the Pastor just spoke about a few weeks ago. You know, the scripture in Luke, they’re always quoting. I forget the chapter, but it says to those who are given much, much will be expected. I want to do something important. I want to ‘give much,’ I just don’t know what path I’m supposed to take in order to do that.”

“Ya know what, little sister, I’m not a bit worried about you. I think your head’s in the right place. Just stay calm, let go of trying to force it, and God will make His plan known to you. I know He will.”

✝✝✝

March 29th Friday Morning Sunrise EDT

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

“Hey there Santana,” Jake said as he petted and nuzzled his chestnut stallion. “I sure have missed you, boy.”

The horse whinnied and pushed Jake’s shoulder.

Jake laughed. “Sorry, boy, it couldn’t be helped. But I’m home for now. How would you like a good, hard, ride, huh?”

He saddled up and led the horse out into the gray light of dawn. Late March temperatures in middle Georgia in the morning usually hung around fifty degrees, so Jake needed no jacket. He mounted and immediately kicked Santana into a canter and had to smile. The breeze in his face felt good, the equine muscles beneath his legs, powerful.

He rode past the Stewart main homestead and out into the open pasture of the Stewart ranch. His mind relaxed. It was so good to be home. To relax a bit. To let his mind wander. He thought of his parents’ welcoming hugs, of Grams’ delicious dinner last night, and of his initial step down off that bus. Melaynah had been a thorn in his side for years now. First she acted as if she liked him, then as if she couldn’t care less about him, and now as if she hated him. Yesterday all he’d wanted to do was get that guy off her, and all she wanted to do was to tear his head off. He didn’t get it. He hadn’t done anything to the girl. He was pretty sure that he’d been a perfect gentleman their entire lives.

He remembered her when she was like, ten, and how tall and skinny she was. Still, even way back then, she was pretty. And any guy could look at Laynahbug’s hot mom and see what she would eventually look like. He knew, because he and the guys at school had discussions about the lady he called Aunt Lisa. And now, it was plain to see that Melaynah was every bit as gorgeous as her mother. Tall, slim, athletic, with long red curls that almost reached her waist. He’d almost be interested if she wasn’t such a hellion. What her problem was with him, he had no idea.

He’d ridden a good twenty minutes before he headed back. He pulled up short

when he heard the gunshots. He skirted the property and came up on the shooting range. His father was there, and Uncle Chaz, and Laynah. He didn't want Santana's ears to be hurt, so he took him to the stable, and came back to join the shooters. Gabe Tanner and his father had just pulled up in their SUV. He joined them, extended his hand. "Hey, Gabe! Didn't expect to see you."

Seventeen-year-old Gabriel Tanner shook his hand. "We heard you were home and I wanted to come see you before school today because I'm headed out west right after school to go visit with Agent Davis and his family during spring break. So, I thought I'd go ahead and get some shooting in this morning."

"That's cool. Glad you got to see me," he joked. "Why ya going out to visit the Davises? Something going on?"

"Not really. They're gonna spend the week up at their lake house and invited me to get some shooting in."

"Are you taking your guns?"

"Yep, because there's an Ameritech jet leaving the ATL this afternoon and they're gonna let me hitch a ride."

"Sounds like a good time." Jake turned, held his hand out to Gabe's father, Keegan Tanner, who was the head of the southeastern division of Ameritech Security, a hero in Jake's eyes. "Uncle Keegan, uh, I mean, Agent Tanner."

"At ease, Marine," Keegan said as he shook Jake's hand, then pulled him in for a hug. He looked him over. "She did a number on your face, huh?"

"Yeah, Jake, what's up with that?" Gabe asked.

Jake wasn't surprised they knew Laynah had attacked him. In a small town, everyone knew everything. He shrugged, shook his head. "I have no idea."

"Whaddya do to her?" Gabe asked.

"I pulled some guy off her who was pushing her around. That seemed to piss her off."

"Well, come on, Gabe," Keegan urged. "We don't have a lot of time."

They moved forward to join the others.

"Hey Jake, glad you decided to join us," his father said.

"Hey, Dad, mornin', Uncle Chaz."

Chaz nodded but had his eye on Laynah who didn't speak because she was currently taking aim. He watched as she squeezed off one, two, three, four, five, shots from her AR15, pinging metal every time.

"Good job. How does that feel?" Chaz said.

"Okay," she answered.

"And you can see fine, and no more dizziness or headache?"

"No, I'm good."

She put on the safety, laid her weapon down and removed her glasses and ear protection.

"What's wrong with your eyes and why are you dizzy?" Jake asked.

She looked up at him as if she just noticed he was there. "Nunya," she answered shortly.

He rolled his eyes. "Uncle Chaz?"

"She got a little sick last night. Mild concussion from a bump on the back of her

head."

"Dammit," Jake cursed softly, then looked up quickly. "Oh, uh, sorry."

"I'm inclined to feel the same way," Chaz said.

"Ya wanna have a go?" Jake's father asked.

Nodding, he stepped forward, grabbed up Laynah's AR, checked the magazine, released the safety and squeezed off the last ten shots in rapid succession, hitting the metal targets with six shots and then aiming at the paper target attached to a bale of hay with the last four.

John Appel looked on with pride.

Jake flipped the safety, checked the chamber, ejected the mag, and laid the firearm down.

Laynah picked up a scope and looked at the paper target. "Looks like you missed two," she announced loudly.

"Is that what you think?" he asked.

She shrugged. "You took the last four shots at it, there are only two holes."

"I guarantee you all four bullets are in that bale of hay, one right behind the other."

"Fine. Why don't you walk down there and find out?"

"I don't have to. I already know."

"Well, aren't you once again, just so perfect?"

He sighed deeply and shook his head. "It's no big deal. It's just because I've been through some intensive training."

"How nice for you." She turned to head back to the house.

Bewildered, Jake watched her go, and couldn't help admiring the view.

"What *did* you do to her, son?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea."

They both looked over at Chaz.

"I don't know either, but I'm working on a theory."

Gabe moved up, his eye and ear protection on, laid two guns down on the platform, made from a couple planks of wood laid on hay bales.

Keegan watched his son, critiquing in his mind his every move.

Gabe had his Glock and a NATO semi-auto rifle laid out, with the magazines also laid out. He moved quickly as though he'd done it many times before, which he had. He went through every step perfectly, checking chambers, loading, safety off, firing, safely changing guns, firing, safety, unloading, checking and rechecking. Finally he laid his firearms down and backed up.

Keegan nodded. "Well done."

Gabe smiled.

"Way to go, Gabe," Jake added. "That's some fine shooting."

"Thanks. Wanna go?" he said, offering the use of his weapons.

"Absolutely."

There was an unpacking of more firearms and more ammo. All of the men each took turns firing various firearms until the timer went off on Keegan's phone. "That's it, son. Gotta go."

They all packed up and went to start on their day. Jake went back to the stable,

praised Santana for being so patient, and began brushing him.

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Proverbs 15:18
"A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel."

Chapter Three

March 29th 5PM PDT Friday Evening
Ameritech Private Airstrip, Los Angeles, California

Jeff Davis met the jet at the private runway. He shook hands with several of the agents who deplaned, some he'd worked assignments with and some newbies who were arriving to begin training. Jeff smiled. Their lives would be hell for the next year. A section leader moved forward to take charge of the newbies. Jeff waited for his charge to disembark. When he stood at the top of the steps Jeff looked him over.

Gabriel Tanner looked a lot like his father. At only seventeen years of age, he was tall, athletic, bound with muscle and becoming a crackshot. His hair was dark brown, like his father. Though he was the sixth of seven children, he was Keegan's first biological child and only son. As Gabe joked many times, apparently, that fact doesn't make him special, nor does the fact that he was the only boy. He had five older half-sisters who were all blue-eyed blondes, and one blue-eyed baby sister who had his same dark hair—and his heart.

Gabe was needing some time away from the girls and so decided to spend the week with his father's close friend. Grinning, Gabe offered his hand to Jeff as he neared the bottom of the steps. "Agent Davis," he said. "Thanks so much for

making this happen."

"We're not in any official capacity this week, so just call me Jeff."

"Yes, sir, got it."

"So, we're gonna head back to the main house for now and get loaded up and drive up to the lake early in the AM."

"Sounds good."

"I told your mom I'd have you call when you landed," Jeff added.

"Already did."

"You're good, Gabe."

"Yeah, that's what she said."

Jeff chuckled and hit him on the back of the head.

Gabe had actually meant that was what his mom said when he'd just spoken to her, but he didn't let on.

"What guns did you bring?"

"My Glock, 357 revolver, the NATO semi-auto, and my AR."

Jeff nodded. "That ought to do it. Ammo?"

"I brought a good amount."

"We'll get more if we need to." He nodded. "Looks like we're gonna have a blast, literally."

Gabe laughed. He'd been looking forward to this trip. Agent Jefferson Davis was one of Ameritech's top agents. The hair bleached blond by the sun and his cheerful demeanor made Gabe think of a classic Cali surfer dude. But Jeff Davis was lethal. Labeled a sharpshooter, his skills had saved Gabe's father's life way back before his parents married. Then Jeff had been taken and tortured by terrorists and Gabe's father had waded through hell and high water to rescue him. It was the stuff they made movies about. And he wasn't only good with guns. All Ameritech agents had to hold at least a second-degree black belt in two forms of martial arts. Ameritech's owner, Jason Lee, incorporated his master's martial art, Zendo Ryu, into agent training. Zendo Ryu, is a combination of many styles and was actually one of the first mixed martial arts styles.

Gabe himself was a black belt in Zendo Ryu, since that is what his neighbor, Master John Appel, teaches. Master John Appel and Jason Lee had been trained by the same person, Grandmaster Eric Kino. Master Appel's son, Jacob Appel is a 2nd degree black belt and Gabe had a lot of respect for the Marine Raider.

Jeff and Gabe hefted luggage and gun bags and headed to the Davis home near Huntington Beach. It wasn't fancy like the Kino estate, or big like the home Gabe lived in down in middle Georgia, but it was nice, and it had a pool and it was only about two miles from the beach. The four-bedroom home was a slate blue with clean white trim.

As soon as they drove up the boys came running out to greet them. "Hey, Gabe," Daniel said brightly.

"Hey big guy," Gabe returned. "Anybody ever tell you that you look a lot like your dad?"

"Ha, yeah, like everyone."

"How old are you now? Like, fourteen?"

"I wish. I'm twelve and," he motioned to younger brother Jeremy, "he's eleven. But I know you know that."

Gabe laughed. "Aren't you just so smart." He reached out, mussed Jeremy's hair. "Hey Germ, good to see ya."

The shyer boy smiled up at Gabe. "Hi."

"Okay guys, let's get inside," Jeff started. "We got packin' to do, dinner to make and your mom to kiss."

They went inside, ushered Gabe to a bedroom. Feeling a little jet-lagged Gabe sat on the bed. He'd been up at the crack of dawn Georgia time, gone shooting, went to school, headed straight to Atlanta, caught a four-hour flight, and driven an hour to the Davis home. It was almost ten back home, and Gabe would normally have already been asleep because the Tanner family did that "early to bed early to rise thing." Here it was almost seven and there were things that needed to be done. He went in the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face and headed downstairs.

The aromas drifting through the house made Gabe's mouth water. The boys were in the living room playing the ever-popular *Call of Duty*. There were packed bags stacked up next to the front door, so apparently the boys were already packed for their trip to the lake house. Mrs. Davis was in the kitchen, singing softly as she cooked. That made him smile because his own mother did that. Of course, his own mother was Lizzy Tanner, the Grammy-winning singer with, as his father put it, "the voice of an angel."

Gabe moved toward the open kitchen. "Hey Mrs. Davis."

The pretty lady turned, a big smile on her face.

"Gabriel! There you are!"

She came running out of the kitchen and threw her arms around him. "Wow, you must have grown six inches since last year. You look like a grown man!"

Gabe blushed. "Well, not six inches, but about three. Nice to see you Mrs. Davis."

"Mickey. Remember I said you can call me Mickey?"

"I'll try."

She laughed, and the sound was beautiful. He blinked. This lady had to be in her late thirties, early forties, but she was a real looker. He cleared his throat. "Um, Mrs., I mean, Mickey, is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yeah," Jeff said as he came in from the garage. "You can grab that large cooler and bring it in."

Gabe did as told, and then spent the next thirty minutes, filling two giant coolers with all kinds of supplies, loading the back of a Ford-F150 Super Crew and putting on the tonneau cover.

When he finished he sat at the kitchen island, watching Jeff and Mrs. Davis cook dinner like their movements had been choreographed. More than cooking, they were playing touchy-feely as they moved around. Every time they passed each other Jeff would stroke his wife's arm, or she would put her hand on his face and lean up for a kiss. They reminded him of his parents, and it was cool to watch. They were laughing, singing a few words to the song playing on a cell phone, dancing a few steps—they were in complete harmony. Jeff sipped a beer and came up behind

his wife as she washed her hands at the sink, nuzzled on her neck. She shooed him away, nodding at Gabe.

Jeff suddenly turned, pulled another beer from the fridge, opened it and set it in front of Gabe. Gabe looked up. "Really?"

Jeff shrugged. "Just this once. You'll be a man soon enough. Have you ever had a beer?"

"Uh—"

Jeff laughed. "Okay, I won't make you confess. But I can figure you have."

"How's that?" Gabe asked as he took a long pull from the bottle.

"You live in the sticks. Friday night, after the game, small town Georgia, out by the lake, cute girl by your side, it makes for a classic country song and there's always beer in a country song."

Gabe laughed. "Guess you got us pegged."

"Well, I'm originally from the south. My mom didn't name me Jefferson Davis for nothin'."

"Dinner's ready," Mickey announced.

Everyone quickly helped bring the meal to the table. Spaghetti and meatballs, garlic bread, salad, and the promise of ice cream if plates were cleaned.

They sat at the table and everyone took hands just like they did at Gabe's home. Tonight he held Mrs. Davis' hand and Jeremy's hand. Jeff offered a blessing on the food and asked for protection for his family and loved ones, again, like his own father usually did. It gave Gabe a warm feeling in his gut. These things the men did—small things, like pray for their families, kiss their wives, even just be in a good mood when they must be tired—showed Gabe the kind of man he aspired to become. Their strength is comforting. Their belief in God, and their willingness to show it and not be ashamed, it is inspiring.

Everyone had been served, the food tasted and compliments given when Jeff's cell phone went off. The mood immediately changed. Mrs. Davis, Mickey, bit down on her lower lip. The boys quieted and looked up toward their father, their eyes hopeful. Jeff, lips pressed tightly together, glanced apologetically at his wife before he picked up the phone.

"Whatcha got, Jason?"

"Sorry, Jeff, I know it's your vacation, but you said when it was time for extracting Claire Martin and her kids from her situation, you wanted to be in on it. We have an opportunity and I think it's now or never. I'm just giving you the opportunity. I can send someone else."

Jeff sighed. "No. I promised her and the kids I would be there. I can't let them down."

"I'll expect you for the briefing then in two hours."

"I'll be there."

He ended the call, looked at his wife.

She smiled bravely. "No worries, Jeff. We can handle it, can't we boys?" she asked brightly.

Jeff forced a smile.

Gabe looked back and forth between them. He hadn't even told her yet what was going on and she already showed her support.

"I have to leave to take care of a woman and her two kids who are being held against their will by her husband. I'll be gone twenty-four hours tops."

Mickey nodded.

"You guys can go ahead and drive out to the lake house and I'll join you by this time tomorrow."

"Aww, Dad," Daniel complained.

"I know it's hard son, but think of this. What if you boys and your mom were being held somewhere, and some bad men wouldn't even let you go outside, or to school, or to the store, or anywhere. There was nothing to do. You can't even use your phone or computer. You're a prisoner. Not only that, but these same bad guys, they take your mom and hurt her and beat her up whenever they want."

Jeremy hung his head. Sniffed back tears. "Are you gonna go help them get away?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I'm gonna do. And I need you guys to help your mom while I'm gone and it's only gonna be for one day. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," the boys said in unison.

Gabe looked over at Mickey. Her face was pale and it looked like she might pass out. He remembered the story of how Jeff and Mickey met. She'd been kidnapped, held against her will in a cabin that was actually up near the lake house they were headed to. Jeff had been on vacation then too.

"Agent Davis," Gabe began, addressing him formally, since he felt the shift in the atmosphere. "I'll help take care of your family while you're gone. I'll do whatever Mrs. Davis needs me to do."

Jeff took a huge bite of garlic bread, chewed, nodded. "Thank you, Gabe. I gotta go." He held his hand out to his wife. "Mickey, a word please."

He led her down a hallway for some privacy, pulled her close, tilted her face up and kissed her. "I love you, sweetheart," he murmured.

"And I love you," she said. "Come back to me. Please."

"Always. Don't be afraid to ask Gabe to do anything you need. He's a good kid, and he's strong, and he can shoot almost as well as I can."

"No one can do anything as well as you can."

Jeff smiled. "I uh, I'll try to live up to that. You take the truck since it's already loaded. Don't forget to stop and get ice on the way out. I'll take your car. I really need to get on the road." He kissed her one more time then walked out to tell his boys goodbye. He always took a few minutes to relieve their fears, to admonish them, and to let them know how much he loved them, since any mission could end with his death.

Lastly, he shook Gabe's hand. "Twenty-four hours," he said. "You got this?"

"Yes, sir, I got it. Make sure you come back in one piece."

Jeff smiled. "If not, I'll just call your dad."

Gabe smiled, nodded. He watched Agent Davis gather his weapons, check them, bag them, along with a Kevlar vest. The man had to be tired. Had to be

hungry. And by the time Gabe saw him again tomorrow, would probably be triple what he was now. His father always said Jeff Davis is one of the good guys. Like Ricky Kino, Mark and Joey Adams, and John Appel and of course, Grandmaster Kino. One day Gabe hoped to join that list.

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March 30th Saturday Afternoon

Davis Lake House, Northern California

They'd left the house in the wee hours of the morning. It was just after noon by the time they pulled up to the lake house in the Plumas National Forest in northern California. Mickey stood outside the house and smiled. It looked much different now than it did the first time she'd seen it. They'd put a lot of work into it. It now had a large front porch when before it had no porch at all. It used to be a dirty yellow color, now it was crisp white with blue trim, sort of a reverse of their main home. It now had landscaping, and a full deck and boat dock and boat out back. The kitchen and bathrooms had been completely renovated. Mickey loved it here, mostly because it was where she'd met her husband.

Her husband, the hero. Her husband who'd rescued her from certain death more than once, had rescued countless others, and was currently doing the same thing for a woman and her two kids. Her husband whom she loved more than life and for whom she thanked God every, single, day. Her husband, an amazing father, something Mickey had never known.

Mickey watched as, true to his word, Gabriel Tanner carried in the large coolers and then started on their luggage. Her boys also helped. The boys were full of energy, having slept most of the way. Gabe, she could tell, was tired. But he didn't complain. He'd tried to stay awake to talk to her as she drove. He'd offered to do some of the driving and she let him while she got a little bit of rest. Now, he was hard at work, getting things unpacked, setting up the house, checking out the dock and the boat and the ATV's.

She'd come in, set up the kitchen and begun making lunch for the hungry guys. If Gabe were anything like her boys, he was always hungry.

They ate lunch outside on the deck in the bright sunshine. Meat and cheese sandwiches, tortilla chips and salsa, fruit and large chocolate chip cookies. Encouraged by Mickey, Gabe scarfed down three sandwiches.

He pushed back from the glass table, rested his chin on his chest. He startled when thirty minutes later Mickey laid her hand on his forehead.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean to startle you. It's just that it's pretty hot out here in the bright sun. Why don't you go inside and take a little nap."

He jumped up. "I'm sorry. I can't believe I fell asleep." He glanced around. "Is everything okay?"

She smiled sweetly. "Yes, everything is fine. You just look like you're burning up."

"I'm okay. What can I do for you, anything?"

"Actually, I was gonna try to write a little bit and it looks like I'm not gonna be able to convince you to go in and take a nap, so instead, would you mind keeping

the boys occupied outside for a little while?"

"No, I don't mind a bit. And I don't need a nap because apparently, I've already taken one."

She smiled. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll take the boys for a trip around the lake in the boat."

"That would be nice. Wear the life preservers."

"Yes, ma'am."

He gathered the guys who were very willing to go out on the boat. She watched them load up the Bowrider and pull away.

Mickey went into her room and sat on her bed, her laptop across her knees. The words spilled out for a couple of hours. It was difficult though and as she read over the pages she'd just written, she highlighted them all and hit delete. It was just too hard to concentrate, not knowing how Jeff's mission was going. Sometimes he would text, let her know everything was okay. He hadn't so far. She could call Jason, but if he had every agent's worried wife calling him for status updates all the time, he'd never get anything done.

She knew his current mission was tricky. The home was in a secluded area, surrounded by high walls and secured fencing. The husband was a filthy rich drug lord who had a lot of hired gunmen. Ameritech and the police were working in tandem. Jeff's mission was solely the safety of the wife and two children. It was because of the wife's cleverness in getting a message out of the compound that the police had a case at all. When Jeff had met with the woman at an amusement park with her two young children in tow, that was when he'd made the promise.

Feeling antsy and nervous, she did what she knew she needed to do. She dropped to her knees and prayed. She prayed for Jeff's safety, she gave thanks for their family, she prayed for the safety of the woman and her children. She prayed for a very long time, and then, finally, she got the feeling she wanted. It was a feeling she'd felt before. It was as if God just reached inside her and took away all the anxiety. A sweet feeling of peace came over her, and she knew Jeff would be okay.

After attempting to write again for a while, she gave up and went out back. The boys were just pulling up to the dock.

They jumped off the boat and greeted her, then immediately told her how hungry they were. She glanced at her phone to check the time. "I'm not gonna start dinner for at least another hour, but you guys go inside and grab what you want." She called out a list of everything they could have as they ran inside.

Gabe finished securing the boat. "I'll, uh, go supervise."

She nodded. "Thanks, hon. Jeff should be home in less than two hours, if he really does, make it back in his allotted twenty-four hour time frame. I'm gonna start dinner in about an hour. I was thinking of taking a walk to clear my head a bit."

Gabe frowned. "Alone?"

She smiled at him. "That was very much like my husband."

"I can, I mean the boys and I, we can come along if you'd like."

"I'd really just like to be alone." She held up her phone. "I'll call you if I need you."

He sighed. "Okay. I did promise the guys we'd do some fishing."

"That would be great. Thanks so much, Gabe. You've been a lifesaver."

Mickey turned left and headed out toward the lake. Her thought was to walk along the shore of the lake. She did that for some time, until she came to a place where the shore turned into large rocks. She went to higher ground to find a way around the rocks. She had to climb quite a ways up away from the lake. The woods were pretty and quiet and peaceful. Mickey called Gabe to make sure she could still get through.

"Yes, ma'am," he said immediately.

She laughed. "Everything's okay. Just making sure I have reception."

"Loud and clear," Gabe said.

"Okay, you guys have fun fishing."

"Yes, ma'am. Hold on a second, I'm putting you on speaker."

"Hey Mom," Daniel yelled. "Jeremy already caught a fish, but I'm gonna catch a bigger one anytime now."

"No you're not," Jeremy yelled.

"Always be happy for someone in your family accomplishing something," Mickey admonished.

"Did you hear that guys?" Gabe added.

Mickey heard some grumbling. "See you guys in a little while."

"Bye, Mom," they yelled.

She hit the end button and slid her phone into her hip pocket. It was only a few more steps along the top of the ridge when her feet went out from under her. She didn't fall far. Only about the length of her body, but she did smack the side of her head on one of the rocks. Sitting up shakily, she put her hand to her temple. Thank goodness there was no blood. Carefully, she made her way back up to the top of the hill and moved a little farther into the woods so she wouldn't be so close to the edge. Deciding she'd better not press her luck, she turned and started home, this time staying away from the edge.

Mickey knew she'd been walking at least as long as she had on her way out, but the house was nowhere in sight. She took out her phone. She'd been gone over an hour. She was tired, and sweaty and the strange thing was, she didn't even see the lake anymore. Standing still, she then spun in a slow circle, a sick feeling coming over her. Everything looked the same. It all seemed so confusing. Sighing, she admitted to herself that she was good and lost. Taking out her phone again, she called Gabriel.

"Yes, ma'am, are you okay?"

His voice was filled with concern. "Hey Gabe, yes, I'm okay. Will you do me a favor? Please get the boys inside and make them some of those frozen hamburgers for dinner. Don't anyone go back out until I get home."

Gabe's brow wrinkled. "Is something wrong? Do you need me to come get you?"

"Well, that would be great if I knew where I was, but I don't want you to leave the boys. I'm gonna call Jeff. I'll be okay. Just promise me you'll take care of the boys."

"Yes, of course. Don't worry about them."

"Thanks, Gabe." She ended the call and immediately called her husband and was relieved when he picked up on the first ring.

"Hey hon! I was just about to call you. I'm about thirty minutes out. Sorry I didn't get to call you earlier, I've been on the phone for hours tying up loose ends, being interviewed by the cops, you know how it goes."

"Jeff, thank goodness you're okay."

"I'm fine, a little nicked up but I'll make it."

"Jeff?"

"Mickey? What's wrong?"

"I'm, uh, not sure."

His heart started pounding. "What do you mean? Tell me what's going on."

"I think—I'm lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes, I went for a walk and I can't find my way back to the house."

"Where are the boys?"

"They're at the house with Gabe. I just spoke to them. He's gonna feed them dinner."

Jeff sighed because he was bone-tired and bleeding in at least three places. He'd refused going to the hospital because that would mean not making it back to his family in the twenty-four hours he'd promised. He drew a deep breath and forced his mind into work mode.

"Okay, hon, which way did you go when you left the house?"

"Um, to the uh, I think to the left."

"You think?" She sounded confused. Something wasn't right.

"Pretty sure."

"Did you go past the shooting range?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I did that."

He was silent a second. "Mickey, are you wearing the cross I gave you a few years ago?"

She laughed. "Yes, I always wear it. Are you suggesting I ask God for directions?"

He chuckled. "It couldn't hurt."

"I hate to bother Him with something as stupid as me getting myself lost."

"He's always there for you, no matter how big or small the problem. But that's not really why I asked you about the cross."

"Well then, why would you ask me about the necklace I'm wearing out of the blue when I tell you the problem is I'm lost?"

He was silent a second too long.

"Jeff Davis, is there a GPS in my necklace?"

"Don't be mad, but, yes there is."

"I'm not mad but why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now."

"Okay, fine. I don't feel well enough to argue right now, anyway."

"Why don't you feel well?"

"I don't know. Everything seems so, uh, peculiar I guess."

"Honey, have you been drinking?"

"No. Why?"

"Because you don't seem yourself."

"I'm not myself. Hey, I think I see something."

"What do you see?"

"It looks like a house I guess. Or a small cabin. Maybe I'll go knock on the door and... "

"Mickey, stop. Stop right where you are."

She stopped. "Okay. But why?"

"Do you trust me, sweetheart?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do not go up to that cabin. Do not leave the cover of the tree line. I have to get you traced. Do you see a tree near you?"

"Yes, I'm standing next to a tree."

"Good. I want you to sit down and put your back against the tree."

"Okay."

"Sweetheart, I'm gonna put you on hold a minute. Do not hang up. And do not move."

"Okay."

"Call Ameritech Back Office," he said.

"Hey Jeff, this is Paige."

"Paige, can you get a readout on my wife's GPS?"

He waited the few seconds it took her.

"Yes, sir, she's about a mile and a half northwest of your lake house."

"Okay. We have a situation. She's lost in the woods. But there's something else wrong. She's like, really out of it. Let me know if she starts to move at all."

"Got it. You want me to start a search?"

"Not yet. I'm almost there."

"You're twenty minutes away."

"A chopper would take a lot longer than that."

"The sun is going down."

"Yes, I know. I gotta switch back over to her. Just let me know if she moves." He switched over. "Mickey? You still there?"

"Ow, oh, ow!"

"What's happening?"

"There are ants on the tree."

"Okay move to another place but stay still after you move. I'm twenty minutes out. I'm coming to you. Stay still."

"It's getting dark."

"I know sweetie, I won't be too much longer."

"I think I see a light in that cabin. I don't understand why you don't want me to... "

"Do NOT go there. It's the cabin— the one where they held you."

"The one where they held me? Where who held me?"

"Honey, did you take some pills?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Think hard."

"I don't think so. Hey, Jeff?"

"Yes."

"If that's the cabin, then if I put my back to it and walk straight in the other direction, then that should lead back to our house, right?"

"No, because it's not a straight shot."

"I'm gonna give it a try."

"Do NOT disobey me, Mickey. I mean it. You stay still. I don't want you walking in the dark. Stay still."

"Well, I don't think I have a choice anyway."

"Why?"

"Because I stood up and now I'm really dizzy."

"Sit back down, hon. I'm almost there."

Silence.

"Mickey? Mickey?"

He punched over. "Paige?"

"Yep. I'm still here, Mickey is still in the same spot and you must be flying because you are now just over five minutes out."

"Call for a chopper from the medical center in Susanville. I think Mick's gonna need medical attention. She stopped responding to me."

"Roger that."

He punched over. "Call Gabe," he said.

"Hey, I was just about to call you. Mrs. Davis is lost somewh—"

"I know. Grab a flashlight and get the four-wheeler running. Be there in a few minutes. Tell the boys they can play video games and do not leave the house. You're coming with me."

"Yes, sir."

Jeff flew the last few miles. Came to a screeching halt, jumped from Mickey's car, ran in the house, pointed at his sons. "Do not leave that sofa." He ran out the back door. Gabe was just starting the ATV. "You're driving," he yelled over the loud engine.

Gabe nodded.

"Paige, still there?"

"Yes, sir. Head north and slightly west."

He gave the directions to Gabe. The lights from the four-wheeler were weak. Jeff shone the flashlight to help.

"Why are you turning, you need to go straight," Paige warned.

"Have to go around trees. Okay, we're back on the correct trajectory?"

"Turn slightly left. Good. Go another two hundred yards. Good. Slow down.

You should be coming up on her in about... ”

“I see her.” He sprang from the vehicle.

Mickey lay crumpled at the base of a tree, her phone still in her hand.

Gabe jumped out to help in any way possible.

They gently turned her over. She moaned.

Jeff brushed his hand over her face, her head, then her body, looking for injuries, snake bite, anything. The only thing he found was a bump on the side of her head.

“Mickey?” he said softly. “Hey baby, can you talk to me?”

She opened her eyes. “Jeff, I missed you.”

He smiled. “Yep, I missed you too. Can you tell me what happened?”

“I got lost.”

“Anything else?”

“I, um, oh, I fell on some rocks, but I didn’t fall very far. Just a few feet.”

“And you hit your head?”

“How did you know?”

He gave a soft laugh. “Sweetie, we’re gonna get you back to the house. Here, put your arms around my neck.”

He gave a small grunt as he lifted her. Gabe helped Jeff back into the vehicle, jumped back behind the wheel and took off.

At the house Jeff carried Mickey in and laid her on the sofa. The boys were quiet, doing what they could to help by grabbing a towel and the first aid kit. Breathing hard, Jeff stood back a minute to get his bearings.

That was when Gabe pulled his eyes away from Mrs. Davis and looked Jeff over. He wore a white t-shirt with blood spattered over it in several places, the majority of blood at his shoulder. His thigh was wrapped with a dark-colored towel and was being held there with duct tape. There was a large black spot on the towel which probably was also blood, you just couldn’t tell because the towel was a dark color.

“Agent Davis, please sit down,” Gabe ordered.

Jeff didn’t argue. He nodded and slumped down into a chair. “There’s a chopper on the way for Mickey.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll take care of it. And I hope there’s room on that chopper for you.”

Jeff nodded, looked down at his thigh, then back up. “Danny, can you get me some water?”

The boy jumped to do his bidding.

Gabe wasn’t quite sure what to do, so he called his father.

“Hey son, how’s it going?”

Gabe filled his father in on what was happening.

“Son, I have to call Jason. Your mom wants to talk to you.”

“Gabe? You need to get Jeff to lie down on the floor, then elevate his leg. Put some cushions under it.”

Gabe did what his mother said.

“Now, check on Mickey. Is she awake?”

“Sort of. She doesn’t seem to know what’s going on.”

"Get some ice and have one of the boys hold it against the bump on her head. Dad says the chopper ETA is fifteen minutes. Don't give Jeff any more water. He's thirsty 'cause he lost a lot of blood. Don't let him drink."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're doing fine, Gabe. Talk to Jeff, see if he responds."

"Hey Agent Davis," Gabe said, placing his hand on his forehead. "How ya doing?"

"I'm okay, how's Mickey?"

"Tell him she's fine," Lizzy said. "She has a concussion. She'll be okay."

Gabe repeated the message. Jeff nodded and closed his eyes. The sound of chopper blades slicing the air had Gabe offering a prayer of thanks. He ran outside, turned on the truck lights, waved his arms. They would have to land on the gravel road. There was no other place.

Gabe stood back and watched the activity around him. All he could do was comfort the boys and let them know their parents were gonna be just fine. He'd been informed that Jason was sending another chopper to pick them up. He wasn't sure where they were taking them. The boys, feeling certain that their mom and dad were okay, got excited about riding in a helicopter.

Gabe watched the paramedics work on Jeff. They cut away the duct tape, unwrapped the blood-soaked towel, and cut open the leg of his pants to show an angry wound. It wasn't a bullet wound, Gabe could tell. Looked more like a knife wound, which told Gabe that Jeff had been in hand-to-hand combat. Did he not realize how bad the wound was? Why would he drive all the way without first getting some medical attention?

While he pondered those thoughts they started an IV and began working on Jeff's shoulder. Again, they cut away the material. This WAS a bullet. There were also nicks and cuts all over his arms and legs, and one on his cheek. Gabe shook his head. His own father had come home looking similarly tattered and torn a few times. What these men went through on a regular basis, suffering in silence, putting other people's lives ahead of their own, it was moving, and Gabe's heart felt such admiration and gratitude that such men existed and even more, that one of them was his own father.

He moved his attention to the other paramedic who was speaking softly to Mrs. Davis, shining a light in her eyes. He felt guilty that she'd been hurt and lost. He should've known better than to allow her to go off alone, and he was sure he'd be reprimanded for that. He was a kid, and she was an adult, but he still should have asked her to not go, or let him go with her. He'd known instinctively that there was danger, hadn't he? He'd immediately questioned her going alone. She'd even said he sounded like her husband, which was a great compliment, but he should've been stronger, because when ya know something isn't right, you take action. Lesson learned.

His phone buzzed and he put it to his ear. "Hey, Dad. . . Yes, they're okay. I think she's okay. . . They're working on him now. I see a pretty big knife wound on his thigh and a bullet wound in his shoulder. . ."

"Okay, son, so, on the chopper Jason is sending there are a couple of agents.

They're gonna pack up the lake house and drive Jeff's vehicles back to his home. You and the boys pack your stuff. The chopper is taking you to stay with the Kinos."

Gabe smiled at that information.

"Sorry, kiddo, but it looks like your little vacation is over before it got started."

Gabe nodded. "No big deal, Dad. I'm just glad they're gonna be okay. So, I was wondering, do you know how it all went down? I mean, the case Agent Davis was working on, have you been briefed? Did the good guys win?"

Keegan Tanner smiled. He was so proud of his son, who was constantly thinking, constantly reasoning, absorbing information like a sponge. "I've been briefed. The good guys won, but not without a pretty major battle and suffering a loss. Bad guys lost several men. Good guys lost one. He was a vice cop. Jeff and Agent Hawk actually had to fight through a dozen bad guys to get the family out."

"So, they had to kill people."

Keegan was silent a moment and then finally took a deep breath. "Yes, son, they did. It's a hard thing. It changes you. But it's something that has to be done sometimes, in order to protect the innocents of the world. We're warriors. That's what we do."

"I'm just asking, cuz, like, it didn't seem to affect him. I mean, he just got back from killing a bunch of people and all he could think of was finding Mrs. Davis, and seeing his kids. Other than being banged up, it didn't seem to affect him."

"Well, it did."

When his father didn't say anything else, Gabe realized his father was thinking of his own demons. His father was actually known as a killer. Sometimes the other agents joked about it, but that was only a defense mechanism, Gabe knew. They joked about things like that to ease the pressure. Once, his father had killed twenty-three men in a few hours' time when he rescued Jeff from terrorists. He'd shot some of them, broken the necks of some, and slit the throats of some. He'd been bound and determined to save Jeff Davis. And he'd been demonized in front of the whole world and called in front of a congressional hearing. Gabe had heard the stories, many times, and seen news clips and videos about it.

"Dad, I'm sorry. I'm just trying to understand."

"I know you're trying to understand, son. Don't ever apologize for that. I hope you never have to fully understand, however, I see the trajectory your life seems to be taking, so yeah, let's try to learn and understand before it happens. For now though, we need to put this discussion on hold. Go get those boys packed up, the chopper should be there soon."

"Yes, sir."

"And son, I'm proud of you."

Gabe smiled. "Backatcha, Dad."

Gabe ended the call and moved to Jeff's side where Daniel and Jeremy stood. Jeff was alert and speaking to them.

"And your mom and I should be back in just a few days. Don't give Gabe any trouble, okay?"

"No, sir, we won't," Daniel said.

Gabe placed his arms around the shoulders of each kid. "Don't worry Agent Davis, Jason is sending a chopper to take us down to the Kinos' house."

"Alright!" the boys cried.

Jeff laughed. "And just like that, everything is okay." He closed his eyes, scrunched his face.

Gabe realized Jeff was obviously in pain. Instinctively, he put a hand on his shoulder. "Some agents are gonna pack up here and drive your cars down to your house. Don't worry about a thing. I won't let the boys out of my sight."

"Thanks, Gabe. You're a good kid." He looked over at the medic who was taking his blood pressure again. "How's my wife?"

"I'm good, honey," Mickey answered. "They think I have a concussion and want me to stay at the hospital for observation. I'm so sorry, Jeff."

"We'll talk about that later. Right now, you just get better." He gave a soft grunt and closed his eyes again.

"Agent Davis, you're in pain?" Gabe asked.

"Naw, this isn't pain. I'm just a little– uncomfortable. Remind me one day to tell you about real pain."

"I will remind you. Um, I'm sorry, Agent Davis, that I didn't go with Mrs. Davis on her walk, or didn't demand she not go."

"Well, she can be pretty obstinate when she has her mind set."

"No, sir, that's not a good enough reason for me failing to protect her. I promised you I would watch after her. I should have been stronger. Even if it means I made her mad at me. It won't happen again."

"Well, young Gabe, you are more like your dad than I thought. But ya gotta lighten up a little, son. Besides, Mick's old enough to be your mother, and don't you tell her I said that. Would you boss your own mother around?"

"In a heartbeat if I thought she was in danger."

Jeff chuckled. "Again, you are your father." He gave a slight moan, closed his eyes. "Right now, I can't really focus, so let's save this for another day."

"Yes, sir."

The paramedics ushered Gabe and the kids back as they prepared to move the gurneys.

"Come on, guys," Gabe said softly. "Let's go get ready."

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1 Timothy 3:4

"He must manage his own family well
and see that his children obey him,
and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect."

Chapter Four

March 31st Wee Hours of Sunday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

The black SUV hybrid had already been buzzed through the gate of the Kino estate. It pulled up to the front of the house in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Eric Kino met the car, opened the back door and peered in. He had to smile.

Gabriel Tanner sat in the middle, his arms around the Davis boys. All three of them were sound asleep. They hadn't even stirred when the door opened. He hated to have to wake them.

"Hey guys," he said softly.

Gabe drew a breath and sat up quickly. "Sorry, Grandmaster Kino, I must've fallen asleep."

"With good reason."

The boys woke.

"Come on guys, let's get you inside," Eric said.

While Daniel and Jeremy Davis climbed out and headed up the front steps, Gabe stood in front of Eric and bowed. Eric smiled and returned the gesture of honor. It was a tradition between them since Gabriel had been big enough to stand. Gabe then went to the back of the vehicle and unloaded the bags onto the drive. Eric shook the hand of Jason's driver, which he always took time to do, and watched him pull away.

He turned and helped Gabe carry luggage and gun bags into the house.

Shelley stood in the foyer, her sweet voice welcoming the boys and taking them up to the blue room, which was right next to the Kinos' own room. She made sure they were comfortable and told them to sleep in as long as they wanted and when they woke up to come find her and she would cook them the biggest breakfast ever. She then headed back downstairs to find her husband and Gabe sitting in the kitchen, talking softly. She recognized a debriefing/counseling session when she saw one.

"I'll leave you guys to talk," she said. "But before I do, can I get you anything?"

Eric extended his hand and she came and placed her hand in his. He raised it to his lips and kissed her softly. "Nothing for me, Shelley girl. What about you, young man?"

"I could use some water," he admitted.

Shelley grabbed a cold bottle out of the refrigerator and placed it in front of him. She then kissed his cheek and headed back upstairs.

Eric eyed the young man sitting across from him. He felt a connection to him. Always had. He knew Gabriel Tanner was supposed to be in his life. Eric held

Gabe's father in high esteem and he loved Gabe's mother and sisters with a powerful love. He called them his angels.

"It's been a rough couple of days, huh?" Eric began.

Gabe nodded. "I guess. Well, I mean, not too bad, sir. I'm not complaining. I'm a little tired but I'm just glad the Davises are gonna be okay."

"Me too. I guess you're a little disappointed that your vacation was cut short."

Gabe frowned in confusion. "Um, I'm still on vacation. It's the Davises who are gettin' the bad end of the deal."

Eric smiled. "Don't worry. Jason will make it up to them. You want to talk about anything?"

Gabe blinked as he thought about all the things running through his brain. There was something about Grandmaster Kino that made Gabe feel so at ease, so relaxed. He had a strength about him that just made you feel completely—he didn't even know what to call it. Confident? If you were in the room with him, you just somehow knew all is well.

When Gabe didn't answer, Eric patted his hand. "I know you were hoping to get in some shooting. There's a shooting range not far from here. Why don't we head there tomorrow morning and you and the boys show me what you can do. It's been awhile since I've been shooting. Maybe you can help me brush up on my skills."

Gabe's mouth opened in surprise. "I didn't know you could shoot."

Eric laughed. "There's probably a lot you don't know about me. I admit, the weapons I'm most proficient in are more like, knives, swords, nunchukas, bo staffs. You help me brush up on shooting, and I'll help you brush up on a few of those. Deal?"

"Sounds awesome."

"I'm sure Ricky and young Eric would like to join us. Maybe Mark and his boys."

Gabe grinned. "That would be great!"

Eric glanced at the clock. It was almost five in the morning. "You want to try to get a few hours of sleep?"

"I'm not sure if I can."

"Well then, would you like to join us on the beach for our morning work-out?"

Gabe had heard from his father and from Mr. Davis that when Grandmaster Kino invited you to join his morning ritual, you did NOT turn him down. "Yes, sir, I would be honored."

Eric nodded with a smile. "Wonderful. Go change clothes and I'll meet you down there."

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March 31st Early Sunday Afternoon

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Gabriel woke with a start when his phone rang. He'd been lying on a lounge chair by the pool. After the early morning workout with Grandmaster Kino and his wife, Gabe had been more tired than he'd ever been. Even his football workouts didn't break him, like he'd been broken this morning. No wonder the Kinos, though in their sixties, had the bodies of people in their forties, or even thirties. They were

amazing. And to add to that, after the workout, they'd showered and dressed, fed the Davis boys breakfast and headed to church. They'd apologized that they had to leave, but Eric had been asked to speak, and he doesn't like to turn down those opportunities to bear his testimony that Jesus lives.

After Gabe's workout with the Kinos the rest of the day had been spent relaxing and watching over Daniel and Jeremy. Grandmaster Kino said Gabe was still recovering from jet lag and told him to relax the rest of the day. No problem for Gabe. Once the Kinos returned from church the rest of their family began to arrive. Jeffy and her husband, Cameron. Ricky and Bree and their kids. Mark and Bella and their kids. Joey and Breez and their kids. Jason and Angel Lee, and their daughter Kimmie and her husband Jensen Deal. With so many people to watch the boys, he'd allowed himself to relax. Next thing he knew, the phone woke him up.

He glanced at it before he answered. "Hey, Peyton. How's it going?"

"Not bad. Boring without you around. Picked up more hours at the steakhouse since there was nothing else to do. So how's your vacation going?"

Gabe laughed. "Not like I thought it would." He filled his best friend in on what had taken place and where he currently was and what the plans were for tomorrow.

"Wow, man. You are so lucky. It's so cool that you know Ricky Kino. Ya know, you could invite me sometime to come out there with you. So, how's the set-up there? I mean, I bet it's pretty nice."

"FaceTime me and I'll show you," Gabe said.

Gabe's phone rang again. He pointed the phone up at the house. "So, there's the house up there, and the upper deck. That right there is Grandmaster Kino talking to his wife and next to them is Jason Lee, who is my dad's boss, and his wife." He turned the phone toward the pool area. "Here's the pool. And THAT is Ricky Kino playing with the little ones, and that is his wife just coming up the pool steps. Those guys over there are Ricky Kino's son, and his cousins." He turned the phone. "That's the pool house, and that's a bar, and that's Cam Wallace, the one who rescued Doctor Jeffy Kino from Africa a few years ago. He married her." He turned the phone west. "Down there is the volleyball court and there's the ocean. Oh, and that's Mark and Joey Adams walking down there with their wives." He turned the phone slowly around.

"Whoa, who's the hot girl?"

"I'm surrounded by hot girls. You'll have to be a little more specific," Gabe said, though he knew exactly who Peyton was referring to.

"What do you mean you're surrounded by hot girls?"

"Did you not just see who I told you about?"

"No, you went too fast."

Gabe pointed his phone back up. "That is Ricky Kino's wife, *the* Breanna Adams." He moved the phone slightly to the left. "That is Doctor Jeffy Kino Wallace." He moved it again. "That is Shelley Kino. And that is Angel Lee, Shelley's friend who, again, is married to my dad's boss."

He pointed the phone back toward the pool. "That is Kimmie, Angel's daughter. And... "

"There," Peyton said. "That one in the pink bathing suit."

"Oh– yeah, that? That is Taylor Kino. She's Ricky Kino's daughter."

"Good grief, Gabe, that is one good-lookin' girl."

"Yeah, she's hot," Gabe agreed. "And can you please keep your voice down a little."

"Sorry, man. How old is she?"

"Sixteen."

"How perfect is that? You get into any of that?"

"Will you shut up? And no, I haven't. You realize you're talking about a girl whose relatives are some of the most lethal people in the world."

"So? They like you."

"They wouldn't like me long if I were to, as you put it, 'get into that.' Besides, she's never been interested. She has her eye on her cousin."

"Uh, excuse me?"

"Well, he's not really her cousin. He was adopted."

"So, she's with another guy."

"I mean, they're not together. He's older. He's in college. She's just a junior in high school. But last I heard he was waiting for her to be eighteen."

"That gives you time to make a move."

"Peyton, would you stop?"

"Sure. But point the camera at her one more time."

Gabe did as requested. He had to admit, Taylor Kino was definitely the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. With the DNA of Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams how could you go wrong? She had long, dark brown hair. Not straight and not curly, but with a slight wave to it. Her strong athletic body was perfect in every way. Her face was as beautiful as her mother's. Her smile did something to his insides. His eyes widened when she looked up, right at the camera, stood, and came toward Gabe with that gorgeous smile in place. She leaned down close.

"Tell your friend he has a loud voice."

Gabe watched her walk into the pool house, then closed his eyes in embarrassment. "Great, Peyton. Thanks a lot."

Peyton laughed. "Man, she is hot. And I got that on video."

Gabe frowned. "Hey, do not show that to anyone. I mean it."

"Aw, come on, this would go viral."

"I'm not kidding. Do not post that."

"Why not?"

"You know, it's the celeb thing. They don't like their personal life being made public."

"So, what happens if I do? You gonna beat me up?"

"I won't have to. Did it register what I said to you about her family? I promise, you don't want to make enemies of them. And if you ever want me to bring you out here, you better show me that I can trust you."

"I'm just messing with ya, Gabe. And you don't have to use her family to scare me. I'm scared enough of you."

"Good."

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March 31st Late Afternoon Sunday

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

"You know it wouldn't hurt to smile," Jodi Appel whispered to her son as she passed by him on the way to grab more onion dip out of the kitchen.

"I thought I was smiling," he called after her.

The party had been going on for a couple of hours now. Everyone in town it seemed, had stopped by the Inn after church to welcome Jake home from his first deployment. He'd endured hundreds of hugs, handshakes and pats on the back. It wasn't that he wasn't grateful for their kindness and support, but there were so many it had become tedious.

Everyone enjoyed their fill of the buffet prepared by his mom, and Grams, and Aunt Lisa and Aunt Lizzy, and one of her twin daughters, Lily. Now they would all be getting into their suits and hit the pool. Jake decided now was a good time to sneak into the kitchen and get himself that last piece of apple pie that Grams had stashed away for him.

In the large kitchen he reached way into the back of the second refrigerator, and there it was, just where she said it would be. He unwrapped the plate, grabbed a fork, and headed back out to sit alone in the dining room. He was almost to the table when Laynah, looking amazing in her bathing suit, came rushing past him. The plate went flying out of his hands and landed upside down on the floor.

The girl turned and grinned. "Oops, my bad," Laynah said before she laughed and ran out of the veranda doors to the pool area.

Lips pressed tightly together, he closed his eyes, begged for patience, and went to get a broom and dustpan. He'd about had it with this girl. Whatever her problem was, he was getting to the point where he wasn't gonna stay calm and just take it much longer. He cleaned up the mess and went to change into his bathing suit.

He watched out the terrace doors as what seemed like the whole town of Pine Forest played in the giant pool, or stood around talking and laughing. His parents sat with the Stewarts and the Tanners at one of the larger tables. At another he saw the two sets of Anderson twins—Uncle Keegan's stepdaughters, who had kept their biological father's surname. Both sets of twins were gorgeous blondes looking very lovely in their bathing suits, he thought.

He walked outside and over to greet them since he hadn't had a chance to speak with them yet. The Tanners were their neighbors on the other side. Jake's father was responsible for bringing Keegan Tanner and his wife, Lizzy down to Pine Forest. At the time they had five daughters. Two sets of twins and one a year older. Then they had Gabe, a great guy, and now they have a new little two-year-old girl.

The girls rose as he approached. "Hey, Jake!" they said in unison.

He chuckled because their twin stuff always made him laugh.

"Hey, Lily...Daisy... Violet... Rose," he said cautiously.

They laughed. "Don't worry," Rose said. "You got it right."

He shook his head. "At the risk of sounding like a player, you ladies are even more beautiful than I remember."

"Awww, aren't you sweet," Lily said.

"I wouldn't call it sweet," Rose put in. "It's more like he's been surrounded by

nothing but a bunch of smelly, rough men for the past year and a half."

"I wouldn't mind that," the usually quiet Daisy said, making everyone laugh.

Each of the beautiful blondes took a moment to hug Jake and kiss his cheek, wishing him well and promising to get together sometime.

He looked around and couldn't help but notice Laynah, who was a standout with her long red hair, long legs and athletic build. She was being boisterous and loud with a couple of girls he didn't know.

He was called over to the side of the pool by some old high school buddies who wanted to know about the training he'd been through.

Laynah watched Jacob Appel covertly, being all friendly and cozy with the twins. Not that she cared really. Both sets of the Anderson twins were close friends of hers. She'd known them as long as she could remember, and she knew they had no interest in Jake. Their parents and her parents were also close friends since they lived on the dirt road too. She even called them Aunt Lizzy and Uncle Keegan.

Her attention was drawn to Jake's handsome face. He still had some scabbing on his cheek where she'd scratched him. She sighed. Despite the scratches he was still impressive. His mother was of Asian descent. His father looked almost exactly like Laynah's own father, golden-blond hair, and dark brown eyes. They looked so much alike that people often made jokes about them being long lost twin brothers. Jake had large brown eyes, brown hair, beautiful lips, dimples. Looking at him you'd never believe his mother was a petite Asian woman, because Jake was tall and thick and banded with muscle.

Laynah's father was right, he'd somehow changed from a boy just out of high school into a trained special forces soldier. He looked like a man. He'd accomplished what many people could not. He was the youngest Marine Raider on record. And he made her so mad. He had no right to butt into her business. She wasn't even sure why his presence triggered such a strong reaction from her. She used to like him. But no longer. And there he stood right beside the pool, just daring her to do what she's about to do. Nodding her head, she drew a breath and marched right toward him. He looked up at her as she approached, a wary look in his eyes. She smiled sweetly at him— and shoved.

He came up from under the water, shaking his head at her.

"Bet ya didn't see that coming, did ya—*Mister Special Forces*?"

The crowd laughed. Jake did too, to his credit.

Jake watched the gorgeous redhead storm away. He had a mind to go after her and toss *her* into the pool, but had no desire to grace her with a public wrestling match. Besides, he'd already learned there was no way to subdue her without hurting her.

It was the next day that almost brought things to a head. He'd parked his Indian Roadmaster and headed into the Ingles Food Mart. He came out just in time to see Laynah kick the bike as she went by.

"Hey," he yelled sternly.

She turned and made a face. "Oh! Sorry."

"Laynah, what is your problem?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. What is your problem with me, and whatever it is, ya don't go kicking my bike."

He turned and bent down to examine the bike to make sure she hadn't done real damage.

"I didn't hurt your little motorcycle," she said.

"Why would you even kick it in the first place? Really now, Laynah, this has gone far enough. Whatever you think I did to you, tell me now."

She raised her chin. "Don't think you can order me around and I'll just comply like a good little soldier."

He blew out a breath and softened his tone. "Come on now, Bugs. I thought we were friends. What's the deal?"

"You thought we were *friends*? Uuuggghhh." She turned and stormed away.

He watched her go, shook his head, strapped on his helmet, started the engine and took off.

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April 1st Early Morning Monday

Alley Creek Shooting Range, Camp Pendleton, California

Daniel and Jeremy Davis showed out and did their father proud. Their form was good, stance perfect, aim not perfect but getting there. They followed all the rules. Gabe only had to correct them a few times. The men all took time to praise them and tell them how proud they were of them and more importantly, how proud their father would be.

The boys, having unloaded their firearms and placed them down, backed away and removed their eye protection. Agent Nathaniel Hawk stepped up to congratulate the boys on a fine job, then helped Gabe pack up the boys' weapons and protective gear. Agent Hawk had volunteered to take the boys home where their parents had just arrived.

Grandmaster Kino bent down to speak with the boys. "Hey guys, I just want you to know how proud I am of you. Not just for your shooting here today, but for how you guys handled your mom and dad being in the hospital. You watched out for each other, you didn't argue with each other, well, at least not too much, and you've been very polite to Mrs. Kino, which was the most important thing."

The boys smiled. "Will you tell all that to our Dad?" Daniel asked.

Eric laughed. "I might, but in exchange you'll have to come back and visit again soon."

"That would be great," they said.

Gabe gave the boys a hug. "I guess this is goodbye, guys, unless I can somehow get back to your house before I leave Saturday. Maybe the next time I'm out here I can stay a little longer."

"Yeah, you know you gotta come back, Gabe. Dad is really not happy about the way the vacation went down."

"I know. We'll make it happen." He turned to Agent Hawk. "Would you like me to help get the stuff loaded into the car?"

Nate smiled. "Naw, we got this, don't we guys?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

Everyone took a moment to say goodbye and shake the boys' hands. Nate helped pick up the gun bag and they took their leave.

"Okay, Gabe," Grandmaster Kino said. "Your turn. Let's see what you got."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said, giving a mock salute. He pulled out his gun bag and laid his weapons, ammo and magazines out on the counter, and swung into action.

Fifteen minutes later, Eric, Ricky and young Eric stood, brows raised, amazed at the display of marksmanship they'd just witnessed. Joey and Mark Adams and Mark's two oldest, JoJo and Logan, stood the same way. They all looked to Joey, the only pro with them.

"Whaddya think?" Ricky asked his youngest step-brother.

Joey grinned. "I think he's freaking awesome! He reminds me of Jeff."

Gabe smiled. "Thank you, sir."

Ricky glanced at his daughter. Taylor had surprised them all by asking if she could come with the guys to the shooting range. It surprised them because she'd never before shown any interest in shooting. Like everyone else, she wore eye and ear protection and Ricky thought she looked absolutely adorable. He'd even shot a few pics of his beautiful daughter and sent them to Bree. Right now she had a confused look on her face.

"What do you think, honey?" Ricky asked.

Gabe glanced over, interested to hear her response. When she didn't answer, he moved toward her. Her eyes opened wide. He smiled at her and pointed toward her head. She had on noise-cancelling ear protection that allowed conversation, but the dial was turned all the way off. Her brow wrinkled. He reached up on her headphones and turned the small dial. Her eyes opened wide again and she smiled. He turned back to Ricky with a grin. "Ask her again."

"Whaddya think?" her father asked again, chuckling.

"I'm not sure. It looks complicated. Did he hit the target?"

Her cousins and brother laughed.

"Uh, yeah," JoJo said with a chuckle. "Every shot pretty much a bullseye."

"What he just did was extraordinary," Eric senior explained in his quiet voice.

The others quickly agreed.

Taylor smiled. All she knew was he looked very tough firing off all those weapons in rapid succession, loading, reloading, unloading, clicking all kinds of switches and bolts like he knew what he was doing, which apparently he did. She looked him over. She'd known him almost all her life. She'd never really noticed before that he was pretty cute. At the pool yesterday, with his shirt off, he looked like the rest of the guys in her family, ripped. Today he had on jeans and a charcoal gray t-shirt and he looked good, totally. He had dark hair and blue eyes and a dimple on one side. He glanced over in her direction and she quickly turned her head.

She watched as her brother, young Eric, and cousins, JoJo and Logan, ages twenty, twenty, and nineteen respectively, all stepped forward to get their turns. Gabe moved back and stood nearby. Each of the guys laid out their guns and went through a lot of the same things she'd just seen Gabe do, though they were not quite as quick in doing those things, and took a lot longer to aim.

Young Eric's gun jammed and Gabe stepped forward to help, fixed the problem and stepped back again. Taylor asked him what the problem was and he took time to explain it to her.

Joey, Ameritech's number two in charge who would one day take over the company, stepped forward to instruct and help the three cousins, every once in a while asking for Gabe's thoughts and input, which made Gabe feel pretty darn good.

When young Eric, JoJo and Logan had their fill, they stepped back while Mark and Joey took their turn. The brothers, who were both Ricky Kino's brothers-in-law and step-brothers, were pretty impressive, Gabe thought.

Finally, Eric senior and Ricky stepped forward.

Gabe thought they too were impressive. They each had a Glock and they each were proficient with the firearm. Well, of course they were. The Kinos didn't do anything halfway. Eric turned to ask Gabe his thoughts on a few things, but Gabe realized he was just being kind. Mostly Gabe stood next to Taylor and explained what everyone else was doing as they did it.

"That's called a magazine. It holds the bullets. He's unloading the gun. It didn't fire cuz he forgot to take the safety off. Joey stopped him because he didn't click the safety on. The slide stays open when the mag is empty."

Taylor would nod in understanding or ask another question. When everyone was pretty much spent, they were surprised by Taylor's next question.

"Can I try?"

Ricky's brow shot up. The other men were silent. They all had an opinion, but this was her father's call.

Gabe frowned as he thought and then looked up at her father. "You could run in and get her a twenty-two pistol."

Ricky nodded and went inside the building. He came out a few minutes later with the gun and some ammo.

"I thought you can't buy a gun, like, right away," Taylor asked.

"Well, you definitely can't here in Cali," Gabe said. "But he didn't buy it. Just borrowed it."

"Oh."

Ricky handed the gun to Gabe. "Here, Gabe, why don't *you* teach her," he offered.

Gabe shrugged. "Oh. Um, okay." He motioned Taylor forward.

She stood next to him while he took time to teach her about the rules of gun safety and then explained all the working parts of the gun. He must have sufficiently warned her of all the dangers because when he tried to put the gun in her hand, she seemed afraid of it. He explained to her again how there were no bullets in the gun, pointing to the magazine which lay on the counter in front of them, and opening the slide to show the chamber empty. He held her hand and placed the gun in it.

"Never put your finger on the trigger until you're ready to shoot something, even if you know it's not loaded." He placed her finger along the side of the gun, avoiding the trigger. He then moved behind her, placed his hands over hers and

showed her how to hold the gun. When she seemed nervous he reminded her again, that the gun was not loaded.

Young Eric, JoJo and Logan stood together watching. When Gabe had his arms pretty much around her and his cheek next to hers as he spoke to her, Eric and JoJo nodded at Logan. "How does that make you feel?"

Logan smiled. He knew they were wondering if he was jealous, but they should also know that the feelings between himself and Taylor had always been one-sided. "What I feel— is relieved," he finally answered.

"That's what we thought," JoJo said.

"We just wanted to make sure nothing had changed," young Eric added.

Logan smiled. "Well, hopefully, she's finally over her little infatuation with me."

"Well, even if she is, it's not gonna be pretty, because like, Gabe lives in Georgia. A lovesick teenage baby sister will probably not be fun to deal with," young Eric said.

JoJo laughed. "Probably? You know good and well, since she's been lovesick over Logan for the last eight years."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Logan said. "Don't jinx it. Just let it unfold and we'll see what happens."

"Agreed."

Eric senior, Ricky, Mark and Joey also stood nearby, watching and listening. They were impressed, not only by Gabe's knowledge, but by his patience and natural teaching instinct.

With Gabe's arms still around Taylor, he wedged his foot in between her feet. "Widen your stance," he commanded.

She did as instructed.

Ricky shifted uncomfortably, still, what was happening was exactly what he'd hoped would happen. Her fascination with cousin Logan had gone on long enough. It was time for his daughter to see that there were other fish in the sea.

Gabe then showed Taylor how to sight the target, his lips close to her ear. "Do you see what I mean?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"Okay, we're gonna load up. Pick up the magazine with your left hand while you hold the gun in your right."

She tried but couldn't get it to go in.

Gabe pressed his lips together tightly to keep the laughter from slipping out. "Um, turn it around, the uh, bullets have to point away from you."

The cousins were not quite as successful at holding in their laughter, and she turned and glared at them.

Gabe softly kicked her leg. "Don't pay attention to anyone or anything other than what you're doing when you have a weapon in your hand."

She drew a deep breath, blew it out and nodded.

"Okay, put the magazine into the gun."

She did.

"Let me have the gun," he said. He checked the magazine and ejected it. "Do

it again, and this time do it firmly to make sure it's locked in there."

She did.

"Good job. Okay, the magazine is in the gun but there has to be a bullet in the chamber. I'm gonna chamber it for you this time. Watch me."

He took the gun from her, pulled the slide back, and chambered a round.

"So, that means the gun is ready to fire. Almost. There's one more thing you have to do. Do you remember what that is?"

"Switch off the safety."

He smiled. "Good. Go ahead and do that."

"I'm scared."

He put his hands back on hers. "I've got you. Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Safety off."

She accomplished it.

"Finger off the trigger," he reminded her.

"Oh, sorry."

"No problem. Everyone makes that mistake. We're gonna start again. Safety on."

She did.

He took the gun, ejected the magazine, racked the slide to unchamber the weapon, put the bullet back into the mag, and laid them both down.

"Okay, pick up the gun, insert the magazine. Good. Chamber the bullet. Good job," he said, surprise in his voice because she did it right, quickly and firmly on the first try. "Finger off the trigger. Good. Okay, arms out, good, brace with your left hand, good. Finger off the trigger."

"Ugh, I keep forgetting."

"It's okay. It's a natural mistake. Okay now, line up the target in your sights. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Safety off. Good."

She lowered the gun. "Is it gonna like, kick back?"

"Safety on."

"Oh yeah." She fumbled with getting the safety back on.

Gabe explained. "We got you this twenty-two because the bullet caliber is not as powerful. You're a strong girl. You'll barely feel the recoil. Trust me. I've got you."

She nodded her head. "Okay."

"So, gun up, good, but finger off the trigger. Good. Line up the shot. Good. Safety off. Now you can put your finger on the trigger. Shoot when you're ready."

When she still didn't shoot he used his hands to brace her upper arms. "I'm right here."

She pulled the trigger.

The gun barely moved. She sighed. "I think I missed the whole target."

"No you didn't. You hit the outside circle there. Now that you know how it feels, go ahead and squeeze off a few more."

She did it.

"Good job."

She turned with a big smile toward her father.

"Eyes front," Gabe commanded.

"Oops, sorry," she mumbled.

"Okay, now line up the target again and fire until you empty the magazine."

She did as told.

"Okay, the mag is empty now, see, you can see into the chamber, see there is no bullet there. Eject the mag. Good. Lay the mag down and the pistol down. Good job!"

She turned, a giant smile on her face. She ran to her father. Ricky gave her a big hug.

Everyone came forward and congratulated her. Young Eric pulled the target in. "Look at that, Taytay, you hit the center a few times. That's a great job, Sis!"

Eric senior made his way to Gabriel, shook his hand. "That was a superb show of your knowledge *and* ability to teach. A fine job indeed."

"Thank you, sir. I have to admit, it was a little nerve-wracking teaching someone right in front of their family and not even being prepared to teach."

"The fact that you weren't prepared makes it that much more impressive."

Taylor made her way back to Gabe. "Hey, thanks for teaching me. That was fun."

He nodded. What was he supposed to say? He figured it out quickly. "Um, yep, no problem. Work on it, and next time I come to visit we'll see how you do."

"I will." She raised up on her toes and kissed his cheek.

Mouth agape, he watched her walk away.

JoJo moved up and patted him on the back and nodded toward Taylor.

"Ya gonna go after that?"

Gabe turned, looked at Taylor's cousin, trying to figure out if he was serious or teasing. He wasn't sure how to answer. It could be a trick question. JoJo could just be curious, or it could be a warning. Gabe glanced past JoJo to Logan, the cousin everyone knew that Taylor had her heart set on for years.

Logan smiled. "If it's *my* blessing you're lookin' for, you got it."

Gabe still didn't know what to say. An arm suddenly had him in a headlock. It was young Eric, Taylor's brother. He leaned close.

"You have my blessing too, but don't hurt her, cuz then I'd have to kill ya."

JoJo and Logan laughed. Gabe had a feeling it wasn't quite the joke they all pretended it was. He was beginning to think he'd be better off to steer clear of the gorgeous girl in question. Besides, he was leaving at the end of the week.

They all headed back to the Kino estate. They ate lunch, swam in the ocean, a few of them broke out the surfboards. When they grew bored of that, a volleyball game broke out. Gabe knew that everyone was just as, or even more competitive than him. He'd played football and baseball all four years of high school. Football was over. He still had the last half of his last season of baseball coming up. Right now, this volleyball game had become pretty serious.

Taylor had elected to be on the same team as him, and everyone kept spiking the

ball right at her. She'd held her own pretty well, after all, she was a Kino. Still, a twenty-year-old male spiking the ball at a sixteen-year-old girl seemed a little rough. Gabe had to dive toward her a few times to rescue her. This last time he pointed back at her brother in warning. Young Eric only laughed and then smacked the ball right at her again. Taylor dove and got it, Joey set and Gabe delivered a hard kill shot. They won the point and the game.

Gabe helped Taylor up. "Good job," he said.

She smiled. "You too."

She was standing too close to him, so before anything could get awkward, he turned and high-fived the rest of his team. He blew out a breath. It was weird, but Taylor's presence suddenly seemed to be affecting him. He suddenly seemed ultra-aware of her. He pushed the feeling aside the best he could.

They played until almost dinner time, when everyone came in, showered and dressed and filed into the kitchen to see how they could help. The group filled nineteen of the twenty-four places at the giant dining room table. Gabe sighed when Taylor found a seat right next to him. Not wanting to be rude, he smiled at her as she sat down. It wasn't that he didn't want the girl's attention, but he'd already decided her attention was not good for his health. Still, apparently, there was nothing he could do about it.

He was looking forward to listening to the dinner conversation at the Kino table because it was always interesting and stimulating. They didn't disappoint. They talked about young Eric deciding to put his college on hold, changing directions from AsCan, Astronaut Candidate training. They talked about the next possible MART candidates and whether any of the people at the table were interested in participating. They talked about the Kino Challenges and the thought that this year might be Joey's last as the main contender. They talked about the movie young Eric was shooting with fight scenes choreographed by his father.

As much as Gabe enjoyed the conversations, he also enjoyed the little things, like the interactions between the husbands and wives. These men were always so kind and loving to their wives, and the women were the same. They were all beautiful, and strong and intelligent. His own father and mother were just like these people. And the little ones, Mark's little girl and Joey's two little girls and baby boy, the kids were not afraid to speak and be heard. Jeffy and Cam weren't here, but if they had been, he was sure the conversation would probably be way over his head.

Right now they were talking about the slew of students they would have in the Kino studio classes this week because of spring break. Gabe would have thought the classes across the country would be empty because of spring break. But instead, people were taking the opportunity to get in extra classes. Of course, Gabe decided that here in California at least, part of the reason for that was because the students knew that Ricky Kino would be randomly showing up in some of the classes. They all hoped to stand out enough to get to meet him.

"You are coming to our class in the morning, aren't you Gabe?"

Gabe looked up at the silence. It was Grandmaster Kino who asked the question. He nodded. "Yes, sir, I'm looking forward to it." He frowned. "Um, I didn't bring

any uniforms with me."

"We have plenty," Shelley said.

"Great then," Eric said brightly. "Then we'll all be there. It should be a fun day."

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April 2nd Early Morning Tuesday

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Just before dawn, Jake rolled out of bed. He was looking forward to another ride. He'd missed Santana just like he'd missed his parents, his friends, his hometown, and of course— Grams' cooking.

Jeans, boots and a t-shirt and he was ready to go. He hopped on his motorcycle and headed over to the Stewart Ranch, passed the main house, hit the back road that led to the stables. He parked his bike and headed inside.

Santana was not in his stall. Jake panicked for a second, looking around to see if Santana had somehow unlatched his door and headed to the back corral. Then he heard the hoofbeats. He looked up to see Melaynah riding Santana toward the stable. What the...?

He strode out to meet her as she came to a halt.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She smiled. "Good morning, Jake. Lovely day for a ride."

"I cannot believe you would have the audacity to take my horse out."

"Oh, were you gonna ride him?"

"You know I was."

"How could I know?" she asked as she swung her leg over and dismounted.

He moved close to her. "Maybe, because I've been over to ride him every single morning since I've been home."

She backed up a few steps. "Oh, well, sorry, guess I wasn't thinking."

"Oh right, you weren't thinking. Just like you weren't thinking when you kicked my bike yesterday, or when you knocked my plate out of my hands, or pushed me into the pool, or tried to tear my freakin' head off. Well, Melaynah, this is gonna stop right now. I don't know what you think I've done to make you so mad at me, but... "

"Of course you don't know," she yelled. "Because you're an idiot, just like the rest of the guys I've ever dated."

"Yeah, you mean like the guy who was beating you up in the parking lot? And who else? Huh? Is there someone else whose butt I need to kick?"

"I don't need you to beat up anyone for me. I can do that myself."

"Well, that's evident," he said, stroking his cheek. "Bugs," he said firmly. "What– is– the problem? I don't understand."

"Like I said, because– you're– an idiot, like every other guy I've ever dated."

"*We've* never dated," he yelled at her.

She stood there, her mouth open, drawing in deep breaths. He looked into her eyes, and it dawned on him. They'd never dated. Suddenly he understood.

He moved forward so fast that she only had time to gasp. He grabbed her by the shoulders, pushed her up against the stable wall and laid his mouth on hers.

She struggled against him, but that only made him kiss her longer and harder. Finally, he released her. She stood there, her breath heaving. He watched her for a moment, and then moved forward and kissed her again, this time gentler.

She pushed him away, hauled back and slapped him as hard as she could. He stood there, stone-faced. So she pulled back and slapped him again.

"Stop," he commanded.

When she went to slap him a third time, he caught her arm and pulled her close. "Stop it, Laynah," he said softly. She tried to wrestle away but he held her fast in his iron grip. "Bugs, stop now. Stop."

It was his soft tone that got her. She stopped struggling and let her head fall against his chest. Then the tears came.

He wrapped both of his arms around her and held her tight as she cried. "Okay, Laynah, shhh, it's okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Bugs. I get it now. I hurt you, didn't I? I hurt you, but I didn't mean to. You're right. I'm an idiot."

After a few minutes she quieted.

He pulled her away just far enough so that he could see her face. "Laynah, can we talk?"

"What is there to say? I've just completely humiliated myself. I pretty much want to go crawl in a hole somewhere and die."

"No, don't feel that way. I didn't understand. But maybe if we talk, I could understand, and maybe I can help you to see where my head's been the past several years. I didn't mean to hurt you, Bugs. Please, we need to talk. And I need to put Santana up."

She nodded at that. "Why did you kiss me?"

He knew it was a loaded question. Pretty much anything to do with Laynah was loaded. He sighed. "I'm sorry if that upset you. I had an overwhelming urge and couldn't fight it."

She smiled. "Really?"

Inwardly he sighed in relief. Apparently his answer was acceptable. It was also the truth. "Yes, really. As a matter of fact," he said as he moved close. "I think I need to do it again."

He didn't give her a chance to say yay or nay. He simply took her face in his hands and kissed her. Gently at first, and then a little more passionately. This time she put her arms around his neck and kissed him back. She sighed. He moaned.

"What's going on here?" Chaz Stewart barked.

Jake jumped away from Laynah. He rubbed his hands on his jeans, backed up even farther.

"Uh, sorry, Uncle Chaz. I, uh, was just, uh, I need to put Santana up." Quickly, he grabbed the horse's reins and pulled him into his stall.

Chaz pointed at Laynah. "You, back to the house."

"But Daddy."

"Don't 'but daddy' me. Go."

She looked over at Jake and had to smile at the look of dread on his face. Shrugging, she giggled and walked off.

Jake drew himself up, and swallowed hard. He was a Marine Raider. He needed

to take it like a man, he thought.

Chaz stood there looking over the guy who'd just been all over his daughter. He was a good kid, well, young man, and Chaz had been hoping they would see the light and get together. Still, he had to play the part of the protective father and honestly, he also didn't want them taking things too fast.

"You wanna tell me what's going on?" Chaz asked.

Jake swallowed, cleared his throat. "To be honest, sir, I'm not quite sure."

"You'd better get sure, real quick."

Jake nodded in agreement. "You know she's been riding me pretty hard. I couldn't figure out what her problem was with me. I thought we'd always been good friends. As it turns out, I think that was the problem."

"That you were friends?"

"Well, yeah, and she wanted our relationship to be more than that, I think."

Chaz nodded. "She made a comment the other day about someone not appreciating her for the great person she is, I'm thinking she was talking about you."

"But, that's not how it is at all, Uncle Chaz. I mean, who wouldn't appreciate a hot, uh, I mean, a beautiful girl like Laynah. And she's brilliant, and feisty, and tough."

Chaz stood there waiting. When Jake didn't go on, Chaz waved his hand in a circle. "And?"

Jake's mind scrambled. "And, uh, well, I was definitely interested. I have been for a long time. And I knew she had like, a crush on me. But really, what was I supposed to do, Uncle Chaz? I mean, I knew I was going into the Marines as soon as I graduated high school. I knew I was going directly into Raider training. I had no idea how long it would take me. Was I supposed to claim her for my own and then what? Just leave her? It didn't seem right. So, I pretty much ignored my feelings for her and focused on what I needed to do to go after my own goals. But, ignoring my own feelings also meant I ignored her feelings and apparently, it hurt her pretty bad. I'm guessing she started out hurt and when I came home and interfered with her and her boyfriend, she went from hurt to mad real fast. Like, I didn't want anything to do with her, how dare I come home and insert myself into her life. And she's right, it's not fair, but you know, I couldn't come home, see some guy hurting her and simply look the other way."

"No, you couldn't. You did the right thing. I get it. But she didn't look too mad just now."

"Well, things kind of came to a head and I just sort of took matters into my own hands and kissed her. I'm sorry, sir, I guess. I mean, not really. I mean, it seemed to do the trick as far as her not being mad anymore. At least for now."

Chaz nodded. "I can't believe she let you kiss her."

Jake blew out a breath, shifted uncomfortably and rubbed his cheek. "Well, no, sir, she didn't actually let me. I mean not at first. It kind of took her by surprise and she fought me."

Chaz' brows rose.

Jake rubbed his cheek. "She smacked me a few times, but she finally realized

it was what she wanted." He glanced up at his Uncle. "Oh, uh, I don't mean that like it sounds."

Chaz smiled. "Yes you do. The first time I kissed her mother, it was pretty much the same, in that she didn't know at first that it was exactly what she wanted."

Jake blew out a relieved breath, but held back his smile.

"So, what now?" Chaz asked.

Jake shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, nothing has changed. I still *will* have to leave again. Am I supposed to get together with her and then just leave her? I don't know what to do."

"She has a brain."

"Of course she does. I know that. What are you tryin' to say?"

"I'm sayin' that you talk it over with her, lay your cards on the table, and you let *her* decide what she wants, and what she wants to do— about what she wants."

Jake nodded in understanding.

"*I* just want to know that *your* intentions are honorable."

Jake nodded again. "Of course, Uncle Chaz."

"That means, no rolling around in the hay."

"Roger that."

Chaz nodded. "Okay then." He drew a breath. "Now that's settled, different subject; if Laynah decides to press charges against this Brett guy, she'll need you as her witness. You have any problem with that?"

"No, sir. No problem at all."

Chaz started to leave, then stopped. "Don't forget to brush that horse."

"No, sir, I won't."

"You know, Laynah is the one who's taken care of Santana for you pretty much every day you've been gone."

Jake frowned. "No, sir, I didn't know that."

"A little appreciation might go a long way."

Jake nodded. "Copy that."

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Song of Solomon 8:7
"Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.
If one were to give all the wealth of one's
house for love, it would be utterly scorned."

Chapter Five

April 2nd, Tuesday Morning
Kino Martial Arts Studio, Newport, California

Breathing hard, Gabe bent over, his hands on his knees. The sweat poured from his body, splashing on the mat in front of him. He tried to take a few deep breaths to slow his breathing. Using the shoulder of his gi, he attempted to wipe some of the sweat from his brow. The only thing that felt good about his current condition was that at least he wasn't the only one.

"Attention," Master Mark Adams called.

The class lined up. Gabe hustled into place. He thought, or hoped, that maybe the class was over, but they were only being directed to divide into groups for sparring. He had to reach down deep and find some reserves in order to continue. Gabe was a black belt. So was Taylor. Joey Adams was a 7th Dan, his older brother Mark, was a 6th Dan. Young Eric, JoJo and Logan were all 3rd Dans. Ricky Kino was 8th Dan in several styles of martial arts, which is also a Grandmaster, though only every once in a while did anyone ever address him that way, because Ricky Kino was, well, Ricky Kino. Grandmaster Eric Kino was a 10th Dan in at least six styles but also had mastery over many styles that did not use the belt system of ranking.

They were in one of the original Kino studios which was also the largest. Currently there were about forty students in class, with plenty of room since the class area resembled a high school gym. Gabe was thinking that maybe it actually used to be one.

Gabe was relieved when Taylor was divided off to a female sparring group. Shelley Kino, a 3rd Dan herself, was asked to help supervise the female groups. Gabe could see that the others in the Kino/Adams family were moving around from group to group, giving pointers, offering critiques, addressing an act of poor sportsmanship, and making a ruling on a discrepancy.

Gabe peered around at his group. They were all black belts. Some were larger than him. Some were smaller. He didn't realize they were about to see who was the best. The first two called out to spar by the group leader were equally matched. Gabe studied their every movement to see what would and wouldn't work. Their group was one of the largest, so he figured it would take some time for them all to have their chance to spar. Gabe was one of the last to be called. He was glad because he'd needed time to catch his breath. He went three two-minute rounds and turned out to be the victor. He thought he was done, but was surprised to find that after everyone in his group had sparred, the winners were asked to line up again, and pair off.

Once more he had to reach down deep and find some reserve. This match was not as easy as the first. Gabe had to actually put some power behind his punches and kicks. He gave it his all, and again he was the winner. That brought him to the final. Thank goodness they gave him time to rest. He grabbed some water and sucked air into his lungs.

Gabe's group of male black belts was the only group left to name a winner. The rest of the class gathered around, cheering for one or the other. Nobody knew Gabe, so most of the class was cheering for his opponent. Gabe tried not to let it bother him.

They bowed to each other. Took their stance, and waited for the command. Gabe was truly tired. He was hoping the other guy felt the same way. The first round, Gabe did nothing but block. The other guy was coming at him pretty hard. The second round Gabe decided he had to do something. So, he blocked and punched, blocked and punched, and each time he was surprised that he landed those punches. The class was now also cheering for him. He was ultra-competitive, always had been, not outwardly as much as with himself. He decided right then and there that he was gonna win this little class sparring competition and, sure enough, when the third round was over, Gabe was declared the winner.

He was not surprised by the show of sportsmanship and camaraderie from the rest of the class. After all, the Kinos were all about honor.

The class was called to attention, winners were congratulated, homework assignments were given and they were dismissed.

While everyone made their way out, Gabe sat down heavily. He didn't feel like he could move. Actually thought for a minute that he might be sick. Luckily, the nausea subsided.

He noticed that the Kino and Adams families stood in a circle, having an impromptu pow wow. He thought about moseying over to listen in but couldn't make his body move. He looked up to see Taylor standing over him with a cold bottle of water.

"That was a great job, Gabe," she said. "Drink this. It's special water that will replace your electrolytes. You'll feel a lot better in just a few minutes."

Gabe nodded his thanks, took the water, and began sipping immediately.

Taylor was still standing there so he tried to make conversation. "Wonder what they're over there talking about," he said, nodding at the family.

"You," she answered simply.

He looked up in surprise. "Wonder what I did."

She laughed. "Like you don't know."

He truly was puzzled, but he didn't have the energy to even think about it. Finally, their meeting broke up and everyone turned with a smile to approach Gabe.

Grandmaster Kino neared and Gabe tried to stand to greet him, but he put a hand on Gabe's shoulder. "Sit. Relax."

Gabe didn't argue. He slumped back down into the chair.

Grandmaster Kino actually knelt down in front of him. "You did a great job out there today."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'm very proud of you, and of Master Appel, who has taught you well."

"Well, I hear he learned from the best," Gabe said with a smile.

There were murmurs of agreement from the family.

"We have a proposition for you, and please feel free to be honest in your answer."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Over the next four days, Kino Martial Arts would like to sponsor a little mini-competition. We would select another black belt to fight against you on Saturday. You both will train for three days and then on Saturday there will be a seven-round match. Each round will last 3 minutes with one minute rest in between. Ricky will train your opponent. I will train you. We'll give all proceeds to one of Jeffy's or Angel's foundations."

Gabe started to answer but Grandmaster Kino held up his hand. "Allow me to finish before you answer."

"Oh, yes, sir. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Grandmaster Kino smiled kindly. "I warn you, this will not be an easy task. That is twenty-one minutes of fighting. I will train you harder than you've ever been trained."

"I can vouch for that," Shelley said. "Me too," the others said.

"As I said, it will be difficult. But at the week's end, win or lose, you will have accomplished a great deal and it will be an event to remember the rest of your life. Today, you showed your skills and your tenacity. You have also shown a great competitive edge that we admire. You are a credit to your parents and your teacher. You have proven yourself to me, which is the only reason I make this offer." He motioned around to the rest of the family. "You have also proven yourself to them. The family will divide up, some will work with me to train you, and some will work with your opponent. As much as we all love you, I guarantee that the ones who will work for your opponent, will do it wholeheartedly and even ruthlessly."

Another murmur of agreement.

"That is the only way they can honor you is to work as hard as they can to defeat you. Now, before you give me your answer, call your father, call Master Appel, call whomever you want, get their advice and input, and then give us your answer by 3 PM today. Oh, and one more thing, and it's a big thing. Whenever our family swings into action, there tends to be publicity, a lot of publicity. Whether you like that or hate that, you will have to be focused enough to push that aside. Our family is used to dealing with it, the celebrity thing. I'm telling you, it can change your life. If you consent to do this, and since you're a minor, if your parents consent, and you win, you could get famous pretty fast. If you do poorly, which is unlikely, still, if that were to happen, that too would be highly publicized." He rose. "No matter what you decide, you will forever be in our good graces." He stood back and bowed.

Gabe rose and did the same.

The others gathered around and patted him on the back, mussed his hair, shook his hand. Then they all gathered their stuff and headed out to the cars.

Gabe's mind was racing. He would make the cursory phone calls, but to him the decision was made. He knew exactly what Jeff and his father and Master Appel

would say. You do not turn down Grandmaster Kino when he invites you to join him in any martial arts activity. Gabe knew it was gonna be a hard task, just judging from the regular class he joined today, which kicked his butt. However, he was never one to shy away from something difficult. Actually kind of thrived on it. This will *not* be a resting kind of vacation.

They had lunch and even though he hadn't given his answer yet, he noticed a marked difference. There were no starchy carbs on the table. No desserts. Pretty much the meal was protein and veggies, and a lot of it. The rest of the family had headed to their respective homes. It was only him, Grandmaster Kino and Mrs. Kino. Gabe ate, cleared his plate and excused himself to make the calls.

He sat down by the pool. The first call was to his parents. His mom was worried. His father was jacked. And proud. And thinking about flying out for the event. Master Appel was a ditto of his father. He was also honored. Jeff Davis was all in. Mrs. Davis was also excited for him. He knew they all would be. It was only 1:00 in the afternoon, but he went to find Grandmaster Kino. He was in the kitchen, kissing his wife.

"Oh, uh, sorry," Gabe murmured.

Shelley giggled. "We'll try to be more discreet."

"You have your decision?" Grandmaster Kino asked.

"Yes, sir."

"And?"

"It's yes. Master Appel says it would be crazy to turn down such an opportunity to learn from you, and I agree with him."

Eric nodded, his eyes dancing with pleasure. "Then let's get to it." He pulled out his phone and called Ricky first, because he had only a few hours to find the opponent, though Eric was sure he'd already done some preliminary calling around to some of the Masters of their more local schools.

He put his phone on speaker. "Hey Rick."

"It's a go?" Ricky asked.

"Yes it is."

"Awesome. See you Saturday."

"Yes you will."

"Tell Gabe, I feel a little guilty for what I'm about to do to him."

Eric smiled. "Bring it."

Gabe's eyebrows rose. Apparently they weren't kidding about being competitive. A little trickle of dread entered his brain.

"You let that get to you and you'll lose in the first round," Eric said as if reading his mind. "Tough body, tough mind, got it?"

Gabe nodded. "Got it, sir."

"I will give your father a call and work out the details of the competition, but first, before we get to work, I have a promise I made to you that needs to be fulfilled."

"You do?"

Eric smiled. "Follow me."

They went downstairs to the weapons room. Eric swung his arm around. "You

choose. Which one would you like to work with?"

Gabe walked along, eyeing the weapons. Nunchukas. Bo staffs. Scimitars. Sword. Sai. Shurikens. Kama. Knives.

"I'd prefer you choose one you've worked with a bit," Eric added.

Gabe nodded. "Then it's probably better to stick with either the staff or the nunchukas."

Eric nodded. "Still your choice."

"I think I'll choose the bo staff."

"May I ask what helped to make your decision?"

Gabe sighed. "Hmm, well, I'm about to start training for something important and I have a little better control over the staff. I don't want to accidentally bash myself in the head with the nunchukas before I even get started training."

Eric laughed. "Good decision."

"What does it matter why I made the decision? If you don't mind me asking."

"Because where your mind is at is every bit as important as your body."

Gabe nodded in understanding. He looked up at Grandmaster Kino. "Okay, so then, what does my decision say about where my mind is at?"

"So much. It says you're serious about doing your best in the coming competition so you don't want anything to interfere in that. It says you don't think you're invincible. You have humility. It says you chose responsibility over fun, because everyone knows it's much more fun to play with the nunchukas than to swing a staff. And it says you didn't need to try to show off for me before we begin your training."

Gabe's mouth opened. "Wow, all that?"

Eric smiled. "All that and more." He picked up a staff, handed it to Gabe and bowed, grabbed another one for himself. "Let us begin."

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April 2nd Late Afternoon Tuesday

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake rubbed the soapy sponge over the letters on the white shuttle van, "Pine Forest Country Inn and Cottages," but he wasn't really thinking about what he was doing. It had been ten hours since that early morning kiss. He couldn't get it out of his mind. How was he supposed to function like this? He really needed to kiss her again. If he was being honest, he needed more than just a kiss, but he forced that thought from his mind. This was just not gonna work. He wanted to pursue a relationship with Laynah, but he had to leave again. Would she wait for him? Would it be fair to her?

Uncle Chaz had told him to let her make that decision, but actually, he was getting way ahead of himself. He needed to talk to her, clear the air, see where her head is at. When he'd kissed her, she'd fought it at first, but then it was obvious it was precisely what she wanted. It was just so hard with Laynah to know exactly what she was thinking. Sighing, he rubbed his hand on his jeans to dry it and pulled out his phone.

She answered immediately. "Hey."

"Hey. So, uh, would you consider having dinner with me tonight?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so, any suggestions as to where? I mean, I've been gone awhile. Is there some place you'd like to go?"

"Nope. We can just keep it casual and head to Joe's."

He nodded. *Joe's Bar and Grill* had been around for forty years and was owned by Laynah's grandfather. "Sounds good. Pick you up at six?"

"I'll be ready."

He put his phone in his hip pocket and breathed a sigh of relief. He had two hours to finish up the chores he'd volunteered to do at the Inn, shower and dress. He swung into action with renewed energy.

At 5:55 Jake stood at the Stewarts' front door, showered, dressed in jeans and a black knit shirt. He rang the bell, heard a rumble of loud footsteps and the door opened. It was twelve-year-old Matthew Stewart.

"Hey."

"Hi Matt. Would you get Laynah for me?"

"Sure, come on in."

Jake watched as he went to the bottom of the steps and yelled. "Laynah! Jake's here!" He then turned and headed to the kitchen.

Jake looked up as Laynah came down the steps. To his surprise, she was wearing a dress. His heart stopped. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen her in a dress. It was soft, and feminine, some sort of flowing material, white with tiny blue flowers on it. And short, with a ruffle at the bottom that brought attention to her muscular thighs. He swallowed hard. "Hey, Bugs, uh, you look nice, I mean, really good."

She smiled sweetly. "Thanks." She came right up to him. "You clean up real nice too."

"Um, thanks."

"You're right on time," she said, seemingly surprised.

"Yep, is that a problem?"

She shook her head, her red curls shimmering around her face. "Nope. It's actually very refreshing."

He frowned. "Refreshing? Why? Because other guys have kept you waiting?"

"Oh, to say the least."

"Well, Laynah, it's actually a show of respect to be on time, and an extreme show of disrespect to be habitually late."

She laughed and gave a mock salute. "Got it. Yes, sir, soldier, sir."

Sighing, his eyebrows rose. "Laynah, you know that you don't call a Marine a soldier, right?"

"Then what are you?"

"A Marine. Your father is a Marine, so you should know that. If I was in the *Army*, I'd be a soldier. Are you ready to go?"

She took his hand. "Come say hello to my parents first." He nodded and she pulled him into the kitchen.

"Jake, it's so nice to see you again. I'm still just getting used to you being back," Lisa Stewart said, moving forward and hugging him. "Umm, wow, don't you smell really nice."

"Mom!" Laynah said, protesting her mother being so personal.

Jake laughed. "Thanks, Aunt Lisa."

Chaz walked forward and shook his hand, then turned to Laynah. "While I have you and your mother here at the same time, I need to ask you a question."

Both women nodded.

"Ty wants to know if you want to press charges against this Brett Adderman."

"Press charges?" Laynah asked. "For what?"

Lisa sighed, shook her head. "Honey, for roughing you up in that parking lot. You DO know that it's against the law, right? You do understand that no man has the right to do that?"

"I already told you guys that it wasn't as bad as it seemed."

"Except the part about him giving you a concussion, right?" Jake put in.

Laynah flashed him a look and he held his hands up. "Oh, sorry. It just slipped out."

"But Jake's right," Chaz said. "He hurt you bad enough to cause real damage. The question is, do you want to press charges? I'm not gonna pressure you. It's your decision. If you want my opinion, I think you should. The guy does what he does because he's been able to get away with it. You should let him know that he cannot get away with it."

Laynah shook her head. "I just want to put it behind me. I don't want to think about it anymore. No, I do *not* want to press charges. Please, Daddy."

He sighed. "Okay, if that's your final decision."

"It is."

Jake turned to Chaz. "Can I speak to you privately a minute?"

Chaz nodded and he and Jake moved into the living room. Jake shifted uncomfortably. "What's on your mind, son?"

"Can I—borrow—your car?"

"Huh?"

Jake shrugged. "I brought my motorcycle. I didn't think Laynah would be wearing a dress."

Chaz chuckled, pulled keys from his pocket, tossed them to him. "Take the Explorer."

"Thanks, Uncle Chaz."

"You know, I thought you were gonna talk to me about paying a little visit to Brett Adderman."

"Oh, *that is* gonna happen. I just didn't realize you wanted to come along."

"I'd prefer it."

Jake nodded. "Then plan on it."

Lisa and Laynah came into the room.

Chaz kissed his daughter on the cheek. "You two have fun."

"Thank you, sir," Jake said with a smile.

Laynah immediately turned to leave. Jake followed behind.

She stood in the drive looking at his motorcycle. He ushered her to the Explorer.

"We're going in Dad's car?"

"Yeah, it's either that or you sit your pretty self on the back of my motorcycle."

She giggled. “I guess we’ll save that for another day.”

They headed to Joe’s, made their way inside and sat at a small table. Jake chose a place where he had his back to the wall. He smiled at Laynah. “So, we could waste time with some small talk, but I don’t think that’s how either one of us operates.”

“Agreed,” she said shortly.

“It’s actually one of the things I like about you. You’re a no-nonsense kind of girl.”

She nodded. “One of the things? That means there are other things you like about me?”

He smiled. She was definitely getting right to the point. “Of course. Your quick mind. Your honesty. Your strength. Your confidence. And, you are one beautiful girl.”

“But?”

He shook his head. “There is no but. You are all those things, Bugs, and I’ve felt that way for a long time.”

“If you felt that way, then why didn’t you tell me?”

They looked up as the server came and took their order. They ordered buffalo wings and waffle fries. Jake started to order a beer, taking advantage of having turned twenty-one just over a month earlier. Then he remembered Laynah was only twenty, so they got some sweet tea instead.

The server went to get their drinks and put in the food order.

He looked down, then back up into her gorgeous green eyes. “Let’s see, where were we?”

“You were about to say why you never told me how you felt about me.”

He nodded. Sighed. “You know my father was in the military, right? He was special ops, with Keegan Tanner.”

She nodded.

“They’re Marines,” he added.

She smiled. “Yep, Marines, Semper fi, oohrah, and not soldiers, got it.”

He chuckled. “See how quick your mind is?”

“Yeah, and I’m losing my patience.”

“Okay. So, from the time I was a little kid, I wanted to be a Marine. I wanted to be like my Dad. I wanted to make a difference. It was like this burning desire. It’s all I could think about. I felt like I was born to be a warrior. Add my faith into that, and it began to feel like a calling.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

“And then, there was you. Ya know, a long, long time ago, I thought of you as my cousin. I mean, I called your parents my aunt and uncle. I remember asking my mom about it once and she explained to me that we aren’t really cousins. I remember feeling really relieved about that because I had a crush on you. A big one. And then, we got a little older, like in our teens and I realized you might like me too. It was a wake-up call for me, because I knew I couldn’t have you. It wouldn’t be right. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

She shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

"I knew I was leaving right out of high school. I knew I was going away to join the Marines. What was I supposed to do, Bugs? Was I supposed to tell you how I felt about you? And then what? We'd be together, right? And then I would go off and leave you, for who knows how long. And while I'm off doing my thing you'd be here, all alone, waiting for me to come home."

"Wow."

"Wow?" he asked, her tone making him wary.

"You really are an idiot."

He blew out a breath. "What am I missing?"

"Jake, I WAS home—alone, waiting for you to come home, wondering if there was ever a chance for you and me to be together. Knowing you would eventually come home to see your parents and hoping that maybe, just maybe when you did come home, you would somehow see me in a different light. At least if I'd known before you left that you had some kind of feelings for me, it wouldn't have hurt so much. Maybe if you'd given me the chance to make a choice to wait for you, the past three years would have been somewhat bearable, knowing that when you did get home, we would be together. Instead, it's been hell. You didn't think that I could make a decision for myself, so you made it for me."

Her eyes were blazing fire and he was at least smart enough to know to not say 'calm down' to a woman who was pissed. He wasn't quite sure what to say. He finally came up with something. "I'm sorry, Bugs. It wasn't cuz I thought you weren't capable of making your own decisions. It was more like, I was trying to protect you from having a miserable life waiting on me to come home. I guess, I didn't realize just how strongly you felt. I didn't mean to hurt you. You gotta believe that."

She softened and sighed. "I believe you," she said quickly and simply.

He appreciated that. Their food was served and they ate silently for a few minutes. He watched her eat the chicken wings, smacking her lips, licking some sauce off her fingers, and his heart took a tumble. He shook his head. Now what was he supposed to do? He decided to change the subject. "I heard you were the one taking care of Santana while I was gone."

She grinned. "My dad tell ya that?"

"Yes he did."

"I've been taking care of most all the horses. Every morning, every night."

"That's hard work."

"Doesn't bother me. I like it."

"Well, I just wanted to say thanks. I truly appreciate you taking such good care of my horse."

She shrugged. "No prob." She stuffed a waffle fry in her mouth. "So, tell me about this Raider thing. I hear the training is pretty tough."

He smiled. "Yeah, it's tough, but it sure ain't pretty."

"And your dad and Mr. Tanner, they both used to be Marine Raiders, right?"

"No and yes. They didn't USE to be Marines. There is no such thing as a former Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine. And yes, they're Raiders."

He suddenly stiffened. His eyes immediately taking in and assessing what was

happening in front of him, he estimated the distance to the exit for Laynah.

"What's wrong?"

He sighed. "Your little friend just walked in with three of his buddies."

"What little friend? Brett?"

"Yes, don't turn around."

"I won't. I just hate when someone does that, don't you?"

His lips twitched with a smile. "Yep, hate it."

"Do you think they're just hanging out? Or are they here to cause trouble?" Laynah asked for his assessment.

"That depends. Does *Brett* usually carry?"

"No. I've never seen him with a gun."

"Then I think they're here to cause trouble." He sighed. "Laynah, it's hard to miss your red hair, so I know they've already spotted us. They're circling, looking for the best angle, which they won't be able to get."

"Why not?"

"Because I have the best angle. So, I need you to pretend you don't see them, make no eye contact and walk out that door."

"No freakin' way!"

"Why did I know you were gonna say that."

"You say there's four altogether?" Laynah asked.

"Looks like it."

"I can help."

"Yeah, you can stop a bullet and that's what I'm trying to avoid."

"I'm not leaving you ..."

"Aaand it's too late."

Jake stood as Brett approached the table right behind Laynah. He had one friend right beside him, one moving in from the right and one from the left. As far as Jake could tell, Brett was the only one with a gun.

"Can I help you guys?" Jake said.

Laynah watched Jake. He looked very strong, very relaxed. She had a feeling that was a warrior mode.

Brett fingered the gun tucked inside his waistband with his brows raised. "Yeah, you can step outside for a minute."

"Just for a minute?" Jake asked.

"That's all it will take."

Jake nodded, because he was right about that. He then pulled his shirt up an inch and tucked it behind his holstered weapon.

Laynah gasped. Brett took a step back.

Laynah stood then and turned toward Brett. "Have you lost your mind? What in the world do you think you're doing?"

"What are you doing here with him?" Brett nodded toward Jake.

"He's a friend of mine, not that it's any of your business."

"Yeah, like the little friend you were flirting with the other day? Tell me Laynah, how many of these so-called friends do you have? Or should we call them what they really are— friends with benefits."

Laynah drew in a sharp breath and started to spring at the guy. Jake was fast enough to reach out and grab her arm in a steely grip and sit her down in her chair.

Jake nodded at Brett. "Okay boys," he conceded. "Let's go outside." He definitely would like to take it outside where the innocent people sitting all around him would be out of danger. "Or," he continued, trying to de-escalate the situation. "Or, you can just leave. If you do that, I promise not to hurt you. If we go outside, someone is gonna get hurt."

At that moment, a couple of Jake's old high school buddies, Kurt and Landon, approached and came up right behind where Brett stood. "Hey Jake, how's it going, buddy? You got a problem with these guys?"

Jake nodded. "I don't know yet. Guys? Do we have a problem?"

Brett glanced behind him, backed down, shook his head. "No, no problem here. Come on, guys, let's go."

They watched as Brett and his friends quickly left the bar, climbed into the gray Camaro and sped away.

Jake's friends laughed, shook his hand.

"Thanks guys," Jake said.

"No worries," Kurt answered. "I gotta say though, I was kinda hopin' you had a problem. I really wanna see you in action."

Jake shook his head. "No you don't."

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Proverbs 17:14-15

"Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam;
so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.
Acquitting the guilty and condemning the
innocent— the Lord detests them both."

Chapter Six

April 3rd Wednesday Morning
Kino Martial Arts Studio, Newport, California

"Do it again," Grandmaster Kino demanded.

Breathing hard, Gabe went through the sequence again. Punch left, upper cut right, roundhouse, low kick, knee, front kick, spinning back kick.

He stopped, listening for more direction, sweat pouring, breath coming in gasps now.

"If you move too slow on the spinning back it broadcasts what you're doing. Focus your energy on that."

Gabe nodded. Held up a finger. "I'm, uh, gonna be sick."

Eric nodded. "Go ahead, and don't forget to rinse your mouth and sip some electro-water before you come back."

Gabe took off for the restroom.

Eric watched him go.

"You're being really hard on him," Jason remarked. "The hardest I've ever seen you be. Mind if I ask why?"

Eric nodded. "Because he's special," he said softly.

The rest of the entourage nodded in agreement. Eric looked around at Team Gabe; Jason Lee, Jeff Davis, Mark Adams and his adopted son, Logan Adams, Shelley and finally granddaughter Taylor, who'd insisted she be on his team against her own father. Hormones were definitely involved in that decision.

Ricky's team, actually Team Julian now, consisted of Joey Adams, Justin Lee, Jeffy and Cameron Wallace, young Eric Kino and JoJo Adams.

Gabriel Tanner was 17 years old, 6'0½", and 180 pounds, while Julian Washington was 23 years old, 6'2" and 195 pounds. At first glance, one might think a fully grown man was fighting a boy, advantage Julian, but not necessarily. Ricky had fought many an opponent who outweighed him, or had a longer reach. Eric was somewhat surprised when the opponent Ricky chose had those qualities, because Ricky would know that Eric knew how to counteract those qualities.

Then again, because Ricky would know, he'd know exactly what sequences Eric would use and what strategy he would pursue. Eric smiled. It was gonna be tough to out-think his son. Tough but delightful.

Gabe was *probably* faster, quicker, a huge bonus, *probably*, being the operative word. Eric needed film of the opponent. "Jason."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you can find me some video on this Julian guy?"

"Well, if anyone can, I can, either find some or make some new."

"Do it."

"Yes, sir."

Gabe came trotting back in. He approached Grandmaster Kino and bowed.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes, sir." He glanced at Taylor. It was pretty embarrassing to have to run and be sick with her there and fully aware of it.

"Focus," Eric snapped.

Gabe swallowed. "Yes, sir."

Eric looked around. "Mark? Would you care to oblige us on the mats?"

Mark smiled. "Happy to," he said as he bowed, stepped onto the mat and proceeded to kick Gabe's butt.

Eric coached, directed, redirected, and corrected, throughout. He had others join in the battle until at one point Gabe fought Mark, Logan, Jason and a somewhat gimpy Jeff at the same time. He finally lay flat on his back, gasping for breath, tears running from the outer corners of his eyes.

That was when Eric decided it was lunchtime.

Logan reached a hand down and pulled Gabe to his feet.

"Thanks," Gabe mumbled.

Logan chuckled. "It's gonna get easier. I promise."

Gabe had no response. He only raised his eyebrows to show he had doubts about that.

Lunch was catered and they only had to move to the large outer lobby where tables had been set up. Taylor hung back. "Grandma," she said softly.

Shelley turned. "Yes, baby girl?"

"I'm just wondering, so, what is the purpose of us girls even being here, if all we're ever gonna do is get water, get towels, and hand over equipment? I mean, are we ever gonna get to spar against Gabe?"

"Sweetie, all those little things that we've been taking care of are important and free up the men to help with the actual training. I wouldn't want to waste Gabe's time by asking him to fight down against me or you."

"Fight down?"

"Yeah, you know, fight someone who doesn't give him any competition."

"But you're a 3rd Dan. And I'm a black belt just like he is."

"Well, we may have the same skills as him, but we don't have the power."

"Grandma, isn't that like, sexist?"

Shelley put her hand on her granddaughter's shoulder. "Taylor, who in the world have you been listening to? No, it's not sexist. It's science. It's physiology. It has to do with male hormones and muscle mass and bone density. Men are naturally stronger than women. Not just a little bit, but a lot."

"What about female athletes who train a lot?"

"Even then, there are only a small percentage of strong, highly trained women who can match the strength and power of an average trained man. I've trained almost every day of my life since I was thirty-four. I'm a 3rd Dan, so is your brother. Do you think if he punched me with all of his power that he would hurt me?"

She nodded. "Yes, of course, but you're a lot older, no offense."

Shelley laughed. “None taken. Still, I guarantee you if I was only twenty, young Eric would still hurt me—badly. This difference between men and women, it doesn’t bother me. I love being a woman. I love being able to do all of the things I’m able to do. I love helping out in Gabe’s training *any* way that I can help, because I love him as if he were my own. I wouldn’t even think to let my ego interfere with his well-being by wasting some of his training time to spar against me. I’m happy to help him stretch, or to point out flaws in his form, or to merely wet a cloth for his head. That’s what’s so cool about being women. We get to do a whole lot of different things AND we get to have babies. And that is not sexist because if you were training, let’s say for the next MART or Kino Challenge, then I would put the same effort into helping you train. And because I’m so old, as you put it, I probably still wouldn’t waste your time sparring against you. As a matter of fact, when your granddad was training me, he had me fight up. I sparred regularly against your dad, Jason, Justin and Granddad. That’s why I won. Gabe needs to train up.”

“I get it,” Taylor said, frowning.

Shelley smiled at her. “Sweetie, I understand. It would be kind of fun for you to be able to spar with Gabe, in a playful kind of way. You like him. I get it. It’s hard not to like a guy like him. Sparring with him for you, would be sort of like couples who go dancing together. And he’s gonna be leaving in just a few days.”

Taylor looked down. “I guess you do understand.”

Shelley put her arm around her. “What if, as a warm up tomorrow, I suggest the two of you do forms together? The complete form. The Kino form.”

She smiled. “That would be cool.”

“Okay, then, you better brush up. We wouldn’t want him to show you up. And just maybe, you’ll show him up. However, keep in mind that if you do, he’ll probably end up having to do two hundred more pushups.”

Taylor giggled. “I’ll try hard to make that happen.”

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April 3rd, Wednesday Afternoon

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake was not happy. He’d just been told to stand down by Sheriff Tyson. He should’ve just gone by himself to find Brett Adderman without involving Uncle Chaz, because that’s how Ty found out his intentions. Jake had wanted to go see Brett and let him know in no uncertain terms, that if the guy goes near Laynah again, there will be consequences. He’d intended to give him a warning he couldn’t ignore, what his Marine buddies jokingly called a stern warning. You get a stern warning from a Marine and you will know without a doubt that you’ve been warned. But Ty had walked in on Jake’s conversation with Uncle Chaz and vetoed the excursion. Tyson was Chaz’ younger brother, still, he was the Sheriff and they would show him respect.

So they told Ty about Brett showing up at the Grill last night, armed and looking for trouble. Tyson said he was on his way to go and speak with both William and Brett Adderman and would issue a formal warning of his own.

Currently Jake walked the property of the Inn as he had many times when he

wanted to think. This time he was thinking about this thing, whatever it was, he had going with Laynah. The property was large, and included organic vegetable gardens, from which they fed the guests, orchards and a pecan grove, and at the very rear of the property, dense woods that ran into a creek about a hundred yards farther.

If you were facing the Inn, the large area of property to the right, held eight country cottages. Go, a little farther to the right, just past the cottages, and closer to the creek at the rear of the property, separated by the Inn's twelve-foot-tall black iron fence, was the Tanner home, a large estate. The Tanners purchased that property from the Inn. Beyond the Tanner property lay another two hundred and twenty acres. On the other side of the Tanner property was two hundred and twenty more acres that used to be part of the Winstead home, which was also now owned by the Inn. The home had been demolished. It held some bad mojo. Again, facing the Inn, to the left of it, was an apple and pear grove and farther down the pecan grove. Even farther to the left one would eventually come to the paved road and across that road, the Stewart Ranch.

Amazingly, the road that ran in front of the Inn was a dirt——or more accurately, gravel and dirt—road. They'd left it that way because the Stewarts ran cattle down that dirt road twice a year. They'd been doing that for about a hundred years. Also, that dirt road had sentimental value. Lisa Lewis, her name back before she met Chaz, had become caught in Chaz Stewart's cattle crossing, he rescued her, and that's how Uncle Chaz met Aunt Lisa on that very road.

Now, here was Jake, having feelings for their oldest child and he didn't know what to do about it. He thought maybe he shouldn't do anything about it, but that's what he did last time and it hurt her. She was at school at this minute and all he could think about was her coming home, getting her alone, and kissing her again. And again.

The testosterone was pumping. He knew that. And since he couldn't go kick Brett Adderman's butt, he could do the next best thing. He could go to his father's studio and work it out with his dad, Master John Appel. He headed there and by the time Jake arrived at the studio located on Main Street in "downtown" Pine Forest, just across from the old elementary school, a class was just about to begin. He walked in and twelve students all turned.

His father looked up, questioning.

"Hey Dad, mind if I join your class?" Jake asked.

John smiled. "Not at all. Class, for those of you who don't know, this is my son, Jacob. He's just back from being deployed. He's a second-degree black belt. He'll be an asset to our class."

They all gave a slight bow, then turned back to face front, no one daring to break protocol. Jake smiled at that. His father always commanded complete respect from his students.

Jake quickly changed clothes and his father directed him to the front line because of his rank. He went through the entire class, at times taking time to help a student with a certain movement here and there. There were a few young teen boys who were immediate fans, so Jake took time to encourage them. Near the end

of class it was time to spar.

Jake and his father watched and directed and coached. Of course, it turned into a little bit of a competition, Jake coaching one student, and John coaching the other. Jake was currently coaching a fifteen-year-old girl against a twenty-something-year-old woman whom his father was coaching. Jake spoke softly to the girl, telling her to fake low and move high. The girl smiled and nodded.

Jake watched as his coaching worked. His father nodded at him. Jake grinned.

This went on until each student had a turn to spar. Then one of the students suggested Jake spar someone. Jake shook his head.

"Why not?" one of the teen boys asked.

"Wouldn't be fair."

"You could spar your dad," another offered.

"Still wouldn't be fair," Jake quipped.

There was a rumble of laughter.

Jake looked at his dad, who had a glint of laughter in his eyes too. "Dad, I meant it wouldn't be fair to me."

John laughed. "I don't think that's what you meant at all. Regardless, why don't you and I have a go, just to give your old man a workout."

The class cheered and Jake was cornered. Sighing, he nodded and moved onto the mat. His father joined him. They bowed to each other.

Jake decided to get it over with and took the first swing. His father blocked and punched back. They went back and forth, punching, kicking, blocking, kicking. It went on for some time, neither one ever landing a solid hit. The class was murmuring in appreciation at first, but those sounds turned into outright cheering and applause by the end.

The men bowed to each other and to the class. John lined the class up, spoke to them about assignments and dismissed them.

They all immediately went to shake Jake's hand. He laughed and chatted with them until they finally all took their leave.

After everyone left John and Jake stood together, breathing hard.

"Any pointers, Dad?" Jake asked.

"A few. Want to hear them?"

"Absolutely."

Jake listened intently as his father, a 7th Dan, instructed him. They worked for another hour, sweat dripping, bodies tiring. It was just what Jake needed.

Finally, his father ended the session. "Well, Jake, your mom is gonna wonder where we are."

Jake nodded. "Ya think it would be okay if I go see if Laynah is home yet?"

"Okay with me, sure. Okay with your mom, probably. Okay with Laynah? Who knows."

Jake laughed. "Well, I haven't had a chance to tell you, we kind of came to an understanding."

John smiled. "You mean the understanding when you kissed her in the horse stable?"

"Uncle Chaz?"

John nodded. "You wanna talk about it?"

Jake shook his head. "Nothing really to say. I have feelings for her. She has them for me. That's about all we've acknowledged so far."

"Well, you know I'm here for you if you need to talk."

"I know."

"So, go find her. But before you do, I have a question for you. How would you like to fly out to Cali for a few days with me and Keegan?"

"Why? What's happening in Cali?"

"Gabe has gone out there and made an impression with the Kinos. They're having this mini competition, I think Keeg said they're actually calling it a mini-MART. Grandmaster Kino will do like a tactical training for Gabe for three days. Ricky will do the same for an opponent. Saturday will be a seven-round fight."

"Seven rounds? That's sick."

"Yep, and since Gabe was taught by me, I've been given honor, and feel like I should reciprocate that honor and go out there to support the event. Jason Lee has a jet heading to Cali, so, we'll leave tomorrow afternoon. That means we can watch Friday's training and Saturday's event, but we'll miss Sunday morning church, but will be home by Sunday afternoon. So, whaddya think? Are you in?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Great. Sounds like a fun time. I've gotta lock up here. See you at home?"

"Eventually."

Jake went into the men's dressing room, took a quick shower and headed out. He got on his bike and pulled his phone out, waited, and then smiled when Laynah picked up.

"Hey."

"Hey, Bugs. Can I see you?"

"Yes, I'm at home."

"Be right there."

"Okay."

"Oh, and wear pants."

She giggled. "Got it."

She was outside waiting when he pulled up. He handed her a helmet, she put it on, jumped on the bike behind him, wrapped her arms around him and he took off. She gave a slight squeal as they skidded a bit on the dirt road, but in no time they were on the blacktop. He gunned it.

He couldn't help but smile. It felt good to be on his bike, on a back road, the sun shining, and a beautiful girl wrapped around him. There was almost nothing missing except food. They came to a four-way stop and he turned left. He was hungry and this road led into town. He pulled into a drive-thru, ordered up some burgers and fries and stuffed them into the tank bag. As they pulled out, he couldn't help but notice the Camaro pulling in. He watched to see if they tried to follow him, but it appeared they didn't notice him. Not that the guy knew Jake drove a bike, but again, it's hard to miss Laynah's red hair blowing back behind her as they drove.

He headed to Wilson's Lake, hoping it wouldn't be too crowded. When he got there, though, there was definitely a crowd. Someone was having a party. He circled

around to the far side of the lake where it was quiet.

He pulled the food out of the tank bag along with two bottles of water, and handed it all to Laynah, then pulled a blanket out and spread it on the ground.

They sat. Jake said a quick blessing, and they dug into their food.

His mouth stuffed full, he swallowed and asked, "So, how was your class today?"

She shrugged, took a sip of the water bottle he'd handed to her. "It was boring. I'm pretty sure I'm gonna change my major."

"Really? To what?"

"I think I want to be a vet."

"Vet? You wanna join the military?"

She laughed, pushed her hair back out of her face. "Haha. A veterinarian."

His brow furrowed. "Isn't that what Heather Anderson is doing?"

"No, she's got a degree in animal husbandry, which has to do with managing and raising livestock."

"Got it. So, what do your parents have to say about you switching majors?"

"I know I surprised them, but they were somewhat supportive. I realize I've already cost them a good amount of money. But I'll figure out a way to pay them back."

"You really love animals, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I really do. But especially horses. Well, mostly horses."

He shrugged. "Well, instead of being a vet you could just be a stable hand. That won't cost them any more money."

"You're so funny tonight."

He smiled at her as he finished his fries and reached for hers. "Well, actually, I wasn't trying to be funny."

"You were serious?"

"Not really serious about you being a stable-hand, but you could do something more to do with just horses, like run your own stables, teach riding to kids, or train horses."

She frowned.

He shrugged. "But what do I know? Just offering alternatives."

She offered him her last few fries and started taking her shoes off.

He watched, fascinated with her every move. She folded up the legs of her jeans, stood, went to the edge of the lake and dipped her toes in the cool water.

She turned in a slow circle, closed her eyes, leaned her head back. Her hair blew behind her in the slight breeze. This girl, this girl whom he'd tried to ignore for years, was currently wreaking havoc on his system. It felt like his blood was rushing through his body, making him almost light-headed. He stood and went to her. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. His hand skimmed her face, his head bent and he kissed her.

"Aww Bugs, what am I gonna do about you?"

"That was good for a start," she said with a smile.

He laughed. "Don't promise what you're not willing to give."

She shrugged. "Backatcha."

She smiled sweetly, turning her body to place his back to the water. "So, tell me a little bit about the training you had to go through. Is it as bad as they show in the movies?"

"Much harder than they show in the movies, because it's hard to put personal, internal struggles on a piece of film."

She smiled sweetly. "So, I guess you think of yourself as pretty tough," she said as she gave him a hard shove.

But he was ready for her this time. He'd widened his stance, and merely used her forward motion to throw her over his hip. She hit the water with a giant splash.

He grinned at her and reached a hand out to help her up. "I win this time. How about the best two out of three?" he offered.

"Sure," she said as she allowed him to pull her from the water. When she had his hand firmly in her grip she jerked him forward.

But he didn't budge. He only laughed, kept hold of her hand, spun her around and shoved her into the lake face first this time. She turned over and sat up sputtering.

"Best three out of five?" he offered, extending his hand out to her again. "Cuz, like, I can do this all night."

She wrinkled up her nose in an adorable pout. "I concede," she said.

He helped her from the water and they went back to the blanket. He lifted the blanket up, shook it out, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"There. Better?"

She nodded.

"Mad?"

"No, I guess I had it coming to me."

"You really are different from other girls."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Most definitely."

They sat together on the ground.

"So, I have to leave town tomorrow for a few days."

She looked up with surprise in her eyes. "Already?"

"My dad and I are going with Uncle Keegan out to California to see Gabe fight in a martial arts tournament."

"Oh, that sounds like fun."

"It will be. *Kino Martial Arts* is hosting it and it's kind of a big deal. We're gonna stay with the Kinos."

"That's always a good time."

"So, would you like to come?"

"It would be fun, but I have another class on Friday and I don't have anyone to take care of the horses for me."

"Are you sure you can't miss the class? I mean, you're gonna drop out anyway."

"I'm not dropping out, just changing majors, and this class is already paid for and so I will finish it."

He nodded. "That's very responsible, I guess."

She smiled, turned to him, reached up around his neck and pulled him to her for

a kiss. She pushed him over, opened the blanket, and lay down on top of him.

"You're getting me all wet," he complained.

"That was the point," she giggled.

He laughed, but pushed her off him and stood up.

"Aw, come on, what's a little water?" she complained.

"I'm not worried about the water, but rolling around with you on the ground is forbidden."

"Forbidden by who?"

"Your father."

"Are you kidding me? What did he say?"

"He said exactly, 'no rolling around in the hay'."

"Well, this is not hay," she pointed out.

"Semantics," he quipped. He noticed her shiver. "Let me get you home so you can change clothes before you end up sick. The sun's going down and you're gonna be cold."

"I hate for the evening to be over already. I mean, we just got started."

"Well, we could go make popcorn at your house and talk."

She agreed. By the time they got back to her house her teeth were chattering from the air hitting her wet clothes as they drove on the bike.

They went inside through the front door. They found Laynah's family in the back den. Chaz was playing video games with Matt and Charlie, while Lisa and seven-year-old Aralyn were coloring pictures of butterflies and caterpillars. They all looked up when they came in.

"Little accident?" Chaz asked, taking note of his daughter's wet clothing and messy hair.

Laynah smirked and looked at Jake. "Why don't you tell them what happened while I go change." She ran off, giggling.

Jake, decidedly uncomfortable, tried to think fast but decided to stick with the truth. "She tried to push me in the lake and didn't succeed. I retaliated, and did."

"Ya don't push girls in the water," fourteen-year-old Charlie said. He shrugged. "At least that's what Dad says."

Jake chuckled. "Sorry, I guess I didn't get the memo."

Twelve-year-old Matthew waved his controller. "Wanna play some video games with us?"

"Um, well, I'd better... "

"We got *Call of Duty*," Matt prodded.

"We HAVE," Lisa corrected.

"Which one?" Jake asked.

"We got, I mean, we *have Black Ops*, and *Modern Warfare*," Charlie answered.

Jake shrugged. "Well, then, I guess it couldn't hurt to do a few minutes of *Modern Warfare*."

Chaz stood and offered Jake his controller. "Here, take my place."

Jake took the controller and the boys went off into a different world to kill bad guys.

Twenty minutes into the game Melaynah finally came back downstairs. Jake

looked up at her as she entered the room. She wore a pair of gray sweatpants and a faded navy blue Gordon College sweatshirt. Her hair was wet as if it'd just been washed. Her beautiful face freshly scrubbed. Why, he wondered, dressed like that, did she look so sexy? He blew out a breath.

"Jake, pay attention," Matt ordered.

"Oh, sorry."

Lisa stood, leaving her husband to finish the current picture they had been coloring. "Everyone want some popcorn?"

"Yes," the boys said quickly. "And some ice cream," they added.

Laynah laughed. "Want some help, Mom?"

"Sure, honey."

"So, why didn't you guys go to church tonight?" Laynah asked as she pulled out a large pot with a lid.

"Aralyn is sick. I think she has a little cold. Why? Were you hoping you and Jake would have the house to yourselves?"

Laynah smiled, shrugged. "Maybe. We haven't really had a chance to talk about..."

Lisa busily spooned some organic coconut oil into the pot, put it on the burner, and threw two corn kernels into the oil. When Laynah didn't go on, she turned. "About what?"

Laynah sighed. "About us, I guess. The only thing we know so far is I had a crush on him, and he actually once had a crush on me."

"All past tense," Lisa said.

"Exactly."

"And you presently have feelings for him, strong feelings?" Lisa asked.

Laynah nodded, saying nothing else as she scooped ice cream into bowls and laid spoons out on the counter.

The two kernels popped, one shooting out and right at Laynah. She opened her mouth and tried to catch it, but missed. Lisa poured kernels into the pot, just enough to cover the bottom, put the lid on and started to slide the pot back and forth on the burner, the old-fashioned way. The corn started popping.

The popping corn made it too loud to talk so Laynah pulled whipped cream and chocolate sauce out of the refrigerator and set them on the counter next to the spoons.

Lisa picked up the pot, shook the popcorn out into a giant bowl, sprinkled sea salt and dill over it, then turned to her daughter. "We'll try to eat and retire early and get out of your way. It's gonna be okay, honey."

"Thanks, Mom. I think it will be more than okay. I mean, he's actually here, right here in my home, with me, sort of," she added.

"Well, what soldier could turn down *Call of Duty*, right?"

Laynah grinned. "He's not a soldier. He's a Marine."

Lisa smiled. "My bad." She lifted the bowl and carried it into the den. "Controllers down," she ordered. "No oily fingers on the games."

Everyone immediately complied.

"Ice cream has already been put into the bowls. Just go in and add what you

want on it," Laynah directed.

There was a mad scramble. The boys ran into the kitchen. Jake put his controller down and turned to take a handful of popcorn. Grams had taught everyone how to make the best popcorn. Organic everything. Non-GMO. No vegetable or seed oils. The dill was one of his favorites, but there was about any flavor you could think of from caramel to pizza. Good stuff.

Laynah sat down on the sofa next to Jake and stuffed some popcorn in her mouth. He smiled at her. "Hey."

"Hey."

"You smell really good."

"Really? It's called soap and shampoo. You should try it sometimes."

He laughed. Lifted his arm, sniffed. "Am I smelly?"

"Not in a bad way. You smell like," she shrugged, "like a man, I guess."

His eyes darkened. She was doing it again. Gettin' to him. Here she sits, dressed about as casually as a girl could dress, no makeup, hair in wet tendrils down her back, feet bare, and he could eat her alive. He looked up to see her little seven-year-old replica walk up to him, and smile sweetly.

"Hi, Aralyn," he said softly.

She sniffed, wiped her nose on the back of her hand, held out a folded paper to him. "I made this for you."

He wiped his fingers on his jeans, took the paper and slowly unfolded it. "Wow," he said softly. "I think this is the prettiest picture anyone has ever given me! Look at that butterfly. Wow, have you ever seen a butterfly like that?"

Aralyn shook her head and then smiled. "No, but when you color you can make up anything you want."

"I see. So, there's purple, and pink, and green," he said pointing at the different colors. "Are those some of your favorite colors?"

"Yep."

He folded the paper back the way it was. "I'm gonna keep this forever," he said solemnly.

Aralyn grinned. "I'm gonna make you another one."

"Oh. Okay."

"Actually," Lisa said. "You're gonna either eat some popcorn or some ice cream and then get yourself to bed."

Aralyn made a face.

"No arguments. You have a cold and you need to rest."

"Say, 'yes, ma'am'," Chaz suddenly put in.

Aralyn frowned. "Yes, ma'am," she muttered and put a handful of popcorn in her mouth.

Jake had to keep from laughing.

Laynah waited impatiently for her family to wind down and finally go upstairs.

Lisa had tried to stay and clean up the mess in the kitchen, but Laynah promised to take care of it. Once the fam was gone, Laynah and Jake gathered the empty ice cream bowls and the popcorn and went into the kitchen. Laynah quickly rinsed everything off and put it in the dishwasher. She turned in time to see Jake turn up

the chocolate and squirt some into his mouth.

"What are you doing?" she chided.

He grinned. "What does it look like?" He did it again, and then, keeping the chocolate in his mouth, took the whipped cream and squirted it into his mouth. Laynah laughed. Jake swallowed the concoction. "Want some?"

She shrugged. "Sure. Who could turn down chocolate and whipped cream?"

He wiggled his finger at her. "Come here."

"Hmm, I don't think I trust you."

"I promise I won't make a mess, I don't want to have to wait another whole hour while you go take another shower."

"I did NOT take a whole hour."

He chuckled at her indignation. "Whatever. Come here."

She came closer.

"Tilt your head back and open your mouth."

She did, and he realized he'd made a mistake. He had to draw a deep breath to resist the urge to kiss her. He squirted the chocolate in her mouth, then quickly added the whipped cream, getting a little on her cheek. "Oops, sorry, I swear that was an accident."

She giggled, almost making the whole mess come out of her mouth. She quickly swallowed before that happened, then grabbed a paper towel and wiped her face off.

She turned abruptly, wiped down the countertops, put away the chocolate and whipped cream, took his hand, turned off the light and led him back to the den. They sat on the sofa, turning slightly toward each other so they could talk.

"It's been a fun night," she said.

He nodded. "Yeah it has. I wish we could do it every night."

She wasn't sure what to think about that. What did he mean by that?

"I mean," he said as if he'd read her mind, "I really like you, Laynah."

"Like me?"

He smiled at her. She didn't mess around. She liked getting right to it. That didn't bother him a bit. He didn't have a lot of time.

"Well, it's more than just 'like.'" He touched her cheek softly. "You are an amazing girl, Bugs. Everything you do gets to me. I can't seem to get you out of my mind. Which is maybe what I don't want to feel since I *will* be going away again. But at the risk of missing you when I have to leave, I want to spend as much time with you as possible until then."

She nodded her head. "I feel the same way, Jake. I think about you all the time. You're the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning, and the last thing at night. Well, I mean, except for God."

He smiled and nodded. "And that's how it should be."

"I'm glad you think that, because to me, there is nothing more attractive than a man with a strong faith."

"And there is nothing more beautiful than a woman who thinks that," Jake quipped.

He put his arm around her. "Bugs—I think I'm falling for you."

She sniffed. He pulled away, lifted her chin. “Does that upset you?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s just that I’ve waited so long to hear you say that. I prayed about it, I dreamed about it, I’d gotten to where I thought it would never happen, and here you are saying the most beautiful words in the world to me.”

He smiled at her confession. “So, that means I can safely say that you feel the same way?”

“No, I don’t feel the same way,” she said. “I’m not maybe falling for you. I fell a long time ago. I don’t think it. I know it.”

He sighed. “Your honesty and forthrightness, it is so, I don’t know, refreshing. I mean, you don’t play any games. You just tell it like it is. I love that.”

She smiled at him using that word. Love. He hadn’t said he loved *her,* but for now it was close enough. She was about to ask him when he was gonna kiss her, but didn’t get a chance.

He lifted her face in both of his large, strong hands. His rough, lethal hands that were at this moment, gentle and loving. He brushed his lips softly over hers before he finally kissed her, deeply and passionately. When he pulled away he smacked his lips together. “You taste like whipped cream.”

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April 3rd Wednesday Afternoon

Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

Gabe’s body felt slightly renewed after the nutritious lunch he consumed. They worked on his kicks for almost three hours, took a break, consumed more food and electro-water, and then worked on the memorization of combination sequences and finally, near the end of the day, he sparred again.

Grandmaster Kino explained that he knew he was exhausted, and he wanted Gabe to reach down somewhere deep inside himself and come up with the reserves to spar. He was told to pretend the lives of his family depended on whether he was able to land a punch on Jason, Mark and Logan at least one time. He did what he had to do, though they didn’t make it easy on him. He finally hit Mark and Logan, and when at last, he landed a punch against Jason, it was as if his body knew that was it. He fell flat on his back and lay there gasping for air.

Logan leaned over him. “You did it. You saved your family.”

Mark also peered down at him. “That was truly awesome, Gabe. Your sweet mother will be forever grateful.”

Gabe didn’t answer, mostly because he couldn’t.

Grandmaster Kino spoke softly. “Let’s end this first day of training the way we began it, please. Someone help Gabe to his knees.”

Jason reached down for him. “Come on, son, you did well.”

Gabe struggled to his knees. Shelley was asked to pray.

They all knelt in a circle as Shelley asked God to heal Gabe, to bless their endeavor, to guide them so that their impromptu tournament would bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have ears to hear.

When she finished they all headed back to the Kino house. They intended to implement a technique they’d used waaay back before Shelley fought in the MART. The *Plan of Positive Input*. They would all be there together at the house as a team.

Some would even spend the night, namely Logan and Taylor. They would all build light around Gabe with only positive thoughts and words. Complete positivity. No lapses.

At the house Gabe showered and came to the dinner table. He was starving. The blessing was said and he ate heartily. When Jason's phone went off he apologized. Being the head of Ameritech, he was always on call so they were used to his phone buzzing. As he glanced at the phone, he smiled.

"This is Jason. Yep. Fantastic. I'll have Mina send you a flight schedule. You bet. See you tomorrow."

He smiled at Gabriel. "So Gabe, your dad, Master Appel, and Jake Appel will be arriving tomorrow afternoon."

Gabe's face lit up. "They're coming? That's awesome. Thank you so much, Master Lee," he said softly and slowly.

Eric smiled. Gabriel Tanner always seemed to know when it was time to use someone's title as a show of respect. He was a special kid indeed. However, the lack of enthusiasm in his response told Eric the young man was barely hanging on.

"Gabe," Eric began. "After dinner we need some mind work in my study. Then I think you need to hit the bed."

"You won't get an argument from me about that," Gabe admitted.

"I bet," Logan said. "You did awesome today, Gabe. I think you're my new hero."

"Hear, hear," Mark agreed.

They all quickly jumped on the bandwagon.

"For the rest of you," Eric began, "we have a meeting with the opposing team at this table in an hour. Before that, please be ready for a family prayer session before Gabe goes to bed."

"Yes, sir," they all responded.

Fifteen minutes later Gabe sat in the comfortable leather chair in front of Grandmaster Kino's large desk.

"I'm pleased with your work today, Gabe. You're being a real trooper."

"Thank you, sir."

"So, tell me how you're feeling about things."

Gabe shook his head and then shrugged. "I guess everything is okay."

Eric smiled. "Well, your body language tells me differently. Before you answered, you shook your head, which is a negative response. So, let's talk about your honest feelings. Do you think that maybe you're a little scared?"

Gabe thought. "Maybe."

"What do you think frightens you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Are you afraid of getting hit?"

"Oh, no, sir. I get hit all the time in football. Either that or I'm hitting someone. Contact doesn't scare me."

Eric nodded. "That's good. Are you afraid of failure?"

"Well, sure. I mean, I don't want to fail. I hate to fail."

"Why? What will happen if you fail?"

Gabe thought a minute. “Nothing will *happen*. My family, and you I imagine, and everyone else, will probably tell me I did a good job, fought a good battle and that will be that.”

“We will, as long as you give it your all.”

“I *will* do that. Always.”

“I believe you. So, let’s go back to what frightens you. Maybe it’s the scale of the event itself, like all the people who will be watching.”

“Could be, but I play football in front of thousands of people. It doesn’t really bother me. Actually kind of jacks me up. The bigger the crowd, the better.”

Eric chuckled. “Good to hear that.”

“I hope I don’t disappoint you,” Gabe suddenly said.

Eric smiled. “Ah, there we have it. You already said you would give it your all, so there’s no danger of that.”

“But, what if my mind doesn’t work fast enough? Like, what if I freeze and can’t think of what to do next, or what sequence to use, know what I mean?”

“I do. That’s *my* purpose in being by your side. I guarantee you *my* mind won’t freeze. Just listen to me and trust me. Like you told Taylor on Monday to trust *you* at the shooting range. She was afraid, but you had complete control over the situation, right?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

Eric nodded. “And so do I. I’ve been doing this a long time. And let me remind you of something. In the little class tourney we held yesterday morning, no one was coaching you. You did that all on your own.”

Gabe considered that and nodded. His eyes actually drifted closed for a second.

“I think that’s enough for tonight. Will you join us in family prayer?”

“Yes, sir,” he said yawning.

They headed out to the living room where Team Gabe waited. Jeff was called on to pray and he proceeded to bless Gabe with healing, to express gratitude for the opportunity taking place to be a light to the world, and to ask for quickness of mind and body for them all, but especially for Gabe. He did it all in Jesus’ name. The family was dismissed until Ricky and the rest of Team Julian arrived for their meeting.

Gabe said “good night,” and slowly made his way upstairs. Taylor watched him go, then decided to go upstairs herself.

She went to his door and knocked softly.

Gabe opened the door. When he saw her standing there, his heart skipped a beat. He smiled his surprise. “Hi!”

“Hey. I, uh, I just wanted you to know that I think you’re doing an awesome job.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to let your grandfather down.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s impossible, as long as you do the best you can do.”

He laughed. “I’ve been hearing that a lot lately.”

“Well, I just wanted to tell you that. So, good night.” She offered her hand to shake.

But instead he took it, raised it to his lips and kissed her fingers. “Thanks for

being there, ya know, to help out and stuff. It means a lot."

Her mouth opened, but she couldn't speak for a second. Finally, she smiled. "My pleasure." She turned, her heart racing, and walked back downstairs.

Gabe's heart was also racing, and his body too. So much so, that he thought he might have trouble falling asleep. However, the exhaustion was too much, even battling against teenage hormones, and in only minutes he was sound asleep.

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They sat at the giant dining room table. Eric at the head, Ricky opposite him at the other end. To Eric's right were Shelley, Mark, Logan, Taylor, Jason and Jeff. Team Gabe. To Ricky's right sat Justin, Jeffy, Cam, Joey, young Eric and JoJo. Team Julian. Bree sat to Ricky's left.

Justin first gave a report on the venue. The event would be held at the *Rosewood Sports Arena*, the same place the first Kino Challenge had been held. A place now owned by *Kino Martial Arts*. Tickets were already on sale. Word of mouth traveled quickly through the Kino Studios, and other martial arts studios run by former students of Eric. A social media blast had already almost completely sold out the event.

Bree spoke next. "We thought at first that we would simply go live through some social media influencers, but, guess what—ESPN has decided to pick up the event! We will still allow the social media all-access. We offered ringside seats at an exorbitant price and they have been bought up by some celebs, politicians, and the like. My assistant, Jenny, has been amazing in quickly setting up some pre-event entertainment and has hired *Event Foods* for concessions. By the way, the event has officially been named *Kino Mini-MART*."

"Bree, you are something else," Ricky said, as he reached out and squeezed his wife's hand.

"That's what he said," she responded with a grin, causing a low rumble of laughter from the others except Taylor.

"Mom!" Taylor admonished, which only caused more laughter.

Ricky pressed on. "Dad, just a thought; the quick response to this event makes me think it shouldn't be just a one-time thing. The number of students that wanted to be chosen as Gabe's opponent was well over a hundred, and there would've been more than that had more known about it. Think of all of our schools in every state, even in every country. We could have regional events, and then bring the winners here for a national event. If we can throw this one together in a few days' time, it shouldn't be too hard. Especially if we hire someone to handle all the details. Whaddya think?"

Eric nodded. "I think it's inspired. I think this thing we felt inclined to do is not just a fluke. I think God is leading us and this little event is gonna be more important than we know."

"I agree. I'm really feelin' it. So, once this first one is in the books, let's all meet and brainstorm about how we want to proceed."

"I look forward to it," Eric said.

They went on to discuss more arrangements for the current Mini-MART for a while, and finally, Eric asked, "So, how'd your first day of training go with Julian?"

Ricky grinned. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

But it was the looks on the faces of the other team members on Ricky’s right that Eric was most interested in. It wasn’t all confidence. A few chewing on their lips. A few brows furrowed.

“How’d yours go?” Ricky countered.

Eric smiled. “Brilliantly.”

Everyone at the table was busy eyeing everyone else.

It was Taylor who spoke. “It’s not really fair.”

“Why not munchkin?” Ricky asked his daughter.

“Because you guys have seen Gabe fight.”

Ricky grinned. Shrugged. “Well, sometimes life isn’t fair. You have to compensate for that.”

“But we don’t have any video of your guy fighting.”

Ricky laughed. “That’s because there is none.”

Now Jason laughed. “Oh, there is now.”

Ricky looked up at his father, whose eyes were dancing in merriment.

“I hope having no video was not the reason you chose the opponent you did,” Eric said.

“Of course not. It was only a plus.” Ricky shrugged. “Doesn’t matter either way. I love Gabe, but Julian is gonna kill him.”

Eric smiled. “This meeting is adjourned.”

They rose, bowed to each other and those who were leaving for the night took their leave.

Taylor and Logan went up to their rooms. Eric and Jason retired to Eric’s study to watch film. Shelley tidied up and went to bed. She was happy when only an hour later, Eric tiptoed into the room.

When he finally climbed into bed behind her, she turned to him and cuddled close. “I remember when you were training me for the MART, how I was the one asleep while you and everyone else took care of business.”

“And?”

“And, it’s just cool to see it from your point of view. Gabe’s been asleep for hours and you’re just coming to bed, and I have a feeling you’ll be the first one up in the morning.”

“Well, I can’t ask Gabe to give his all if I don’t do the same. He’s depending on me to bring him through this thing and I intend to.”

Shelley put her hand on her husband’s face. “Every day I don’t think I could love you more than I already do, and then you say something like that, and I fall for you all over again.”

He smiled. “And then *you* say something like that and I fall again too.” He kissed her softly. “Good night, my love.”

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Ecclesiastes 9:10

“Whatever your hand finds to do,
do it with all your might,
for in the realm of the dead,

where you are going,
there is neither working nor planning
nor knowledge nor wisdom."

Chapter Seven

April 4th Early Morning Thursday
Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Someone wanna tell me what's going on here?"

Jake would have jumped to his feet, but he couldn't because Laynah's body was sprawled across his.

Chaz stood in the doorway of the den, his hands on his hips. He didn't say another word, only waited patiently.

Jake swallowed hard and gently shook Laynah. She stirred. "Bugs, get up," he said.

"Hmm?" She smiled up at him. He nodded toward her father. She looked over her shoulder. "Daddy!" She jumped off the sofa, taking the blanket they'd pulled over themselves the night before with her. She stood there, smoothing her hair, straightening her clothing. Not that it needed straightening.

Jake rose, started pulling his shoes on.

"Daddy, it's not how it seems."

"How does it seem?" Chaz asked.

"I mean, it looks like we slept together."

"And?"

"Well, I mean, we did sleep together, but nothing happened. Really. You have to believe me. We wouldn't do that, not here on the sofa."

"Um, not anywhere," Jake added quickly.

Chaz cut his eyes to Jake. "I'll deal with you in a minute."

Jake huffed out a breath. Nodded.

"Daddy, we just talked for so long, next thing we knew we'd fallen asleep. Jake woke up and started to go home, but it was like three in the morning and he didn't want to disturb his parents or guests at the Inn if he went home at three in the morning. So, he just stayed."

"And you, being a great hostess, couldn't find your way up to your own room? You had to stay down here and sleep all over him?"

"I wasn't all over him, Dad," she said, her temper beginning to take hold. "We were sort of sitting together and then we fell asleep and he laid down and I laid next to him, that's all. It's no big deal."

Chaz shook his head at her. "Melaynah, are you that innocent? Why don't you ask Jake if it was a big deal."

Jake's eyes opened wide and his lips pressed tightly together. Laynah looked at him for the answer to her father's question, but he looked down. It had been heaven sleeping next to her, her body all cuddled up against him. He knew good and well

he should've gone home. And it was definitely a big deal because he'd been considering the consummation of their relationship half the night.

"Well, you're no help," she muttered when he didn't say anything.

"May I remind you, young lady, that you have young brothers living in this house and you need to set an example for them." He sighed. "Now, it's already sunrise. Do you intend to go take care of the horses?"

She looked down. "Yes, sir."

"Then do it."

She looked over at Jake, moved toward him, pressed her mouth to his. "Good morning," she said softly. "Have a safe flight."

He smiled at her. "Thanks, Bugs."

She turned to go upstairs to get dressed. Jake watched her leave, his eyes wandering over her. Chaz cleared his throat and Jake jerked his head to attention.

"Got anything to say for yourself?" Chaz asked.

He sighed. "Don't really know what to say, sir. You're right, we should have considered the boys, and I should've gone home, even at three in the morning. It might have disturbed my parents or the guests, but I should have gone. I just couldn't make myself do it."

"Why not? Are you a grown man, or not?"

He rolled his eyes. "I thought I was, but I'm beginning to wonder about that. I guess I didn't leave because I can't stand to be away from her."

Chaz didn't speak, only stood there waiting for him to go on.

Jake looked toward the steps then back to Chaz. "I guess what I'm saying is, Uncle Chaz, I think I'm in love with your daughter."

Chaz rubbed his hand over his face. "Well of course you are. Any idiot can see that. But I know I told you no rolling around in the hay."

Jake smiled and motioned to the couch. "This isn't hay."

"Ha, very funny. Look, son, I really hope you two work things out. I can't think of a better man to have in my daughter's life. And you're both grown and can make your own decisions. Just remember, there are consequences to every decision. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

Jake's phone went off and he scooped it up off the coffee table. "Hey, Mom. Yes, I'm okay. Sorry. Yes, ma'am. I'm uh, at the Stewarts'. Yes, ma'am. Sorry. I was talking to Laynah and we fell asleep. Okay. Tell Dad I'm on the way. Five minutes. Bye."

He looked back up at his Uncle Chaz. "I, uh, gotta go." He patted his pocket to make sure his keys were still there. Reached up under the sofa and pulled out his firearm, clipped the holster inside his jeans. Held his hand out to Chaz. "Sorry, Uncle Chaz. I'll do better. I really gotta go before my father blows."

Chaz nodded. "Get outta here. And, Jake, have a safe flight."

"Thank you, sir."

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April 4th Thursday Morning
Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

Gabe was surprised when Grandmaster Kino asked him to do all forms, from white-belt to black-belt as one long series. It was actually quite a feat. The forms were custom Kino, taken from different styles. Master Appel had taught this form in his classes, but it'd been a while. Gabe hadn't trained consistently lately because of football and baseball at school taking up all his time. Gabe's mind scrambled. For a second he couldn't even think of the first movement.

"Since you're not used to this exercise, Taylor will do them with you. Just follow her," Grandmaster Kino instructed.

Gabe drew a deep breath and nodded. He looked at Taylor. Her long dark hair was up in a ponytail. She wore a plain white uniform, her black belt wrapped around her perfect little waist. Her cheeks were a little pink, he wasn't sure if from embarrassment or excitement. Her feet were bare. She moved up to his side and then took one step forward, so that he could see her.

Eric nodded. "Begin."

They worked together perfectly. Each movement precise, fluid, yet strong. Each foot was placed correctly, each hand exact, each block, punch or kick powerful. It was an exquisite show of the beauty of the art. Only at one point did Gabe forget, for just a second, what was coming next. Taylor stopped. Showed what he missed, and then they began from there. When they finished, everyone nodded in approval, it had been a beautiful dance.

"Well done," Eric said. "Now give me two hundred pushups."

Gabe didn't even question it. He knew why. He spoke a quiet, "Yes, sir," drew a breath and began.

Taylor smiled at her grandmother. Shelley winked at her.

By the time Gabe finished his punishment for forgetting a simple form, he was breathing hard again.

Logan felt bad for him. The rest knew that the harder Eric was on Gabe, the better he would be on Saturday.

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April 4th Thursday Morning

Kino Martial Arts, Laguna, California

Ricky shook his head and moved to correct the kick Julian had just placed. "Kick the bag again," he ordered.

Julian kicked again and it made a soft thunking sound.

Ricky shook his head again. "By turning off your back foot you lost all your power. This kick could take your opponent out in one connection if you shift your weight to the front leg." He demonstrated and kicked the bag. It made a loud, reverberating whack. "Now, go again."

"Yes, sir," Julian murmured under his breath, not because he was being disrespectful but because he couldn't breathe.

Jeffy stepped up and whispered something to her brother and Ricky nodded and looked closely at Julian. "Julian, are you dizzy?"

Julian looked from Jeffy to Ricky. He knew, as did everyone who was enrolled with *Kino Martial Arts*, that Jeffy Kino, whose real name was June Flower, was psychic. She didn't even have to touch you to know what you were feeling,

physically or emotionally. And honesty was a big deal to the Kinos and they'd know he was lying if he denied being dizzy. "Um, yes, sir, a little bit," he admitted, hoping it didn't make him seem weak.

"Take a break. Be back in ten. When we get back I want you to use the sequences we've been working on to spar against Cam, then young Eric, then Joey, so be running them through your head while you rest."

Julian bowed. "Yes, sir."

"Whaddya think?" Ricky asked the others after Julian left.

"I think it's gonna be a tough match," Joey said.

"I think he has a good chance," young Eric said.

"He's definitely powerful," Cam Wallace said. "If he can move fast enough to connect, he's got a good chance."

"JoJo?"

JoJo grimaced. "To be honest, I think he's moving slow. Uncle Rick, you know good and well that speed is how you were able to beat a lot of guys that were bigger than you and stronger than you."

Ricky nodded, as did the others. "Jeffy?" Ricky asked.

"Physically I can't say anything different than what you guys have said. Mentally, I think he needs some work. I think he's timid, or maybe afraid of messing up." She pointed to her head. "That's what I'm seeing. He doesn't want to disappoint you. He's extremely grateful for you selecting him, and he's worried you might regret the decision."

Ricky nodded. Julian Washington was a good guy. Humble, teachable, hard worker. He'd have to have a counseling session with him at the house tonight. Ricky looked up. "And Justin," Ricky said. "We haven't heard from you."

Justin shook his head. "What else is there to say?"

Ricky smiled. "I don't want you to tell me how you think Julian's doing. Tell me how I'm doing. You've worked with my father longer than anyone. What am I missing?"

They all smiled in appreciation of Ricky's humility. He'd always said he could never fill his father's shoes.

"Ricky," Justin began, "I've watched you closely these past two days. At times I've had to remind myself that it wasn't your dad standing there giving direction. You say what he says, you pick up on the same mistakes, you are almost a carbon copy in teaching skills, the only thing I see different is maybe your confidence level in this task. If you could see yourself through my eyes, or probably through the eyes of everyone here, then you wouldn't lack any confidence. I'm proud of you, Rick. I know your father, if he were a fly on the wall watching you, he, too, would be so proud of you."

"Huh," Joey said. "Knowing Jason, he probably IS a fly on the wall."

Everyone laughed.

"Take heart, Ricky," Justin said. "Beating your father is gonna be difficult for you, but him beating you is gonna be difficult for him."

Ricky frowned. He wasn't sure that he liked the sound of that.

Young Eric approached. "Ya see, Dad, that's what I was talking about the other

day. My confidence stems from yours, and yours stems from YOUR father. It's a strange feeling to think of the younger becoming stronger."

"When did you become so wise?"

He laughed, shrugged. "When did you?"

Jeffy looked over at the two of them, her eyes welling with tears.

Cam put his arm around her. "Wanna let me in on it, my love?"

She sighed. "Yes, very soon." She rubbed her hand over her abdomen. "But not right now."

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April 4th Thursday Afternoon

Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

Eyebrows raised, Grandmaster Kino nodded his head. "That was perfect. Good job, Gabriel."

Gabe had his hands on his knees, he was breathing hard, but at least he was still standing. He smiled at the compliment. It was high praise coming from Grandmaster Kino who would only say something was perfect if he thought it was. He glanced over at Taylor who was smiling admiringly at him. Gabe smiled back.

Yesterday Logan had told him it would get easier, and maybe it was, because he hadn't collapsed on the floor at all today. Oh, he was tired. Exhausted. Yet he was feeling a second wind. Things were coming to him faster, more naturally, instinctively, and muscle memory was already happening.

They'd worked hard all day. He'd been informed that his father and neighbors had just touched down and they would be at the house by the time Gabe arrived.

The last part of this day would be spent sparring against one of the most lethal men in the world, Jason Lee, and also against Mark Adams and his son Logan, who was a nineteen-year-old 3rd Dan. Gabe's focus was to be speed. Quick hands, quick feet, quick blocks. He worked hard and well against them all. He was getting to failure though, the place where his body refused to do what it was told. Thank goodness Grandmaster Kino called the day, had them gather and pray and head home.

By the time they arrived at the house, sure enough, his father was there. Keegan gathered him into a giant bear hug and lifted him off the floor. Gabe suddenly felt very emotional and hugged his father very hard. He'd only been gone from home six days, so why did it feel like it'd been forever? It felt like so much had happened.

Keegan put him down and ruffled his hair. "I'm proud of you, son."

Gabe smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

Keegan frowned. "You look tired."

"I am." He thought about explaining to his father about how rough the past few days had been, but was too tired to even try.

"Gabe!" Jake called as he came down the stairs from putting his luggage in a room. He also gave him a giant hug, set him down and told him how excited he was for him, but then pushed him away. "Man, you are smelly."

Gabe nodded. "I'm sure."

Master Appel then emerged from the kitchen. Stopped. Gabe bowed to him. John returned the honor. "I'm so proud of you, Gabe."

"Thank you, sir."

Eric stepped in, shook hands with everyone. "Thank you for trusting me with your son, and your student. As you can probably tell, he's exhausted and depleted. He probably wants to go take a shower and eat. Please make yourselves at home, while we get dinner on the table."

"Can we help with anything?" Jake asked Shelley.

"We're having the meals catered during this time that we're all off torturing Gabe, so there's not much to do, but you can come help me get some plates and utensils set out."

While Shelley, Jake, and Taylor worked in the kitchen, Mark and Jeff said their hellos and goodbyes and took their leave to go be with their own families. Jason touched base with Keegan over some pending clients at Ameritech and John and Eric spoke about Gabe's training. Eric told John they had a highlight video of Gabe's training over the past two days and that he and Keegan were welcome to see it. Actually, he encouraged them to watch it so they could know and understand what the young man had been through in forty-eight hours.

Twenty minutes later, Gabe came down the stairs, freshly scrubbed and more relaxed. He went to the kitchen and immediately spotted Taylor reaching up into a cabinet for something. He moved up behind her, reached over her head and lifted a large platter down for her.

She turned and smiled up at him. He smiled down at her.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi."

"Thanks for your help with forms today. You were amazing."

"You were too." She sniffed. "You smell good."

He smiled bigger. "Thanks."

Logan laughed. "You two wanna stop the chit chat and let's have dinner?"

"Wow, give a guy a break," Jake put in.

"No breaks yet," John Appel added. "Wait until after Saturday."

They all went to the table. John was asked to bless the food. He did and they dug in.

Gabe felt like he couldn't get the food into his mouth fast enough. He looked up to see his father watching him. He smiled, looked around. It seemed everyone was looking at him. "Uh, I got hair sticking up or something?"

Eric smiled. "It appears you are what's on everyone's mind."

"Well, I don't like it. Think about someone else."

Everyone laughed. Gabe sighed. Then he felt Taylor's hand slip into his. He glanced down at her. Gave her hand a squeeze, leaned toward her. "Thanks for the support," he whispered.

Eric cleared his throat. "Gabe, after dinner we'll do some mind work and then you can visit a few minutes with your family, and then you'd better hit the bed."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said.

Only twenty minutes later Gabe sat in the hot seat across from Grandmaster Kino.

"How are you feeling?"

Gabe nodded. “I think I’m okay.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that you were quite emotional when you saw your father.”

Gabe’s eyebrows arched. “Oh, you saw that?”

Eric shrugged. “I’m very focused on you right now. On everything you do, everything you say. At this moment in time, you are MY student and I take that responsibility very seriously. So, I want to talk about that emotional response to your father.”

Gabe looked down. “I’m not sure what that was about. He hugged me and I suddenly felt like crying like some two-year-old kid. I mean, I’ve only been away from home six days. I’ve been gone a lot longer than that at summer camp and football camp.”

“The relationship between a father and son is indeed, special,” Eric said softly. “The bond between the two of you is strong.”

Gabe nodded.

“It’s been a long, difficult week for you. A lot has happened. Jeff gets called away. You inherit a huge responsibility. Mickey gets lost. Jeff gets shot. Then you come here and put on that amazing display at the shooting range, a big high. The next day you blow us all away at the class sparring competition after you’d already given your all during class. The next two days are, I’m gonna guess, some of the hardest training days you have ever been through. A lot has happened.”

“Yes, sir. But that stuff shouldn’t make me blubber like some baby.”

“Well, don’t exaggerate. You weren’t blubbering.”

“Yeah, only because I held it in. I sure felt like blubbering. I’m surprised that you noticed.”

“I only picked up on it because, like I said, I’m very focused on you.” He sat quietly a moment. “Gabe, have you ever heard the stories of how men come home from serving in the military, and they don’t really want to talk about the things they’ve seen, or especially, the things they’ve done?”

“Yes, sir. As you know, my father is a Marine, Special forces. He served in Afghanistan and Iraq. He’s that way.”

Eric nodded. “Even though they don’t really want to talk about their experiences, they WILL talk about it with fellow military. There’s a reason for that. They know outsiders could never understand what they’ve been through. Outsiders just don’t get it. And it’s too hard to try to explain it to them. But fellow soldiers, or in your father’s case, fellow Marines, they DO get it. They’ve been through the difficult training, they’ve fought the personal battles, they’ve seen the horror. This week, you haven’t really seen horrors, but you’ve been through a difficult time, fought some deep personal battles. And you need your father to not only know what you’ve been through, but to also know what you’ve accomplished.”

Gabe looked up, tears forming in his eyes.

“Your father has a commanding presence and you need him to understand. That’s why at this moment he’s watching video highlights of your training from these past two days. He’s seeing not only the good parts but the hard parts, the failures and successes. The victories and the falling flat on your back in utter

exhaustion."

The look of surprise first and then gratitude on Gabe's face was satisfying. Eric smiled. "You know, you're a lot like your dad."

"Yes, sir, I've been told that a lot."

"Not just physically. Your dad is a serious guy, no nonsense. Very– intense. You're like that, at times. Though you do have a lighter side."

Gabe smiled, then frowned. "Ya know, people call him a killer."

Eric nodded. "It takes a strong man to do what he has to do to protect the innocent. He's a warrior. Jason knew what a good man he was from the first time he met him, which was why he seduced him away from the FBI and brought him on at Ameritech. God sent your father, and you I might add, to this world at this time as a light and to be His warriors. Those warriors have to do hard things, and not everyone is cut out to do those things." He paused, took a deep breath. "Are you strong enough to do the things God needs you to do, Gabe?"

"I— strive to be. I want to do God's will."

"I know you do. I've known that about you for a long time." He paused. "You know, you being named Gabriel wasn't just a coincidence. He is one of God's archangels. His name means 'God is my strength.' You will go into this little competition with the will to hone yourself into the warrior God is waiting for you to become. Win or lose doesn't matter, though I know it matters to you. However this tournament turns out, it will be exactly how it was supposed to turn out. God has a plan, Gabe, and I trust that plan."

"Then, you think I'm gonna lose?"

Eric smiled. "I would never go into a competition thinking that way. I think you're gonna win. But I will accept whatever God's will is, and I don't always know His will until the last minute. But don't worry. We're gonna win." He sighed. "We've talked long enough. Before we go back out, may I have permission to lay hands on you and give you a blessing?"

Gabe was surprised by the offer, but nodded.

Eric moved to stand beside Gabe. He laid his hands on his head, closed his eyes and began to pray. Gabe felt an immediate warmth move through his body. If he didn't already have a strong faith and belief in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ, he would be an immediate believer now. He felt the Holy Spirit move through him and his eyes filled to overflowing. Grandmaster Kino blessed him with healing in his body and heart and strength to overcome adversity. Gabe felt renewed, at peace, and so—very—grateful.

Eric and Gabe joined the others in the living room. Keegan turned as his son entered the room. Gabe looked up to see himself on a large screen TV, holding his own for a few seconds against three mighty warriors, namely, Jason, Mark, and Logan.

Jake was excited. "Look at that," he said, jumping to his feet. "Oh man, that was impressive. You are gonna kick butt, Gabe!"

Gabe only sighed. "Yeah, did you see the part when I, like, fell on my face."

Jake laughed. "Yep, been there, done that. I'm tellin' ya Gabe. You are doin' great!"

"Thanks."

"Jake is right," Keegan said. "I'm proud of you, son."

Gabe shuffled, pushed his hands into his pockets. "Thanks, Dad."

Master Appel nodded. "It's been a rough week, huh?"

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir." He breathed a sigh of relief. It felt good to know that they knew what he'd accomplished so far without him having to take the time and energy required to tell them all about it. He looked over at Grandmaster Kino. Nodded his thanks.

Eric smiled. "Well, if you all wouldn't mind, we can have our family prayer now, then you guys can visit for a bit, but Gabe needs to be in bed by 8:30 at the latest."

They all knelt together, while Eric himself prayed. Afterward, Jason said his goodbyes, Eric, Shelley, Taylor, and Logan made their way upstairs and Gabe sat with his father, Master Appel and Jake, discussing things they'd seen on the video. It wasn't long though before he was yawning and they ushered him off to bed.

About that time, Shelley came back down to see if anyone needed anything. They assured her that if they did they would get it themselves. They'd been guests at the house enough times that they knew how things went. She wished them a good night and reminded them that doors were already locked.

After hugging his dad one more time, Gabe made his way upstairs. He found himself hoping that Taylor would come to his door again. He waited a good fifteen minutes before he gave up and sleep overtook him.

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April 5th Friday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Laynah gave Santana his head and laughed as the wind blew her hair back. Riding Jake's horse in his absence made her feel a little closer to him. She was wishing she had just skipped class, gotten someone to take care of the horses for a few days and gone with him. She'd lived without him for years, and suddenly it seemed she couldn't go two days without him. If she was feeling that way, how could she allow him to go away again? How could she let him go to be deployed again to who knows where, facing who knows what? How would she survive that, knowing he may not survive?

Santana came to a stop just outside the corral. She leaned on his neck. "What am I gonna do? Huh, boy?" Her tears came then. Her yearning for a boy had turned into a yearning for a man. She was desperate for relief from this constant ache. Constant. Ache. An ache she'd carried for years hoping that one day he would see her, and now that he does see her, the ache has only become stronger.

She looked heavenward. "Father, I know I already talked to you about this just a little while ago, but please Father, I love him so much. I hurt so much and I'm not even sure why. I guess it's because I miss him right now. But if I miss him this much when he's only gonna be gone two days, what will I do when he deploys? I don't know what to do. Please help me to find peace. Please. In Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, Amen."

She pulled her phone out to see the time. It was 7 AM. It would be four in the

morning in California. Sighing, she put the phone away and hurried to feed and groom the horses. She had barely enough time to do her chores, shower, dress and get to class.

Dutifully, she went about her day. Later, as she drove her Ford Bronco, she thought about the class she'd just attended. The class had been as boring as she'd thought it would be. Would she feel the same way when she started her classes for vet school? Did Jake have a point about really doing something she loved, like working directly with horses? Jake. Ugh, could she just go a few minutes without thinking about him? How completely weak she must be. Maybe she needed to go somewhere to think, to pray, to meditate.

She swung the car toward Wilson's Lake. Wilson's lake was actually a private lake owned by the Wilson family. The Wilsons had lived on the property for over a hundred years. They'd invited the town to their property back before her parents were even born. Fourth of July fireworks were always held there for the town of Pine Forest. During the summertime kids were there daily—and nightly. Her parents had actually gone to Wilson's Lake when they'd first met each other and had a makeout session in the back of her mother's old pickup. Laynah and Jake had been there two days ago. It being Friday, and the last day of spring break for the county schools, the lake would be brimming with teenagers in just a few hours.

She pulled in. There was no one around presently but she still drove to the quiet side of the lake, where she and Jake had been a few nights ago. The place kids would come to do the secret things kids sometimes do.

She pulled in so she could sit and watch the water. She stayed in her car for a while. Praying, meditating and listening to music. Finally she got out, sat on the edge of the lake and took her shoes and socks off, as usual. Of course, visions of Jake tossing her into the lake played through her mind. "I can do this all night," he'd bragged. She smiled. She liked the fact that she couldn't best him. She took her phone out of her pocket. It was 11:30 here, so in Cali it would be 8:30.

That should work so she pushed the buttons, but it went straight to message. He probably has his phone off because he's watching Gabe train, she thought. Sighing, she sent a text instead. "Hey. I'm at the lake. Just thinking of you. Hope you're having a great time. Tell Gabe I said, oorah!! Smiley face. Blowing kisses."

She was scrolling through her music looking for her favorite playlist when a car pulled in. She put her hand to her head to block the sun so she could see if she was about to get bombarded by a bunch of kids. She frowned. It was a gray Camaro. Brett. What was he doing here?

She was hoping he would stay on that side of the lake, but it appeared he was coming over to see her. She stood. Folded her arms across her chest. Put on a scowl.

He pulled up beside her, his window down. "Hey gorgeous."

She rolled her eyes. "What do you want?"

"I'm lookin' at what I want."

"Well, ya can't have it, so move along."

He didn't. Instead he got out of his car and came toward her. "Can we just talk?"

"I think you said all I needed to hear the other night at Joe's when you pretty much called me a whore."

"I said you were sleeping around. I didn't say you were making people pay for it."

"Oh, well then that's okay," she said sarcastically.

"Come on, Laynah. Look, if you want me to apologize, I will. For what I said and for the other day when your goon jumped on me."

"Jake is not a goon, he's a very good friend, and he's a Marine and you're really lucky he didn't take your head off."

"Give me a break. He attacked me when we were just doing what we do. You know you like it rough."

Her stomach turned. Over the course of their six-month relationship, the first month had been nice. Nothing special, but nice to spend some time with him rather than sit at home ALONE, as Jake had recently pointed out. But after that first month it seemed Brett's goal had been to relieve her of her virginity. At first he was playful, but just like her mother said, it got worse, rougher and rougher. They'd had some pretty heavy make-out sessions and he always tried to go further. Keeping his hands off her had become like a challenge, which is where the rough play had come in.

"Listen, Brett, I don't want anything else to do with you. Now just leave me alone."

He came closer to her and took hold of her arm. "You don't mean that."

"I'm pretty sure I do."

"You thinkin' about hookin' up with the soldier dude?"

"That is none of your business. And he's not a soldier. He's a Marine."

"Whatever. Laynah, if you think you're gonna lead me on for six months and I'm not gettin' anything out of it, you're crazier than I thought."

"Oh, I'm crazy alright. Crazy for ever going out with you. Now let go of my arm."

He only smiled at her.

"I'm not playing around."

"Me neither."

"Let go."

"Not 'til I get what I came for."

She raised her wrist to her mouth and bit down hard on one of his fingers.

He yelped, let go, hauled back and punched her square in the face.

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April 5th Just after Noon, Friday

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lisa pushed the giant sandwich across the island to her husband.

He grinned. "Thanks, Red."

"You're welcome. So, you gonna eat the whole thing?"

His brows raised. "Uh, yeah. If you wanted a sandwich, why didn't you make one for yourself while you had all the stuff out?"

She licked a dot of mayo from her finger. "Hmm, I guess cuz it doesn't taste as good unless it comes from you."

He shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense because YOU made this one

too."

She giggled. "Yeah, babe, but once I gave it to you it took on your essence. Now it's yours and it looks a thousand times more delicious."

Chaz chuckled, glanced at the clock. "Kids won't be home from the Walkers' house for another hour or so."

"Yeah, but if you're thinking about us heading upstairs for a bit, Laynah will be here any minute. As a matter of fact," her brow wrinkled, "she's over an hour late."

Sighing, Chaz stood, pulled his phone from his pocket, and checked to make sure he hadn't missed a call from his daughter, but there was nothing.

Lisa held her finger up. "Oh, sounds like she just pulled in." They heard the garage door open. Heard the car pull in. Heard the car door slam and looked up as Laynah burst through the door, disheveled and bloody.

Lisa gasped and rushed toward her daughter. Chaz froze in place as he took in the scene.

Laynah stood before them, her hair a tangled mess. Her shirt torn open. Blood ran from her nose and mouth. There were scratches on her face and arms. Her entire body was trembling. Tears poured down her cheeks.

"Oh baby," Lisa cried as she threw her arms around her daughter. "Were you in an accident?"

She looked at her mom and then slowly turned to her father, who immediately knew what he was looking at.

"Daddy," she cried, unable to say more. She went to him, laid her head on his chest.

"Did you know him?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she answered between sobs.

"Was it Brett?"

She only nodded as she cried louder.

He held her close for a minute. Lisa was finally grasping what her daughter was trying to say.

"Bugs," Chaz said softly. "You have to talk to me now, Sweetheart. I'm sorry but I have to ask, did he rape you?"

"Yes," she cried. "Oh, Daddy."

"Okay, baby girl. Don't you worry. We're gonna take care of it. You have to be strong for me, honey. Do you hear me?"

She sniffled, hiccupped, nodded. Lisa started to wet a cloth but Chaz stopped her. "No, Lisa, she has to stay like this. We have to take her to the hospital. You need to get on the phone to the Walkers and get them to take the kids."

Lisa nodded. She walked away on her phone.

"Bugs, sit down." He pulled out a chair, sat her down.

Chaz immediately got on the phone to his brother and got the ball rolling. Ty would meet them at the hospital.

"I'm gonna run upstairs and get her some clean clothes for later," Lisa said after she got off the phone.

Chaz looked down at his sweet, innocent daughter. Her face was bruised. Her teeth were chattering. She was in shock. He ran in the den and grabbed the blanket,

wrapped it around her shoulders and lifted her into his arms. Lisa came running. She sat in the backseat holding her daughter, rocking her back and forth, crooning soft, loving words into her ear.

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April 5th Friday Afternoon

Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

Jake was totally loving what was going on with Gabe. The kid was a natural. Jake was pretty sure he could hold his own for at least a minute against a few of his Marine buddies. And he's just a seventeen-year-old kid.

"I can't wait for tomorrow," Jake told his dad. "I can't see how another black belt could take him on."

"Well, remember, son, the other teacher is Ricky Kino, THE Ricky Kino. I'm sure he's not going into this blindly. And also remember, Ricky learned everything he knows from Eric. I think it's gonna be a closer battle than you think."

"Maybe so. Either way, I'm really looking forward to it."

"Me too."

Eric had worked Gabe hard all morning, given him a mid-morning break, worked him hard again, and then stretched him until 1:00. Now, he was about to end the day early. He called everyone together. "I think that whatever I *can* teach you has been taught. It's time to rest and get centered. Gabe, we'll end with you and Taylor doing your forms, and then we'll go home for our pre-tournament rituals."

"Yes, sir," Gabe responded and moved to the center of the mat. Taylor moved to stand beside him. This time she did not take one step forward.

"You may begin," Eric said.

The group watched in admiration as the two young people went through the Kino elongated version of forms. Not a mistake was made. No forgetting anything this time. The dance was perfect. When they finished and bowed, the group cheered.

They arrived back at the house. Everyone either showered and dressed or just dressed. Dinner was laid out. It was heavily laden with carbs.

Candles were lit, prayers and blessings pronounced, wine sipped by some of the adults, plates filled and emptied and some filled again.

As he had the past two nights, Eric asked to see Gabe in his study.

"Feeling pretty good about tomorrow?"

"Pretty pumped."

"No fear?"

Gabe searched his mind. "No, sir."

"Anxiety?"

"None."

"How are you feeling?"

"Actually, it's weird, but I feel pretty relaxed."

Eric smiled. "Good. Go out and socialize for a bit, but bed by 8:30."

Gabe grinned. "Yes, sir."

He rose, went to leave, but stopped. "Um, Grandmaster Kino?"

"Yes?"

"I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me. I will never forget this for the rest of my life."

"Nor will I."

Gabe bowed deeply. Eric returned the honor.

Gabe went out to find his father and the Appels. They had come a long way to see him. However, he couldn't help but look around for Taylor. It seemed she was making herself scarce. She was nowhere to be seen. Disappointed, he made his way into the living room.

"There's the man of the hour," Logan said.

Gabe smiled. "Not yet, but hold that thought."

"How ya feelin', son?" Keegan asked. "Ready?"

"Yes, sir. I'm ready."

"Me too," Jake said. "Sooo, looking forward to this."

"Where's Master Appel?" Gabe asked.

"He got a phone call and stepped out the front door," Jake replied.

Gabe sat down next to his father to talk, but it wasn't long before the excitement of the past few days caught up to him. When he started yawning, his father insisted he go get some rest. Gabe finally agreed. He went into the kitchen to say goodnight to Miss Shelley, and looked around to see if maybe Taylor was sitting somewhere nearby.

"She's outside," Shelley offered.

Gabe looked out the giant glass door. There she was sitting on the steps that led down to the volleyball courts. Shelley pushed a button to open the motorized door, smiled at Gabe and ushered him through.

He kissed her cheek as he passed.

Taylor remained sitting as he came up behind her. He stepped down in front of her a few steps until he was about eye level.

"Hey," he began.

She smiled. "Hey."

"You doin' okay?" he asked.

"I'm doin' fine. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you're sitting out here all alone."

She smiled sweetly. "I'm just giving you some space."

"When it comes to you, I don't need space."

Her eyes opened wide. "Wow, those are some mushy words."

He shrugged. "They're about to get mushier because I don't have a lot of time. I'm leaving tomorrow evening. I'm supposed to be in bed right now, I won't be able to get near you before the fight tomorrow except maybe to help me stretch. I gotta do this right now."

"Do what?"

He held his hand out to her. She placed her hand in his and he pulled her up to stand in front of him.

"I want to ask you a question."

"Okay, shoot," she said, giving a soft giggle.

He smiled. "What's so funny?"

"You know, shoot, that thing you do so well."

He chuckled. "Oh yeah, that."

"So, what's the question?"

He drew himself up. "May I have, or, uh, will you give me— a kiss, like, for luck?"

She drew in a deep breath. "Oh, Gabe, most definitely."

He moved closer, put his hands on her waist and gently pulled her forward. She tilted her face up and he lowered his head. The first touch of their lips was like electricity. His breath hitched. She sighed.

Gabe hadn't kissed a lot of girls yet in his life, but of all of them, this one would stand out as the first REAL kiss. They pulled away for only a few seconds and then dove right back in.

Shelley watched from the kitchen window, smiling with a sigh.

"What are you looking at?" Eric asked.

Shelley put a finger to her lips. Pointed outside.

Eric looked out, quickly looked at his watch, then looked back out.

Keegan came in the kitchen to say good night. "What are we looking at?" he asked.

Shelley again put her finger to her lips and pointed.

Keegan looked out to see his son with his arms wrapped around beautiful Taylor Kino, their mouths melded together. They watched for a few moments. It was when Gabe lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist that they were pulled from their trance.

"I am sorry," Keegan apologized. "I'll go put a stop to this."

Eric placed his hand on his arm. "Keegan. It's okay. He needs a release."

When Keegan's brows shot up, Eric rethought his words.

"I only mean the release of a little bit of pressure by kissing a beautiful girl. They won't go any further than that."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Well, I know my granddaughter. And I'm pretty sure that your son wouldn't do anything to displease you, because he loves and honors you above all else—except, God."

"So, you're saying I should trust him."

Eric nodded.

"Well you sure couldn't trust *me* at that age," Keegan admitted.

Eric smiled. "Different times, different people, different circumstances."

They watched as Gabe set Taylor back on her feet. The kids turned and headed toward the house hand in hand.

"They're coming back," Shelley said. "You guys go away."

Eric frowned at his wife. "I refuse to hide in my own house, and certainly don't shy away from uncomfortable circumstances."

"Are you uncomfortable?" Shelley asked.

He smiled. "No. But Gabe is about to be, and that's okay. It'll be good for him."

Keegan nodded. "I like it."

Gabe looked up as they came through the glass doors. "Oh," he muttered, when

he saw the three people standing there.

"I, uh, was just saying goodnight to Taylor before I went up to bed."

Taylor didn't say anything, only blushed.

Eric raised his eyebrows in mock sternness. "What part of bed by 8:30 did you not understand, Gabriel?"

Gabe knew Grandmaster Kino would expect only honesty, even though he also knew he wasn't really angry with him.

"I, um, I understand 8:30 well enough, and I, uh, willfully disobeyed when I saw the chance to speak with Taylor, knowing I probably wouldn't get a chance to see her alone tomorrow. I weighed the options and decided whatever punishment you could give me would be worth the time spent with her."

Taylor smiled.

Eric smiled, nodded.

Shelley grinned from ear to ear.

Keegan's mouth dropped open. Who was this kid?

Gabe stood tall, waiting to hear what his punishment would be.

"There will be no consequences because of your honest answer," Eric said with a smile. "Just don't push it."

"Yes, sir." He looked at his father and Shelley. "Good night."

They nodded.

He turned to Taylor, brushed his hand over her cheek. "Good night."

She smiled sweetly. "Nite, nite."

They watched him leave.

John Appel came into the kitchen. "Hey, everyone, just wanted to say goodnight. Um, Keeg, can I speak with you a minute?"

"Sure."

John looked around trying to decide where to have the conversation.

"Take my study," Eric offered. "You've been on the phone for some time. Is there a problem?"

"Nothing we can't handle right now. You just concentrate on the tournament, and I'll let you know if we need help."

Eric nodded. "Happy to do that."

John and Keegan headed into Eric's study.

"What's up?" Keegan asked immediately.

John sighed. "Laynah went to Wilson's Lake today, apparently to sit alone and pray and meditate and chill, and— she was raped."

Keegan's face darkened, his jaw clenched. "By a stranger or someone she knew?"

"It was her ex."

"The guy your son just pulled off of her the other day?"

"Yes. He beat her up pretty bad. He tried to skip the state, but Ty was able to get out an APB and he was picked up west of Atlanta. Problem is, he comes from money and they'll probably only be able to hold him until Monday. He'll post bail and be out. I don't want to lose him."

"I'll put a tail on him. We'll know where he is." Keegan frowned. "Geez, sweet

Laynahbug. Chaz must be about to go crazy." He suddenly looked up. "Has Jake been told?"

"No, and that is the problem right now. Telling Jake could ruin the whole thing for Gabe tomorrow, because if Jake is told he'll go freaking crazy. He'll demand to go home right away. Gabe will know something is up and he won't be able to fight until he knows what's happened and then when he learns what's happened he won't be able to fight in a meaningless tournament when his friends, who are like family to him, are suffering."

Keegan nodded and bent his head in thought. "Well, John, Gabe would be right about that because I'm feeling the same way."

"I knew you would say that, but hear me out. This tournament is NOT meaningless. It is gonna be nationally televised. He cannot drop out. Not now. Besides, you signed a contract. This event is gonna change Gabe's life one way or the other and we have to make sure it's in a positive way. His ONLY option is to fight and fight well. It may seem harsh for me to say, but what's done is done. We can't change what's happened to Laynah. All we can do is help her deal with the aftermath. So, we wait until after the tournament to tell Jake. As soon as that's happened he'll want to get home to her. We'll see if we can arrange earlier transportation, and maybe even a chopper from the Atlanta airport to get Jake to her side ASAP."

"I'll talk to Jason," Keegan said.

"Make sure Jason understands that neither Gabe nor Eric are to know until we tell them."

Keegan sighed heavily. "Got it."

"So, how good of an actor are you?"

Keegan smiled. "Uh, you know I worked undercover for years. I think I can handle myself."

John nodded. "And, we might need a few reinforcements come time to tell Jake. I mean, the country boy thing combined with the Marine thing, I'm not quite sure how he might react."

Keegan nodded. "Roger that." His statement triggered a memory. "So, John, a long time ago, when I was in Washington getting ready to face that Congressional hearing, and you had all the guys holding me down when you told me Lizzy had been assaulted, were you the mastermind?"

"Guilty. But there was a difference. I WAS sure how you would react, and I needed you to face that hearing or it would've ruined you."

Keegan nodded. "You're a good friend, John."

He grinned. "Right?"

As the two men came out of the study, they saw Jake in the kitchen tossing his phone down onto the counter. He looked up. "Oh, hey. So what's up? Something happen at the Inn?"

"Yep, but it's nothing we can't handle. Everything okay with you?" John answered.

"Yeah, I guess. It's just that I can't seem to reach Laynah. She called me earlier, and texted me that she was at the lake. I've tried to return the call several times but

she's not answering."

"It's late there now. She's probably in bed," Keegan said.

"I guess. It's just strange."

"Well, you'll be back there tomorrow and all will be well," John added. "I'm gonna get some sleep. Good night guys."

"Night."

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1 Peter 5:8

"Be sober-minded; be watchful.
Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion,
seeking someone to devour."

Chapter Eight

April 6th Saturday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Shelley sighed with pleasure as a drop of water splashed on her cheek. Tournament day! Every tournament day from the first tournament she'd ever participated in as a MART competitor thirty years ago, Eric had come to her freshly showered, allowing a drop of water from his wet hair to drip onto her face to wake her up. He'd never missed a time, whether it was her tournament or one of the kids' and now, this one.

She rose, stretched her arms over her head. Eric glanced at the thin white scars that ran the length of the inside of her arm from her underarm to her elbow. Parallel lines on each arm and each leg too. He didn't often notice them, but every once in a while they were a reminder that there is evil in this world. It reminded him of his true purpose, to be a light, to vanquish darkness, to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ through example and through strength and power and love.

Today, that example of power and light will be visible nationally. His entire family, though representing opposing sides, will be in the limelight, and that means they have an amazing opportunity to show the world what they believe, what the light of Jesus Christ can do, and to show non-believers that He is real.

Eric smiled at his beautiful and sweet and powerful wife. "I was wondering if you ever intend to get up today?"

"As soon as I get my morning kiss."

He obliged.

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April 6th Late Morning, Saturday
Rosewood Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California

The Rosewood Sports Arena was bustling with energy and activity. They arrived at the rear of the facility. Before they emerged from the limo, Eric cautioned Gabe.

"Listen, Gabe, once we go inside, don't let the media thing overwhelm you or make you nervous. People are gonna rush at you, try to get you to answer their questions, especially the social media influencers who've been given access to the event. Smile, be pleasant, but don't answer any questions about the fight, especially if they ask for predictions of the outcome. We don't want to alienate them, so if they ask what you had for breakfast, you can answer that."

"Why would they care what I had for breakfast?"

Everyone on his team laughed. It was Taylor who gave him the answer. "You're not used to all the publicity, but I am. They want to know every single thing about you. Everything. Ignore them. Don't let them get to you. Focus completely on the

task at hand."

Eric chuckled. "Very good, Taylor."

"She sounds exactly like you, Eric," Jason said.

"Well, I AM a Kino," she replied with a grin.

Again, they all laughed.

Gabe smiled at them. They all wore black shirts that said 'Team Gabe' in red letters. Those same shirts would be for sale out in the lobby. Even though his father, Master Appel and Jake were not here with him, and were sitting in the VIP section, he knew they had on the same shirts.

They went inside. Gabe tried to not look around, but the place was crazy. Cameras everywhere. People chatted away for unseen audiences. There was a cry of, "There he is, that's Gabe Tanner."

Gabe heard it and looked down. He found himself doing exactly what they told him not to do, getting nervous.

Eric knew it immediately, sighing he shook his head. "Stop and do one interview," he directed. "It will get it out of your system."

Gabe stopped and Logan spoke. "Okay, so, think of this girl that's approaching as a wide receiver," Logan said, thinking since Gabe was a defensive back he could compute. "She's not someone you fear. She's the enemy. She's going down."

Gabe nodded as a very cute young woman came running up to him. She turned and smiled at another person, holding a phone. "Look who we found! Gabe Tanner. Wow, I didn't realize he was such a hunk. Hi Gabe!"

He nodded, smiled. "Hey."

"How does it feel to be selected by the Kinos to fight in the first Mini-MART?"

He smiled again. Such an easy question. "I feel extremely honored."

"Are you gonna win?"

"I can guarantee that both Julian and I will give it our all. That's all I have to say about that."

"All the ladies out there want to know if you're available?"

Taylor moved forward when she noticed the color drain from his face. "I can answer that one. Yes, he is. Lord knows I've tried to get his attention, but he's so focused on the task at hand, he won't pay attention to anyone right now."

"You heard it ladies, Gabe Tanner, the ultimate male, is single."

"Well, I have to go get ready," Gabe said kindly.

"Thanks for taking time to talk to us," the girl chirped cheerfully.

"It was my pleasure," he returned taking a page from his favorite fast-food restaurant.

They made their way into the dressing room. Gabe blew out a breath. "How do you guys deal with all that on a daily basis?"

"Crazy isn't it?" Shelley said.

"My mom has it the worst," Taylor added.

"Okay, us ladies will see you guys in the prayer room," Shelley said. She went on her toes and kissed Gabe's cheek. Taylor did the same, winking at him.

"Focus," Eric snapped.

"Yes, sir."

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Jake sat in the stands, watching the interview happening on YouTube and had to laugh. “Some girl just called Gabe the ultimate male,” he told Keegan.

Keegan only shook his head. “He’ll never live that one down.”

Jake frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“No, maybe a little nervous for Gabe.”

“He’s gonna be great. Don’t worry.”

They watched as the pre-fight entertainment began. A couple of up and coming singers were great. A children’s chorus was inspiring. And a few weapons demonstrations by some of the Kino Studios were impressive and motivational.

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Both Team Gabe and Team Julian met in what they termed the prayer room. Both Eric and Ricky stood in front of the room. Eric spoke, reminding everyone that first and foremost this competition is to be a light for whoever may be watching. Sportsmanship will be exemplary, honor will be shown to their art, to their team members and to the officials and referees.

Ricky then took time to remind the fighters of illegal strikes. “No groin shots, no punches to the back of the head, no head butting, and no strikes when their opponent is down.”

They called Gabe and Julian to the front of the room and introduced them. They bowed to each other and then shook hands. Gabe smiled and Julian nodded.

They each wore the tight-fitting shorts. Julian’s white. Gabe’s black. For protection they had only a mouth guard, hands taped and open-fingered gloves, and groin protection. Currently they both had on their team T-shirts, but that would come off soon. Side by side, Julian seemed to be much bigger than Gabe, though he was only an inch and a half taller and fifteen pounds heavier.

Eric spoke again. “Before we go out there, I know you are all Christians and so I would ask that we pray together. Rick, would you like to pray?”

“Out of respect, I will defer to you.”

Eric nodded. “Father, we are grateful for this amazing opportunity to have this event, we know we are blessed with this opportunity because of all You have given us. We’re grateful to have such fine young men representing *Kino Martial Arts* today, Father, and we ask a special blessing on them both that they will each perform to the best of their ability, that they will be injury free, and that their hearts and minds will be filled with peace. May Your Holy Spirit fill them and lead them and guide them in their endeavors not only today, but throughout their lives. We go forth today asking for You to place people in our path that we can help or be of service to in some way, that we may do Your will here on earth. Accept our gratitude for all things, we pray in the mighty name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.”

The teams adjourned from the prayer room and headed out toward the arena. There was a huge buzz from the crowd as they made their way through. Each team lined up on opposite sides of the thirty-foot-by-thirty-foot square 'ring,' with ropes, a combination of an MMA cage and a boxing ring.

They stood at attention, their right hands over their hearts during the national

anthem, sung by a brother, sister duo from the most recent AGT. Gabe quickly glanced over at his father, Master Appel and Jake Appel, the three men here that he knew were military. They stood in proud attention, facing the flag. It was little times like this that made Gabe's heart swell with pride. No one here knew what these men had sacrificed for their country, what hardships they'd faced, yet here they stood, strong and tall.

Gabe also noticed when he glanced around, the cameras panning the audience and the phones and cameras of social media people held high.

Once the anthem ended, an announcer with a mouthpiece mic on his ear welcomed everyone and began introductions. He introduced the judges, timekeeper and scorekeeper and gave their credentials. He then did the same for the referee. Next he announced that the event was sponsored by *Kino Martial Arts* and that all proceeds would go to the *American Chapter of Jeffy's Heal the World Foundation.*

Once that was done, they began to introduce the teams. There was no current champion for this event. However, there *were* three Kino Challenge Champions on Julian's team, namely, Ricky, Joey and Jeffy, and one on Gabe's team, namely Mark but the person who trained all of those champions was Grandmaster Kino. Therefore his team was given the distinction of being introduced last.

The announcer introduced all the members of Julian's team, giving only a few credentials of each one or they'd be going on forever. Julian stood in front of each member of his team as they were announced and bowed to them, the last one being Ricky Kino. As usual, when Ricky's name was pronounced, the crowd went crazy, screaming, yelling, whistling. Ricky waved and placed his hand over his heart in thanks.

Julian then faced front as his own information was announced.

"In the white trunks, at twenty-three years of age, standing 6'2" tall, weighing in at 195 lbs., a married legal assistant and father of one, from Santa Barbara, California, black belt, Julian Washington!"

The crowd again cheered long and hard, bringing a smile to Julian's lips.

The announcer then started on the members of Gabe's team. Gabe also stood in front of each member of his team and bowed to them as their credentials were read. He couldn't help but smile and wink at Taylor. Then he remembered that cameras were everywhere and he schooled his features.

When Grandmaster Kino's credentials were announced, black belt Hall-of-Fame, four time MART champion, creator of Kino Martial Arts, Grandmaster Eric Kino, the crowd was not as loud as they'd been for Ricky, after all, Ricky Kino was, Ricky Kino, but they all stood in reverence and clapped for a very long time. Eric too, waved and tapped his heart to show he was truly honored.

Gabe bowed to Eric so reverently, that Eric stepped forward and mussed his hair. Smiling, Gabe faced forward.

"In the black trunks, at seventeen years of age, standing at 6' and ½" tall, weighing in at 180 lbs., a high school student from Pine Forest, Georgia, Gabe Tanner!"

The arena erupted. Gabe's eyes opened wide and he glanced around. Could all that noise be for him? Then he realized they were probably cheering so hard

because he was considered the underdog. He had no problem with that. He liked coming from behind to win the game.

The crowd then watched as Gabe and Julian met at the far side of the ring, shook hands, and kept going around until they stood in front of the opposite team. They then went down, bowing to and shaking hands with each member of the other team. Gabe laughed at the little bit of trash talk taking place. “Love ya buddy, but you’re goin’ down.” “It’s been a pleasure knowing ya, Tanner.” “Hope you brought one of your little guns with ya, it’s the only chance you got.”

Smiling, he rolled his eyes and headed back to stand next to his teacher. While the audience was reminded of some of the rules of the fight, Gabe and Julian started stretching again, since they’d been standing still for so long. When they finally pulled their shirts over their heads and tossed them aside, the crowd’s reaction was something Gabe considered silly and laughable. You would’ve thought a naked girl had just run out on the floor, for shrieks and even some whistles filled the air.

“Focus,” Eric commanded. “The public is fickle. Tune them out. They don’t matter.”

Gabe nodded, bent over and folded himself in half.

“Remember your first sequence. Picture it clearly in your mind. And remember, Rick is gonna send Julian in hard and fast because he thinks if they can draw first blood they will have a mental advantage.”

Gabe nodded again.

“Your speed, your quickness, is THE most important thing here, in the first round while you have the most energy. So, think quick. Be quick. Focus that sharpshooter mind of yours on what’s coming at you. You got this Gabe.”

Eric reached up and smoothed some of the jelly on Gabe’s cheek then smiled and nodded at the young man.

The teams sat down along the edge of the ring. Eric and Ricky stood close to give direction. Gabe and Julian each jumped the ropes into the ring, joined the referee in the center and shook hands, nodding and making eye contact.

“Keep it clean,” the ref said. “Defend yourself at all times. Ready? Fight.”

They circled for only a few seconds. Just as Eric had said, Julian came at Gabe quickly.

Gabe threw a high block, high block, low block, high block, low block, low block, low block, nothing landed. Gabe reversed and came at Julian, high left, high right, low right, low kick, high left, low left, low kick, high kick, nothing landed.

The crowd was already on their feet screaming, realizing what an amazing show of skill they were already witnessing.

The fighters went back and forth. The families of each team member were cheering hard for their fighter. Except maybe Bree, whose husband and son were Team Julian, but whose mother and daughter were Team Gabe. She nervously wrung her hands.

Jason’s wife, Angel, was screaming for Gabe. Their daughter Kimmie however, best friends with Jeffy was all into Julian. Kimmie’s husband, Jensen Deal, had to go with Gabe, since he was an Ameritech agent and his boss Jason was team Gabe.

Of course, Jeff’s wife, Mickey and their two sons, Daniel and Jeremy, were all

about Gabe and were going crazy. Also on team Gabe was Mark's wife and Logan's mom, Bella who was trying to watch the fight and bounce little Emily on her knee at the same time. Bella's sister, Breez who was married to Joey on Julian's team was also struggling to watch the fight as she had a six-year-old, three-year-old, and two-year-old to deal with.

Julian's wife and daughter also sat with the VIPs, right next to Gabe's father.

Julian came at Gabe again. Gabe threw up a high block, high block, high block, he stumbled backward for just a second. In that time, Julian threw a roundhouse and connected to Gabe's mid-section. Gabe flew back, landed hard, scrambled to his feet in time to block the next two kicks coming in. The bell rang.

Breathing hard, both fighters went to their corner.

Ricky patted Julian on the back. "Great job. You moved in fast and took advantage of his mistake. Keep it up."

"Yes, sir," Julian replied.

Eric spoke softly to Gabe. "Okay, so Ricky accomplished what he wanted, made first contact. Are we defeated?"

"No, sir. Just getting started."

"That's right. Watch your footing. That was careless. Focus."

Gabe nodded. Eric knew that Gabe knew that since only one strike had been landed, and it was Julian who landed it, round one would go to Julian.

"I know we've talked about it, but remember, he's bigger, stronger and older, but you have speed and youth on your side. Use it. It will take more punches thrown, more kicks, but you *will* wear him down."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said as he stood and went back to center ring.

Unfortunately, the second round pretty much was a duplicate of the first round, only Gabe didn't stumble this time, he simply didn't block fast enough and Julian was able to get in a punch to Gabe's forehead. It made Gabe a little dizzy and so he was grateful when the bell rang ending the second round.

The crowd was a little less enthusiastic, but still showing their appreciation that Gabe had been pretty much holding his own. Only two strikes had been landed, but both of those were landed by Julian. Round two– Julian.

In his corner, Gabe sucked in oxygen, sipped some water, rinsed his mouth.

Eric examined his eyes, making sure he was okay. "How ya feelin'?"

Gabe nodded. "I'm okay."

"Don't be discouraged. You got this. On the third sequence of the next round I want you to add two sidekicks to the end."

He looked into Gabe's eyes. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir. Two sidekicks at the end of the third sequence. Coming right up."

Eric smiled. He wasn't a bit worried.

Ricky took a moment to look over at his father, saw his smile and his calm demeanor, and it made him nervous.

Bree looked over at Breez, Joey's wife, and held up her phone. "Are you seeing this?"

Breez shook her head as she dug in her bag and pulled out a snack bag of yogurt rounds for Ledger, her two-year old. "No, Phia's got my phone. I had to do

something to keep her quiet. Why? What's going on?"

"I've been looking at the live streams on Instagram, YouTube, all of them– the world has gone bonkers for Gabe. They keep zeroing in on his chest, his abs, his face and, uh, other body parts." She shook her head. "The comments are, well, some of them are pretty lewd about things they'd like to do with Gabe."

Jake looked up. "This one girl, the one he let do an interview earlier, she's all over it. She knows what sells. She's def focusing on him being some kinda beefcake."

"Good grief," Bella said. "He's only a kid."

Jake laughed. "He's old enough."

Keegan shook his head.

"Does it really bother you, Uncle Keegan?" Jake asked.

"What? That they're thinking of my son as some kind of sex symbol? No. But speaking from experience, the media can be very dangerous. I had a reporter going after me a while ago. I went from being labeled a hero to being called in front of a congressional hearing for 'excessive force.' It wasn't pretty. The media, even these little YouTubers, are powerful. I don't like it."

"He's right," Bree agreed. "The media can change the course of a country and can certainly change your life. You know though, the first Kino Challenge happened because of the paparazzi, which turned out to be a great thing, so I guess it's just how *we* handle it."

They hushed as the third round began.

Gabe thought Julian would come out guns blazing again because he sensed a kill after winning two rounds, and he was right. Patiently though, Gabe focused and went about blocking everything he threw. Regrettably, an errant kick from Julian caught Gabe directly in the groin. He doubled over and went down hard, grabbing the source of the pain. He couldn't control the loud grunt as the pain overtook him. He gave it a second or two then sat up and got to his knees, his hands gripping his thighs, his breath coming in huge gasps.

Julian tried to approach him but the ref sent him back. Julian turned his back and went to his knees as was protocol as he waited to see if Gabe was okay. He hadn't meant to kick him in the groin and he was feeling really bad about it. He'd only approached to see if he was okay.

Eric was allowed to approach to check on Gabe's well-being. Rules state that in the event of an inadvertent groin shot the fighter could have up to five minutes to decide if he can go on. Eric knelt in front of him. "How ya doin' there sport?"

Gabe swallowed hard. "I'm good. It's going away. Give me another minute."

"Will do. The plan hasn't changed."

Gabe nodded. "Got it."

Gabe finally rose, nodded to the ref. Julian was called to center and given a warning. Before the ref could start the fight, Julian moved forward, put a hand on Gabe's shoulder. "Sorry, man, it was an accident. You okay?"

Gabe smiled, nodded, and gave him a thumbs up. They shook hands.

The crowd applauded.

"Fight," the ref said.

Gabe started in fast. Leg sweep, high punch, high punch, low punch, spinning hook kick. Julian came back with his own sequence. Gabe went again, high, low, low, low, high, low. Julian countered again. The crowd was on their feet again. With only a half minute left in the round, Gabe went high, high, low, low, high, low, sidekick, sidekick. The second sidekick landed hard into Julian's midsection and knocked him off his feet.

The bell rang and Gabe immediately turned to Eric with a giant smile on his face. Eric nodded. Gabe pointed at Eric then heavenward, and nodded. He came to his corner, feeling renewed energy. Apparently, the entire arena felt a renewed energy, because they applauded and cheered during the whole minute of rest.

Keegan and John also seemed relieved that Gabe had finally scored. They were even happier by the end of the fourth round, and really happy by the end of the fifth round because Gabe was the only one who connected during those rounds. The two warriors were fighting hard. It was about as even a match as it could possibly be. They each blocked so well, moved so well, thought so fast, that thus far only one point had been scored per round; Julian the first two rounds and Gabe, the next three.

It seemed the momentum had swung in Gabe's favor, until round six. In round six Gabe missed a block and Julian connected with his cheek in a brutal punch, snapping his head around. Gabe held on without getting hit the rest of the round though, and was extra relieved when the bell rang. He slumped down in his corner, trying hard to catch his breath.

Eric spoke quietly to him. "It was a costly mistake but don't beat yourself up about it. Julian has three good rounds. You have three good rounds."

"Can I win?"

"Only if you think you can."

Gabe nodded. "I do. I'll do what it takes."

"Good. Go in hard. First sequence, all low until the last, then high left, then add an uppercut right, elbow right, sweep left, roundhouse, roundhouse."

Gabe nodded.

"Repeat it back to me."

Gabe did.

Eric smiled. "Your mind is sharp. You got this, son. No mistakes. Be alert. Block hard."

"Yes, sir."

Ricky spoke to Julian. "Good job. You took perfect advantage of that mistake. This is it. You have three good rounds. Gabe has three good rounds. You got this."

"You think I can win?"

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Then you can." He drew a breath and nodded confidently. "Okay, this is your last chance to impress, so go in hard. Go back to the head. Don't let up. Go low at first then go high."

Julian nodded.

"Got it?" Ricky said.

"Low first, then high, back to the head. Got it."

"No mistakes," Ricky cautioned as he sent him back in.

The roar in the arena was so loud it was almost deafening. Everyone was on their feet. Poor little Ledger had his hands over his ears. Little Sophia, Kelstyn, and Em followed suit. It was a madhouse.

Back in Georgia, Lizzy Tanner and her girls were pacing, praying, biting nails. Rose was screaming at the TV. Jodi was at the inn, screaming along with their guests who knew it was their neighbor's son who fought. Chaz and his boys were in their home shouting encouragement. Lisa and Laynah sat in the corner of the L-shaped sofa. Laynah had been pretty quiet, but she watched the screen closely on TV and on live broadcasts on her phone, hoping to get a glimpse of Jake.

"Fight," the ref yelled as he gave his hand signal.

Gabe missed a block and got hit almost immediately, but it was a glancing blow.

That's enough of that, he thought as he dug deep inside, found that steel will, and executed the sequence Eric had given him. He connected three times, on the uppercut which obviously did damage, on the elbow, and on the second roundhouse, which sent Julian down.

Julian got right back up and went in hard. But Gabe was in the zone and blocked everything coming at him. Almost everything. Another glancing blow started blood running from his lip. Even though it was a glancing blow, Gabe couldn't let blood flowing be the last thing the judges see, so he went into block, punch, block, kick, block, punch, block, kick, and the last kick sent Julian down again. The bell rang, and they went back to their corners.

"Was it enough?" Gabe asked.

"Hard to tell," Eric said. "Either way, I couldn't be more proud."

Gabe shook his head. That wasn't what he wanted to hear. He looked over at Ricky talking to Julian. He looked pretty hopeful, which told Gabe he too thought it could go either way.

He looked over at his father, who seemed abnormally nervous. That was not a good sign. Master Appel also seemed anxious. Jake was laughing and talking to all the ladies about something on his phone. He seemed at ease. He wondered how his mom and sisters were handling things. The thought made him smile. Oh, well, he'd done his best. He'd held his own against a bigger guy. They were called into the center of the ring. The referee held both their hands. The announcer read the decision— and— Gabe's hand was lifted into the air.

The place went berserk. Gabe was actually surprised. He'd pretty much reconciled himself to losing. He couldn't hold back the grin. Julian found his way to him and they hugged. "You did a great job, Gabe. I thought I had ya. You came back. That's a great lesson."

"Thanks, man," Gabe answered simply.

Ricky's team fought their way through to congratulate him. Then Gabe's own team. Finally, Grandmaster Kino made his way to the young man. He didn't offer any wise words. He just hugged him, long and hard.

Gabe hadn't even made his way out of the ring yet. He wanted to get to his dad, but Taylor was standing right there near him, smiling sweetly at him. Without

thinking, he grabbed her and kissed her, hard, right there in front of the world.

She pushed her hand against his sweaty chest. "Save it for later," she whispered.

Gabe finally made his way to his father, who once again wrapped his arms around him in a giant bear hug and lifted him off the floor. And once again, Gabe became emotional.

Jake grabbed him and shook him hard, and Master Appel bowed to him. Gabe looked around the arena. There was a line of reporters waiting to speak with him. He knew he was obligated to talk to them.

Because he'd looked in their direction he guessed, they swarmed toward him. Taylor was thoughtful enough to bring him his shirt, a towel and a bottle of water. The questions were fast and furious. He did his best. Thankfully almost all of the questions were about what he was thinking as he was fighting. So, he joked that he was thinking about not dying. But then he gave more serious answers, such as: he needed to get better leverage and put more power into his kick or block, lots of thoughts about blocking.

The younger crowd, namely the social media influencers, asked more personal questions and got him to pose for selfies, many times while some girl was kissing him on the cheek. He was really tired and really hungry and really hoping they could go back to the Kino estate soon.

He looked past all the cameras, trying to see his father. He finally found him. He and Master Appel seemed to be having a serious discussion with Ricky, Joey, Mark, Jason, Jeff, Justin and Grandmaster Kino. Gabe immediately wondered if there was some case demanding immediate attention at Ameritech.

He saw Jake, young Eric, JoJo and Logan in another group laughing and talking jovially. The women were all in one area, standing around or sitting, playing with the kids. Most of them were looking at their phones and talking about whatever they were seeing on them. Gabe had no idea that what they were seeing was him.

The girl who'd interviewed him before the fight made her way up to him. "Hi again, Gabe!" she said brightly, as if they'd known each other a long time.

He smiled. "Hey."

"That's the second time I've heard you say 'hey.' Tell me, is that a southern thing?"

He shrugged. "I guess. But I think it's pretty universal."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure all the ladies out there think it's adorable. Don't ya girls? Go ahead and put it in the comments!"

Gabe sighed. He was exhausted. He tried to focus on the girl.

"So, tell the people about yourself. We're all just dying to hear what else this single 'ultimate male' has going on."

She raised her phone to look at it, while keeping eye contact with the person who was videoing. "Ha ha," she said. "I'd better not say that live."

She leaned over and whispered what one of her followers commented. He blushed. "So, Gabe, what else do you like to do?"

"I, um, like football, and baseball."

"Well of course you do! Do you play on a team?"

"I played football on my high school team, but that's over. When I get back

home I still have the rest of baseball season before I graduate."

"Oh really! Hey, everyone, who wants to see Gabriel play baseball?"

She looked at her phone. "OMG my phone is blowing up."

Gabe sighed heavily. "Well, I really need to get going."

"Okay, just let me get one more pic for the road." She pointed at her "camera" guy, then turned and planted her lips on Gabe's cheek and kept them there for several angles. Finally she pulled away.

"You are just the sweetest," she said, a twinkle in her eye. "And there you have it, people. The ultimate male. Wanna see him again? Let's make this happen!"

The crowd around Gabe finally thinned out. Only Taylor stood nearby. It seemed everyone else had forgotten about him.

"You about ready?" she asked.

"Yes. Where is everyone?"

She shrugged. "Don't know. Something's going down but they haven't told me yet. They just told me to wait for you and get you to the car ASAP."

"Okay, then let's go."

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The limo pulled up to the house. Others had come too, including Team Julian, and all the families of both teams.

Gabe immediately noticed a helicopter on the front lawn. They went inside where the delicious aromas of grilled meats and hearty side dishes filled the air. They entered the house and Logan grinned at Gabe. "*Now* I can say it. There is the man of the hour."

Gabe smiled.

Eric entered the room. "Everyone, please make yourselves at home. This is a celebration of what Julian and Gabe accomplished in four days' time. They were both remarkable and I cannot emphasize enough how proud I am of both of them."

Food was served and piled high onto plates. Music was played and drinks were offered.

Eric made his way over to Gabe. "Gabe, I'm sorry, but things are not gonna happen this evening the way I hoped. I need to ask you to go take a shower and dress for travel, grab some food and meet me in my study in thirty minutes. I know you have questions and they will be answered there."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said obediently.

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Psalm 20:5-6

"May we shout for joy over your victory
and lift up our banners in the name of our God.
May the Lord grant all your requests.
Now this I know: The Lord gives victory to his anointed...."

Chapter Nine

April 6th Saturday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Gabe arrived at Eric's study showered, dressed and fed as asked. He opened the door, expecting to have to occupy what he'd come to think of as "the hot seat," but it wasn't available. The room was occupied by the group he thought of simply as "the men." Well, except for young Eric, JoJo, Logan and Jake. They were "the guys."

The chair that usually sat right in front of Eric's desk had been pushed back to sit adjacent to the large leather sofa that sat against the far wall and the chair was presently occupied by Jake. Standing near Jake, almost in a semi-circle around him, were Ricky, Cam, and Joey. Jeff, Master Appel, and Gabe's dad were sitting on the sofa. Sitting in one of the chairs near the front window was Justin Lee, and in the other, Jason Lee. Standing and occupying various places against the wall were Mark, JoJo, Logan, and young Eric.

"Come in, Gabe," Eric said from where he sat behind his desk. "Just find an empty space or sit on the floor." Gabe moved across the room warily and sat on the floor in front of his father.

Eric watched him walk. "You're limping," he stated.

"Just a little sore," Gabe answered.

Eric took a moment to examine Gabe's face. The little cut on his lip was a tiny bit swollen. His cheek was slightly bruised.

Eric gave a slight smile. "Gabe, you did a fine job and I think I can speak for everyone here in saying that we are all terribly proud of you."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"What Shelley and I had set up for you here at the house was supposed to be a giant celebration. But I'm afraid that celebration will have to be postponed, unless of course you want to continue it after what I have to say. And what I have to say doesn't directly have to do with you, it has to do with Jake."

Jake's body straightened when he heard his name.

"Though it has to do with Jake, you are the reason we've chosen to save this information until now. Before we go any further, let me say that there are times in our lives when we have opportunities or challenges. Every challenge IS an opportunity."

Gabe's eyes shifted to Jake. He seemed to be relaxed but alert. Jake reminded him of his father, Master Appel, and also of Gabe's own father.

Eric looked at Jake. "I'll let your father speak now."

"Jake," John began, "something happened at home."

"Is Mom okay?" Jake said.

"Your mother is fine. It's Laynah."

Jake's breathing increased.

"She was at the lake and..."

"Yeah, she texted me and told me she was there yesterday. I've tried to call her back but she doesn't answer," Jake said.

"Jake, she was at the lake alone and Brett showed up."

Jake was breathing hard now.

"He beat her up pretty badly."

Jake's jaw clenched. His chest now heaved as he breathed.

"And— he raped her."

Jake's eyes closed.

The room was quiet. Ricky put a hand on one of Jake's shoulders. Joey put his hand on the other. Cam stood at the ready.

"There *are* things to be grateful for," John said quickly. "The fact that she's alive being first. As unstable as the guy obviously is, he could have killed her. Why he didn't I'm not sure. But I am grateful."

Jake nodded slowly as he got his breathing under control. "I— have to get home to her."

"We know," Jason said. "We have a chopper standing by to get you and your family to the airstrip ASAP. I have a jet and pilots standing by. There will be another chopper waiting in Atlanta to take you to Pine Forest."

"When did this happen?" Jake asked, his voice deadly quiet.

"Yesterday."

He shook his head as the emotions welled up. "She tried to call me. Then texted me. I had my phone off so I wouldn't disturb the training. It must've happened right after that."

John nodded. "Ty says he found her cell phone at the scene. She texted you about 11:30. The attack happened just after noon."

Gabe broke in. "So, you guys knew this happened but you didn't tell Jake until just now because of me?" Gabe asked incredulously.

"It was my call and I made the decision," John said. "Your dad wanted to tell him right away and hightail it back, but I saw things differently."

"Well, I agree with my dad," Gabe said.

John smiled. "Let me try to explain. The event was gonna be nationally televised. You couldn't drop out. There was a contract."

"So? I couldn't drop out but Jake could already be at home."

John sighed. "If Jake had left, you would have wanted to know why. You would have been at least as upset as you are now. What you were facing was difficult enough. How do you think you would have done with your mind all over the place?"

"Who cares?" Gabe shot back.

"I imagine the Kinos care, especially Grandmaster Kino. They spent a lot of

money hosting the event. It was a great honor for them to do this on your behalf, in honor of YOU and me, I might add. What happened to Laynah happened, and there was nothing we could do to change it. I knew the event would have a huge impact, so I made the call and I stick by it."

"Dad's right," Jake said softly.

"I need to correct one small point," Eric said. "Money had nothing to do with this decision. We would have taken the loss. No big deal. The decision was made with YOUR well-being in mind, Gabe. Because it was a nationally televised event and highly publicized, to drop out would have made you infamous for life. To fight poorly would also have made you infamous for life."

Gabe looked down. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be disrespectful, not to you and not to you, Master Appel."

"It's okay," John replied. "It's a stressful situation."

"How did they, uh, find her?" Jake asked. "Or who found her?"

"No one found her. She climbed back in her car after he left her there and drove herself home. In her panic she left her phone near the shore of the lake. Chaz and Lisa were home, thank goodness and got her to the hospital."

Jake shook his head. "That's my Laynahbug. So strong." He sighed. He needed to talk to her. "Why hasn't she been answering her phone? How is she? Can she speak?"

"Yes, she can speak. She hasn't answered your calls because she was briefed on our decision. But she is very much looking forward to your call now," his father said.

Jake frowned. "Anyone know where Brett is?"

There it is, John thought. It was what they'd been waiting for. "Ty put out an APB and they were able to pick him up west of Atlanta. They think he was headed out of state to go to his brother's place in Texas."

"So, they have him? Good. I won't have to go hunting."

"You will let the *law* take care of him."

"Is that what you think?"

Ricky smiled, as did a few others in the room.

"He will go down, Jake. The evidence is all there. Her battered body, his DNA on her clothing and on her body and under her nails. Her blood and DNA on his clothing that he was still wearing when they picked him up. I'm telling you, he will go down. There is no doubt."

"Yes, he will," Jake said softly, the words his father had just spoken making him shudder. He looked up at Ricky, Joey and Cam standing nearby, the situation dawning on him. "So, you guys were here to restrain me if I were to go crazy when I was told?"

Ricky shrugged with a smile. Patted his shoulder. "Or just to keep you calm."

"I wasn't sure how you would react," John said. "It was just a precaution."

"Well, no offense, but if I'd wanted to go crazy, you guys couldn't have stopped me."

"Is that what you think?" Ricky said, throwing his words back at him.

"That's exactly what I think."

Cam chuckled. Joey snorted. The testosterone in the room surged.

"This could be fun," Ricky said.

"I have a great idea," Mark said with false enthusiasm. "We could start a new challenge. We could call it the Kino *Family* Battle, and we will face off on each other. Just think of how much money people would pay to see that!"

The hormone levels calmed.

Jake moaned. "I need to call Laynah."

"Yes, you do. And you guys need to pack your stuff and get out of here," Eric added. "But I have one more thing to discuss and then we can go."

Everyone nodded. Eric looked at Gabe. "A little while ago I spoke of challenges and opportunities. Well, when you get home, you're gonna have plenty of both. This social media thing is powerful. It can be used in very good ways, to spread a message of light, or in very destructive ways."

Gabe frowned. "It's just a few YouTube videos, right?"

Eric shook his head and motioned at young Eric to explain.

"It's not just a few," young Eric began. "And it's not just YouTube. It's Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and a dozen other smaller sites. We're talking millions of views already. That one girl who interviewed you twice today, her name is Isla August at Teenspotter.com. She has over twenty million followers. She's given you a moniker of yUM."

"Yum?"

"The UM part stands for Ultimate Male. The 'Y' was added for obvious reasons."

Gabe's face reddened.

Young Eric went on. "Gabe, twenty million followers. You just don't realize what that means. The power she wields is strong. So, what that means is your life is about to change. It could be cool. It could be rough. You have to play it well. I know firsthand. Coming from a famous family, with my dad and my mom, my Aunt Jeffy, it isn't a bed of roses."

"What's so hard?"

"Ya never know who wants to be your friend. Is it because they're your friend or because you're famous. Maybe they genuinely like you, or maybe they like you only because they believe everything they've read about you or heard about you on social media. And Gabe, once you're famous, and YOU are bro, the things people write about you and say about you get further and further from the truth. And people will want to use you all the time to make a buck. You have to find a fine line to walk, to please them, stroke their egos a little and maintain a little bit of privacy, and that's harder than you think. For example, at this moment there are several paparazzi sitting outside our gate hoping to get a shot of you."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

Eric sighed. "Keegan, this is gonna be a challenge for you. Keep your head on a swivel. I know that you know the dangers of the media. So, increase security at

your home. Monitor the situation."

Keegan nodded. "Got it."

"Keeg," Jason said. "Ameritech will take care of its own. Whatever resources you need will be available to you."

"Thanks, Jason."

"Then this meeting is adjourned. Everyone go talk to your wives. I'm sure they're curious about what's going on."

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Jake immediately went up to the room he'd been staying in, his phone pressed to his ear. Finally she picked up.

"Hello."

"Laynah."

She sniffed and immediately the tears came. "Oh, Jake, I miss you so much."

"Bugs, I miss you too. I'm about to be on a chopper that's taking me to the airport. I'll be home soon, hon. Hold on."

"I am holding on."

"Baby, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry for what happened. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry you've had to wait on me. It wasn't my decision."

"The decision was explained to me and I completely understand it, and even agree with it. It's just that it's been hard. I need you. I just need you to hold me."

"I will, Bugs, I'll be there in about five and a half hours."

She sighed. "Just talking to you, I already feel better."

"I do too. I've heard about how strong you've been. Be strong just a little while longer."

"Not so strong, Jake. But I'll hold on. I love you, Jake. I know we haven't gotten that far in our relationship and you don't have to say it back. But, I just wanted you to know, I love you. When Brett, um, when it was happening, I thought he was gonna kill me."

Dear Lord, Jesus. Jake closed his eyes at the words she spoke.

"And I remember thinking I was gonna die without saying those words to you and how much I regretted that. I love you, Jake. I have for a very long time."

"Laynah, I... "

"Please don't say anything else. Whatever you were about to say, I want to see your face, I want to look into your eyes when you say it."

He sighed. "Okay, Bugs. Look, I gotta go so that I can get home to you. Stay strong, Bugs. See you soon."

"Soon," she agreed.

Jake ended the call, and then had to take a second to get his emotions under control before he headed downstairs.

JoJo approached Jake as everyone was saying their goodbyes. "Jake, uh, just wanted to say, I am truly sorry about what's happened to Laynah. Ya know, I, uh, didn't even realize you two were, like, together."

Jake eyed JoJo, who was only a few months younger than he. "Oh man, JoJo, I just remembered, you and Laynah had a thing, right?"

JoJo shrugged. “Maybe for a minute. I was about Gabe’s age. You guys all came to visit when all that was happening with Granddad and Grandma being kidnapped. I was definitely interested. I mean, a gorgeous and super sweet redhead, who wouldn’t be? But, it’s kind of hard to have a ‘thing’ when I live in Cali and she lives in Georgia. Anyway, listen, tell her I’m sorry for what happened to her.”

Jake nodded. “Thanks. I will.” He frowned. “I also just remembered that she kissed you.”

JoJo smiled. “Yep. And it didn’t suck. But I didn’t kiss her back.”

“Yeah, right.”

JoJo offered his hand. “Really, if there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“Thanks.” They shook hands.

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April 6th Evening, Saturday

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

“I knew this day was coming, but I didn’t think it would be so hard,” Taylor Kino said to Gabe as she leaned against his chest.

He bent his head and kissed her for the umpteenth time. “Me neither.” He looked down at her. “So, this is gonna be like, a thing, right?”

She smiled. “I hope so. I like it. I like you.”

“Me too. I mean, I like you too. I gotta figure out a way to get back here to see you again. I only have a few more months of school. Maybe this summer.”

“Yes, and maybe I can come see you too.”

“That would be great,” he said as he kissed her again.

“Um, Gabe, don’t say anything about me to the media, okay? And not to your friend you were talking to the other day. It won’t be pretty if word gets out that there’s anything going on between yUM and Ricky Kino’s and Breanna Adams’ daughter. Next thing you know they’ll have us in a long-term relationship and we’ve been keeping it a secret and I’m pregnant with your baby and... ”

“What?”

She shrugged. “That’s how it goes. Tell me you won’t say a thing.”

“I promise.”

He kissed her again, long and slow.

“Gabe,” Grandmaster Kino called from the top deck. “They’re waiting on you.”

He sighed. “I gotta go.” He stepped back. Watched her as a tear ran over her cheek. He would keep that in his mind a long time.

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April 7th Wee hours of Sunday Morning

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake decided to text Chaz to let him know he was on the way to the house so that he didn’t wake everyone by knocking on the door since it was almost two o’clock in the morning.

- *Hey Uncle Chaz. Just a heads-up. Chopper will be landing in your front pasture in about twenty minutes. Can you let me in?*

- *Front door will be open. Come in and lock it behind you, please.*
- *Will do. Thanks.*
- *Brace yourself. She feels better- physically- but looks pretty bad.*
- *Got it.*
- *And Jake- I know how you're feeling. Check that temper at the door. She doesn't need to feel that and she WILL pick up on it.*
- *Copy that.*

Twenty minutes later, Jake was letting himself in at the Stewart home. He quietly set his luggage down, locked the front door and headed for the stairs, his heart pounding in anticipation. Once upstairs he realized he didn't know which door was Laynah's. He walked silently down the hall, hoping there was something to give it away, like a name, or something pink, though pink could be Aralyn's. Then he saw a sticker on a door. A horse. Had to be her. He slowly turned the knob and opened the door and peeked in. There was a queen-sized bed against the left wall, but there was no one in it. Then he saw her. Sitting in the window seat. She turned.

He couldn't see her very well in the dark, but the moonlight coming through the window was enough to make him realize that Laynah had taken a severe beating. *Check the temper, check the temper, he reminded himself.*

"Jake?" she whispered.

"Yes, sweetheart, it's me."

She stood as he crossed the room. Once he got to her, he was afraid of being rough and accidentally hurting her, so he very gently wrapped his arms around her. She laid her head on his chest, and totally broke down.

They stood there a long time while she cried. When it appeared she wasn't gonna be done any time soon, he lifted her and carried her to bed. He laid her down and got in bed right beside her and covered them both up.

She turned into him. "Oh Jake, I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too, Bugs. Me too. You just go ahead and cry as much as you want. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He held her, kissed her forehead, stroked her back and whispered to her until she fell asleep.

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April 7th Wee hours of Sunday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"You need to get some sleep," Keegan told Gabe as they entered the house.

"I slept on the plane."

"You need to get some more sleep."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir, I'll go up and try."

Gabe grabbed his luggage and headed for the stairs, then turned and grabbed his father's too. "I'll, uh, just drop this by your door."

"Thank you."

"No prob."

Keegan watched his strong son as he carried four bags upstairs. Was it his imagination or had his son changed? He seemed more serious, or, maybe the kid was just tired. He'd definitely been through a difficult week. Nothing traumatic. Though traumatic to Gabe and traumatic to Keegan were two completely different things. Keegan had been to war, he'd not only killed, but violently killed, *and* he'd been tortured. He knew what was traumatic, but he'd made it through it all. But Gabe was an innocent. The most violence he's ever experienced was maybe a fight on the pitcher's mound, or a hard hit on a QB, and now, the Mini-MART tournament. Still, Gabe *did* see Jeff's injuries. Maybe that got to him. Or maybe it was just that he'd had to push himself further than he'd ever been. Keegan decided he needed to take time to have a heart-to-heart with his son.

He'd deal with it quickly, because that's how he rolled. He'd also deal with home security quickly, because the last thing he wanted was a bunch of media people hanging around. He didn't care whether they were pros or amateurs, they were at least a nuisance and at worst, extremely dangerous mentally and even physically.

Keegan shook his head. The "Ultimate male." He couldn't hold back a small smile. His son being labeled the ultimate male, well, there were a lot worse things he could be called.

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April 7th Sunday Morning

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake woke to fingers softly touching his face. His eyes opened and he immediately felt his temper rise. The desire to tear Brett's heart out of his chest was strong. He pushed it down and pasted a smile on his face.

"Good morning," he whispered.

"Hey." She ran a finger down his nose then back up and across his forehead.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making sure you're real and not just a figment of my imagination."

"I'm really here. How are you, uh, feeling?"

She sighed. "Well, I thought that somehow, once you got here I'd miraculously be all better, but I'm not."

"It's not even been forty-eight hours, Bugs. Give it time," he said softly.

She was silent.

"Bugs?"

"Yep."

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"I, I'm not sure."

He stayed silent.

"I was so stupidly scared."

"Um, of course you were. Why is that stupid?"

She shrugged. "It's not like me. I'm usually not afraid of anything. I HATE that he was able to scare me. I hate it," she repeated as her throat clogged with emotion.

Jake wasn't sure what to say to that and was realizing he was way out of his league. He needed to speak with his parents. He ran his hand over her face and down her arm and said the first thing that came to his mind. "Even hardened Marines get scared when they're facing life-and-death situations."

She looked into his eyes, then sat up.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom."

"Oh." He threw the covers off, moved out of her way and watched her go. She was limping slightly. Her hair had been braided into one long tail. She wore purple pajama bottoms and a gray t-shirt with a "Southeast Equestrians" logo on the back.

When she didn't come right back, he went down the hall to find another bathroom to use himself, but when he got back to her bedroom and she still wasn't out of her bathroom, he knocked softly on the bathroom door. "Bugs?"

She didn't answer. He could hear the shower running so he went ahead and pulled on his socks and shoes. He'd left his bags downstairs near the front door and ran down to retrieve them. He could hear someone in the kitchen and figured it was his Aunt Lisa, but he didn't take time to speak right now. Back in Laynah's room he dug through his stuff, pulled out his toothbrush and deodorant and went back to the hall bathroom to clean up. When he got back to the room and Laynah still wasn't out of the bathroom he got concerned. He turned the knob and peeked in to make sure she was okay, but she definitely wasn't. She was still in her pajamas, crouching in the corner of the shower, her head on her knees, sobbing.

"Oh, baby," he muttered. He quickly turned off the freezing cold water, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her. Scooping her up into his arms, he walked her to the bed and placed her gently on it.

Her teeth were chattering. She needed to get dry. He ran down the stairs to the kitchen. "Aunt Lisa," he said urgently. "I, uh, Laynah needs your help."

She followed him upstairs to Laynah's room. He watched as Laynah's mom took over. She looked back up at him. "Chaz is out taking care of the horses. Can you go help him?"

He nodded and quickly left the room.

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April 7th Sunday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe came down the stairs into the kitchen. He stopped on the next-to-last step and just watched. His beautiful, Grammy-winning mom was singing as she made

his favorite breakfast, pancakes and bacon. His two-year-old sister, Iris, was in her booster chair, the older sisters who were closest in age to him at twenty-two, Daisy and Lily, were chatting as they set the table but looked up when they realized he was there.

"And there he is, our star!" Lily sang.

Lizzy turned from the stove and smiled up at her only son. "Gabriel!"

He came to her and hugged her tight. "Hey Mom."

She touched his bruised cheek. "I thought you'd want to sleep in."

"Smells too good in here to sleep," he said with a smile. "Besides I'm going to church with you guys."

"Are you sure? It won't be wrong for you to take a day off and stay home and rest."

He shook his head. "God's been so good to me. A little praise is the least I can do."

"Who is this kid and what have you done with my brother," Lily said as she came to hug him.

Gabe smiled broadly at her. "I love you too, sis."

He turned to Daisy who had become the quiet one. "And you too, Daisy."

He'd been told that a very long time ago, Lily was so shy she would barely speak to anyone, and Daisy used to talk for her. Somewhere along the line, they'd done a reversal, and now Daisy was the one who is quiet and reserved.

"Man, oh, man little bro, did you kick butt! We are all so terribly proud of you!" Lily gushed.

His cheeks turned pink. "Thanks. So, like, did Heather or Rose or Violet get to watch?"

"Rose and Violet did and they're here. They're just being lazy. I thought Rose was gonna throw something through the TV when that happened," Lily said, pointing to his cheek.

Gabe smiled, touched his cheek, remembering the impact. It was the hardest he'd ever been hit in his life. He looked up. "And Heather?"

"Yep, she and a bunch of her friends all watched it together up in Tennessee at her apartment. She called home several times during the match to make comments. She's very proud of you."

He smiled. "Cool." He walked over to his baby sister. "Hello there my little flower," he said as he nuzzled her cheek. "I missed you."

She reached up, her eyes twinkling. "Gabe, Gabe, I want down."

"Oh, no you little rascal, you stay there and I'll sit next to you and let's eat up all the yummy pancakes, okay!"

She giggled and agreed.

He looked up. "I can't believe Dad is still asleep."

Lizzy laughed. "Why would you think that? Is he ever still asleep?"

"Well then, where is he?"

"He should be back any minute. He was walking the perimeter of the property, trying to figure out where to put security cameras and build fences and maybe even

walls."

"You're kidding? Does he really think we're gonna have trouble?"

"Well, honey, he's not sure, but he doesn't take safety for granted when it comes to his family. You know that."

"Gabe," Daisy said. "You do know you're trending, right?"

"I know I was yesterday."

Lily shook her head. "No, you are today. And you're gonna be for a while at least. I'm not even sure you want to see what's going on."

Lizzy turned. "No, he doesn't. Not now anyway. Go call your sisters. Breakfast is ready and then we gotta get ready for church."

"Okay, but Mom, how's Laynah?"

They all got quiet. "She's not good, Gabe, and she needs our prayers."

Gabe sighed. Two hours later, as Gabe sat in church, he had that feeling again, the one he'd felt when Grandmaster Kino had laid hands on him and blessed him. His body felt like a warm light moved through him. It made him feel like he was slightly vibrating, and it made him feel emotional, like when his father hugged him.

"Because that's what is happening Gabe, only not your earthly father, but your Heavenly Father."

It was a thought in his mind, but almost felt like it came from somewhere outside of his mind. It was almost as if he'd heard those words being spoken. He swallowed hard and tried to calm his emotions as he offered up a silent prayer for Jake and Laynah.

As he sat there a couple of girls from his Sunday School class came up and sat next to him. He couldn't remember their names. There wasn't much room in the pew because his family was large, but the girls forced him to scoot over so they could slide in next to him.

The one closest leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Hey Gabe! We saw you fight yesterday. You were so good. I told some of my online friends that you and I went to church together, but they didn't believe me."

He frowned down at her. The girl on the other side of the one who spoke had her phone out.

"So, if you don't mind," the first girl continued to whisper, "we're gonna take a quick pic to prove it."

He turned toward them. "Actually, I do... "

Click. The girl giggled. "Oh, thank you so much. Hey, maybe we can get together sometime. I know, maybe I'll come watch one of your baseball games. You go to Pine Forest, right? I go to Upton. I think we play you guys in football. Anyway, we'd better go back to our seats before we make a scene. Byee!"

He watched them walk away, then turned his head to see his parents and sisters looking at him. His sisters were smiling. His mother looked concerned. His father was frowning. Well, he'd been warned, hadn't he?

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April 7th Sunday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Dad? Do you have a minute to talk?" Jake asked.

John Appel looked at his watch. "I have a few minutes. How's Laynah?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I don't think she's doing very well at all."

Jake went on to describe the things Laynah had confided in him and then how he found her in the shower. John listened intently, nodding his head at times in understanding.

"I feel like I'm in over my head. I don't know what to say to help her. And I'm afraid that anything I say will send her over the edge."

"Well, son, first, you don't have to say anything. What I mean is, many times women want to tell us how they're feeling about something, but they're not asking us to fix the problem. They just want us to know or understand the problem. So, just listen. And don't let whatever she says upset you, or make you mad. She needs you to be her rock, a calm source of strength. No judging. No opinion. She just wants to know that you understand.

"And as far as you saying something that might send her over the edge, ya know, that's not a bad thing. If it does, it does. If it does then that means she needed the release. If you're washing a glass, you have to fill it to overflowing, right?"

Jake nodded. "That makes sense."

"Just be there for her. Listen, encourage her to talk about it. And when the time is right, I'd be happy to practice some EFT on her."

Jake thought about the *Emotional Freedom Technique* his father practiced. It was a kind of acupressure energy alignment technique that was being used to help veterans with PTSD, but the difference was you tap on certain points instead of steady pressure.

Grimacing, he shook his head. "I don't think Laynah would be open to that. She's kind of hard-headed."

John smiled. "You'd be surprised how, when people are suffering, they're willing to try anything to make the pain stop. Besides, her father would help convince her, since EFT pretty much saved his life. That and God, and of course, Lisa."

"You've done EFT on Uncle Chaz? For what?"

"If he wants you to know, he'll have to tell you himself."

Jake nodded.

"Well, I know you're tired, but you've barely spent any time with your mom, and she really needs to hug her little boy, if you don't mind."

He smiled. "I don't ever mind being hugged by my mom."

"Good. She's in her office."

"Headed there now."

"You're a good kid, Jake."

"You're a good dad, Dad."

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April 7th Sunday Afternoon

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

It felt good to be back on a horse. She wasn't really riding the horse since she sat on Santana in front of Jake and he was very slowly walking him across the west pasture, toward the back gate that opened into the woods. Still, it felt good to feel the movement of the powerful animal beneath her, to feel the strength of Jake's arm around her waist, to lean back and rest against the muscular chest behind her, and feel his chin rest on the top of her head.

"I noticed you limping this morning. What's hurt? Your ankle?" Jake asked.

"No. I think I pulled a muscle in my thigh. I tried to kick him. I connected a few times but he grabbed my legs and..." She stopped. She couldn't bear to say the words, to describe how he got her into the position he wanted. Her body shuddered.

"It's okay. You don't have to talk about it." Jake tried hard to not show the anger. What was he gonna do? Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, Jake reminded himself for about the hundredth time, but he really desperately wanted to kill this guy. He didn't just want to kill him. He wanted to torture him. He wanted to hurt him so bad that he broke down and cried and begged him to stop. He wanted to castrate him. This need for revenge was not a good feeling. It was making him feel like a caged animal. He took a deep breath and tried to let it go.

He leaned forward once they reached the fence. "You wanna get down for a few minutes?"

She nodded. He dismounted and she slid down into his arms.

"Behave," he said to Santana, then took Laynah's hand and walked slowly with her through the gate and into the trees. They stopped in a peaceful area where the creek bubbled prettily over the rocks. She sat down cross-legged. He sat in front of her.

His eyes moved over her bruised and swollen face, then lower. There were scratches on her neck. He could see a dark bruise where the first button on her shirt was undone. He reached up and opened the material a tiny bit. It looked like she'd been in a car accident. His eyes moved back to hers. She'd been watching him as he'd looked her over.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was just wondering how many injuries there are and how long it will take to heal."

Her eyes welled with tears but almost immediately changed to fire. She reached up and unbuttoned two more of the buttons of her shirt. "This looks really bad, right? I mean, it looks like I've been hit in the chest with a cannonball. But hey, it doesn't look nearly as bad as the insides of my thighs. Oh, and you should see my arms. But don't worry, Jake, in a few weeks you'll barely be able to tell."

His brow wrinkled. Did she think he was worried about how she looks? "Bugs, I didn't mean it like that. I was just trying to determine the extent of your injuries and how long you'll be uncomfortable. It's killing me to see you so banged up, so ill at ease. That's all."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry that it's so hard on *you*."

"Do you know why it's so hard on me?" he countered. "Because when someone you love is suffering, you suffer too."

The fire in her eyes died. She stared at him for several moments. "When

someone you love?"

"Yeah. You wouldn't let me say it the other night on the phone. You said you wanted to see my eyes. Well, look at me." He pointed toward his eyes. "I love you, Laynahbug. I love you and I don't freakin' know what to do about it. I love you enough to want to kill a guy. And I love you enough to stay here."

Her eyes opened wide. "What? No!"

"No?"

"No, Jake, you can't just stop being a Marine. It's who you are. It's one of the parts of you that I love. This guy, this man, who feels it's his calling to step up and be a warrior. To serve others. To protect those who can't protect themselves. I love everything about you and everything you are, so, no, you can't change who you are for me. Why would you even think about doing that? Because I would miss you? Because I'm gonna be sad when you're not home? Well, that just shows that I'm perfect for you, because I'm strong enough to wait for you when you have to leave, and to be here for you when you come back!"

Her words surprised both of them.

He closed his eyes, then opened them and put his hands on either side of her face. "That right there, everything that you just said, is why I love you."

She placed her hands on his.

"I'd kiss you right now if I thought it wouldn't cause you pain."

She smiled.

He tilted her head forward and kissed her forehead.

"Do you think we're too young to know what real love is?" she asked.

He sighed, shrugged. "Maybe. But like, I'm old enough to make the decision to give my life in the service of my country, so I'm gonna go with 'no,' I'm not too young to know what real love is."

Laynah sighed. "I've loved you for so long, it almost feels like it was meant to be since before we were born."

Jake looked deep into her eyes. "I think I like the sound of that."

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April 7th Sunday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric Kino glanced at his phone before he picked up. "Hello there, Jake."

"Hello, Grandmaster Kino, I hope I'm not disturbing you, sir."

"Not at all. I was actually expecting a call from you."

"Really? That's interesting."

"I imagine you're calling about Melaynah, and how you might be able to help her."

"Yes, sir, that is exactly why I'm calling. I've already spoken to my father, but I thought I would get your take on things too."

"And what did John say?"

"Well, he pretty much told me to listen to her, to stay calm, not show her my anger, and to not try to fix things, but just let her know I understand what she's feeling."

"That's good. He's exactly right. But, how can you listen to her if she's pretty much not talking, right?"

"Exactly."

"In order for her to heal, she needs to be able to talk about it, about every single thing that happened, every single thing she went through."

"Well, I don't think she wants to relive it."

"Of course she doesn't, because that is a painful thing to do. But Jake, when someone is traumatized, we need to learn to not push the experience away, because that will only prolong the pain. Forget what you may have heard about safe spaces. People who need to heal need to experience what happened to them fully, wallow in the pain and sorrow of it, really feel it, really be mindful of all the ways it makes them feel, and then, only then, can they let it go and be done with it. If they push it away first, and just never talk about it, it will fester and grow. Talking about it, reliving it, is like lancing a festering wound and it's much better to lance it than to wait for it to explode."

"So, you said they have to experience fully what happened to them, but didn't people already do that the first time around when something bad happens?"

"No. First time around they are in shock. They were not mindful of what they were feeling, or thinking, or experiencing. So, the point of all this is, you have to get her to talk about it. That's how she'll become mindful."

"How can I do that?"

"Ask her specific questions."

"I hate to sound like an idiot, but what kind of questions?"

"Jake, you don't sound like an idiot. You sound like a young man who cares very deeply for a young lady."

"I do. But I don't know what to ask her."

"What time of day was it? What were you thinking when you saw him approach? When he left you, what was the first thing you did? Was there a time when you reconciled yourself to the fact that it was gonna happen and there was nothing you could do about it? Did he speak to you? Did he say anything to you during or after he raped you? And yes, use that word. Don't shy away from it, because that IS what happened to her and using that word will help her to wallow."

"Those sound like some volatile questions."

"There is no way to soften what took place. The guy didn't gently rape her. If you don't feel equipped to do this, and I totally understand that, I can recommend someone to you for her to see. Someone I trust in your general location."

"I want to try to help her myself."

"I had a feeling you would say that. But Jake, you know, your father is a healer."

"Yes, I know, and we've spoken about him helping Laynah. I'm just trying to seek help from every corner."

"I commend you on your effort."

Jake was silent a second.

"I'm sensing you have something else you want to discuss?" Eric added.

Jake sighed. "I guess it's something about me. I'm almost ashamed to tell you,

but it's become a serious problem." He stopped there.

After a minute Eric asked, "Did you want me to guess what it is?"

Jake gave a short laugh. "Could you do that?"

"Probably."

"Really? I'll play. What am I struggling with?"

"A need for vengeance."

"Wow."

"Not bad for an old man, huh?"

"I have never thought of you as an old man, but, yeah, you're almost right on."

"Almost?"

"Well, I would say it's more like I'm struggling with wanting to kill a man. And make him suffer first. And I use the word 'man' lightly. So, how did you know?"

Eric sighed. "My wife was raped. Twice. And assaulted several times."

Jake was silent a moment. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

Eric nodded. "We don't dwell on it. My Shelley girl learned that we are only victims if we allow ourselves to be. She had a hard time getting over it, the first time, but she finally learned that we don't have to let what happens to us decide how the rest of our life will be. We don't have to play the victim for the rest of our lives. So, Jake, don't let Laynah fall into victimhood."

"Yes, sir. May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"What happened to the guy who raped her?"

"The first guy never got caught. Some of the police officers actually made Shelley feel like they didn't really believe her, even worse, her husband at the time led her to believe that he wasn't sure he believed her either."

"Did you believe her?"

"I think the description of what took place is something she couldn't have made up, and the trauma she had to overcome was definitely real."

"She's such a good lady."

"She is that."

"So, what happened to the second guy? Did he get caught?"

"He got dead."

"How did he die?"

"I killed him."

Silence again. And then, "Well, I have to say, I did not expect that."

"I'm sorry if it disappoints you."

"You mean, makes me disappointed in YOU? Never. It only makes me see another dimension of you. I've heard you say that a warrior like my dad sometimes has to do the hard things, things no one else wants to do. I see that you aren't just saying words. So, the Marine in me wants to know, if you don't mind me asking, did you shoot him?"

"No. I killed him with a knife."

"Wow. Again, I did not expect that. How did I not know this?"

"We don't dwell on it. Your father knows the story."

"How old was Ricky when it all went down?"

"He was twenty-two. It was a bad time. The man did terrible things to my wife. I was shackled nearby and was made to watch the whole thing." He paused. Drew a deep breath. "He tortured her. He tried to get her to kill herself and she almost did. Which meant she almost killed our Jeffy, because Shelley was pregnant. But God spoke to her and told her to not give up and she listened."

"God spoke to her?"

"He did. He will speak to us all. We only have to get in tune and listen. We have to build a relationship, through prayer. If one never speaks with their father, how would they know His voice when he speaks?"

"I'm trying."

"I know you are. Try praying with the woman you love. It's a beautiful thing."

"I will do that, sir. If you don't mind, the warrior in me wants to know, how did you come to kill the guy with a knife if you were shackled?"

"I was able to get my legs free and used them to pull him off of her. She ran. The guy went after her. Ricky, Justin and Jason came and freed me. We chased them down and I came upon him about to slit her throat. I threw the knife and hit him in the heart."

"How far away were you?"

"About twenty feet."

"You hit him right in the heart from twenty feet? That's incredible."

Eric sighed. "I'm good with a knife, and I think God helped my aim. You know, I usually don't talk about this, I try not to dwell on dark things, but I'm telling you all this so that you'll understand that with all this man did to my wife, it was still a difficult thing to kill a man, as much as he needed killing. I didn't see a way out of it. It was his life or hers. I chose well and did what I had to do. Of course there's much more to it than that. Many more things happened. Speaking in retrospect though, if there was some way I could have kept from killing him, I would have. Sometimes we have to do hard things.

"There is evil in the world, Jake. It goes after those with the light of Christ and tries to put out their light. And, as you said you've heard me say, that's why God has sent His warriors, men like you and me and your father, to do the hard things. However, those hard things—now listen carefully, those hard things may include staying in control of yourself and allowing justice to prevail. I admit, I myself struggled with it. I wanted to hurt him. Eight months before he raped her he beat her almost to death. It was bad. And I wanted to kill him. I did. But I was reminded by her and others that I loved, that me going to prison would hurt her just as much."

"Why did this guy have it in for Mrs. Kino?"

"That is a longer story for another day. Bottom line, we are only victims if we allow ourselves to be. 'Vengeance is mine saith the Lord.' Get her to talk about it. Stay calm, stay in love and do it all in Jesus' name."

"Thank you, Grandmaster Kino."

"You are most welcome."

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Deuteronomy 32:35
"Vengeance is mine, and recompense,
for the time when their foot shall slip;
for the day of their calamity is at hand,
and their doom comes swiftly."

Chapter Ten

April 8th, Monday Morning
Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Mornin' Uncle Chaz."

"Mornin' Jake."

"I can take care of the horses if you'd like," Jake offered.

Chaz looked the boy over. Well, not a boy, but a man, he reminded himself. He nodded at Jake. "You can help me."

They worked together silently for some time.

It was Jake who broke the silence. "So, Uncle Chaz, do you know the status of the case?"

"The status?"

"Well, I mean, will Brett get out on bail?"

"More than likely," Chaz said as he hefted a bale of hay into a stall.

"Do you know when?"

"Could be as early as today."

Jake nodded silently.

Chaz looked him over. "Does your father know what you're thinking about doing?"

Jake looked confused. Geez, was he so easy to read? "Well, heck, if you know, then I'm guessing my father knows."

Chaz nodded. "I know because I'm Laynah's father, and I love her, and I know what I feel like doing."

Jake nodded. "I spoke to Grandmaster Kino and he told me that doing something illegal and getting myself thrown in jail would only hurt Laynah more than she's already been hurt."

"And how do you feel about that?"

Jake ran a hand over his hair. "I feel useless."

Chaz nodded. "I get it Jake. I do. But Grandmaster Kino is right. As much as I'd like to tear this guy apart with my bare hands, I don't want to hurt my daughter again, or my wife, or my family, by giving in to my baser urges. I have to be strong enough to do the right thing."

Jake looked down, realizing Chaz was right. "You're right, Uncle Chaz. And I swear, not giving in to those urges is harder, much harder. So, I'll be strong and not kill him. But, I have to do *something*. Even if it's just to have a few words with him. Remember, Ty made me stand down earlier when I wanted to have a word with Brett. He said he would go and issue a formal warning to Brett and Brett's father

and ya see how much good that did. Honor dictates that I at least address the issue with him."

Chaz didn't argue with him.

Jake continued. "I mean, he not only used his fists on her, he not only raped her, but he took her virginity."

Chaz' eyes narrowed. "And now, you don't want her?"

"Are you kidding me? What kind of man do you think I am?"

"Don't be offended, Jake. I'm just trying to figure out where you're coming from."

"I'm coming from seeing things from her point of view. She's never had sex. Her first time is a horrific experience...."

"That wasn't sex," Chaz interrupted.

"I get that, but the act is the same. It's gonna be difficult to undo the negative experience she's had and help her to know about real love, I mean about the act of making *real* love." Jake's face colored as he thought he may have said too much.

Chaz sighed and closed his eyes for a second. "I'm guessing, from here forward, you're thinking that part is now up to you?"

Jake swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. I mean, if she says 'yes' when I ask her to marry me, that is if you'll approve of me doing that."

Chaz nodded slowly. "How did we get from having a talk with Brett to asking for my daughter's hand in marriage?"

"Uh, I'm not sure sir. To be honest I wasn't expecting to say those words, but since I've said them, they feel pretty right." Jake smiled.

"You haven't even been home two weeks, son. Slow down. Think about things. Talk to your parents. Give Laynah some time to heal. Then, when you're ready, you have my blessing. But you will still have to talk to Lisa."

Jake nodded. "Yes, sir. So, back to what I originally wanted to say, just a heads-up, I have to report to base next week but before then, I intend to have a conversation with Brett Adderman."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, sir. I got this."

"Watch your six."

"Roger that."

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April 8th Monday Morning

Pine Forest High School, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe grabbed the books he needed for his next class and shut his locker. So far it had been a very strange day. You would think that the entire school had suddenly become martial arts fans and had all watched him on TV. Before today, no one at school even knew he was a black belt except for the few who took Master Appel's classes. Even the principal congratulated him on his win during the morning announcements. Kids who'd never spoken to him before were stopping to talk, patting him on the back. Girls were literally throwing themselves at him. His ex-girlfriend from back when he was a sophomore was suddenly making eyes at him

again.

He looked up to see Peyton coming toward him, grinning.

"Hard day?" Peyton asked.

"It's like the whole freakin' world has gone crazy."

"I know, right? It's so cool. I'm proud of you, man."

"So you've said about a dozen times. I can't wait for this last class to be over and we can go to baseball practice and just do our thing, ya know?"

"I guess," Peyton answered.

"What do you mean by, 'I guess'?"

"Have you not seen what's going on? Have you checked your TikTok or Instagram?"

"No, I haven't had time."

Peyton pulled out his phone. Punched a few buttons. Turned the phone around. Gabe looked at the phone and his stomach dropped. He couldn't fathom what he was looking at. Peyton used his thumb to scroll down, showing not a few, not dozens, but hundreds, maybe thousands of videos and pictures, all of him. Gabe felt sick.

"And look at this," Peyton continued. "Did you know that ESPN did research on you before the match Saturday and ran this piece?"

Gabe looked. It was an article about Gabe being the son of former FBI Special Agent Keegan Tanner who was famous back eighteen years earlier when he broke up a giant child trafficking ring and was subsequently called in front of a congressional hearing for alleged excessive force.

His breath hitched. His father was not gonna be happy about that.

"And that's not all," Peyton said. He went to YouTube, clicked on trending shorts of yUM. He thumbed through. There were hundreds of videos of *him*. Gabe looked at a few. One was of him taking that punch to the face. Another showed the sidekick that put Julian on his back and was Gabe's first score. Another was him taking the groin shot, over and over and over. Another of him on his knees right after the groin shot with the words "Balls of steel" flashing across the screen.

Gabe cursed, which he didn't often do.

He scrolled some more. Saw close-up pics of just his body parts. One of his chest, one of his abs, one of his mouth, one of his eyes, with some comments about his "gorgeous blue eyes," and then some pics of his "midsection" with comments that made him blush.

Gabe shook his head. Pushed the phone away from his face. "What the hell. I was right. The whole world has gone crazy." He started to class. "We're gonna be late."

Peyton watched him go. To him it was just cool, and entertaining. But he knew his friend was kind of a quiet guy. Serious. Peyton might have to help him navigate all this stuff. He shrugged. It couldn't hurt *him* either to be the best friend of the most popular guy in school.

Later as they undressed in the locker room, Gabe was looking forward to practice, to some normalcy in his crazy day. But even in the locker room he

couldn't escape it.

"Hey Gabe," Lucas, the first baseman, called. "Why don't you show us those balls of steel."

Everyone laughed, and so did Gabe. What else was he supposed to do? The whole thing was ridiculous.

"I wouldn't piss him off if I were you," came from Liam, the catcher.

There was a murmur of agreement from the room at large.

"I ain't scared of Gabe," Elias said.

"Oooooh," the group called.

Center fielder Peyton decided to step in and rescue his friend before things got a little crazy. "Well I am. He's beat the heck out of me several times."

"That ain't sayin' much," Lucas returned.

Peyton frowned at Lucas, whom the team all called Luke, because Peyton's little brother was also Lucas. But luckily, at Luke's remark, there was laughter all around and the tension dissipated.

After that, thank goodness, the rest of practice went down as normal.

At home that night dinner was strained. Gabe's sisters were over at the Stewarts, visiting with and cheering up Laynah. Gabe's mom and dad were abnormally quiet. Iris was making a mess smacking her spoon in her mashed potatoes.

"How was school?" Keegan asked.

Gabe swallowed. "Not great."

"Wanna talk about it?"

Gabe glanced at his mom. He certainly did *not* want to talk about his "balls of steel" in front of his mother. He shook his head. "No, sir. Not right now."

Keegan nodded. "In my office after dinner then." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir."

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April 8th Early Monday Evening

Joe's Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake sipped on his beer at the bar at Joe's. He grabbed a second slice of the pepperoni pizza and stuffed it in his mouth. Next to him, his friend Kurt was making short work of some triple hot wings.

"I don't know how you do that," Jake commented.

"It's because he's not human," Landon, sitting on the other side of Jake, put in.

"They're good. Try one," Kurt argued, pushing the plate toward him.

Jake shook his head. "Nope. I have this firm belief that your food shouldn't hurt."

"What a wuss," Kurt mumbled.

Bartender Josh Turner, who was an old high school friend of Laynah's dad, set the called for shot glasses in front of them and filled each one to the brim with some straight Jack Daniel's.

"What's the occasion, boys?" Josh asked.

"We're fixin' to go kill a man," Landon said.

Josh smiled. "Really? Who's the lucky guy?"

"I could tell ya, but... "

"Then I'd have to kill ya," all four men finished together.

"Well, then, maybe you guys should keep a clear head," Josh suggested.

"I'm good," Jake said, "and I'm the one that counts."

Josh's eyes questioned. "You guys ARE just kiddin' around, right?"

"Of course," Jake said quickly. "I'm not even carryin' tonight."

The three young men finished their food, pushed back.

"It's about dark, Jake. You ready to do this?"

Jake nodded, tipped his beer up for one last swallow, placed money on the counter and stood up. "Who's driving?"

Kurt eyed Landon. "I think I'd better. Landon had a head start before we got here."

They headed out and climbed into Kurt's hydro-blue Ram pickup.

"I'm guessing you know the way," Kurt asked.

Jake nodded. "Only driven by there a few dozen times in the past twenty-four hours."

"Wow, stalkin' the guy. That's a bad sign."

"Well, I was exaggerating."

They zoomed south on SR19. Thirty minutes later they rolled slowly down Hillendale Drive, a high-end, supposedly exclusive neighborhood. Jake had just spent a few days in a truly exclusive neighborhood in Cali, so he wasn't that impressed. These houses were owned by bankers and pilots and attorneys and such. Kurt didn't pull into the drive, but parked out on the street a little ways down. The houses in the neighborhood were spaced a good distance apart so they weren't parked in front of anyone else's property who might get suspicious.

It didn't really matter. Jake was only gonna have a conversation. He had no intention of breaking the law, he'd pretty much promised his Uncle. But this guy has shown violence twice within the week that Jake had first come home. To Jake, that he was even allowed to get out on bail was beyond belief. At least he had an ankle monitor since he was considered a flight risk.

Jake took a deep breath to calm his temper and headed toward the door, his hoodie pulled around his face. Kurt and Landon followed at a distance, being his backup, just in case.

Jake slapped a piece of duct tape over the camera, rang the doorbell and waited. When he finally rang it a second time, the doorknob turned. Brett actually answered the door. As soon as Brett saw who was at the door he tried to slam it, but Jake put his foot in the door, pushed it wide open and stepped in.

"Is your father here?" Jake asked.

"Why do you want my father?"

"Is he here or not?"

"No, why do you want him?"

Jake shook his head. This boy was really not very bright.

"I don't. I just wanted to know who else was here, so that I could invite them to join in this little conversation."

"No one is here. As usual. What do you want? You're not supposed to come within five hundred feet of me."

Jake smiled. "That's not how it works. YOU can't come within five hundred feet of Laynah."

"So, I didn't, so what do you want?"

"Just want to have a conversation."

"So talk. It's not like I'm gonna invite you in to sit down."

"That's fine with me. Answer me this, Brett. What were you thinking? Did you think you could just do what you did and simply get away with it?"

Brett shrugged. "She led me on, like she was gonna give it up, then she just walks away. No girl has ever done that to me."

"Done that to you? To you?" He had to draw a deep breath. "So you think that gives you the right to take her by force?"

"I did, didn't I? And it was worth it."

Jake moved so fast that Brett didn't have time to blink, much less run. He had Brett against the wall, his forearm against his throat.

Brett struggled to breathe and then started to cry. "I'm sorry man. Don't kill me," he gasped.

"It would be so easy, you know, to end your life right now. But I won't, because I want you to live in prison and see what it's like to have someone violate *your* body."

Brett whimpered.

"Here's a promise. You try to run, or you go near her or any member of her family, and your life will come to an abrupt, very painful and very violent end. Got it?"

"Yes," Brett was barely able to grind out.

Jake let him go. "Then I'll see myself out."

Brett stood against the wall, gasping for air and watched him leave.

Jake sighed as he walked outside. It didn't go the way he envisioned. He hadn't meant to go inside the house and he hadn't meant to touch the guy. But Brett said what he'd said with no remorse, and Jake had lost his temper. He moved down the walkway and came up short. There, in the drive, were two cars, each with two men leaning on the cars, arms calmly folded across their chests. Sitting on the ground next to the cars were Jake's friends.

Jake walked slowly toward the scene, his eyes shifting from one man to the next. Finally, he stopped, pointed at them. "Ameritech?"

The men half smiled and slowly nodded.

"So, I guess I'm in trouble?"

One of the men shrugged. "You can figure that out when you speak with Agent Tanner. I'm thinkin' since there was no blood, that you'll probably just get a slap on the wrist."

"It really just depends on what kind of mood he's in," another guy said.

"Yeah, that could be a freakin' hard slap," another said.

"I wouldn't wanna be in your shoes," another said.

"Great," Jake responded, sighing deeply.

"Um. Can we get up now?" Kurt asked.

"Oh, yeah, almost forgot about you guys. You may get up and get your butts outta here."

They rose quickly. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"How do you know there was no blood?" Jake asked.

"We hacked the feed and watched on video," one of the agents replied, holding up his phone.

Jake sighed. "Am I free to go?"

They nodded. "Agent Tanner wants to see you tomorrow at 0600 hours, at his home."

Jake nodded. "I'll be there."

"Hey, I would've done the same thing," one agent said.

"Thanks."

"Semper fi, brother."

Jake looked up quickly as he realized the agent was a Marine. "Oorah."

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April 8th Monday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe sat in his father's office, again, in the hot seat. He blew out a breath. He hoped it wasn't gonna be a long session because he had homework and he was also hoping to get in a quick call to Taylor.

Keegan smiled at his son. "So, I know I've said this a lot lately, but I'm proud of you."

Gabe frowned.

Keegan nodded. That told him what he wanted to know. "It's not because of the tournament you just fought in, though that was impressive. It's because of the young man I see you turning into. Respectful, responsible, kind, protective of your mother and sisters. The qualities I see in you are way beyond your seventeen years."

Gabe offered a small smile.

"So, tell me about your day at school. What happened?"

Gabe drew a deep breath and told him everything that had taken place in school, from his old girlfriend trying to hook up with him right down to the locker room chatter, and the fleeting thought that he may have to face off on a teammate.

"Your mother and I have seen the videos and the pics and the articles, some that you haven't mentioned, and I hope you never see. I guess I have to apologize, son."

"Apologize?"

"Yes. Grandmaster Kino warned us that you fighting in that tournament could bring a lot of publicity, unwanted publicity, and I know all too well that the media can change your life for better or worse, and I think mostly, for worse. I was thinking only about what an honor it was for the Kinos to recognize your talents and skills, and what an opportunity it was for you to test yourself and to reach deep to achieve something. I didn't really give too much thought to what all the publicity could do. I mean, you hadn't killed anybody, so what could they say, 'This kid

fights really well'?

"I didn't think about the fact that they would want more information about you and start digging, and bring up my past. It must be difficult for you to have your friends at school see you and think, 'there's the guy whose father is a killer.' I'm sorry that my past actions... "

"Dad, stop. If kids at school are thinking that, then they're not my friends. The ones who are my real friends have only respect for you. I have only respect for you. I know all about what happened back before I was born. I know what a hero you are, because Jeff, I mean Agent Davis has told me all about it. And Master Appel and I have talked about it. I know what you did and why you had to do it, and I feel really bad that there were people who didn't appreciate your service. But, Dad, there were also people who DO appreciate it, and I'm one of those people."

Keegan didn't often get emotional, but he couldn't stop the moisture that gathered in his eyes. He nodded. "I appreciate the pardon. Still, you are a minor and I should've thought harder about what the consequences would be before I signed that contract to allow you to fight. So, for that, I am sorry. Things might be difficult for a while, Gabe. People gettin' all into your business. The public seeing things that are personal. And when someone rises to the top like you have, when they do it quickly, like you have, there is always jealousy and resentment. And that means people will challenge you. You will have to walk a thin line trying to decide when to defend yourself and when to simply let things go. Always, Gabe, always try to go the non-violent route whenever possible."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir."

Keegan smiled. "So, even though you're the ultimate male, I'd like to ask you to be very aware of your surroundings at all times."

"Dad, I can take care of myself."

Keegan chuckled. "I know you think you can, and I know you've gained quite a bit of confidence since the tournament, but you are no match let's say, for a couple of full grown men who have no qualms about hurting you. A tournament is not even close to a street fight."

"Why would full grown men want to hurt me?"

"I don't know why. I'm trying to cover my bases here. You have no idea what evil there is in the world. Like our Laynahbug. Who would've thought that someone could do to her what he did. She never thought it. But it happened. I don't want to make you cynical, but we have to open our eyes that all this publicity could put you in the crosshairs of someone's scope."

Gabe nodded.

Keegan held up a finger as his phone buzzed and he read the text. He rolled his eyes. Typed out a quick text, hit send.

"Everything okay?" Gabe asked.

"Yep. Jake's just trying to get himself into trouble." He placed his phone down and smiled. "Before I let you go, have you done any more thinking on what college you're gonna go to?"

Gabe shook his head. "I can't figure it out. I just can't seem to decide."

"Well, time is running out."

"Yes, sir. I'll do some more thinking and praying and see what I can figure out."

"I will too. Do you have homework?"

"Yes, sir."

"I guess I'll let you get to it, unless you have something else to discuss."

"Well, I do want to ask something, if that's okay."

"Shoot."

He smiled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Anyway, so, I guess I don't want to ask something. I want to ask *for* something. And I'm completely willing to work for it."

"Oookaaay."

"When school gets out, can I take a little trip?"

"A trip to where?" he asked, though he knew the answer.

Gabe smiled. "To California?"

"I'll see if I can arrange it."

"Thanks, Dad," Gabe said as he rose.

Keegan came around the desk. Held his hand out, shook his son's hand and then brought him in for a hug. "Remember son, be awake and aware. Even balls of steel won't help if you're taken by surprise."

"Da-ad, I can't believe you just said that."

Keegan chuckled. "Ya know, your mom is not at all comfortable that her little boy is being thought of in that way, so, be kind to her. Her little boy is growing up."

"I will be extra good to her," Gabe promised as he left the room.

He stuck his head back in. "Hey, you guys coming to my game Friday?"

"Of course. Wouldn't miss it."

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April 8th Monday Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Currently the fitness room of the south Kino estate was occupied by females. From her place on the treadmill, Bree watched her daughter as she went about placing weights on the barbell. Taylor looked so much like Jeffy it was uncanny. Three years ago, when Taylor had been just thirteen years of age, she'd tried to pass herself off as Jeffy in order to save her from some nut-case who was trying to hurt her. Taylor had always been so fearless.

She'd just moved her weights from thirty-fives and fives, to thirty-fives and tens. She straddled the bench and sat down. She'd been working out for a good thirty minutes now. She was sweating. Usually, she had on her AirPods, but not today. She was frowning, or maybe just concentrating. Whatever it was, she wasn't herself. She usually had the same personality traits as her dad, namely, jovial and upbeat. Lately that hadn't been the case.

"Do you need me to spot, honey?" Bree asked.

Taylor glanced up at her mom. "No, I got it."

"How's school going?"

Taylor shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

“Did you get your grade back on your essay?”

Sighing, Taylor nodded her head. “I got a ‘B+.’”

“Hmm, why?”

“Let’s see, I had a few run-on sentences. I used the term ‘super-fast’ twice. I started several sentences with ‘but.’ I had a few sentence fragments. A few of the paragraphs were too long. I used the term ‘like.’ Ya know, he was, like, super-fast. Also it was too religious and yet I forgot to say that young Eric was a devout Christian like I did everyone else. And mostly, the biggest thing I did wrong was I didn’t choose a career path. They said not going to college and being a wife and mother was an easy way out. Or something like that.”

“Well, first, being a wife and mother is not easy. It’s difficult, it’s honorable, and it’s a blessing. If that’s your choice, it takes a lot of love, perseverance, physical, mental and emotional stamina, dedication, wisdom—and I could go on and on, so don’t listen to them about that. I wish the schools would teach English, math, and science, and stop putting their opinions over on my daughter.”

“Right? And they said it was too religious. I mean, how can it be too religious if my faith is a large part of my life? I mean, really, it’s the biggest part of my life.”

Bree frowned. “May I see the essay you wrote and the teacher’s notes?”

Taylor shrugged. “Sure. I don’t care.”

“Well, you should care.”

“Why should I when I put so much thought into it and was completely honest and I tried so hard and I don’t get a fair grade.”

“Okay, I hear you, sweetie. Let me read it first and then we’ll talk about it.”

“Fine.”

Taylor lay back, hefted the bar and pushed out ten reps before carefully racking the weight. She crossed to the squat machine and pushed out her last fifteen. After pacing the room for a minute, she returned to the bench, lay down, and simply stared at the ceiling.

Bree didn’t say anything at first but after ten minutes, she got off the treadmill, grabbed a stool, and went to sit beside her daughter.

“Sweetheart, there’s more wrong than your essay, isn’t there?”

Taylor sat up. As soon as she did, the tears ran over onto her cheeks.

“Oh, honey,” Bree said as she put her arms around her daughter. “What is it, sweetheart? Can you tell me?”

“Mom, I never thought I could feel this way. It hurts so bad. I can’t stand it. And I can’t keep living like this.”

Bree pulled her away just enough to see her face. She used her hands to brush the tears away. “Baby girl, are we talking about this little thing you’ve got going with Gabe?”

Taylor burst into a round of hard sobs and threw herself against her mother. “It’s not little, Mom. I miss him so much. It feels like my heart has been torn from my body. I can’t do anything. I can’t concentrate. I can’t do my schoolwork. I feel like I’m gonna die.”

"Oh, sweetie, I understand. Truly I do." She held her daughter until the sobs died down to a few sniffles.

"What am I gonna do?" Taylor mumbled.

"It feels like it's the end of the world, I know, sweetie. But you're young. This will pass."

"No," she practically screamed. "I don't want it to pass. I just want to be with him. I mean, I need to be with him. I need to live with him."

"Honey, you're only sixteen years old. That's not—going—to happen."

Taylor stood up just as her father came into the room. "I knew you wouldn't understand! You don't understand anything! Ugh!"

"Hey," Ricky's voice was not loud, but commanding. "I don't know what's going on here but you will NOT speak to your mother that way."

She stood there, the tears running down her face. She turned to her mother. "I'm sorry, Mom. Really." She ran past her dad and up to her room.

Ricky looked down at his wife, who also had tears running down her face. "Bree, honey, what the heck is going on? What don't you understand?"

"She's heartsick over Gabe. I mean really and truly hurting. She says she feels like her heart has been ripped out."

"Well, that *is* descriptive." He frowned. "It sounds to me like you understand."

"Well, she says she wants to go live with him and I told her that's not gonna happen."

"And you were absolutely correct."

Bree threw her hands up. "I have no idea what to do."

Ricky pulled her up and into his arms. "We'll figure it out."

She laid her head on his chest. "I wonder if I was this much trouble for *my* mom."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure you were."

She looked up at him, surprised, and then laughed. "You always seem to make things better."

"I don't know about that, but we can start right here to make it better. Let's have a prayer and go talk to our daughter."

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April 8th Monday Evening

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Hey ladies," Jake said as he came in the kitchen door of the Stewart home. Laynah and the Anderson twins were all sitting around the kitchen table enjoying their bowls of ice cream, bananas, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream.

"Hey Jake," they all said at once.

He came and kissed Laynah's cheek.

"Aww, isn't that sweet," Lily said.

"Yeah, I always wondered if you two were ever gonna be smart enough to get together," Rose added.

"We finally figured it out," Jake said. "You guys mind if I grab a bowl and make me a banana split? I promise to stay out of your way. I'll go see what's happening

in the den."

"In the den some very cute looking soldiers are saving the world," Violet informed him.

"Oh, then I'll fit right in," he joked making the girls giggle.

"You're not a soldier," Laynah whispered softly. "You're a Marine."

Jake smiled at her. "That's my girl."

Laynah watched him as he put his banana split together. The moment he came in everything changed. The air shifted. There was such power and strength in every movement he made. He had a commanding presence. He was practically burying the ice cream under the chocolate sauce, so much that you could no longer see the ice cream. He then picked up the whipped cream and eyed Laynah. She blushed. He filled his bowl with it.

He looked up to see them all watching him. "I'll, uh, I'll just make myself scarce."

They watched him leave. Rose and Lily actually sighed.

"When did he get to be so cute?" Lily asked.

"He's always been cute," Laynah said.

"Maybe so," Rose said. "But he hasn't always been sexy."

"Well," Daisy finally spoke. "He certainly is now."

"You're so lucky, Laynah," Lily purred.

When everyone got quiet, she realized her mistake, but decided to double down. "Well, she IS lucky where Jake is concerned. The bruises are gonna fade. As a matter of fact, they already have. She's gonna have Jake for always."

"That is very romantic," Rose said. "But let's talk serious, now. How *are* you feeling, Bugs?"

"I'm doing better. Emotionally, I go back and forth."

"It must've been scary when it was happening," Violet said softly.

"It was. I thought he was gonna kill me. I mean once he'd gone over the edge, he had to know I was gonna go straight to my Dad and he would be arrested. He could have killed me and thrown my body in the lake, and probably gotten away. But he didn't." She shrugged.

"Well that sounds like some divine intervention to me," Daisy said.

"Praise Jesus," Rose said. "Absolutely."

Laynah nodded. It did seem like God intervened.

She remembered Mr. Tanner saying something about, we're not guaranteed to live a life with no problems, but God will be with us throughout those problems. So, maybe He *was* there with me, she thought. But why would He allow me to go through it? The answer came into her mind so quickly. We have to learn to handle all the obstacles that come our way. Even hard ones. She would try to do that. She would handle it.

In the den, Jake finished his ice cream and then played a few rounds of *Call of Duty* with Charlie and Matthew. He finally gave up his controller and asked the boys, "Where's your dad?"

"I think he's in Mom's office," Matt said.

Jake went down the hall and knocked on the office door. "Come in," Chaz called.

Jake poked his head in. "You alone?"

"Yes. You wanna talk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mission accomplished?" Chaz asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Feel better?"

"Much."

"Did he say anything worth repeating?"

Jake thought about telling Chaz that he'd said "it was worth it", but decided that wouldn't help anyone. "No, sir. Nothing."

Chaz nodded. "Good talk."

Jake started out, then stopped. "Um, so, Uncle Chaz, would it be okay if I stay with Bugs again tonight? I just need to ask her some questions. I promise no messin' around."

"You don't have to say that. I believe you have her best interest at heart. And yes, you can stay. I think she needs you to be nearby right now."

"Roger that." Jake started to leave, but stopped when Chaz called him back.

"Yes, sir?"

"You'd better set your alarm if you're gonna be at the Tanners' house by six."

Jake's mouth opened, then he smiled. "Roger that."

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April 9th Wee Hours Tuesday Morning

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

They'd talked almost half the night. It felt really good to lie in the bed next to the girl with whom he'd fallen in love, and have permission from her father to be here, Jake thought. Under normal conditions, they'd be in big trouble. But circumstances were no longer normal. His goal was to help Laynah to heal in any way he could and he was pulling out all the stops. He'd spoken to his Aunt Lisa about Shelley Kino, hoping she would invite Mrs. Kino here to speak to Laynah.

He'd also spoken to Laynah, broaching the subject of EFT, and asked her to please consider it and also to ask her own father about it. And now, during this night of lying beside her, he'd already asked her several of the questions Grandmaster Kino had suggested to him. Some of the answers made him proud of her, like she said she felt no fear and only irritation when she first saw him drive up, and how she told him to get lost. When he asked the question about when she realized what was gonna happen and it was inevitable, she broke a little bit. She'd said it was after about the third time he'd hit her in the head and she got dizzy. He'd ripped her shirt and it dawned on her what was gonna happen. The telling of that part had brought on a fresh bout of tears, but that was what Jake was after. The wallowing, as Grandmaster Kino put it.

And then he asked her if Brett had said anything to her during or after the act. The filthy things he said to her made him wish he would've done more than just threaten the guy. But her answering the question instead of refusing to talk about it, made it evident

that she needed to vent. She trembled, she cried, she hit the pillow and only after she'd gotten it all out did he pull her close and comfort her. All in all he felt like they were making progress.

Now, he lay beside her, watching her sleep, his heart filled to overflowing with the love he felt. It was so weird. Two weeks ago all he could think about was getting home to see his parents and eating some of Grams' cooking. Expecting to see Laynah over the course of his leave was a fleeting thought, but he never expected to be in her bed, holding her against his body, thinking about when and where he would ask her to marry him. Yet, thinking those thoughts now, he couldn't conceive being without her. He was gonna have to leave for five days next week, report to base in North Carolina, for ongoing training. He just realized he needed to tell her so she can be well-prepared.

She moaned and turned over on her back. He could just barely see her face. She was healing fast. The swelling was down. Maybe not all the way. Some of the smaller bruises were already fading. He stealthily pulled down the ribbing of the t-shirt she slept in to expose the bruises she'd shown him on her upper chest. They too were fading.

"What are you doin'?" she asked softly.

"Oh, sorry. Just trying to assess the healing process."

"Aw, and I thought you were trying to get a peek at me."

Jake smiled at the flirtatious words. They meant her mind was also healing. "Sorry I woke you. I'm just lying here watching you sleep."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Hmm, about a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like wondering if you would feel like going to Gabe's baseball game on Friday."

She frowned. "Can I think about it?"

"Sure. So, what is it you want to think about specifically?"

She shrugged. "Maybe just want to see what my face will look like in a few days."

"Got it. Just remember, it will be good for you to get out and do something normal."

"Speaking of that. I think I'd like to shoot tomorrow. And as soon as I turn twenty-one, I'd like to go into the courthouse and apply to get my CCP."

Jake nodded his approval. Maybe if she'd had her weapons permit, she would've had her gun on her hip and Brett would have been deterred. But she needed more training, that is for sure. Not training on how to use a gun. She had that down pat. She needed self-defense training in what to do in certain situations, because she wouldn't want to pull a gun on her attacker and have him reverse the situation.

She turned closer to him, laid her head on his chest, and splayed her hand over his abdomen. "Anything else you want to discuss?" she said as she yawned.

Her hand was moving in circles over him and he placed his hand on hers to still it, then drew a deep breath. "Yes. I have to leave next Monday, well actually, Sunday night."

She drew in a sharp breath and rose up. "Why?"

He patted her hand softly, trying to keep her calm. "I have to report to base. I'll be gone for five days."

He felt her body literally shudder.

Saying nothing else, she laid her head back down. He started to question her, but decided she'd had enough questions for one night. She needed time to digest the information. He wrapped his arms snugly around her and let her sleep.

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April 9th 5:55 AM Tuesday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe ran down the stairs to answer the door.

"Hey, Jake," he said, surprised to see him.

"Hey. Your dad is expecting me."

"This early? Why?"

"I'm, uh, in trouble."

Gabe laughed. "What did ya do?"

"I went to have a word with the guy who raped Laynah."

"Cool. You kill him or somethin'?"

Jake chuckled. "No, but I wanted to. I did get a little rough though. I'm guessing that's why your dad wants to yell at me."

"Oh, well, Dad doesn't yell."

"Okay, that's good to know. Except that means he does that calm thing, like my dad and the Kinos, which can be very scary."

"Yeah it can. Well, he's in his office. Go ahead in."

"Thanks, Gabe. Have a great day."

"Yeah, that's probably not gonna happen, but thanks."

Jake knocked on the door even though it was halfway open. "Uncle Keegan?"

"Yes, Jake come in and close the door."

That didn't sound great. He did as told and then took a seat in the chair opposite the desk.

"Jake, I've known you pretty much your entire life."

"Yes, sir."

"Your father is not only my best friend, but my brother-in-arms."

Jake nodded.

"So, he has asked me to make a few points with you that he feels apparently he was unable to get across."

Jake swallowed, nodded. "Yes, sir."

"From what I understand, being Marine Special Forces has been your goal since you were a little kid."

"Yes, sir."

"So, you go and accomplish exactly what you wanted to accomplish, and come home with the distinct honor of being the youngest Marine Raider on record."

Jake nodded.

"And then because you're a young man with more testosterone than wisdom at that particular moment, you do something that would put all that in jeopardy."

Jake frowned. "No, sir."

"No?"

"It wasn't because of testosterone. We're supposed to protect the people we love."

"Well, if you want to get technical, the need to protect our women is a male thing, and actually does involve our testosterone levels."

Jake sighed. "Okay. I meant it wasn't just to prove my manhood, or something like that."

"I understand. But how smart do you think it was to put everything you've ever worked for at risk? You do know that if you break the law as a Marine, you could put an end to your military career, right?"

"I was just gonna have a conversation."

"But that's not how it went down, is it?"

"No, sir. But sir, what..." He stopped. Sighed.

"Go on, Marine."

"If he had beaten and raped one of your girls, or your wife, what would you have done?"

Keegan smiled. "You been saving that one, huh?"

Jake shrugged and smiled slightly.

"It would have been a great battle for me, and I probably would have sought a 'conversation' also, however, I would have been smart about it. Public place. No cameras. *You* effectively pushed your way into his home and assaulted him."

"He said getting what he wanted from her was worth it, I was making him rethink that."

"I know what he said. I understand you wanting to kill the guy. But you have to think. You have to be smart. And you have to understand that part of being a man is to know when to stand down. Sacrificing yourself or your military career helps no one."

Jake sighed and looked down. "Copy that, sir."

"You thought about the door camera, put tape over it, and that was it. Surely you know a home like that would have security cameras outside *and* inside. If not for Ameritech keeping watch over the perp, you could be prosecuted. Luckily, somehow, all the video from those few minutes has disappeared. Nothing but static."

Jake looked up, surprise on his face.

"You're welcome."

Jake nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"Next time you wanna go off half-cocked, talk to your Dad, or me."

"Well, I did speak to Grandmaster Kino and Uncle Chaz."

"And did Eric tell you to have the 'conversation' with Brett?"

"No, sir. He told me to push my need for revenge aside."

"Uh huh. And what did Chaz say?"

"He told me it would be best to stand down, but he understood if I needed to go confront the guy. He even offered to come with me."

Keegan nodded. "I'm gonna give him a pass. It was his daughter and I'm sure he's been feeling the same way as you. From here on out, Jake, be smart. Don't mess up everything you've worked so hard for."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, on a completely different subject, Gabe has a game Friday, 1800 hours. Thought you might want to know."

"I'll be there."

"And try to bring Laynah, if she's up to it. Getting out around people is important to her healing process."

"Roger that."

"You're dismissed."

Jake stood, shook hands and saw his way out.

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2 Timothy 1:7

"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."

Chapter Eleven

April 9th Tuesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Shelley searched for and found her husband walking on the beach. He seemed deep in thought. He'd been like that a lot lately. He looked up as she approached and smiled at her. That smile. It always got to her. The day they'd met he'd smiled at her with such kindness. She'd run into him, literally, and he was helping her up, picking up her things and he smiled at her and that was it. Boom. Love at first sight. They knew now that was because they were supposed to be together.

He reached his hand out to her, pulled her close and kissed her softly.

"Hello, Shelley girl," he said.

"Hi Eric. What are you doing?"

He chuckled. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Well, at first glance it looks like you are merely walking on the beach, but I know there's more to it than that."

"What makes you think that?" Eric asked.

"Because with you, there's always more to it."

"And so there is."

They stood together silently for a minute or two.

"So, Eric, are you gonna share your thoughts?"

"Yes. I suppose I was just contemplating life. How strange it is, the circle of life and death and life again."

"What do you mean exactly?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet exactly what I mean. I haven't come to any conclusions yet. I was thinking about my father. Ya know, he'd just turned eighty when he passed. Just eleven years older than me. Our time together was very short though, because he sent me off on my own when I was eighteen, and it was difficult to get back

to Kauai to see my parents on a regular basis. But our time together as a family, before we left the island, with all my aunts and uncles and cousins, who were like brothers and sisters to me, it was a wonderful time. It seems the time early in a marriage, when the kids are young and full of life and mischief, those are such happy times."

"So, those times when Ricky was young, those times when Ann was still alive, were those your happiest times?"

He pulled her close. "Oh, my sweet Shelley, are you doubting yourself again? What AM I gonna do with you? Huh? Those were happy times, yes. Then Ann died and I tried hard to understand and move forward. And then along came the most wonderful and beautiful girl in the world and the times spent with you, and little Mark and Joey, and Ricky and Bree, and our own little June Flower, they were such happy times. Just the best."

"But the kids grew up and moved away and that's kind of sad," Shelley added.

He nodded. "It seems sad at first, but then I remember when I grew up and moved away from my parents. At that time, I was excited about life and happy and I wouldn't have wanted my parents to be sad and I imagine our kids don't want us to be sad either."

"Are you sad, Eric?"

"No, not at all. First, I'm so grateful that I have you, and I love you, Shelley girl with a love so powerful, sometimes I think I will simply spontaneously combust." He brushed some hair out of her face which was a particular habit of his. "You are so amazing. So beautiful. So kind. So strong. I am so very proud of you, sweetheart. And now, we have the grandchildren, whom, I guess, are also growing up. It happens so fast, really as they say, in the blink of an eye. If only we could live more in the moment, appreciating every smile, every walk on the beach, every adventure, both good and bad."

"I thought we do. You've taught me to do exactly that."

"Looking at you, I want to do it even more than we do already. Like right now. The sun shining on your hair. Your sweet smile. Your strong body. No one would think you were in your fifties, much less in your sixties. The delightful fact that you searched me out and came down here to join me on the beach. You took the time to do that, and here we are having a beautiful conversation. Isn't that what life is? Having conversations? Some verbal. Some just a look or a smile at a stranger."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Eric, it feels like your mind is all over the place."

He chuckled. "It is. Like I said, I haven't come to any conclusions. I was just sharing my thoughts with you." He tilted her face up and gently kissed her. "Tell me, my love, is there a reason you came down to find me? Is there something you need from me?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, I completely forgot what I came down here to ask you."

He smiled. "Okay, what is it?"

"Lisa Stewart called me. Of course, she knows my story and knows I've done some speaking on recovering from the trauma of rape. She wanted to know if I could speak to Laynah. I told her I'd be happy to, but I want to help her the best I can and so, I told her it would be best if I speak to her in person."

Eric nodded. "I agree."

"And then I thought, Jeffy too could certainly do her thing, ya know, and help her find some healing."

"Absolutely."

"So, I spoke with Jeffy and she suggested if she and I were flying to Georgia for the weekend, we might as well bring Taylor, because apparently she's really struggling."

"Struggling? You mean, about Gabe?"

"Yes, bless her heart. And then Bree said, if Taylor was going, she might as well come too. And then I heard from Lisa that Gabe has a baseball game on Friday evening, and maybe you and Ricky would like to tag along with us girls and see Gabe play. I know it's a long way to go to see a little high school baseball game, but thought I'd throw it out there anyway."

He smiled. "I'm glad you did. Do you already have plane reservations?"

"No, not yet. I wanted to see first if you and Ricky wanted to come."

"I would love to accompany my girls to Georgia. Let me take over the transportation plans for you. I'll talk to Ricky and Jason. If Jason has a jet already headed to the east coast, we might be able to hitch a ride. If not, I'll make the reservations."

Shelley grinned. "And just like that, you make everything so much easier."

He shrugged. "My life in serving God means I need to be in service to others and helping you plan a little trip is no big deal. I'm happy to serve you in any way you need."

She smiled. "I'll keep that in mind."

He laughed. "I know you will."

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April 10th Wednesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe made his bed, grabbed up the small gift bag and headed down the stairs at his usual gallop. At the last second he saw the small plastic pink pony with a long purple mane and tail. He tried to avoid stepping on it and ended up tumbling down the remainder of the steps, making several loud thumping sounds and ending with a soft groan.

Keegan and the twins came running from the kitchen and Lizzy came running from her bedroom upstairs. "What in the world?" Lizzy exclaimed.

Gabe sat up. "I'm okay. I just tripped. Go back to bed, Mom."

"But..."

"Please," Gabe said. "I'm okay."

Lizzy turned around and went back to her room. It was her birthday, and she knew they were trying to get together a birthday breakfast for her before they had to leave for their day.

Keegan looked at his son with a smile. "Sure you're okay?"

Gabe grinned as little Iris came to him and put her arms around his neck. "Yeah, I'm good. But I tripped over YOUR little pony," Gabe complained at Iris.

"My pony! Where's my pony!"

He stood and reached up onto the steps and grabbed it. "Here ya go, little flower. But you shouldn't leave it on the steps. Someone could get hurt."

She smiled. Took the pony from him and headed back into the kitchen. "Come on, Gabe. We making Mommy a birfday bweakfast."

"Yes, I know," he said as he picked up the gift bag that went flying.

"Hope that wasn't breakable," Keegan said.

"Thank goodness it's not." He walked into the kitchen. "Good morning, everyone," he said to his sisters.

"My Gabriel, always knows how to make an entrance," Rose said as she mussed his hair.

He frowned and ran his hand through his hair to fix it. "What can I do to help?" he asked.

"Nothing. We're about ready," Keegan said as he lifted the tray holding eggs and hash browns, with toast and jelly, and a glass of OJ, plus one of Maddie's giant blueberry muffins with a candle in it.

Gabe picked up Iris. "Come on squirt, let's go see Mommy."

They gathered outside the bedroom door. Violet got Heather on FaceTime and Keegan held the tray down so Daisy could light the candle.

"Everybody ready?" Rose asked.

They all nodded. She opened the door and the family started singing happy birthday as they walked into the room and placed the tray on Lizzy's lap.

She smiled up at her husband, her eyes shining, and he placed his hand lovingly on the side of her face, bent down and kissed her softly.

"Happy birthday, my sweet Elizabeth," he said softly.

Gabe loved how much his father took care of his mother. The girls all sighed, because they too loved how good their father was to their mother.

"Happy birthday, Mom," all seven children called out.

"Oh, thank you, everyone," Lizzy said sweetly. "This is such a surprise."

Gabe just rolled his eyes. They all knew that she knew and she knew that they all knew that she knew.

"Bwoe out the candle, Mommy," Iris insisted.

"Okay, let me make a wish. Umm, I wish that, well, I really wish that I could freeze this moment in time. You're all growing up so fast."

Her eyes filled with tears.

Everyone laughed at their mother getting emotional, not because it was funny, but simply because it was something she did often.

Lizzy giggled when they laughed. She took a bite of her eggs. "Umm, this is so good. I bet Dad made this breakfast."

Keegan smiled. "Well, I admit, I allowed Vi to put the bread in the toaster, but I had to have Rose keep an eye on her."

"Ha ha, very funny, Daddy. I'm not that bad," Violet said.

When the whole room went silent for a few seconds, everyone burst out laughing.

"Anyway," Violet said. "Here Mom, Rose and I got this for you."

Lizzy took the offered bag and pulled out a wooden wall hanging that formed the word, "Family" and along the bottom dangled little silver medallions with each person's name and birth date on it.

"Oh, now, isn't that just beautiful," Lizzy said. "And I think I know just where I'm gonna put it. In that place right as you come downstairs on that wall to the right."

"That would be perfect, Mom," Rose said. Both she and Violet kissed their mother.

Rose held up her phone for Lizzy to take in her hand.

"Hey Mom," Heather said from her place in Tennessee. "Sorry, I couldn't be there, but I want you to know I love you and I saw this in a store up here and just had to have one specially made just for you. Rose, hand it to her."

Rose handed a small but heavy box wrapped in blue paper with a white satin ribbon.

Lizzy opened it and found a large, clear paperweight and inside the weight were tiny replicas of a rose, a violet, a daisy, a lily, an iris and a spray of heather, representing each of the daughters' names.

"And if you look very closely, Mom, in the very center, is an angel, and I know it looks kinda girly but that represents Gabriel."

Everyone laughed. Gabe shrugged. "I can handle it, because I know I AM Mom's angel."

There was more laughter and a few snorts.

"Thank you, Heather, I absolutely love it. This is so sweet."

"This is from Daisy and me," Lily said as she handed her a small gift bag.

Lizzy pulled out her favorite, very expensive brand of perfume. The family usually took turns giving her a bottle of it every year.

"Aww, thank you girls. You know I love this."

"I do too," Keegan said.

The girls all giggled.

"We actually love it too," Rose said. "It reminds me of you. And makes me think of times you've been close to me, like when I got the flu, or when you fixed my scraped knee when I was little."

"Oh, you guys," Lizzy said as she teared up again.

Keegan handed Iris her gift to give to her mom.

"I made this for you, Mommy," Iris said happily. She held a paper plate out to her mother.

Lizzy turned it over and made a huge gasp. She was looking at a blue paper plate with dried lima beans glued onto it in the shape of a heart. "Oh my goodness, Iris. This is beautiful. I love it so much!"

Iris beamed. "Daddy helped me. And Gabe too. And Daisy too."

"Who helped you write your name?"

"Daddy."

"Well, you all did a wonderful job. Give me a hug, Iris. I love it so much."

Keegan lifted her onto the bed to hug her mother.

Gabe stepped forward and kissed his mother on the cheek. "Happy birthday, Mom. I love you." He handed her the gift bag.

She pulled out a velvet box and opened it. Her eyes teared up again. "Oh, Gabe, I love it."

"Well, let us see," Rose said.

It was a necklace with two gold hearts interlinked. On one heart was engraved the word, "mother," and on the other heart was the word, "son."

"It's like, forever linked," Gabe explained.

Lizzy laughed through her tears. "Oh, I get it, sweetie."

They all laughed.

Gabe blushed. He glanced at his father who nodded at him.

"My turn," Keegan said. He handed Lizzy a small rectangular package.

She smiled at him and opened it carefully. It was a hardcover book. The front jacket had baby pics of all seven children, all made to look like angels. Lizzy opened the book and began to read, and once again, her eyes filled with tears. She read aloud. "Once upon a time, there were five little angels. Now, these angels all had big blue eyes and beautiful blond hair."

Heather on the phone was the first to recognize the story. "Daddy, that's the first story you ever told us."

Keegan smiled and nodded. "All of them are in the book, Lizzy. All that I could remember. All that I ever told. And I got a real artist to illustrate the book."

She closed the book and hugged it to her chest. "I love this, Keegan. Oh my goodness, I love this so much."

He smiled.

"Is my story in there about the bad angel who loved to wreck his firetruck?" Gabe asked.

The girls laughed as they remembered it.

"Yes, yours is in there. I think there's about twelve stories in the book."

"Wow, Dad, you're a published author," Violet said.

He laughed. "Right? Who knew I could tell children's stories."

Lizzy smiled. "I did." She clapped her hands together. "Oh, everyone thank you so much for the best birthday ever. I feel so blessed."

Keegan nodded. "Indeed we are. Let's have a family prayer and then this guy has to get to school."

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April 12th Friday Afternoon

Pine Forest High School, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe's spirit had lifted since Monday. It seemed the novelty of him being something special was finally winding down. Oh, there were still hundreds of videos out. The ones showing actual interesting parts of the tournament, like the winning fight sequence, those were pretty cool. Gabe himself had watched them several times, mostly trying to figure out where he could improve. Unfortunately, the other ones were also still out. "Balls of Steel" had over thirteen million views. Other stupid ones that zeroed in on his eyes then moved down to his abs had well over a million views. Thankfully, though, the kids at school seemed to have calmed down and moved on.

What had really lifted his spirit was learning that Taylor was coming and she and her family would be at his game. Their flight would be arriving in the next hour, and because of Friday afternoon Atlanta traffic, by the time they got here he would already be on the field warming up. Still, the minute the game was over, he intended to make her feel very welcome.

He headed for the locker room, where some food was waiting, the usual chicken, mashed potatoes and green beans and a biscuit. The beans usually went pretty much uneaten. Gabe ate and chatted with his teammates, mostly about their opponent, Upton

County. It made him think about the girl at church whose name he still didn't know. She'd posted her unauthorized church pic on Instagram which had like twenty thousand likes with comments about him being a Christian. He was not ashamed of that, just not happy about how even that very special part of his life was now public domain. Still, if it brought people to God, that's totally cool. Who knows, maybe that's why all this had happened anyway.

After dinner, they suited up. Gabe found his heart beating pretty fast knowing that soon, he could look through the fence and see Taylor. She would be easy to spot. Her father and mother, and grandparents would also be here. There may even be a crowd around them asking for autographs.

The coach was speaking and Gabe made himself pay attention. Coach was talking about focusing on the game. What else would they be doing? What did he miss?

"So, thanks to our shortstop," Coach began, raising his eyebrows at Gabe. "The stands are completely full on both sides, the soccer field on the other side of centerfield is filled with people who had to go home and bring back their lawn chairs, people are even sitting in the parking lot on their tailgates. The parking lots are full and people are having to park along the street and walk three blocks to the field. My wife has gone crazy at the concession stand and had to send people to get more food and drinks."

Gabe's mouth opened in surprise. "Uh, Coach?"

"What is it, Tanner?"

"I don't understand. Why is it my fault there's no parking?"

"Because apparently with all the social media attention you've been getting, people have come from all over to get a look at you up close and personal."

The guys laughed. Gabe didn't think it was funny.

"How do you know they're all here for me? I mean, couldn't it just be that it's our first game after spring break, and everyone wants to come?"

"Oh, it's you they've come for, Tanner and when we get out there you'll see."

Gabe frowned and shook his head. "People are crazy. I thought all this stuff was done."

Coach shrugged. "Hey, don't worry about it. If a huge crowd wants to come to our game and cheer for the home team, I got no problem with that. The only thing I'm trying to say is, you guys need to forget the crowd and all the girls out there and focus on the game. If you do that then you won't embarrass yourselves in front of the world, cuz, I'm tellin' ya, you guys are good. I'm not just sayin' that. I mean, this year we have a real chance to go to state and take it all the way. So focus please." He turned to Gabe. "Any other surprises you want to tell us before we get out there?"

Gabe grimaced. "Uh, well, I hope it doesn't cause too much of a commotion, but the Kinos are in town and they're gonna be here at the game. Probably already are out there somewhere."

"The Kinos as in, Ricky Kino?"

"Yes, sir. And his wife Breanna Adams, and his daughter, and..."

"Oh, yeah, Gabe, ya know ya gotta introduce me," Peyton said.

Gabe blew out a breath.

Coach jumped in. "That's what I'm talkin' about guys. Forget about who's here.

Focus– on– the game. If I have to call you out, there's gonna be hell to pay, got it?"

"Yes, sir," they all answered.

"Okay. Anyone who wants to pray, can pray. Anyone who doesn't want to pray. Don't. No judgment, no division, all good, all team," the coach said as he did at the end of every practice and before every game.

"All good, all team," the boys repeated.

"Since it's you causin' all the commotion, Tanner, you do the prayin'," pitcher Carlos said.

"I got no problem with that," Gabe mumbled. They huddled together and bowed their heads as Gabe prayed, asking for a spirit of camaraderie and good sportsmanship, asking that they will be able to play to the best of their abilities, asking that there would be no injuries on either team, and thanking God for their coach and for the opportunity to play, and he did it in Jesus's name. "Go Rebels," they said together.

Revved up, the team headed out. They headed to the first base dugout and Gabe turned to look at the crowd sitting in the bleachers behind the dugout. He looked for his father, always on the top bleacher, always standing, so Gabe could find him. Gabe tipped his hat at his dad, his father pointed at him and nodded. Gabe's mom was helping baby Iris to wave at him. Gabe's heart slammed into his ribs as the Kinos came into focus, sitting right in front of his parents. Taylor was smiling at him. He tipped his hat at her too, which made her smile bigger. Her mother patted her on the back and leaned close to whisper to her daughter.

"What part of 'focus' did you not get, Tanner?"

"Sorry, coach. Just tryin' to see what you were talkin' about. You said I would be able to see that everyone was here for me."

"Yeah, and don't you see it?"

He looked around, really looking at the crowd. And then he realized, most of the people in the stands, on both sides were wearing 'Team Gabe,' shirts. "Oh, uh, yes, sir," he said with a sigh. "I see it."

"Now, focus," Coach said again.

Gabe nodded, did some stretching, pulled his glove from the bag and waited for the other team to vacate the field. Once he took the field for warmups he fell into his rhythm and was able to do just what the coach was asking. As he warmed up, every time the ball came to him and he scooped it up and fired it to first, you'd think he'd just made the play of the century. But after the first few times of that happening, he was able to block them out.

They came in from warming up, the announcer started welcoming everyone and introducing the Upton Cavaliers, who lined up along the third base line as their names were called. They did the same for the Pine Forest Rebels, who lined up along the first base line. They introduced the umps and then asked everyone to stand for the National Anthem. As always, they invited any active duty military and the veterans to come to the middle of the field. Keegan Tanner, John Appel, Jake Appel, and several other men and women from both sides came to the center of the field, faced the flag flying over the rear of the centerfield fence, stood at attention, and saluted as the anthem played.

Gabe always loved this part. He felt such pride and patriotism, but there was more.

The other team, right now, was the enemy, but in this, together, they were all Americans, and Gabe always felt it deep in his soul.

Anthem over, the military on the field took a moment to shake hands with each other, everyone returned to their places. Carlos warming up, fired his final pitch, Liam caught it, stood, fired the ball to second, they whipped it around the horn and threw the ball in.

"Play ball."

Carlos fired in a strike on the first pitch. Second pitch the batter hit a shot. Gabe dove, grabbed it, reversed direction, fired it to first, batter out.

The crowd was on their feet for Gabe, going crazy, but this time he wasn't hearing it. He was in the zone and stayed in the zone, and there was no score as they went into the bottom of the first. Gabe was the first batter. Not because he was a big power hitter, but because he was fast and usually found a way to get on base, walk, single, bunt or beating out a throw, somehow. Today he did better than that. It went to full count, he swung and hit a line drive double. He slid into second, came up quickly, dusted off his shirt, tucked it back in and waited. When the pitcher was ready to throw to the next batter, Gabe walked several feet toward third, and on the first pitch he took off. It was close, but he made it. He held his hand up to call time. Again dusted himself off. Clapped his hands hard, motivating his teammate who was at bat, to bring him in.

Laynah was standing, clapping her hands. She raised her finger to her lips and let out a sharp, very loud whistle. "You go, boy," she screamed at the top of her lungs. "That's my guy. Yes! Woo hoo, Gabe!"

Jake watched her, not able to keep the grin from his face. Coming to this game was indeed good for her. She was focusing on something other than the violation of her body. He joined her, whistling and yelling encouragement to Gabe.

The crowd, too, was eating it up. The guy they'd come to see was amazing in their eyes. He wasn't just a superb martial artist, as they'd seen on the videos. He wasn't just some great looking hunky kid. This guy was an all-around athlete and he was growing in popularity as each minute ticked on. Whether it was him clapping his hands at his teammates, jumping up and down like some little kid when something good happened, placing his hands on his hips and kicking dirt in front of him when something not so good happened, taking off his hat, wiping the sweat from his brow, it didn't matter what he did, it seemed he could do no wrong.

Two pitches later, the ball hit the dirt and got past the catcher and Gabe took off. The umpire called him safe and the place erupted like they'd just won the World Series. Looked like Gabe was gonna have a good game.

Taylor leaned over to talk to Jake and Laynah, getting them to explain to her what exactly was taking place. She was discovering a whole new world thanks to Gabe. Guns and baseball. Who knew?

After Gabe scored, the batter, Elias got on, the next batter, Luke, struck out, the next batter, Peyton, hit a home run, score 3-0, Rebels. There was a pitching change. The next batter, Liam grounded out and the next one popped out.

Second inning three up, three down for both teams.

Third inning Gabe was up first again. The crowd went wild. Apparently, this was not sitting well with the other team, and definitely not with their pitcher. He wound up,

threw hard, and right at Gabe. Gabe tried to get out of the way, but the ball hit him solidly on the upper arm. Gabe went down for a minute.

The crowd was roaring. Booing. Gabe sat up, rubbing his arm. Coach came out to check on him. Gabe nodded that he was okay. The ump pointed at first, awarding him first base. Then the ump turned and warned the pitcher.

"What the hell," Laynah screamed.

"Come on, Blue," Keegan and John were yelling.

"Are you crazy, Blue," Laynah screamed. "That was intentional!"

Gabe walked slowly down to first, his eyes on the pitcher. He pointed at the guy, nodded his head.

Jake was busy calling out his own sentiment, and also explaining to Taylor that the pitcher intentionally hit Gabe probably because Gabe was having a good game and he was obviously popular. He was explaining that an HBP, hit by pitch, whether intentional or unintentional, gave Gabe first base and that the pitcher was playing a mind game to try to turn the momentum of the game. He explained to her that everyone was mad because they felt like the pitcher should be ejected from the game rather than receive a warning. And he explained to her that in his opinion the pitcher messed up, because Gabe was gonna make him wish he'd never let him on base.

Jake turned out to be right. Gabe kept taking big leads off first, the pitcher kept throwing to first, trying to pick him off. The crowd booed every time. And finally, he threw an actual pitch to the next batter, and Gabe immediately stole second. That was great payback for hitting him with the pitch, but not enough for Gabe. He also stole third. He really wanted to steal home, but his teammate got a hit, and Gabe scored. Good enough. Gabe clapped his hands hard for Elias who got the hit. "You da man," he yelled at Elias, jumping up and down, before he went to the dugout.

Taylor watched closely as all his teammates stood in line to high five him. Gabe tossed his helmet to the equipment manager, grabbed his water, squirted it over his face and then some into his mouth and sat down on the bench to cheer on Lucas. "You got this, Luke," Gabe yelled.

Rebels ended up scoring twice more after Gabe, making the score at the end of three, 6-0.

In the field the Rebels were executing flawlessly. Gabe made several more scoops, turning one into a double play, ending the other team's hope of finally scoring that inning.

Gabe didn't get up to bat again until the fifth inning. His showing was highly anticipated. When he came to the plate the crowd was already on their feet. They were yelling so loud, that even the ones far away, sitting out in the soccer field could be heard.

First pitch was a little inside so Gabe laid off. Second pitch brushed him back, but he was able to get out of the way. The crowd booed.

The third pitch did exactly what the pitcher had meant to do. Gabe tried to duck but it still drilled him in the side of his helmet. He went down and the dugouts emptied.

Gabe rolled to his back, started to get up and then laid back down. The assistant coach was by his side along with one teammate, Peyton. Up in the stands Lizzy placed her hand on her husband's arm. Keegan covered it, "He's okay," he said.

The crowd was going crazy. Keegan, John, Jake, Ricky and Eric were on their feet, but very quiet. Laynah would've climbed out of the stands and into the brawl taking place on the field if Jake hadn't grabbed her. Taylor had her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide.

Gabe sat up and realized the place had gone crazy. The head coaches were nose to nose yelling at each other. Some members of each team were shoving each other, while other members of the teams were trying to prevent a free-for-all. The umpires were trying to restore order. The head umpire had already thrown the pitcher from the game. The ejected pitcher's team was trying to push him back so they could protect him from the Rebels.

Gabe finally stood, brushed himself off, found his helmet, placed it back on his head. The coach was talking to him, looking into his eyes. Gabe was nodding, obviously telling him he was okay.

Grandmaster Kino looked over at his daughter. "Jeffy?"

She drew a deep breath, nodded. "He's okay. Just stunned."

That news made Taylor feel a lot better.

The teams were ushered back into their respective dugouts. Gabe was sent to first. He leaned over, hands on knees, talked to the first base coach while they waited for the new pitcher to take his warm-up throws. When the game started again, Gabe did not take a big lead off first. He played it safe. After all, they were ahead 6-0 and he was feeling a little sluggish.

With the new fresh pitcher, no one else got a hit and Gabe was stranded. The last two innings of the game were uneventful. It was a lack-luster finish, but still, the Pine Forest Rebels won the game.

People slowly started to file out, but many stayed trying to get a word with or a pic of Gabe. There was also a huge line waiting for Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams autographs, which they were generously signing.

The boys retrieved their bags from the locker room and headed out. Peyton stood next to Gabe, somewhat as a protector, but also to meet any girls that Gabe turned down, which were quite a few. Within only a few minutes Peyton had given his number to six girls.

Gabe was tired and dizzy, and trying to be kind to all these people who'd come out to see him play. Girls were all over him, kissing him on the cheek, actually putting their hands on his chest and stomach. He thought it was about done when who should appear in front of him but Isla August, star of *Teenspotter.com*.

"Gabe Tanner, hello!" she said, looking brightly at the guy with the camera trained on her.

He sighed. "Hey."

"There's that southern thing again. So sweet."

He rolled his eyes.

"Well, I said we would make it happen and we did. Here I am! Our audience at *Teenspotter* wanted to see you again and they contributed in order to get me here. They've been so excited to see if you play baseball as well as you fight, and I tell you what, Gabe, you did NOT disappoint at all. You are a tremendous athlete! Whaddya,

think people? Put it in the comments."

"Thank you," Gabe muttered.

"Can you believe that pitcher throwing at you like that? Got anything to say about it?"

Gabe shrugged. "It happens. It's part of baseball. No big deal."

"Doesn't that sound just exactly like what the Ultimate Male would say?" she asked her unseen audience.

She lifted her phone and read some comments. "Yum, indeed," she agreed with one commenter.

Gabe could feel his face turn red. All he wanted to do was go find Taylor and find somewhere private.

"So, what other tricks do you have up your sleeves, Gabe?"

"Um, tricks?"

"Martial arts, baseball, football, which I'm so sad that we missed. Anything else?"

"Nope, I'm just a simple guy."

"Aw, come on, I happen to know better. Don't be humble."

Gabe had no idea what she was talking about.

She turned brightly toward the camera. "I have it on good authority that our own Ultimate Male is an expert sharpshooter."

Gabe's mouth fell open.

"Is that true, Gabe?" she said.

"I, uh, do some shooting sometimes. And, I really need to be going."

"You heard it straight from his mouth. What a guy! He's so humble. I did some research and he's actually won several shooting competitions. Promise us, please, Gabe, that you'll talk to us again sometime."

He smiled stiffly. "Sure."

She finished her spiel and turned back to Gabe to speak off-camera. "Hey, you've been a great sport, Gabe. Really. I know you're not used to a bunch of publicity, but you really are a delightful young man. Is there anything I can do for you that would pay you back for how kind you've been to me and our audience?"

"Yeah, you can stop calling me that ridiculous name."

"What? The ultimate male?"

"Yes."

"Funny how that happened. It was actually just a mistake. I was referring to the UFC, you know the Ultimate Fighting Championship."

"Yeah, I know what the UFC is."

"So, I messed up and said the ultimate male instead of the ultimate fighter, but it stuck, because, Gabe, whether you understand it or not, you ARE an ultimate male. You are gorgeous, hunky, and hot."

"Good grief."

"You'd better accept it. You are all those things and on top of that you are really good at what you do. Plus you're not cocky and you're kind of innocent. Every teenage girl in this country would like to at the very least have a conversation with you and most would like to do a whole lot more than that."

"Uh, I really gotta go."

She put her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. Look, I'm a lot older than you, but I'm good at what I do and I know my audience. What I'm telling you, it's all true. You are now a celebrity. From here on out people will recognize you wherever you go." She pointed around. "All this isn't going away. The moment I saw you at the Mini-MART, I knew you were money. And Gabe, the few interviews you've granted me, sweetheart, you've boosted me into the top rankings! So, thanks for that, and thanks for being real, and honest and a good ol' American boy from rural USA. So, really, if I can do anything to help you adjust to this, let me know, anything within reason. Hopefully, we'll see you again and have another chat soon." She held out her hand, a kind of peace offering.

He shook it, and turned away, looking for his family. They were easy to find. They were standing right next to the Kinos who were still signing autographs. He was hugged by his sisters and mother. His father, Master Appel, Uncle Chaz and Jake all shook his hand and congratulated him on a game well played. Laynah hugged him hard and had all kinds of ugly things to say about the other team's pitcher. Aunt Lisa, and Aunt Jodi, pretty much echoed what Laynah said. The Stewart boys were excited and jovial. The oldest, Charlie, would start high school in August.

Gabe glanced at the Kinos. Taylor was also signing autographs, but she looked up and smiled at him. He pointed toward the school, motioned for her to follow where he went. She handed a girl her autograph and slipped away. Of course Ricky noticed and motioned at the Ameritech agent who followed her at a discreet distance.

Gabe was waiting just inside the door of the school. He took her hand, ushered her quickly down the hall, his cleats clicking loudly on the floor. He took a left at the locked breezeway door and found a corner, guided her back against the wall, smiled at her, brushed some hair off her cheek, leaned forward and kissed her.

Taylor wrapped her arms around his neck. "I've missed you so much."

"Me too. I mean, I've missed you. It's been a crazy week, but having you right here, right now, it makes it all better." He kissed her again.

She sighed. "I don't understand how all this happened. How I came to feel so attached to you so fast. But being with you just seems right."

"I don't know either, Taylor. Before last week you were just a beautiful girl that I've known all my life who was off-limits and way above my pay-grade."

She ran her hands over his shirt front, covered with Georgia red clay. "You are a mess."

"Oh, yeah, sorry." He went to brush some dirt off her shirt but thought better of it. "We need to get back before your dad comes hunting for you."

She giggled and pulled his head down for another kiss. He lifted her again, like he did in California, and again, she wrapped her legs around his waist. They kissed for a long time.

"Excuse me, Miss Taylor, but your father says it's time to go and," he shrugged as he paused and listened to his earpiece. "And if he doesn't see your face come out that door in about thirty seconds he's gonna beat you within an inch of your life."

Gabe looked over at the man who spoke. He looked to be about thirty. He was

carrying, though it wasn't where anyone could see, however Gabe was aware of the bulge. He looked questioningly at Taylor.

"My bodyguard," she explained.

"Ameritech?" Gabe asked.

"Yes," the man answered. "Agent Dalton. I work for your dad, Gabe. By the way, you rocked it out there today."

"Thanks."

"Um, we'd better go," Agent Dalton said.

Sighing, they headed out.

"So, Taylor, like, has your father ever hit you?" Gabe asked.

Taylor giggled. "Sure. On the beach, every morning. But every once in a while I get in some contact too."

He blew out a relieved breath. Sparring. He was glad he didn't have to lose respect for Ricky Kino. "So, he said, 'beat you within an inch of your life'?" Gabe questioned.

Taylor laughed. "It's a joke. When I was a little girl I asked him what that meant because I'd heard it in a movie. I thought it was a dumb expression. Every once in a while he uses it to make me laugh."

They emerged from the school, and the look on her father's face didn't look at all like he was joking.

Neither did the look on his own father's face.

Gabe turned to Agent Dalton. "Do you think they would allow Taylor to ride back to the Inn with me?" He pointed south. "My pickup is down there in the student parking lot."

Agent Dalton spoke for a moment. Nodded. "Yes, as long as I ride along."

Gabe frowned. Nodded. "Okay, we'll take it. But you have to ride in the back," Gabe said.

The agent smiled. "Who am I to get in the way of young love."

Taylor smiled. She liked the sound of that. They headed to the student parking and one of the last vehicles still in the lot, Gabe's old 2015 black F-150.

They climbed in, he started the truck and had to quickly turn down the stereo. He gave a sheepish grin. "Uh, sorry."

Taylor giggled.

Gabe smiled. "So, how ya doin' Taylor?"

She looked into his eyes. "I'm great right now and I'm starving."

"Well, Grams and her kitchen staff have been cooking up a storm, so, dinner is gonna be good." And crowded, he thought. Gabe glanced in the rearview mirror at Agent Dalton. "Do you think we could take an extra fifteen minutes to walk down by the lake? Just so Taylor and I can have a little alone time before the crowd at the Inn."

"Alone time? And just where am I supposed to be?"

"You could stay in the truck?"

Dalton shook his head. "That's a negative."

"No one would even notice if we're a few minutes late."

"Listen kid, whatever you can get done in fifteen minutes will not be worth the trouble you'll be in, you'll BOTH be in, heck, we'll ALL be in, so it's ill advised."

Gabe got a text, picked up his phone and glanced at it. He used his thumb to quickly type in the words, "Yes, sir," and tossed his phone back onto the console.

Taylor picked the phone up and giggled as she read the text that had come from Gabe's dad. "Agent Dalton is correct. You had better be pulling up here in two minutes."

She turned to the agent. "Open mic?"

"Yes indeed," he said with a smile.

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April 12th Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

As soon as they arrived, Gabe ran up to Jake's room and quickly changed his clothes. He had no time to shower. He washed his hands and face, ran a hand through his thick hair, and headed back downstairs.

The Pine Forest Country Inn was delighted that they had three vacancies, and even more delighted to offer those three rooms to their famous clientele. Currently, the Kinos, including Jeffy, and also the Stewarts and Tanners were about to enjoy a gourmet dinner compliments of Miss Maddie Lewis, though she now delegates most of the actual kitchen work to her staff. There were also four other guests staying at the Inn who were a little bit starstruck by the people who occupied the table.

Grandmaster Eric Kino was given a seat of honor at the head of the giant table at the Inn. The table was even larger than the one at the Kino estate back in Cali. It had been hand-built by Maddie's husband, the grandfather of Lisa Stewart. When Lisa had taken over turning the old farmhouse into an Inn, the table was refinished and had become a beautiful conversation piece. It currently seated twenty-seven people plus one two-year-old in a booster seat, with ease.

Presently, Eric Kino sat at the head, his wife Shelley on his right, and Miss Maddie on his left. They'd had to talk her into sitting with them. At eighty-seven, she showed no signs of slowing down and was always getting up to wait on someone.

The rest of the table was occupied on Shelley's side, by little Aralyn, Lisa, Chaz, and Laynah Stewart, Jeffy Kino Wallace, Bree and Ricky Kino, Daisy and Lily Anderson, and two of the four guest outsiders. On Maddie's side sat Jodi, John and Jake Appel, Gabe Tanner, Taylor Kino, little Iris Tanner in her booster chair, Lizzy and Keegan Tanner, Violet and Rose Anderson, and Matt and Charlie Stewart. The third and fourth guests sat at the end, which made them happy, they said, because they had a great view of the Kinos.

Maddie asked Eric Kino if he would bless the food, which he did, eloquently. The menu, as always was scrumptious. Pear Salad with Mixed Greens, Walnuts and Bleu Cheese with Walnut Vinaigrette, Wild Mushroom Ravioli and Butternut & Ricotta Ravioli, Brussels sprouts with Green Peppercorn Brandy Sauce, Sage Brown Butter Garlic Yeast Rolls, and Key Lime or Chocolate Banana Pies.

"Miss Maddie, your menu is exquisite," Eric stated.

Maddie blushed. Cooking for people was her bliss.

Eric's eyes wandered over the large group. As he laid his eyes on each person, he felt his heart swell. Not just members of his own family, but every single person. There was

low chatter as everyone ate. He watched Jeffy briefly lay her hand on Laynah's face. He watched Jake's eyes glow with love aimed at Laynah. New love was beautiful. The thought moved his eyes down to Gabe and Taylor. He wasn't sure about the love thing there, but there was definite strong chemistry and they were probably struggling with their Christian beliefs and lustful feelings.

He smiled at the girls he thought of as "his angels," namely, the Anderson girls. Only Heather was missing as she was doing her thing up in Tennessee, working with some horse and cattle ranches. Way down at the end of the table were the Stewart boys, ages fourteen and twelve. An important age for each boy. He would make it a point to speak privately with each of them while he was here, see if he can be of service in any way.

Eric noticed two people looking at him. His son, Ricky, smiled knowingly and nodded at his father. Eric smiled back. Ricky knew Eric had been assessing the group, seeing if there was anyone God wanted him to help. It was something Eric often did when in a large group. Eric glanced down at his wife. She'd also been watching him. She too knew his intentions. He took her hand briefly, squeezed it and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

He looked back up. There were four people at the table whom he didn't know and since there are no coincidences, he spoke to the one sitting just opposite him. When he did, the entire table quieted. That's just the way it seemed to always be whenever Eric spoke.

"Mrs. Williams, right?" Eric said.

The woman dropped her fork, and it clattered to the table. "Oh! Yes, that's right," she said, obviously surprised that Eric Kino was speaking to her.

"And this is your family?" he asked, motioning to the three sitting on his right.

"Yes! These are my two daughters and my son-in-law. Autumn, Aubrey and Andrew," she said as she pointed to each one. "All A's," she added with a smile.

"Nice to meet you all," Eric said kindly. "So, where are you from?"

"We're from Baltimore."

"I'm just curious, what brings you out here to middle Georgia?"

"Well, we," she stopped and glanced at her family, "probably more like, I, wanted to come to Georgia to feel closer to my husband. Anthony was from here." She smiled. "Another 'A.' Anyway, I mean, he wasn't exactly from Pine Forest, but a small town near here. He recently passed away, and— " She stopped, used her napkin to blot at her eyes. "Sorry."

Eric nodded kindly, but stayed quiet.

She went on. "Anthony always talked about getting back home, but we were never able to make it happen. He worked all the time. He was an attorney, a corporate lawyer. There just was no time. And now he's gone. Oh, sorry, got off track," she said, waving her hand. "Anyway, I wanted to come here, to small town Georgia, to see what he was always talking about, to maybe feel closer to him. My sweet daughters didn't want me to come alone, and my son-in-law didn't want us girls to go alone, so here we all are. We saw an advertisement about this Inn and it has more than lived up to its reputation. It has been a blessing to be here, and Miss Maddie and Miss Jodi and John, they have been so wonderful. And Chaz and Lisa have let us ride on their ranch and that was so much fun.

And now, here we are, rubbing shoulders with real movie stars, and what an experience this has been."

Shelley watched as Eric smiled his kind smile at the sweet woman. She knew all too well the effect his smile would have. The woman looked to be in her mid-fifties, maybe. Her daughters were young, in their twenties and they'd already lost their father.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Williams. I know it's been difficult for you and I would love to speak more to you, privately, share some insights, if you would like."

"You would?" She blushed. "Why? I mean, you don't even know me."

"I know you," he said softly. "And you are important, and so are these beautiful members of your family who have come here to support you." He nodded at them. "I commend you." He looked back at the woman. "Maybe we can speak more tomorrow?"

The woman nodded. "I will very much look forward to that."

The table at large went back to quiet chatter as Eric directed his attention to others.

The Anderson twins were seated the closest to Mrs. Williams and her family and struck up a conversation with them.

Gabe watched everything taking place. He hadn't thought he could have more respect for Grandmaster Kino than he already did, but here it was. Eric didn't have to speak to these people. No one would have thought anything of it if he didn't. Gabe certainly hadn't spoken to them. Now though, he would make a point to do so before the evening ended. There was something more to all this. Gabe puzzled over it. He glanced back up at Grandmaster Kino and he realized he was looking at him. Gabe smiled at the man and he smiled back. And there it was again, that warm feeling, the one that made Gabe know there was more to this earthly life. His eyes moistened. Taylor slipped her hand into his. He looked down at her and she smiled her sweet smile.

"I know," she whispered.

He gazed into her beautiful eyes. What was happening?

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James 1:27

"Religion that is pure and undefiled
before God the Father is this:
to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,
and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

Chapter Twelve

April 12th Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Dinner ended and like a traditional southern family, everyone pitched in to help with the dishes. Jodi and Maddie had no problem with that even though they had staff to take care of things. They'd discovered that the same people who wanted to work on the ranch and ride the horses, they also wanted to get back to the simpler things in life, like working together to clear the table, or putting their hands into a sinkful of soapy water and washing a few plates and cups. Someone always hummed or sang or put on some music. Tonight, it had been their own Grammy-winning singer, Lizzy Tanner, who offered up a few songs.

Now everyone had divided up. Most of the females sat at the table, their focus on Laynah. Lizzy held a sleeping Iris in her lap. Maddie had gone to bed. Grandmaster Kino, John, Chaz and Keegan had moved outside to talk about some plans. Charlie and Matt were playing video games on their phones at the kitchen table and eating ice cream, as usual. Mrs. Williams and her family had retired to their rooms.

In the large living room/lobby, Ricky Kino sat with his wife, Bree, curled up next to him. They were waiting for Taylor to speak. She'd told them there were some things she wanted to speak with them about and she'd just begun to speak when Jake and Gabe came into the room and quietly joined them.

"Do you want to go up to our room to talk?" Ricky asked his daughter.

"Oh, did we intrude on something private?" Jake asked.

They were all waiting for Taylor's response. She sighed. "No, it's okay. It wasn't really a big deal. It was just some thoughts I had about, like, baseball."

"Baseball?" Ricky asked.

"Yeah, so, how much do you know about baseball, Dad?"

Ricky frowned, wondering where this was going. He shrugged. "Enough. I used to play when I was in high school. Why? What do you want to know?"

"You used to play baseball?"

"Sure."

"I didn't know that. What else?"

"What else, what, sweetheart?"

"What else did you play?"

"Um, well, I played football. Actually played same position as Gabe, defensive back."

"Really?"

"Yes. Why?"

"What else? I mean, what else did you do that I don't know about?"

Ricky glanced at Bree, who looked as confused as he was. "I, uh, let me think. I played a little basketball. But ended up having to choose between it and a martial arts tournament and chose the tournament. I sang for one semester in chorus. Bad idea. I did a little gymnastics just for fun. I loved doing all the flips and twists and was really good at it and that skill served me well when I used to do martial arts demos." He thought a second. "I played some tennis. Great sport but I wasn't focused enough."

Taylor turned to her mom. "What about you?"

Bree frowned. "I think you know I used to be a cheerleader. I also played basketball for two years in high school, but then I got into the drama club, and I directed all my focus on that. Why?"

Taylor glanced over at Gabe and Jake who sat on a sofa adjacent to the one she currently occupied.

"Jake? What sports have you played?"

"I played the usual."

Her eyes filled with tears. "What is the usual?"

"Sweetheart," Ricky began. "What's wrong?"

She held her hand up, cleared the emotion from her throat and turned back to Jake. "What is the usual?"

He shrugged. "Football, basketball, baseball, wrestling, played soccer only one year in high school, but a bunch when I was little. Of course, martial arts with my father, shooting, and I ran some track."

"Oh, yeah," Ricky added, "I ran track too. Cuz you know, your dad was fast," he added with a smile.

Taylor didn't smile back. "Gabe?"

"Same as Jake pretty much."

Taylor turned back toward her father. "I didn't know." She blinked, and the tears ran over her cheek.

"You didn't know that we've done those things?" Ricky asked, desperately trying to understand where his daughter was going with all this.

"Yes, I didn't know you've done those things and I didn't know about them. Dad, I watched a baseball game today and Jake and Laynah had to explain to me what was happening. It was actually really interesting. It was actually really fun. I could be a fan. But I didn't know, Dad. I don't know about any of it."

"Honey, why didn't you just ask me?"

"How can I ask about things I don't even know about?"

He nodded, but the light wasn't quite on yet.

"Dad, I love you and mom so much, and I respect you so much. I'm not complaining about the wonderful life you've given me. I'm grateful to be a part of our family, please know that."

Ricky nodded. "Oookaay," he said slowly. "But?"

She sighed. "But, I feel like I'm this princess, kept in a little golden cage. I don't know anything about the kind of lives other people live, right here in my own country. I didn't know how much fun baseball is, though I knew it was called America's pastime.

It made me wonder what other sports I've missed. Or maybe even could have played since we're a pretty athletic family and I could probably excel, right?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"The only thing I've really done is martial arts. And please don't get me wrong, Dad, I love it. I do and I'm proud to be a part of *Kino Martial Arts* and I take it very seriously. It's just that I'm seeing that there is a lot more out there, stuff I didn't even know about. I mean, I knew at my school, I could've been a cheerleader, or played field hockey or soccer or volleyball. They don't have baseball."

Gabe jumped in. "Well actually, Taylor, girls play softball, not baseball."

"Well then they definitely don't have that. Not at my school. They have crew, and I'm not sure what else. Dad, why haven't you told me about these things? I feel like such a dummy."

"Taylor, I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I had no idea you felt this way. I guess I figured if you wanted to do anything you'd just come to me and ask. I thought you just weren't interested. Like, with the shooting. You never before showed an interest in guns, and then out of the blue the other day, you want to tag along. I had no problem with that. I encourage you, or thought I encouraged you, to try new things. But you're right, how can you tell me you want to try something if you don't even know these things exist."

She nodded. "It's like I live in this tiny little world, and I have no idea what's out there. I'm just safe and sound in my little cocoon. I have a bodyguard whenever we go out of state. I'm watched and protected at all times. I know at this moment I'm sounding like a spoiled, ungrateful little brat, but Dad, I guess I'm saying, I want to experience more of life."

He nodded. "I understand. Let me ask you, your school offers volleyball, and you know about volleyball and play it well, why have you not looked into it?"

She looked down. "Well, everyone on the volleyball team is tall and I'm a little on the short side."

"Well, sweetheart, the shorter girls can make up for that with quickness. They can get to balls easier than some of the taller girls," Ricky explained.

The tears started again. "See— I didn't know that."

Ricky nodded. "And that's my fault."

"That's our fault," Bree added. "I'm sorry sweetheart. I should have paid more attention to your needs. Let me ask you though, why now? What suddenly made you start thinking along these lines?"

Ricky knew the answer to that, but waited for her to say it.

"It was Gabe."

Jake looked over at his young friend whom he'd known since he was born.

Gabe's mouth opened, his eyebrows rose, but he said nothing.

Bree and Ricky both nodded. How obvious. She was attracted to Gabe, and therefore would be interested in the things that he was interested in.

It was Bree who asked the next question. "Are you interested in shooting and baseball just because Gabe is, or do you really find them interesting?"

"Good grief, Mom, I'm not that shallow."

"Be respectful," Ricky warned.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be disrespectful, but the question is kind of insulting. Yes, I tagged along to go shooting because I found Gabe interesting and wanted to see what it was all about. But then, the shooting itself was interesting and I wanted to try, and I really liked it and would like to continue learning more about it. Baseball was really fun, and I think it would be cool to play girls' baseball, but if not, then I'd like to see more games. You know, we almost never watch TV, but I bet there are baseball games to watch. But, Mom, just to be clear, let's say Gabe was into field hockey. I'm not interested in that, and so I wouldn't say I was just because he was. No offense, Gabe."

He smiled. "None taken."

Taylor sighed. "I'm sorry Dad, I didn't mean for this to turn into a big family discussion, discussing personal things in front of people."

"I asked you what the problem was in front of people, so, no worries about that, sweetheart."

"And Mom, you're right about Gabe making me want to do things, try things I've never thought of, and I'm glad. He's opened my eyes to so many things. I mean, he even makes me want to know about sex."

Jake couldn't suppress his chuckle.

Gabe sat straight up. His eyes opened wide.

Ricky's expression was much the same.

Ricky sat up, looked at Gabe. "Is this something the two of you have been discussing?"

"No we have NOT— sir," Gabe stated adamantly.

"We're not discussing it, Dad. That was just an example. Again, the question is kind of insulting. I'm a Christian. I believe, no, I know, God is real, and I know his laws and I want to live as upright and holy as I can. I thought you knew that about me. I'm just saying that he makes me interested in sex for the first time in my life. He makes me understand how you and Mom are always being told to 'get a room.' My eyes are starting to open, and Gabe in my life is a good thing."

Ricky smiled. "I don't mean to insult you, Taylor. And I'm glad to know you're thinking straight. Just remember, if we seem to have a tight hold on you, it's because we know things you don't know. We know how tempting it can be when two young kids are together alone."

Gabe stood. "Um, maybe I should give you guys some privacy."

"Sit," Ricky commanded.

Gabe sat back down. Jake grinned.

"Mom," Taylor continued. "I mean, I've heard the stories about how you asked Dad to take your virginity."

"Yes, I did," Bree answered boldly. "But I was eighteen, not sixteen. And besides all that, he turned me down." She looked at Gabe, the message loud and clear. "He also knew it was something reserved for marriage, and he stayed true to his convictions."

"So, you were both virgins when you got married?" Taylor asked.

"No," Ricky said. "And now we are to a place that should be saved for another time."

Now that they had both Jake's and Gabe's undivided attention, of course the conversation was ending. Both boys sighed.

Ricky nodded at the guys. “We’ll talk later. It might be helpful to you guys to hear the story of my fall from grace. But not in mixed company.”

He turned back to his daughter. “Taylor, my sweet daughter, the guys and Laynah are all gonna shoot in the morning. Would you like to join us?”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes, Daddy, I would!”

“Good. And how about, when we get back home, would you do me the honor of attending a Dodgers baseball game with me?”

She smiled bigger. “Yes, Daddy, I will!”

He stood. “And, will you accept my apology for not making you aware of things going on in this world, if I promise to try very hard to educate you from now on?”

She flew into his arms. “Of course I will, Dad. I love you and Mom so much.”

“And we love you too, baby girl. There’s just one more thing I need to address. We’ll try to give you a little bit more freedom, but you’re gonna have to accept that you are the child of Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams and I’m sorry, but the truth is, that puts you at risk. I have to do what I have to do to protect you. Protecting you is MY responsibility and I never want to have to say, ‘I wish I had done a better job keeping you safe.’ Three years ago, when you did what you did, I can’t even tell you how that affected your mother and me. I swore we would never be in that position again, so yeah, we may have gone a little too far sometimes, but we will try to be a little more understanding of your need to stretch your wings.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said, hugging him hard and then turning to her mom and doing the same.

Ricky sighed and turned to Gabe. “So, if you two would like to take a walk around the property, go ahead. Keep your phones on you. Gabe, are you carrying?”

“No, sir, I’m a minor, but I *can* be carrying in about one minute, if that makes you feel better. My parents would have no problem with it.”

Ricky nodded. “Make that happen.”

Gabe looked over at Jake. “Can I borrow one of yours?”

Jake nodded. “Got ya covered.” He ran upstairs.

Ricky looked at his phone. “It’s already after eleven. You kids have thirty minutes. Taylor you be in your room before midnight.”

“Yes, sir,” she said with a smile.

“And we’re shooting at seven, so get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jake came down the stairs, passed his 9mm Smith & Wesson to Gabe, who took it out of its holster, pointed it down, checked the magazine, chambered a round, slid it back into the holster and tucked it inside the waistband of his jeans.

“Just a question, Gabe. So, do you always carry your firearm chambered?” Ricky asked.

Gabe nodded. “Yes, sir. If the reason I’m carrying is self-defense, which is pretty much the only reason, unless I’m hunting. Anyway, self-defense usually means I have to act quickly, and those few extra seconds it takes to chamber a bullet can get you killed.”

Ricky nodded. “Good answer.”

The kids headed out the back door.

Jake went to find Laynah.

Bree eyed her husband. "You handled that well."

He blew out a breath. "I need to be a better father."

"You're doing just fine, Ricky. I think you said all the right things. If you hadn't I would have tried to step in, but I'm relieved that I didn't have to try. You did great and I'm not sure I would've been able to handle it."

She moved close, put her arms around his neck. "Shall we make someone say the words?"

"What, 'get a room'?"

"Yes."

"Naw, let's just go without being told."

"Let's do."

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Still April 12th Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jeffy stood in the guest restroom, patting her face with a wet paper towel as she looked in the mirror.

Lizzy Tanner came in and smiled at her. "How far along are you?"

Twenty-eight-year-old Jeffy, youngest child of Eric and Shelley, smiled at the angelically beautiful, blond woman. "How'd you know?"

"I used to be a nurse, and I have seven children. And this is the third time you quickly excused yourself."

Jeffy nodded. "Dinner was so delicious, but I knew better than to eat so much."

"So, who else knows?"

"My husband, Cam."

"Is there a reason you're not telling people?"

"I can't seem to find a good time. We were gonna announce it at the celebration after the Mini-MART, when everyone was together, but then we got the news about Laynah and it didn't seem the right time."

"You could announce it here!"

"I could, except Mark and Joey and their families aren't here."

"Heck, we could zoom them in. We could have a big gathering sometime tomorrow, tell them to join the conference whenever you think would be a good time."

"Sounds fun, but my husband isn't with me and I really want him to be with me."

"Oh, yeah, of course, you're right. But may I suggest just one thing, sweetie?"

"Sure."

"At least tell your mom, or maybe your sister. You may be a big, famous doctor saving the world, but as a first-time mom, you need some support."

Jeffy nodded. "You're right, I do."

Lizzy hugged her. "If I can do anything for you, please let me know."

Jeffy suddenly gasped and jumped back.

"What's wrong?" Lizzy asked.

"Nothing, sorry. I just, uh, thought of something. Thank you so much, Lizzy. You're

so sweet. No wonder your Gabe is such a good guy."

Lizzy smiled. "He is isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. Hey, I think I'm gonna go find my mom and tell her right now."

Lizzy clapped her hands together. "Oh, I think that is a wonderful idea! She just went upstairs right before I came in here."

"Thanks," Jeffy said as she started up the stairs.

She knocked softly on her parents' door.

"Come in," Shelley called.

"I hope I'm not disturbing anything."

"No, honey, I was just filling your dad in on Laynah's condition."

"I need to tell you something."

"Must be important since it's so late and you couldn't wait until morning," Eric said. "Is this just for your mom, or can I stay?"

"You can stay. I don't think we have any secrets between us anyway."

Eric nodded with a smile.

"Mom, Dad, Cam and I can't seem to find a time when everyone is together, and I just need to tell someone, cuz I'm not feeling so well."

"What's wrong, honey?" Shelley said quickly.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm gonna have a baby."

Eric smiled. Shelley squealed and threw her arms around her daughter, already crying tears of joy.

Eric watched patiently while mother and daughter shared the very special moment. When they finally pulled apart he gave Jeffy his own hug. She closed her eyes, her head against her father's chest, hearing his heartbeat, so safe and secure.

She looked up into his eyes.

"There's more?" Eric asked.

"Well, I hugged Mrs. Tanner, and, it feels like there is something wrong. Either now, or coming up pretty soon."

"Do you think she's ill?" Shelley asked.

"No. But she was, or I guess, soon will be very sad, or upset, or distressed in some way." She looked at her father. "Whatever it is, I hope we can stop it from happening. We have to try to help her."

Eric nodded. "We'll pray about it and ask for guidance."

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April 12th Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe and Taylor walked slowly around the large property. It now had lighted pathways, with flowers lining the walks. Gabe remembered when it was just all grass, and pecan trees and a vegetable garden. They walked toward the very back until they could see a large home on the other side of the large iron fence. Gabe led Taylor off the path to sit on a steep hill that led to that fence.

"That's your house, isn't it?" Taylor asked.

He nodded. "Yep, or, I mean, it's my parents' house."

"It's really pretty all lit up like that."

He nodded. "The lights are new. Dad's putting in new security fences. He's taking precautions because of all the publicity."

Taylor nodded. "I think that's a good idea. Don't say we didn't warn you."

"Yeah, it's all so silly."

Taylor shrugged. "People seem to need idols, someone to look up to."

"Well," Gabe said. "It's okay to look up to someone, to admire them, but the idol thing, I mean, it's like on the verge of worship."

"Maybe it's up to *us* to make sure they direct that worship to God," Taylor offered.

Gabe nodded. "That's a good thought. Ya know, I'm glad we have the same beliefs."

"Me too."

"So, Taylor, what you said in there, to your dad, it made me see you in a whole different light," Gabe said.

"How so?"

"You're not a spoiled little rich girl. You're a smart, beautiful girl who just wants to know about the world."

"So, you used to think of me as a spoiled little rich girl?"

He laughed. "No. I saw you as the beautiful girl I can't have, so don't even think about a future with THE Taylor Kino."

She smiled. "Do you think there is a future for us now?"

"I hope there is. But, I mean, you live in Cali, I live like three thousand miles away. And I'm not sure what I'm gonna do after graduation in a few months."

"It's two thousand, two hundred and seventy-six miles," she corrected. "And why don't you know what you're gonna do?"

He shrugged. "My father and I have talked about it many times. He's trying to not pressure me, but I can't seem to make a decision."

"So, in general, what are you thinking of? Like, do you wanna be a doctor? A business man? Be in a boy band?"

He chuckled. "No, to all of those."

"Okay, how about a professional baseball player, or maybe a high school coach, or an Ameritech agent?"

Smiling, he shook his head. "I don't think I have what it takes to go pro in any sport. Coaching is not a bad idea. Ameritech agent would be cool."

"How about going into the military and being a soldier?"

"Well, if I went into the military, I wouldn't be a soldier."

"What would you be, then?"

"A Marine."

"So, what is a soldier?"

"Someone in the Army, or National Guard."

"Oh, okay. And if they're in the Air Force?"

"Those are Airmen."

"What about the Navy?"

"Sailors, or seamen, or if they're special forces, frogmen or SEALs."

"That's interesting."

Gabe sighed. "The only thing interesting right now is you." He turned to her, took her

face in his hands, leaned forward and kissed her.

When he pulled away, she smiled. “I have so been waiting for you to do that.”

“That’s good to hear.” He did it again. She leaned back on the hill and he leaned forward. He rose up for just a second, smiled at her as she lay there, and then leaned back down and kissed her again. He could do this all night. Being close to her, tasting her lips, it was like heaven and he knew he was getting close to the line he shouldn’t cross. The text he received had both of them sitting up.

He pulled out his phone, read the text, and chuckled.

“Who is it?” Taylor asked. “My dad threatening to beat me within an inch of my life?”

“Nope. It’s Jake letting me know that he and Laynah are also out here walking around and don’t shoot him.”

Taylor giggled.

Gabe stood and held his hand out to help her up.

“Already?”

“Yes, and we want to show that we can be trusted.”

“Are you always so responsible?”

He chuckled. “No, but I’m trying really hard, so I can make sure I get to see you again.”

He walked her into the Inn, upstairs to her room and kissed her goodnight.

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April 13th 7 AM Saturday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

“That’s some darn good shootin’, Bugs,” Jake said. He’d just watched his girl empty a thirty-round magazine with only a few misses. Then she’d laid down the AR15, picked up her pistol, and emptied the mag without a single miss.

Taylor was even more impressed. She decided right then and there that she wanted to get as good at this sport as Laynah.

Gabe helped her again. This time Taylor had Matt Stewart’s 380. Gabe explained the differences of the gun to her, led her through the same procedures as before, except the safety was completely different. She was still a little nervous, but he stayed close, directed her step by step and she did fine.

Everyone got two turns to shoot. Jake, Gabe and Keegan decided to shoot a longer distance and used the Ruger hunting rifle their second time around. Which again, was very interesting to Taylor. It was a good time and Taylor found she really liked being around the camaraderie of the guys, being accepted into their fold.

“Jake,” Laynah began. “I have to finish the horses. Would you like to help? And then maybe afterward we can go for a ride?”

“Dad?” Jake said. “Do you or Mom need me for anything right now?”

“No, son, but I am hoping you and Laynah will find some time to attend a martial arts class or two this week.”

“Yes, sir, we’ll do that.”

“I have one at ten this morning. Anyone else want to come?”

Eric and Ricky nodded. “We would love that.”

"My class will be ecstatic to have you guys there."

Gabe took Taylor's hand. "Would you like to go to Uncle John's class? Or would you like to maybe go for a ride with me?"

"On a horse?"

He smiled. "Uh, yeah, on a horse."

"I didn't know you rode."

"I've lived next door to a ranch my entire life. It's sort of just a natural thing."

Taylor looked at her father. "Dad?"

He drew a deep breath. Nodded his head.

Gabe and Jake immediately started putting guns and rifles in their cases, gathering ammo, bagging up their firearms and protective gear and placing the canvas bags in their fathers' vehicles.

Laynah and Taylor waited on the guys and the four of them headed down to the horse stables together.

"Can we ride Rocky and Ginger?" Gabe asked.

"Sounds good," Laynah answered.

Taylor reached out and put her hand on Gabe's arm.

He glanced down at her. "You're shaking. Are you okay?"

She bit her lower lip.

"Taylor, are you afraid of horses?"

"Yes, but I thought it would be okay if you were with me. Now I'm not so sure. Could I– like– ride with you? I don't want to ride my own horse."

"Yes, of course. We'll take Rocky."

"Rocky as in Dwayne Johnson?"

"That's the Rock. Rocky as in Balboa."

"Oh, yeah, the old movie."

Gabe gave a short laugh. She really was in her own little world. Gabe frowned though, as he suddenly grunted, sank to his knees, and then fell over.

"Gabe?" Taylor looked up panicked. "Jake! Something's wrong with Gabe."

Jake came running. Gabe lay flat on his back. His eyes were open, his breath coming in great gasps. "Taylor, go get Uncle Chaz. Hurry."

Taylor left quickly, but Gabe was already coming out of whatever was happening.

He looked up at Jake. "What happened?"

Jake had his fingers on Gabe's neck, taking his pulse. "You tell me, buddy."

About that time, five men came running full speed into the stable, circling around Gabe, kneeling by his side.

"Can you tell us what happened, Gabe?" his father asked.

"I don't know what happened. One minute I was standing here talking to Taylor and then there was like, an explosion of pain, and I fell down."

"Where was the pain? In your head?" John asked, his mind immediately going to the scene of him getting beaned in the head at the game yesterday.

"No, it was in my leg. My thigh. It was like a dream. Like, I knew it wasn't really happening, but it was. So strange. It was like a, uh..."

"A vision," Eric said softly.

"Yes, sir, like that." Gabe sat up. "But I feel fine now."

"No more pain?"

"No, sir, none at all." He rose to his feet. "That was— weird."

"Why would Gabe be having a vision?" Keegan asked. "Look, I know this kind of stuff happens to you guys. But why to my son?"

Eric smiled kindly. "Let's talk about this privately, for Gabe's sake."

"Dad, whatever it was, a premonition or something, it's over. It hit me fast. It's done. I'm okay. Taylor and I are gonna go ride. I'm okay."

"Before you go ride with Taylor, will you let Jeffy examine you?"

Had the question come from anyone else, Gabe would have argued. But it came from Grandmaster Kino. "Yes, sir."

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April 13th Still Saturday

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Okay now, don't be afraid. They can sense your fear. Just put your left foot in the stirrup. Can you reach the horn with your right hand?"

"I don't think so."

"That's okay. I'll give you a push. So, left foot in the stirrup. Step up and swing your right leg over the horse. Good job."

"He's so high!" she said, her voice in a panic.

"Don't worry, I'm gettin' up right behind you. This is a two-rider saddle and Rocky is about as gentle as a horse can be."

Gabe leapt up behind Taylor. Rocky never moved. Gabe leaned forward and rubbed his hand over Rocky's shoulder, told him what a good boy he was, grabbed the reins and gently started Rocky down the path toward the front pasture.

Wrapping one arm around Taylor, Gabe pulled her back against him. "You're still shaking. Why are you so afraid?"

"I, I'm not sure. He's very big, isn't he?"

"Yep, he's a big boy. But he's gentle and calm. He's the perfect horse for you to ride. If I were to get off right now, he would simply calmly walk you back to the stable."

"Don't get off."

Gabe chuckled. "I won't."

"So, you didn't say how the exam went with Aunt Jeffy," Taylor began, trying to think of something other than how nervous she was sitting atop the giant horse.

"I'm fine. It wasn't something physical. It was like, something in my brain."

"Gabe, you do know that Aunt Jeffy and Granddad have visions and premonitions, right?"

"I've heard the stories."

"Well, it scares me."

"Their stories scare you?"

"No, silly. It scares me that you had some kind of thing, vision or something, and it was painful to you. What if something bad happens to you?"

He leaned down close to her ear. "Well, I'm not afraid."

"Well maybe you should be."

"Taylor," he said as he hugged her closer, splayed his hand over her stomach where he held her secure. "I'm surprised at how you seem to be afraid of a lot of things. I've heard your Grandfather, and your dad too, I've heard them say that we can't live in fear."

"I've also heard my dad say that we have to take precautions to make sure I'm safe. So, I don't get it. Which is it?"

"I don't know. But for right now, can we ride in silence, listen to the birds, listen to the sound of Rocky's hooves as he walks, feel the wind on our face, smell the rain that's coming in, just, you know, just be?"

She giggled. "You're talking about being mindful. Being very present and aware of everything at this very moment. That's being mindful."

"Yeah, that. Let's just be mindful. And you be aware that my hand is right here," he said, moving his thumb. "And I'm right behind you," he whispered in her ear. "And think about how it feels to have me kiss your cheek just like this," he said softly.

Taylor sighed. She could be mindful of all of that, all day.

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April 13th Saturday Afternoon

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

The day had started out with a partly sunny sky during their shooting range outing and had now deteriorated to being overcast and rainy. The people who had filled the Inn last night had gone their own way except for a few. Jake and Laynah were in the living room talking quietly. As far as Eric's family, Ricky accompanied Bree and Jeffy on a shopping trip to the local town shops. Taylor had been invited to lunch over at the Tanners' home. Eric was currently sitting in the dining room with Mrs. Lillian Williams.

He smiled at her. She was a sweet lady who loved her family very much. They'd had a lovely private discussion after lunch about her husband who had passed, death in general and resurrection and God and Jesus, and Eric hoped he'd been able to comfort her and give her some peace. He'd asked if he could pray for her and she'd agreed. He'd held her hands and prayed for her peace, which he knew would come through the Holy Spirit touching her heart. At the moment she was all aflutter and asking if she could share their conversation with the world. He encouraged her to do so, not for his own recognition, but for the Word to reach more people.

He watched her as she went to find her family. Alone for the moment, he thought about John's martial arts class he and Ricky had attended earlier. As usual, Ricky garnered a lot of attention. Eric had no problem with that. He wanted Ricky to realize that he was not a shadow of his father, but instead, his father no longer cast a shadow over him. He wanted Ricky to shine and realize his full potential. Most people would think that Ricky had far surpassed that, but Eric knew Ricky had feelings of inadequacy. Eric needed to help Ricky understand the beautiful, wise, and bright light that he is.

Eric's mind wandered to his daughter and the fact that she now carried a child, his youngest grandchild. Would it be a boy or girl and what influence might Eric be on the tiny new life? In order to do that, to be an influence, their family had to remain close in proximity. It made him wonder about those families whose children had moved out of state, or even out of the country. He'd been so blessed to have the people he loved so much remain nearby. He knew Shelley felt the same way.

Shelley. How can it be that after twenty-nine years of marriage, when thoughts of her crossed his mind his heart beat a little faster, his longing for her increased, his love for her grew. It was incredible, this effect she had on him. He wondered what she was doing at this minute, who she was talking to, what love she was currently spreading. More than likely she was talking to Miss Maddie. His ethic had always been, no time like the present and with that thought in mind he decided he was gonna go find his wife, take her up to their room and show her just how much he loved her.

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Same Day, a few minutes later, still at the Inn

"Bugs, I don't think you should do this."

"Are you saying you won't help me, Jake? Because you're the only one I think can help me with this. At least you're the only one I want to go with me."

"Don't you think it's a little too soon?"

"If not now, then when? You're leaving Monday morning before dawn, right?"

He nodded. "Yes, but I'll only be gone for five days."

"I feel a burning need to do this now. I don't want to wait until tomorrow, much less until next week."

He sighed. "Bugs, let me ask Grandmaster Kino his opinion, okay? If he says it's a good idea, then I'll take you to the lake."

She blew out a breath. "Fine."

They rose together to go search him out but didn't have to go far as he was holding hands with his wife and headed upstairs.

"Grandmaster Kino," Jake called.

He stopped, turned. "Jake, how can we be of service?"

"I just have a quick question to ask," he said.

Eric nodded. "Go ahead."

"Okay, so, Laynahbug wants me to take her back to the lake where, well..."

"Say the words," Eric prodded.

"Where she was raped," he continued. "I think it's too soon, and she says she has a burning need to go there ASAP."

Eric nodded. "And the question is?" Of course, he knew what the question was, but he always thought it was healthy for people to be able to put into words exactly what they wanted to say, because it helped Eric see the real problems. And currently it seemed the real problem was with Jake, not Melaynah.

Jake glanced at Laynah, but she was silent. "The question is, in your opinion, is it too soon for her to go back to the place where, uh, where it happened?"

"Where what happened?"

Jake sighed. "Where she was raped."

"Too soon for her, or for you?"

Jake's brow creased.

Eric smiled. "Jacob, if she feels a burning desire to go back, and she understands what she may experience there, then it's not too soon to go to the place where she was *raped*, where her *body* was *violated*, where a guy did *horrible* things to the girl you love and cherish, where he *hurt* her both *physically* and *emotionally*." He'd spoken slowly,

emphasizing each word that he thought Jake might be having trouble with.

"Good grief," Jake muttered.

Eric reached out and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Jake, it seems Laynah has already begun to overcome the feelings of loss. Loss of her innocence. Loss of control over her body. It seems you're the one who has a hard time saying the word rape or acknowledging the other things I just mentioned. That's not a bad thing, son. You have good reason. When those we love are hurt, it's almost more difficult. You would rather have him beat you to a bloody pulp than do what he did to her. You would have taken her place in an instant if it could keep it from happening to her."

Jake nodded. "Absolutely."

Laynah squeezed his hand.

Eric smiled. "But that's not how it went down, is it, Jake? It happened to her, not you. And she seems to already be dealing with what happened to her body. She is now trying to deal with what happened to her mind, which is often more difficult and just as important for her health. She's facing it. She wants to face it even more by going to the place where it happened. So*, you* have to be strong enough to face it with her. Can you do that?"

Jake nodded again. "Yes, sir, I get it. I'll be strong for her. I didn't realize I was being such a p..., I mean, a wuss."

"You weren't being cowardly in any way. You're simply loving her deeply, so much so, that you feel her pain magnified a hundredfold in your own psyche. Loving someone that well is nothing to be ashamed of. Loving someone is a strength."

"Thank you, Grandmaster Kino, for the help, for taking the time to talk to us."

"It was my pleasure."

Eric watched the young couple head off, turned to his wife, lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them.

"What you just did there? That was impressive," Shelley said.

"What? Kissing your fingers is impressive? If you think that's something, just wait 'til I get you upstairs."

Shelley giggled. "I meant, how you just counseled Jake."

"I know what you meant. And now, it's your turn to get counseled."

She gave a slight shriek as he lifted her and headed upstairs.

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April 13th Saturday Afternoon

Wilson's Lake, Pine Forest, Georgia

It'd been raining on and off so Jake borrowed his father's pickup instead of making Laynah ride on the back of his bike. He glanced over at her now as they pulled onto the dirt drive that circled around the lake.

"Feelin' okay?"

She nodded. "Feel a little tingly in my stomach. I've been here a guzillion times over the past twenty years. A lot of times with my family. Even more times with a bunch of friends. Only a few times was I alone." She blew out a breath to relieve her tension.

"Where did you go?"

"The far side, where you and I were last here."

"Do you remember why you came here alone?" he asked as he drove slowly around to the far side, the tires crunching on the gravel.

"I'd gone to class. The stupid class I thought I just had to attend instead of going with you to see Gabe fight. So, I came here and I was thinking about how boring the class was and that set me off on wondering about my life decisions."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'd just spent two years on the wrong major, I was thinking about spending several more years studying to be a vet. What if that was wrong too? What do I really want to do? What if you were right?"

Jake backed the truck in so they could see the water, put it in park and turned off the ignition. "What if I was right about what?"

"Maybe I should just be a stable hand for the rest of my life."

"Uh, that wasn't my only suggestion and that one was said in jest."

She nodded. "I know. But, maybe I really should consider running my own stables, or training horses, or running a camp for sick and disabled kids and get them up on horses, or all of the above. The point is, I was thinking about you, and missing you terribly and so I came here, to be alone, to think about you, to pray and meditate. I was missing you so badly. It was strange. I'd done okay without you for years, but once you confessed to me that you had feelings for me, suddenly I couldn't stand to be away from you."

"Oh, Bugs." He reached over, touched her cheek.

"I was wishing I'd just gone with you. Why didn't I just go with you? Why do I have to be so stubborn?"

He didn't know what to say, because he wished she'd just gone with him too. He drew a breath. "What's done is done, right?"

She nodded, but the escaped tear was a telltale sign of how she was feeling. "So, I came here and it made me smile, thinking of how you so easily dunked me in the lake—several times. I mean, you're so strong. I'm a strong girl, but you threw me in like I weighed about two pounds."

He chuckled. "Well, you are a strong, athletic girl, but you're a tiny thing, so me being able to throw you in the lake was no big deal."

"I am NOT a tiny thing. I'm five feet seven inches of muscle."

He pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. "You're five foot seven inches of extreme hotness."

"Whatever."

He got serious again because this was not the time for flirting. "So, did you stay in your car, or did you get out?"

She sighed and concentrated. "I got out and sat down there," she said pointing at the shore. "I took my shoes off and waded in the water. I tried to call you and when you didn't answer I texted you."

He nodded. Waited.

"I was scrolling on my phone I think, looking for some inspirational kind of music. I saw Brett's car when he pulled in and I wondered what he was doing here and hoped he didn't see me over here. But he came straight over here. When he pulled up, I stood

up. He said 'hello gorgeous,' and I pretty much told him to go away and leave me alone."

Jake drew a deep breath. "Do you know how he knew you were here? I mean, you said you've been here alone only a few times your whole life. How did he know? Did he just happen to see your car? Was he following you? Stalking you?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea. I didn't think to ask him. I told him to go away and he refused. He got out of his car."

She brushed some hair back from her face and Jake realized her hand was shaking. He wanted to hold her now, but knew he needed to let her get it out.

"We argued, but I can't really remember what we said. He grabbed my wrist and I told him to let go of me. He wouldn't, so I bit his hand. I guess that pissed him off and he punched me in the face. He hit me so hard I think I lost consciousness for a few seconds. When I opened my eyes he was turning me over, pulling at my jeans." Her breath hitched.

Jake's jaw tensed.

"I tried to fight him. I fought with all my strength. I tried so hard. But I got tired. I couldn't breathe. The rest was pretty much a blur. Except for, except... "

She was shaking, so he tried to pull her into his arms, but the steering wheel was in the way, so he went around to her side, opened her door and scooted in beside her, pulled her onto his lap and held her close.

"Except for what?" he asked, sensing that it was important.

"It hurt. The moment he took my virginity, it hurt so bad. He didn't know I was a virgin. I guess he really believed the stories he'd made up in his mind. But it hurt so bad and he realized what he'd done, and he started to laugh. That was the worst part. He laughed."

She looked up quickly, an expression of panic on her face.

"Laynah?"

She jumped out of his lap, ran toward the tree line and threw up.

He ran after her, placed his hand gently on her back, waited until she finished retching.

She turned to him, crying huge sobs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry I didn't go with you, I'm sorry I'm such a mess." She threw herself against his chest.

"Shh, Bugs, it's okay, honey. I've got you now. I've got you."

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1 Peter 4:12-13

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial
when it comes upon you to test you,
as though something strange were happening to you.
But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings,
that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

Chapter Thirteen

Jake took Laynah home and spoke with his Aunt Lisa about what had just transpired at the lake. As he spoke to Laynah's beautiful mom, he couldn't help but think of the stories he'd heard about her. She'd been engaged to another man, not his Uncle Chaz. Lisa's own mother—Miss Maddie's runaway daughter—was having an affair with Aunt Lisa's fiancé. That was messed up, and that's when she'd left California and come back to Georgia. She and Uncle Chaz fell in love. They were neighbors, just like Jake and Laynah were neighbors. They even lived in the same homes.

The people who used to own the property where the Tanners live, a brother-sister duo, came very close to murdering Lisa. It was crazy. People are crazy. The world is filled with so much evil, but that was exactly what he was trying to combat. The Appels, the Stewarts, the Tanners, the Kinos, they were all trying to do what they could to battle evil, without becoming evil themselves. It was sometimes a hard road to walk.

Jake finished speaking with his Aunt Lisa and went to find Uncle Chaz who was actually at Jake's house. Well, at the Inn. He drove home, parked the truck and came in the back kitchen door. The place was pretty quiet, even though he knew all the guys were at the Inn because they were all going together into town to spend an evening at Joe's, while the ladies were headed to *The Ritz*, a fancier night club type establishment run by Aunt Lisa's half sister, Megan.

He made his way into the living room/lobby area. Gabe sat there alone, and looked up when Jake came in.

"Hey Gabester," Jake greeted jovially.

"Hey," Gabe answered glumly.

"What's up?" Jake asked, realizing all was not well.

Gabe nodded toward the dining room.

Jake heard the low rumble of men's voices and headed in.

The table was covered with eight-by-ten pics, pretty much of Gabe.

"What's going on?" Jake asked. He quickly took note of who was in the room. Ricky, Chaz, Keegan, Jake's father and Jeffy, the only female.

It was his father who answered. "What we're looking at here is courtesy of Rose. She wanted us to see just how bad all the publicity was surrounding her brother."

"Bad?"

"Yep, bad."

"Oh, there's still all the teenage girls commenting and lusting after the poor kid. And still a lot of sports enthusiasts extolling his abilities in the martial arts and now, in baseball. But now, they've gotten word that he's a gun expert and enthusiast, and that is not looked on with so much warmth."

"What do you mean?"

John picked up one picture. "Look at this one."

Jake read it and couldn't believe someone had put this up about the nicest kid in the world. At the top of the page was a pic of Gabe's dad with one of the defamatory articles about him killing twenty-three men when he'd rescued Jeff Davis almost twenty years earlier. Then the words, "Like Father like Son," followed by several pics of Gabe. Those pics were of Gabe with a rifle over his shoulder, of Gabe winning first place at a shooting competition, of Gabe shooting a 9mm pistol at a shooting range.

The rest of the spread across the table were pics of Gabe obviously taken from videos that had been made during his game or during the Mini-MART. A lot of the comments were still positive, but a lot of them were getting ugly, mirroring the politics of the day. Some comments defended Gabe's 2nd Amendment rights. Others were vehemently against it, especially because Gabe was a minor. Some spoke of Gabe setting a fine example for America's youth, and others spoke of what a bad example this was, to promote violence in both shooting and martial arts, and that same violence was what came around and showed itself in Gabe's baseball game and got him beaned.

Jake blew out a breath. "Where'd they get the pics of Gabe shooting?"

"Gabe doesn't know. He says it sure wasn't him who gave them out. He said, the Teenspotter woman who interviewed him asked him about his shooting. She called him an expert sharpshooter. He'd simply changed the subject, because he knows not to talk about guns with people who don't understand them or our rights to have them. And there it is, right in front of us, people who don't understand," John said, obviously exasperated, which was saying a lot because John Appel was usually very calm, much like Grandmaster Kino.

"I, uh, guess this doesn't bode well for Gabe," Jake said softly.

"That's an understatement," Keegan said, who knew all too well the power of the media. "I don't like to think negatively, but I think my son is about to be fried. Add to that his little episode in the stable earlier today, his premonition or whatever you want to call it. It's like wheels have been set in motion and there's no going back."

Ricky sighed. "We had no idea what our little mini-tournament would bring. We knew it could spur some publicity, I had no idea it would spur something like this."

"How could you know that a bunch of teenagers could make someone go as viral as Gabe went?" John said.

"I should have known. All of us Kinos should have known. Honestly though, Gabe's fame has far surpassed the Kinos. I'm blown away at how fast this thing has taken off and how far it's gone. But I shouldn't be. He's a good-lookin' kid. My own daughter is completely taken with him. That should've told me something right there. My father and I were seeing him through the eyes of a martial artist. We wanted to honor him. We should have noticed Taylor's reaction to him. We should have realized a bunch of raging teenage hormones could be powerful."

"And that's enough self-flagellation," John said. "Moving forward, we need to focus on how we can protect him."

"He needs to keep a low profile," Jeffy said. "Let all this stuff die down. One thing us Kinos know is the public and the press are fickle. As fast as Gabe's popularity has

flared up, it *can* go right back to nothing. He needs to make sure he doesn't get into any fights at school over this stuff. Don't grant any interviews to anyone. Not local, and definitely not national."

"Wouldn't that make him seem snobby?" Jake asked.

"Does it make us seem snobby?" Jeffy countered.

"No, just private people."

"And that's what they'll think of Gabe. That and humble. We can help spin that, right?" she directed at Ricky.

He nodded. "Absolutely. With the help of some celebs, like Bree, Toby and Caroline, and a few others. Even you, Keeg."

"Me? I'm the infamous one here."

"Maybe you don't remember how all that turned out. All charges were dismissed, you emerged as the hero you were. We just have to remind everyone about that part."

"I remember it turned out with a knife to the gut," Keegan responded.

Ricky shrugged. "There is evil in this world. You lived. You've raised an amazing family, you're at a top level at Ameritech, helping to fight the darkness every day. Let's bank on that now. And Jeff, he was a hero too, and he still bears weight, and he will stand up for the son of the man who rescued him. And Gabe's own mom, is a Grammy-winning singer. I know she doesn't do much of that anymore, but she also carries weight. We can turn this all around. They'll be sorry they messed with Gabe in the first place. They'll be sorry they tried to use him to press their political agendas," Ricky said.

"I agree with Ricky," John said. "We can handle this. They won't know what hit them."

Grandmaster Kino entered the room. "I'm sure I'll agree with Ricky too, as soon as someone fills me in."

"Where have you been, Dad? I was about to go looking for you," Jeffy said.

"I was, uh, resting," Eric said with a smile.

All the men chuckled.

"What?" Jeffy asked. "What's so funny?"

"You don't know?" Ricky asked.

She sighed, briefly closed her eyes and opened them, her cheeks pink. "Oh. Well, how am I supposed to know? I don't use my abilities every minute of every day and I use them to heal, not to check on my parents' sex life."

She turned and stormed out as there was another round of laughter from the men.

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April 13th Saturday Evening

Joe's Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Ricky smiled as he looked around. "I've always liked this place. It's like a continuous family party goin' on. I guess you guys have come here a lot over the years?"

"Well, we used to," Chaz replied. "I guess it's the young people that come here now, at least once a week. John, Keeg, and I, we don't have the energy anymore."

Jake nodded. "When I'm home I always hit this place up. It's a great place for a quick pizza and beer. Even before I could legally drink, a round of pool, a pizza, a soda, great family atmosphere."

"Yeah, that's what you were after," Keegan said with a chuckle.

Jake shrugged. "And the girls." He nodded at a table of high school girls who were giggling and not being discreet at all about THE Gabe Tanner being within ten feet of them.

The men all glanced at Gabe. He rolled his eyes. He wasn't feeling very cheerful.

"Go ahead and give them a thrill," Jake said with a smile. "I dare you to smile at them, or even better, wink at them."

Gabe shook his head. "You couldn't pay me."

"Are you sure?" Chaz asked. "Cuz I got a twenty right here." He threw it into the middle of the table.

"I'm in," Jake said as he threw another twenty on top.

"Okay, let's see what ya got, Gabriel," John said as he added his twenty to the pile.

Keegan sighed. "Well, I don't want to be the only level-headed person in the bunch." He tossed a couple of twenties into the pot.

Everyone looked at Ricky. "Guess I'll match what's in the pot." He tossed a hundred-dollar bill on top.

Gabe shook his head. "Very funny, guys, now take your money back. I don't feel like flirting with a bunch of girls."

Jake grinned. "Aww, come on, Gabester. Just look at them and smile. That's all you have to do and you get the money. Or are you worried that Taylor would find out?"

Gabe glanced up at Taylor's father and suddenly wondered, was this a test?

"You *are* worried about Taylor," Jake said, when Gabe didn't answer him the first time.

"I'm not worried about Taylor because she couldn't care less if I smile at a bunch of girls. She's been encouraging me to do just that. She says it's good for my image. Believe me, Taylor Kino is not threatened in any way by a few giggling girls."

"Then do it," Ricky said softly. "I won't tell her."

"There's nothing to tell."

"That's two hundred dollars on the table," Chaz said.

"Money isn't everything," Gabe countered. "And even though Taylor wouldn't care, *I* would know that I flirted with a bunch of girls for money. And that doesn't feel right. So, take your money back. My soul is not for sale."

Keegan smiled proudly. John nodded. They all nodded at him. Ricky held up his glass of Perrier. "To Gabe. That was a fine show of character."

They all took a sip of their drinks. Ricky gathered up the money, took it up to the bar and stuffed it in the jar for a local kid with cancer.

Their food arrived. It was far from the cuisine of the night before. Pizza– loaded, hot wings, double cheeseburgers, chili-cheese fries, jalapeno sliders, nachos, and a club sandwich for Ricky who was doing his best to eat healthy in the current situation.

As they ate, their conversation turned to a plan to carry out as a publicity campaign for Gabe. It all sounded to Gabe like a lot of trouble to go to just for him.

"And you think that all these people will do this stuff just for me?" Gabe asked.

"Good people will always do what they can to help someone else. Remember that," Ricky said. "And you can pay it forward."

"Do you think there will be a big showing at my next game? Cuz, like, I have a game every Tuesday and Friday for the next five weeks."

"Well, it's hard to tell," Ricky answered. "The media and the public are fickle. This gun thing could put off a lot of people, and that might diminish your popularity a bit, but it could also send a huge surge of a new group of people your way."

"What do you mean?"

"He means, son," Keegan answered, "that instead of a bunch of gushing teen girls, there could be a showing of different political groups, pro-Second Amendment and anti-gun groups."

"Which could get ugly," Chaz put in. "We probably should get Ty to beef up security detail at the games."

"And Ameritech might consider becoming involved," John said to Keegan. "Jason did say they would take care of their own."

Keegan nodded. "I've already started."

"So, does anyone wanna play some pool?" Jake asked, spotting an empty table.

"I do," Gabe said quickly.

The two young ones headed over to the available table. Jake stood back against the wall while Gabe broke. He sank two stripes. Jake rolled his eyes. This kid can do no wrong. Gabe had nearly cleared the table when Jake stood up straight, eyeing the guys who'd just come through the door. Three of them had been with Brett the night he'd tried to start something here. The other two he hadn't seen before and Jake quickly scanned them, looking for firearms. It appeared none were carrying.

They spotted him almost immediately, as if they'd come looking for him. Great. Jake didn't want them to even come near Gabe, so he told Gabe he'd be right back and moved toward the guys.

"Just the guy we were looking for," the one with short blond hair said.

"Okay, you found me. What do you want?"

"We just wanna talk to ya," blondie answered.

"So talk."

"Outside," one of the guys he'd seen before said.

"Yeah," another said with a laugh. "I don't see no backup this time."

"Is that what you think?" Jake returned, using his favorite comeback.

"That's exactly what we think," blondie said. "Outside and we'll take care of this little problem."

Jake nodded. "Just a warning. If we go outside, someone's gonna get hurt."

The five guys chuckled. "You got that right," one said.

Meanwhile, at the table, Keegan and John glanced at each other. "Whaddya think, Keeg?"

"I'm thinkin' Jake's about to have to prove himself."

"I'm thinkin' the same thing," John said.

"Trouble?" Ricky asked with a smile. "Cuz, I kinda thrive on that."

"Let's only back him up if he absolutely needs help," John said.

"Geez, I'm glad I thought to bring my ALS bag," Chaz said.

"How many?" Ricky asked so he wouldn't have to turn around to look.

"Looks like five," Keegan answered.

"Anyone carryin'?"

"Only Jake, as far as I can tell," John answered.

Jake smiled at the guys confronting him. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"So, we take it outside, or someone in here could get hurt," blondie countered.

"After you," Jake said, gesturing toward the door.

Gabe made his way over to the men. "Dad, I think Jake's got trouble."

"I think you're right, son," Keegan answered.

Ricky handed four hundred dollars to their waitress, told her to keep the change. The men rose slowly and waited for Jake and the five to make their way out to the parking lot. The men and Gabe followed discreetly, each taking a different place outside of the circle of the six guys about to tear it up. They blended in with the other people who were already starting to gather around.

Keegan spoke softly to his son. "Gabe, you are not to get involved at all. Not for any reason. Got it?"

Gabe sighed. "Yes, sir. What about I video, just in case there's any need to prove that Jake didn't start it. You know, just in case."

"Good idea, you do that."

Jake stood in the center of the parking lot. The five guys wanting to hurt him stood in a circle around him. "Okay, so, just to be clear," Jake began. "All this is because I pulled your little friend off of a female, and hit him?"

"No one messes with Brett and goes unpunished," blondie answered.

Jake laughed.

"You won't be laughing long."

Still chuckling, Jake shrugged. "Sorry, it's just that y'all are like a little yuppie gang. Little rich dudes from a semi-upscale neighborhood thinking you can threaten people who dare try to put you in your place. You don't even have any idea who you're messin' with. None. It's kind of pitiful."

"You can say what you want, dude, but you're goin' down. Like I said, no one messes with Brett and gets away with it."

"Yeah, well, no one beats on a woman in my presence and gets away with it."

The guy to Jake's right rear charged. Jake merely grabbed the guy's arm as he swung toward Jake, pulled him in closer, shifted and threw an elbow into the guy's nose. The guy screamed and fell to the ground and Jake bounced away.

Then it was a free-for-all. Jake spun and swept the legs of the guy on his left, and the guy fell, Jake gave a quick punch to the throat and he was down. Almost at the same time, Jake threw a front kick to the groin of the guy in front of him who'd tried to move in. He went down and wasn't getting up anytime soon. Two guys left.

The guy to his front left charged in and Jake shifted sideways, put him in a headlock and squeezed. Blondie finally made his move, deciding to take advantage of Jake's hands being occupied in the headlock. But Jake threw a quick front kick to Blondie's jaw and he staggered back. Jake finished choking out the guy in the headlock and he fell limply to the ground. Blondie came at him again, and Jake rained a series of punches on him until he fell down and wasn't moving. The whole thing took about two minutes.

The highly trained men watching from the crowd nodded their heads in approval. About that time a sheriff's car came speeding up, lights flashing. It was the new guy again, Levi Moore. He sprang from the car, weapon drawn and pointed it at Jake. "Get on the ground!" he screamed.

Jake threw his hands in the air and immediately knelt on the pavement. He then lay flat and allowed the deputy to disarm him and cuff him.

A moment later Ty drove up in his personal vehicle. Right behind Ty, one of the officers from the newly formed Pine Forest Police Department pulled up.

Chaz nodded at the police officer and approached Ty.

Ty sighed, shook his head. "Shoulda known it was you guys."

"Sorry, bro. They started it. Jake finished it."

"Got any proof of that?"

"Yes, sir," Gabe said as he approached.

Keegan, John and Ricky also approached.

"Ty, you remember, Ricky," Chaz said.

Ty shook his hand. "Good to see ya again, Rick."

Ricky smiled. "Likewise."

"Moore," Ty barked. "Call for medical please for these guys."

"Already did. ETA five minutes."

Ty nodded. "And take the cuffs off of that young man."

Frowning, Deputy Moore complied.

Ty nodded at the police officer. "Watch those guys, make sure no one leaves," Ty ordered.

Both Deputy Moore and the officer nodded. "It doesn't look like they're goin' anywhere," the officer stated.

John did most of the talking, explaining what actually went down. He mentioned that they could pull the security cameras from Joe's, but also offered Gabe's footage, which was viewed immediately.

Jake came to stand with them, rubbing his wrists, and quickly gave his account.

"If you weren't intending to fight, why did you come outside with them?" Ty asked.

"Well, they implied that they would start inside and other people would get hurt. I didn't want anyone to get hurt, so I complied with their request to move it outside."

The paramedics arrived and started taking care of the five attackers. Ty went to get the medical status of each one while Moore was busy getting IDs.

In their group of six, Ricky was laughing and congratulating Jake on a job well done. He then gave him some pointers on things he shouldn't have done, and some alternatives to things he could have done.

Gabe was in awe of Jake and told him so. Keegan, John and Chaz told him how proud they were. All in all, it was a great time.

"Well, I guess we'd better head back home," John said. "It's getting late and the ladies are probably already back and waiting on us."

Ricky grinned. "John, you are so much like my dad."

"I'll take that as a great compliment."

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April 13th Late Saturday Night

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"I'm glad my dad said you could stay again," Laynah whispered.

"I promised him no messin' around," Jake said. "And he's still concerned about your mental well-being, or I guess your emotional well-being, so it wasn't difficult to get his permission. He sure does love his baby girl."

"You mean Aralyn?"

He laughed. "No, I meant his other baby girl."

Laynah sighed. "How about a little messin' and just no 'around'?"

"I'd like that," he said. He hadn't kissed her in a long time. She was giving him permission and he was happy about that. He lay beside her, in her bed. She was on her back looking up at him, the most beautiful girl in the world. He wanted to dive right in, but made himself go slow. He touched her face, which was no longer swollen but still had a little bruising around her eyes. Slowly, gently, he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers.

After some time he raised his head. She looked into his eyes. The connection was so strong. She stroked his face. "It doesn't look like you've even been in a fight."

Jake gave a soft laugh. "Well, it was a little bit one-sided."

"I heard there were five guys. I figured your face would be all bruised and bleeding."

"Gee, thanks a lot for the vote of confidence."

She giggled. "You don't think anyone could hit you?"

"Wow."

"I mean, like, there were five guys."

"Five dumb, untrained guys. They never touched me. It wasn't really much of a test."

"Oh. Well, aren't you just so tough."

"Yes. Yes I am. Hopefully you'll never have to see it."

"And cocky too," she said with a laugh.

"Didn't look too cocky when your uncle's deputy cuffed me."

She laughed. "Remember, I've been cuffed by the same guy. Levi's not a bad sort. He's just new and a little by the book."

They were quiet a moment. He kissed her softly. "So, Bugs, are you gonna feel like going to church in the morning?"

"Yes. Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes. Pastor Tim has asked Grandmaster Kino if he would give his testimony and I'm looking forward to hearing it, again."

"He's really a special man, isn't he?"

"He is. Think of the work he's done, Bugs. I've done some research. He starts this line of martial arts schools, with honor and integrity and Christian values at its very core. Almost eighty percent of his students get saved and the rest have seeds planted. His one school expands to two, and the teachers at the new school teach the same way, the same values and a high percentage of their students get saved. And one of the coolest things is, they don't teach religion in a formal way in the school, except through example. And what an example he is. Now, Grandmaster Kino has hundreds of studios worldwide and that doesn't count his students who've gone on to have their own line of studios using

Grandmaster Kino as an example, like my father, and his partner Brian, who have a bunch of schools and both were taught by Grandmaster Kino.

"I mean there are like forty thousand McDonald's in the world, and I'm comparing a martial arts studio to a restaurant you see in every town. That is incredible. And how many lives does each one of those studios touch? The scope to me is almost unbelievable. And yet, he is so humble, just always wanting to do God's will, and all glory be to God. I'm blown away by this man and count myself very blessed to know him, to be able to spend time with him, even that my own father was trained by him. It's like being a part of a very big plan to train a bunch of warriors to do God's work here on earth."

"Wow. You're right, Jake. The scope *is* incredible. I mean, think how many students your own father has currently, just at his little Pine Forest studio. What, about two hundred? And that's just currently. How many students has he trained over the past twenty years since he's lived here? How many lives has he touched with Grandmaster Kino's values? And your dad has several more studios who teach the same values. And this is just one guy who learned from Grandmaster Kino. Multiply that by the people who have been touched by Kino Martial Arts each and every year. The numbers are staggering."

"Exactly. And then, think of Ameritech."

"What about Ameritech?"

"Well, Grandmaster Kino trained Jason Lee. And he trained him so well that Jason goes and becomes a consultant to our government, training military, putting together the special ops training. Jason becomes so renowned that he is able to start a little security company called Ameritech."

"You lost me. What does that have to do with God's work?"

"Jason, and his brother Justin for that matter, both become super strong Christians, just like Eric, because of Eric's example. And just like Eric, in everything they do they set an example of living as Jesus would have us live. Did you know that at Ameritech, like ninety-five percent of his agents and other employees are also Christians? And it's not because he hires Christians. But once they're hired they can't help but be touched by the Spirit because the example that Jason and the other Christian employees set is so strong. It's just an amazing example of doing God's work, and it really inspires me.

"And as much respect as I have for my dad, and for Grandmaster Kino, it's really all about Jesus. What a gift. The way His Spirit calls to me, I don't even know how to describe it."

Laynah reached up and stroked Jake's cheek. "Your words. Your enthusiasm for Jesus and doing God's work, it makes me love you even more than I already do."

He smiled. "I love you too, my Laynahbug. I'm so grateful you stuck it out and waited for me to come around and finally see what we have. I think we were meant to be together, maybe from the very beginning."

"Like fate?"

"No, because fate makes it seem like we didn't have a choice. And I know we do, and I'm thinkin' we made that choice since before we came to be in this world."

"Jacob Appel, you are making me so happy."

"I'm glad, Bugs, cuz you make me happy too." He kissed her. "Let's try to get some sleep."

"I'll try but it might be hard."

"Why? I'm exhausted."

"Because I'm so excited for our future."

"Shhh, Bugs. Let's just take it one day at a time and enjoy each moment. And right now that moment is we get to sleep next to each other, we're both alive and well, and madly in love. How cool is that?"

She sighed. "Very cool."

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April 14th Sunday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe was sitting at the table before breakfast. His sister had handed him her phone and invited him to see the pictures she'd taken the night before. He scrolled through his sister's phone, looking at the pics she'd taken at *The Ritz,* a classy establishment with live artists, owned and run by Aunt Lisa's half-sister, Megan. It had been opened to give the locals a fancy place to get dressed up and have a nice evening out without having to drive into Atlanta. When Gabe got to a picture of Taylor in a shimmery blue evening dress, his jaw dropped open. "Wow."

Rose turned from where she was pouring juice. "I know who you're looking at," she said with a smile. "She's stunning, isn't she?"

Gabe couldn't even answer.

Violet giggled. "Close your mouth, little brother."

He finally sighed and scrolled past looking for other pics of the same girl. Stunning was a nice word. She was hot. Totally hot.

"Whaddya think she sees in you, Gabe?" Rose asked glibly.

Gabe blinked up at his sister. "Good question."

"She's just kidding," Violet said. "You are quite the catch, and Rose knows it. And so does Taylor."

Gabe smiled. "Thanks, sis. I was just thinking, I mean, prom is in four weeks. I wonder if I could get her to go with me. So much has been going on, I haven't even thought about it, but seeing her in that dress, I mean, it reminded me that prom is coming up."

"You'll never know until you ask her. And they're leaving after lunch today, so, you'd better work fast."

"I'll just wait until she gets home and give her a call."

"Call who?" Lily asked as she and Daisy came downstairs.

"He's just decided to ask Taylor to the prom and they're leaving today so I told him to work fast but he's talking about calling her instead," Rose summed up.

"Oh my goodness, Gabe, have we not taught you anything?" Lily cried.

Gabe shrugged. "What's the big deal? Taylor is a cool girl. She won't care if I call her. That's why she gave me her number."

"Bro, just stop," Rose said. "If you're gonna do it, you have to do it right."

"What are you talking about?"

"She's talking about a promposal," Daisy said quietly.

"Good grief," Gabe muttered. "I mean, aren't those like, supposed to be done in public, with a big deal and everything?"

"Uh, yeah," Lily said.

"But not always," Daisy added.

"Well, what if she turns me down? That would be like, really embarrassing, I mean, if it's in front of everyone."

Violet laughed. "That is a chance you just have to take."

Gabe shook his head. "I can't do this. Besides, there's no time."

"You're just scared," Rose said.

"Well—sure."

"Come on, Gabe," Lily said. "Since when is my little brother afraid of anything? Good grief, you just fought a twenty-three-year-old man for seven rounds."

"That's different."

"It is," Daisy said softly. "But I think you can stand up to the fear of being turned down. Anyway, I don't think she'll turn you down."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I've watched her when she's near you. She can't keep her eyes off you."

"Exactly, Mr. Ultimate Male. So buck up. Now—we'll help you and we won't make it elaborate. Just a simple, sweet promposal," Rose said.

Gabe sighed. "What do you have in mind?"

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April 14th 10:00 AM Sunday Morning

Pine Forest Community Church of Christ, Pine Forest, Georgia

The visiting Kino family had a seat out in the congregation along with everyone else. There must have been a buzz that they would be attending church today, because the place was totally packed.

Gabe looked around, taking in the differences. There did seem to be a lot more people than usual. Gabe sat with his family, and Taylor sat with hers. They decided it would give people one less thing to talk about. He wondered about that. After the tournament, he'd kissed Taylor in the moment. He hadn't really seen any pics of that. He guessed that was a blessing, but wondered why there had been no mention of Taylor being associated with him.

Today Gabe, with little Iris on his lap, sat between his mother on his left and his sisters Violet, Rose, Lily and Daisy on his right. His father was on the aisle on the other side of his mom. In the pew in front of them were the Stewarts and the Appels except for Miss Maddie who had chosen to sit with her usual women's group. In front of them were the six Kinos along with other members of the congregation. The service hadn't started yet. The two girls who'd talked to him last Sunday, walked by and waved at him. He nodded and offered a small smile. They weren't even discreet this time about taking his picture. Gabe watched as they did the same thing when they passed by the Kinos. He shook his head.

Pastor Tim and his wife came to greet the Kinos. Eric and Ricky both stood and shook their hands. The organist was playing some prelude music and there was

definitely a noisier buzz of conversation going on than usual.

The music changed. A pianist started to play, the choir to sing. Gabe closed his eyes for a second. There it was again. That warm feeling. He loved it. He was starting to crave it. He thought he wanted to live every day so that he could always feel that feeling. And what was it exactly? The Holy Spirit? Was God touching his heart? It felt so good. It made him emotional. It made him feel like anything was possible.

Gabe looked around to see if other people were feeling what he was feeling. Some had their hands in the air, inviting Jesus in. Some were standing. Some were swaying. Gabe playfully lifted Iris' hands up over her head and swayed them back and forth.

"Jesus," Iris said loudly, as she giggled, making his mom and dad look down at her and smile. His father's eyes met his and he nodded. Was Gabe imagining it, or were there tears in his father's eyes?

Gabe's heart swelled. He looked up, and Jake, sitting in the pew in front of him turned and looked at him. Jake definitely had tears in his eyes. Suddenly, he smiled and extended his hand to Gabe. They clasped hands briefly. They'd always been close, but from that moment forward, Gabe knew they would be lifelong friends.

Once all the singing and praying, announcements and business was over, Pastor Tim began to speak. "I know you all know who is here joining us in our congregation today. Some of you may even know that I've asked him to share his testimony with us. I planned to merely cut my sermon short to give us time for this, but I feel in my spirit that my sermon can wait for another time. I feel strongly that I should turn the time over to our guest, so for any of you who didn't already know, Grandmaster Eric Kino, of *Kino Martial Arts* is here with us today, along with his sweet wife, Shelley Kino and a few other members of his family, whose names I'm sure I don't need to mention to you. For now, everyone, please give a warm welcome to Grandmaster Eric Kino."

The welcome was indeed warm, enthusiastic and long. Eric stood slowly, buttoned his suit jacket, kissed his wife on the cheek and made his way up to the pulpit.

If one were to try to describe the appearance of this man, they would probably say he looked like a thirty-five-year-old, light-skinned, Native American warrior in a suit. Well—Hawaiian Native American, born and raised on the isle of Kauai. He had strong broad shoulders, narrow waist, flat stomach, muscular legs, proud bearing. His skin was golden tan, his eyes brown and warm, his smile, kind. His hair was thick, dark brown, almost black with a few soft streaks of gray. It was mostly straight with a slight wave and came just past his shoulders. He'd worn it that way since high school, though at times it was much longer. Many people thought him to be Native American though he was kama'aina, meaning, in essence, native Hawaiian.

People also knew that though this man came across as gentle, friendly, kind, and compassionate, he was also extremely lethal. The power he carried was palpable, and everyone felt it as he walked to the pulpit.

He adjusted the mic, smiled kindly. "Thank you for such a wonderful welcome. I was honored when Pastor Tim asked me to speak and tell you a little bit of my relationship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whom I love with a love I cannot express and for whom I am extremely grateful."

Gabe had to draw a deep breath. Just those few words spoken, and already the entire

room was so filled with God's light, that Gabe wanted to shout for joy. In the next pew, Jake whispered a fervent "Yes, Amen," which got Gabe's attention. It made Gabe feel so happy that others were feeling the same thing he was feeling. He glanced around at his father and mother, over at his sisters, up at people in other pews, they all looked totally enraptured.

"I want to tell you a little bit about my amazing experiences, but just a little bit because I've had a lot of them. In a few months I'll be seventy years old."

There was a large murmur as people found this to be unbelievable.

"But I also want to warn you that I'm not gonna speak very long, because I intend to give the remainder of my time over to my son."

There was a huge gasp from the congregation. Everyone loved Ricky Kino and now they would get to hear him speak.

Bree looked up at her husband's face, which had paled. "Did you know about this?" she whispered.

He blew out a breath. "No, I did not."

She smiled, patted his hand. "You'll be fine."

His jaw tensed. He knew his father. He didn't just make decisions willy-nilly. There was thought behind this action. This was a test or a lesson or something more momentous, like the passing of a torch.

Eric chuckled. "If you could see Ricky's face right now you would know that he had no idea he would be called upon to speak today. I'm sure he'll have a lot to say to me at lunch this afternoon, but it was something God has put on my heart, and I try to do His will at all times. So, forgive me son, and take it up with your *Heavenly* Father."

The congregation laughed. Eric had them in the palm of his hand.

People had their phones out. They were recording his every word. This was also being livestreamed to their online congregation, which consisted mostly of homebound elderly and disabled people or people out of town or people who had moved away from the state and didn't want to leave their church.

"I have been so blessed," Eric went on. "I've been shown miracles with my own eyes. Things that I go back to when I need reminding that God is real, that He's not just a figment of our imagination. I've seen an angel. I was not dreaming. I am usually reluctant to speak about this publicly. It's usually pretty off-putting for people to hear that. But I can't be worried about what others think, for he who has ears to hear will hear and understand that God is still working today as He was way back in the biblical days. And today I will quote Revelation when it says, 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,' for the Spirit is moving me today to speak what I must.

"Here is a bit of what the angel said to me. He said I have a great work to do, to teach the world. He said I was to live in honor, and truth, with integrity, and morals. I was to live nobly and keep God's laws, for they are not given to us to restrict us, but to protect us. I didn't know how to do these things. But as I developed a relationship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, I was taught how to do it. So, my message to you is to build that relationship and find out God's will for you. If you are doing His will then you can't go wrong. He will be with you to lead you and guide you."

Eric smiled and pointed at his son. "Get ready Ricky, I'm almost done."

The crowd laughed again. There was so much excitement that the Spirit was palpable.

"My son, Ricky Kino, who, by the way, is also a Grandmaster though almost no one calls him by this title, tells me constantly that he cannot fill my shoes, that he will never measure up to accomplish what I have accomplished, but I beg to differ. People see his public persona and think that he is somewhat cocky. But we, in his close circle, we know he is humble, almost too humble, for he doesn't quite understand his true power. Not yet. But he will soon."

Ricky's eyebrows rose as he wondered what his father was talking about.

"People are constantly coming to me to ask how they can accomplish what I have accomplished, how they can be like me. I'm gonna tell you all that secret right now. Don't try to be like me. Try to be like Jesus, because *that* is what makes me who I am. I simply strive to be like Jesus. Of course, I fail miserably, because I am merely human. But I do try. And I try to know God's will for me. *For me.* Those are the keywords. You find His will for YOU. Do that and you will accomplish great and marvelous things.

"My son doesn't even realize the light he is to the world. He doesn't insist anyone call him Grandmaster Kino because he innately knows who the REAL Grandmaster is, and that is God. He has a beautiful testimony and he is strong—powerful—wise, and I couldn't be more proud of him. He rises to every challenge placed in front of him, willingly, with great enthusiasm. So allow me to turn the remainder of the time over to him. Please welcome, my son, Grandmaster Ricky Kino."

Ricky stood, kissed Bree on the cheek, buttoned his suit coat, made his way out to the aisle. His father made his way back to their pew. They looked at each other face to face and fell into each other's embrace. The congregation went crazy at this show of love between father and son, applauding, laughing, shouting hallelujahs and amens.

Ricky went to the pulpit and the congregation went totally silent. The energy was so high, you could almost feel an electric current run through the large church. Ricky smiled, a smile the entire world loved and was familiar with. He shook his head, pointed at his father. "I will get you for this."

The congregation laughed.

Ricky drew a deep breath and again, you could have heard a pin drop. "I know my father well," he began. "I know he wouldn't call on me like this for some random, just for fun, kind of reason, like to see me squirm. He has a reason for this, and he says God is putting it on his heart, so, I'm asking God now, to please fill me with His Holy Spirit and give me the words He would have me speak."

He closed his eyes and opened them quickly and nodded, then whispered a "Thank you."

"My father, my earthly father, just spoke the words admonishing us to establish a line of communication with God, to build a relationship, so that we can know His will for our lives. And God just pointed out to me, that's what I just did. I asked Him to fill me with His Holy Spirit and tell me what to say and that is exactly what we are all supposed to be doing. We all have idols, people we look up to and admire that we want to be like, but, as innocent as that sounds, that is idol worship. My idol I guess, has been my father. What God is telling me is I need to stop trying to fill my earthly father's shoes, and try

to fill Jesus' shoes. Of course, that is impossible. But it's not in the accomplishing, it is in the trying. As long as we are focusing on that, on living with the constant question, '*What would Jesus do?*' in our minds, then we will find the right path, the one that will give us great joy and take us back to be with our Father in Heaven and the rest of our eternal families."

Not a baby cried. Not a cough was heard. There was silence. Until, there was a sniffle. And then another, and another. Not just one or two now, it suddenly seemed as if the entire congregation was in tears. It wasn't because what Ricky Kino was saying was so different or profound, but because the Holy Spirit was bearing witness to what was being said. He was letting everyone here today or listening today know and feel that God is real.

Ricky's eyes filled. His voice choked with emotion. "Do you feel that? I hope you do. I think I can see that you do. Dear God, thank you for that."

Ricky went on to speak for thirty more minutes as the congregation listened in rapt attention. Gabe's entire body was now trembling, like he just couldn't take any more. It was so strange. Gabe had just spoken to both Ricky and Bree earlier this morning. He'd called Ricky and asked to speak to them privately, without Taylor knowing. He'd met them out in the parking lot of the Inn. He'd asked them if it was okay for him to ask Taylor to the prom and if it would be possible to get her back here in four weeks. They had been kind and supportive and accommodating. Gabe had much respect for them. Yet at that time, they seemed like regular people. But what Gabe was feeling now, he would never forget. He looked up as he realized Ricky was nearing the end of the talk.

"So, my father knows that I don't do a lot of public speaking, but he also knows I'm certainly not shy."

A murmur of agreement.

"I haven't had the same experiences as him. I didn't have an angel appear to me, unless, of course, you count my wife."

Some laughter and a few two-syllable "Aww-uhhs."

"Still, what my father experienced, I've seen the effect it's had on him my entire life. God is real. I've seen too many miracles to deny it. I would never deny it. You know, I love my father with a love I cannot put into words. I love my wife and children with that same love. That love extends to my father's wife, her two sons, my nieces and nephews, brother-in-law, sisters-in-law, and many others including these people we're here visiting, the Tanners, the Appels and the Stewarts. My heart is so full of love it feels as though it may burst. How much more does our Father in Heaven love us? Can you even imagine? We cannot comprehend. I only know that I love Him and His Son Jesus Christ, and when this earth life is over, I want Him to say to me, and to my family, 'Well done, thy good and faithful servants.' Amen?" Ricky asked.

The resounding "Amen," was so loud it startled Iris, who'd fallen asleep on Gabe's lap.

"So, I just said that I want that for my family. So, how do we as parents do that? And since I'm a man, I ask, how do we men work toward that goal? There is this thing sweeping the nation and no doubt the world that men, that masculinity, is somehow wrong, it's toxic. This is a satanic lie."

The truth of those words hit powerfully and made Gabe sit up straight.

"Men, especially you men of the church, you have a responsibility to stand up and show your power. This is a quiet strength. My father is a great example of quiet strength. This power is not shown by yelling or bossing people around. You are powerful when you are doing God's will. So, with no temper, with no arrogance, humbly serve God. And just like God has made rules for us to live by in His big world, in our little world, which is our family and our homes, men, you and your wives together, make those rules, enforce those rules and be strong. Be warriors. Pray together with your families every day without fail. Do everything you can to ensure that our families will be together. So that everyone in your family will hear those words, 'Well done.'" He stopped and took a deep breath as he allowed his words to settle over the congregation.

"Thank you, Dad, for giving me this opportunity to express myself. Thank you, Pastor Tim, and thanks to your entire congregation for being so kind and welcoming. I turn the time back over to you."

Ricky left the pulpit among loud applause and cheers, and hallelujahs and amens.

Back at his pew his father stood and hugged him again while the applause continued.

Pastor Tim thanked the Kinos, prayed a powerful prayer and ended the meeting.

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John 14:25-27

"These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you.
But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send
in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you;
my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

Chapter Fourteen

Miss Maddie had again put out a farewell lunch that made everyone sorry they had to leave and asking for recipes. They adjourned into the living room/lobby area to relax and digest and to pray together before the Kinos had to leave.

Gabe excused himself for a few minutes.

The conversation turned to the little plan they'd put into place to turn any negative publicity away from Gabe. They also discussed the tournament that had started the whole thing and the fact that Ricky had lost to his father.

"Rick, you know that tournament came right down to the wire," Eric said. "It

could've gone either way. I've spoken to Justin and he told me how you came to each decision, and I would have done the exact same things. You are not less than me in any way, son. I've been teaching longer than you. But you've been lighting up the world in ways I cannot compete with. I haven't had the time to tell you lately, though I certainly should have made the time, let me just say Rick, I am so very proud of you. And your talk today, it was perfect and it was truly inspirational."

"Hear, hear," John, Keegan and Chaz said at the same time.

Jake reached over and took Laynah's hand. She smiled at him. "Did today measure up to what you imagined?" she whispered.

"It far surpassed," he whispered back.

Shelley caught Laynah's eye and smiled. "If I can do anything for you, Laynah, or you just want to talk, please call me."

"I will. I promise. Thank you so much, Mrs. Kino, for coming here to help me."

"It's been a grand time and I'm glad we were able to come."

Jeffy came up behind Laynah's chair, placed her hands on Laynah's shoulders and leaned down to put her head against hers. "May I read you?" Jeffy asked.

Laynah nodded. She felt an immediate peace come over her and her eyes filled with tears.

Jeffy smiled, pulled away. "I think you're gonna be just fine. If you have any setbacks, call me immediately."

"I will," Laynah said.

"I'm gonna go up and change out of these clothes," Taylor announced.

"Wait, honey," Bree said. "Come sit down next to me a minute and let us get some pictures."

Sighing, Taylor sat down. She looked up to see both sets of Anderson twins all with their phones out. They were giggling. They didn't seem to be taking pictures. They seemed to be videoing. Other people were taking pictures though. She frowned, wondering what was going on, but smiled as little Iris came to her.

"Dis is for you," she said in her little munchkin voice as she held out an envelope.

"Well, thank you!" Taylor said sweetly. She opened the envelope and read the plain white card inside.

"Read it out loud," Ricky said.

Taylor's expression was one of confusion. "Okay, well, it says, 'I would travel around the world...' and that's all it says." She looked up to see little Aralyn come forward and hand her another envelope. Taylor opened it and read aloud, "to see you again."

She looked around, searching for Gabe but she didn't see him.

Matt Stewart then stepped forward and handed her another envelope. Taylor opened it and read aloud, "Will you travel across the country..."

Taylor looked around but still didn't see Gabe. She did see Charlie Stewart approach with a smile. He handed her another card and leaned down to whisper to her. "Please say 'yes'."

She opened Charlie's card and read aloud. "To go to prom with me? Gabe." She lowered the card and there he was, in a suit and tie with a bouquet of pink roses.

He reached out his hand to pull her to her feet. He offered her the flowers. Raised his

eyebrows in question.

"Um," she said, turning to her parents. "Can I?"

Bree smiled. "It's 'may I,' and yes, of course. We'll get you here."

She turned back around, smiling. "Yes!" She jumped into his arms.

He lifted her and spun her around.

Everyone applauded.

After that, bags were gathered and loaded. Goodbyes were said. Hugs abounded.

Gabe didn't care that they were in public, he pulled Taylor close and kissed her. "I can't wait to see you again," he said softly.

"I don't want to go," she moaned. "I'm gonna miss you so much."

"Me too. Uh, I mean I'm gonna miss *you* too."

She giggled. "I know what you meant." She laid her head against his chest. "Hold me tight one more time."

He quickly glanced up at her parents, but they seemed to be distracted as they were saying goodbye to all the others. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her hard. When Ricky approached, Gabe let her go.

Ricky held out his hand. "Gabe, I guess we'll see you in four weeks."

"Yes, sir. Thank you so much, sir, for making that happen."

Ricky nodded. "Don't hurt her."

"No, sir, I wouldn't dream of it."

"Just always be honest. That's the main thing. With her and with yourself."

Gabe nodded, trying hard to understand completely what he was saying. He guessed Mr. Kino meant that if Gabe decided he didn't like Taylor anymore, he needed to be honest and let her know. Gabe didn't see that happening anytime soon. Bree approached and hugged Gabe. "Take care, sweetie," she said. Gabe smiled. Sweetie? He certainly didn't think of himself as sweet, and he hoped nobody else did either. "Thanks, Mrs. Kino," Gabe said. "Oh, I mean Mrs. Adams, right?"

She laughed. "No, you had it right. Legally, I'm Breanna Adams Kino. The public knows me as Breanna Adams, but I'm very proud to be a Kino."

"I don't blame you. I would be too."

"You be proud to be a Tanner."

"Yes, ma'am, I am. I'm very proud of my father, of my family."

She put her hand on his face. "You're a good kid, Gabriel Tanner. I can't think of anyone better for my daughter to be interested in."

"Um, thank you, ma'am."

When everyone had said their goodbyes to everyone else, and Grandmaster Kino had given his last admonishments to the men, the Kinos took their leave.

Gabe watched them drive away, as they headed to the airport. He already missed Taylor. It was gonna be a hard four weeks. He'd have to try and focus hard on his schoolwork, his baseball, and mostly on making a decision about what he wanted to do with his life. Yeah, that would probably be a good idea.

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April 15th Monday Morning

State Highway 16, approaching Orchard Hill, Georgia

Jake had four hundred and forty-three miles to think about Melaynah Stewart. He'd decided to take his bike to the Marine Corps Base at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Four hundred miles was doable. He'd left Pine Forest at 0100 hours after about four hours of sleep. He would easily arrive at Camp Lejeune on time.

The two and a half weeks he'd been on leave had been a little crazy from pretty much the moment he'd stepped off the bus. Somehow, in those two weeks, he'd fallen in love with the girl of his dreams, who also happened to be his childhood crush. Crazy.

He thought about her sweet face when he'd kissed her goodbye last night. He'd had dinner at her house. She asked him to stay with her, but he'd turned her down. He needed to get some rest before he rode over four hundred miles on a bike. So, he took her outside on their big front porch and kissed her goodbye. Man it was hard. Now, it was time to focus on the training and get back to her ASAP.

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April 16th Tuesday Evening

Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe thought about his game as he drove home. There had still been a lot of people there, and they were still wearing *Team Gabe* shirts. He tried to play it down. He was part of a team and together they won, or together they would lose. He'd asked the coach if he could speak to the team before the game. He apologized to his teammates, for all the craziness and for the *Team Gabe* shirts and informed them that new shirts were coming out with *Pine Forest Rebels* on the front and whichever team member's name on the back, and all proceeds would go to the *Pine Forest High School Athletic Department.* That was one part of the publicity plan that would at least make his life a little easier.

The team was gracious about it. Apparently they liked all the publicity and playing in front of a large crowd. And they liked the idea that shirts would be available that had their own names on the back for their families to wear to the games.

The bad part of tonight's crowd, Gabe thought, was the few political signs that he'd been warned could appear. He hadn't seen them, but he'd been told that the people holding them were lining the street, decrying the ownership and use of guns. There were only about ten people, though Gabe didn't know if that was considered a few or a lot.

The game itself, they'd won against the *Lakeland Pirates*, but just barely. He'd done okay. No errors. First at-bat was another HBP. The pitcher was immediately ejected. The guys in the *Rebels* dugout hurled threats and insults at the other team, but were kept from charging the field. Gabe didn't mind. Fine with him if he gets on base, cuz he's gonna find a way to score. Which he did. He was advanced to second by a base hit and to third on a long fly ball to right. He stole home. Second at-bat, however, he struck out and third at-bat he grounded out. Not so great, but they won 2-1, thanks to Peyton's homer.

Gabe decided he'd stay late after practice tomorrow and get in some extra BP.

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April 19th Friday Noon

State Highway 172, approaching Sneads Ferry, North Carolina

Jake gunned the engine of his Indian Roadmaster. If he drove hard he could make it

back maybe by the middle of Gabe's game. Laynah would be there and she wasn't expecting him this early so it would be a great surprise. They'd been dismissed early and he had no problem with that. He thought of Laynah at the game. She was such an athlete herself. She'd played softball and volleyball in high school. She was an equestrian. She could shoot. She was quite the girl. Add the fact that she was drop-dead gorgeous, and he was a very lucky guy.

He thought about his Uncle Chaz asking him to slow down, let her heal. He wondered how long he had in mind, because Jake was chomping at the bit to ask her to marry him. For just a minute he had the thought that if he didn't hurry she might get interested in someone else. But what was he thinking? She'd been waiting for him for years. Still, he didn't want her to have to wait on him much longer. Maybe he should explain that to Uncle Chaz.

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April 19th Friday Evening

Pine Forest High School, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe smiled. The new shirts were a huge hit. It was amazing how fast things can get done when you have celebs like the Kinos working in your corner. The crowd was covered in their new red, white, and blue school colors. It was a beautiful thing. Gabe knew that a lot of the people wearing those new shirts didn't even go to his school. He also knew most of them still had his name on the back, but at least it was on the *back*.

He looked up to see his father in his usual place. He tipped his hat as always. His mom and Iris blew kisses and he waved at them. Three of his older sisters had dates with them, and Daisy sat with Laynah, calling his name and waving. He waved back and turned away, briefly thinking of Taylor, and then telling himself to focus. After tonight, the next four games would be away games. He wanted to make a good showing tonight against the *Cedar Mill Eagles*, one of the state's powerhouses.

Twenty minutes later, Gabe stood on first base brushing off his shirt for the fifth time following a pickoff attempt. He thought he wouldn't get tired of pitchers throwing at him but in truth, he was getting pretty frustrated. This was ridiculous. The pitcher that threw at him had been tossed immediately and Gabe had been sent to first. The next pitcher was determined that Gabe was not gonna steal second. Gabe was just as determined that he would. He now took a giant lead. What happened next was one of the two things Gabe had hoped for, either a balk or an overthrow. The pitcher, in his haste, faked a throw to first without stepping off the rubber. Balk. Gabe was awarded second. He smiled ... hugely, clapped his hands hard, and then excitedly yelled at the batter to bring him in.

The pitcher started walking toward Gabe.

Gabe held his hands way out to his sides. "What?"

The pitcher kept coming. Some of his own in-fielders ran toward the pitcher to try to stop him. Coaches were on the field complaining.

The first baseman grabbed his pitcher. "You don't want to do this man. That kid can take your head off."

The pitcher looked past his teammate. "Your kung fu crap doesn't scare me."

Gabe only smiled, and then waved him forward, in a classic Bruce Lee gesture.

Laynah was on her feet. “Come on, Blue, give me a break. Throw him out! You tell him, Gabe! Get ‘im, boy!”

Chaz and Lisa had to smile at their daughter. Though Charlie and Matt were yelling just as much. It was Laynah they were glad to see buck up.

The umpires made it to the pitcher, settled everyone down, issued a warning. The game resumed and Gabe took a huge lead off second.

Keegan shook his head. He didn’t like what was going on. And Gabe wasn’t helping matters. He’d have to have a word with his son. He glanced around to see where the sheriff’s deputies were stationed and took note of his Ameritech agents dispersed throughout.

It was at the end of the fourth inning that there was a rumble of a motorcycle. Jake parked right by the entrance and headed in. Keegan and John noticed him immediately as he scanned the crowd looking for his family, and his girl.

Laynah was standing, screaming something at the other team. Jake smiled. That’s his tough girl, he thought with pride. She turned and saw him and shrieked. She practically climbed over three people to get down to him. Throwing herself into his arms, she wrapped her legs around his waist and held on tight. Since he was wearing his fatigues the people watching assumed it was a military homecoming and began to stand and clap. That made Jake chuckle. “This is a much better homecoming than the last one. Same girl. Different reaction,” he said in her ear.

Laynah laughed. “Gosh that seems like a really long time ago.”

“Three weeks, but yeah, it seems longer.”

He set her down, pulled her along with him to the side of the concession building and kissed her like he’d thought about for the past four hundred miles.

When he finally pulled away, Laynah grabbed his hand. “Come watch. It’s been a crazy game. We’re tied up. You missed the good stuff.”

She went on to explain to him what had taken place.

But the rest of the game went by without incident. Gabe’s extra batting practice paid off and he left with a single and a triple, and of course, the HBP. In the field he was stellar as usual. Someone might think the kid was leading a charmed life, but he knew it was a blessed life, not charmed.

After the game his family hugged him, complaining how sweaty he was. They’d planned a big family dinner at the Inn. Gabe was really tired. It’d been a long week. He’d worked really hard. Besides the two games, a martial arts class, having to put new brake pads on his truck, and regular chores at home, he also had a term paper due next week.

His family and friends all headed home. Gabe promised he was right behind, just had to get his truck out of student parking.

Jake and Laynah intended to stop at the grocery store and pick up some ice cream for the large group of people. They hopped on Jake’s bike and took off. Agents saw Gabe to his truck and left for the night. Gabe was tired and was glad to be headed home. The Inn was only a little over four miles from the school. Gabe was about halfway there when he heard the thump, thump, thump of his tire going flat.

Sighing deeply, he pulled over into the grass on the side of the road. It was pitch

black on the country road he was on, so he grabbed his flashlight and climbed out of the truck. Shining the light on the rear driver's-side tire, he examined it, and immediately realized that his tire had actually been sliced. He cursed, but looked up when he saw headlights coming. It was a tan-colored van. They slowed down and pulled to a stop right next to him. The passenger side window rolled down. It was two women.

"Hey, need help?" they asked.

"No thanks, I got it," he said. "Just a flat."

The side door of the van slid open and before Gabe could even register what was happening, four men jumped out, two with semi-automatic rifles and two with handguns, all pointed at Gabe, who immediately threw his hands up.

"Whoa, what's going on?" Gabe said.

"Get in," one of the men said.

Gabe glanced into the van. He knew if he complied, there was a chance he may never see his family again. Thinking there was no way they could see him on this dark road, he turned and took off across a field, but the very first shot that was fired hit him in the back of his leg and he went down. The four men ran to him, each grabbing one of his limbs. He struggled against them, but four large men against one wounded kid were not good odds. They tossed him into the van, jumped in and took off.

Jake and Laynah came over the hill just in time to see what looked like men fighting on the side of the road. Then they all got in a van and it sped off. But as they neared, they both realized it was Gabe's truck on the side of the road. Jake gunned his motorcycle. In no time he was coming up on the back of the van. There was no tag. About that time the back doors opened and when Jake realized what he was looking at, he swerved away, braking hard.

He came to a stop, pulled his phone out. "Laynah, call your dad," he ordered.

Jake dialed Keegan. "Hey Jake," Keegan answered.

"Gabe's been taken by men in a tan colored van, no tag, older model cargo van, Chevy. Saw it happening, couldn't get to him. Tried to follow but they opened their back doors and are fully loaded. Had to swerve away to protect Laynah. I'm gonna drop her by Gabe's truck and try to catch up."

Laynah got off the bike. "Go, go, go," she yelled.

He took off.

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Inside the van, Gabe continued to fight as they tried to tie his wrists together. One of the men backhanded him into submission. He was losing consciousness, though he wasn't sure if it was from the bullet in his leg or how many times he'd been smacked in the head. The burning pain in his thigh was starting to grow and he grunted with the anguish. When it finally got to be too much, he slipped into oblivion.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been out, but when he woke again he was being dragged across a rough wooden floor, like the floor of maybe an old barn. His wrists were tied tightly together with nylon cord. At least they were tied in front of his body. That part was good. They'd left a length of the cord dangling from his wrists like a dog leash and were using it to drag him. He tried to pull his arms in toward his body to ease the strain on his shoulders. He grunted in pain as the guy pulling him jerked on the rope,

pulling his arms back out.

He was in big trouble. He knew that. His father would eventually find him. He knew that too. He thought briefly about his father and mother and sisters and what they were going through. Had they figured out that he was missing yet? Had they found his truck? He thought his poor mom was probably about to go bonkers. And did Taylor know? If she didn't, she would soon. "Dammit," he muttered.

He wasn't supposed to curse. He sighed, closed his eyes. "Sorry, Father. Listen, I know You know what's happening. Please help me, Father, in Jesus' name," he prayed, unable to keep the desperation from his voice.

The man dragging him slammed him up against the side wall of the structure. He bent down with something tiny in his hand. "Be still. I have to put this in your ear." Gabe tried to move away, but another man put him in a headlock and the first man pushed a small earpiece into his ear.

"Test—one—two—come in, Gabe. Can you hear me?"

Gabe stilled. The voice was not what he expected. It was feminine. She spoke clearly and slowly, almost sweetly.

One of the men kicked his foot, causing the pain to start again. "Speak if you hear her," he barked.

"I hear you," he said, breathing hard.

"How delightful."

Gabe shook his head. Yeah, delightful, he thought. The woman who spoke sounded young. Not any older than maybe his sisters.

"I know you're upset right now, Gabe, but this had to be done."

"Why? What did I do to you?"

"Nothing really. You just offered me an opportunity I couldn't refuse."

"Who are you?"

"You'll eventually find out. For now, I'll be the one asking questions."

"Are you gonna kill me?"

"Well now, you just went straight to the heart of the matter, didn't you?"

One of the men stepped forward and kicked him in the injured thigh. Gabe cried out in pain. "What was that for?" he asked as he gasped for breath.

"Well, Gabe, that was so you understand who's in charge here. I told you, I'll be the one asking questions for now. You just speak when spoken to. I know you're used to being the alpha male, but that's not how it works around here."

Gabe didn't respond. Closing his eyes, he tried to adjust his position to stop the pain. He grunted with the effort.

"So, how does it feel to get shot, Gabe?" the sweet voice asked.

He drew a deep breath. "It hurts like hell."

She was silent for several moments. "Well, maybe now that you know how it feels to be shot, maybe you should reconsider the use of your guns."

Breathing hard, he thought about the hypocrisy of her statement, since he was the one with a bullet in his leg. "Nooo," he said slowly. "Because I don't use my guns to shoot *people*."

"But you would if you had to, right?"

He suddenly realized something. "Are we live, like on social media?"

The man kicked him again in the thigh and Gabe cried out.

"In answer to your question, Gabe, no we are not currently broadcasting. But we are recording and it will eventually be broadcast far and wide. Now *you* answer *my* question. Would you actually shoot a person if you had to? Take one of these guys for example. Would you shoot one of them?"

"Without hesitation," he said, glaring up at the one who kept kicking him.

"But you've never shot anyone before?"

"No." He slid farther down, almost flat on his back, breathing hard and trying to ease the hot, searing pain in his leg.

"Have you killed anything?"

When he didn't answer fast enough, the guy kicked him again.

"Please stop doing that," Gabe said sternly.

"Answer her question."

"Uh, I shot a rabid bobcat once," he said, breathing hard.

"Why?"

"Because— it was trying to hurt me."

"How are you so sure it was trying to hurt you?"

He drew a deep painful breath. "Cuz when a rabid bobcat is running at you full speed and springs into the air with its claws aimed at your neck, ya just know."

"Anything else?"

He grunted with pain. "I don't understand the question."

"Have you killed anything else?"

"Oh, uh, deer."

"Aw, a Bambi killer. How did that make you feel?"

He waited several seconds before he answered. "Full."

He braced that time, knowing the kick was coming. It didn't make it hurt any less. Gasping for breath through the pain, he took a chance to speak. "You're gonna have to take me to the hospital ya know, if you don't want me dead. The bullet needs to come out, or at least the bleeding needs to stop. Please. I need to go to the hospital."

"Sorry, Gabe. That's not gonna happen."

He closed his eyes because he felt the tears coming. He was gonna die, and he really didn't want to die.

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Keegan was relieved of command and Jason took over. Jason had called in the troops. Jeff and Joey, Cam and Jeffy, and cybersecurity expert Jensen, were boarding the jet with him. Jason's liaison with the FBI was contacted. They would need every resource they could gather. The Tanner home was set up as base. Lisa Stewart took little Iris to stay with them hoping seven-year-old Aralyn could help with the tiny tot who always wanted her brother.

Jake had come back from his search empty-handed and he and Laynah had gone back to the Tanner house to report.

"Well, he has to be close by, at least closer than you think," John said. "I mean, Jake was on their tail in only thirty seconds and that road is a long road before any major

turnoff. They had to have turned off onto a side road."

"Or they turned off on a side road and waited for Jake to pass and then continued on their way," Keegan stated.

"I had an APB out almost immediately. There has been no tan Chevy cargo van spotted. No tag tells me they are still somewhere in this county," Ty said.

Lizzy stood just outside Keegan's office door. She couldn't stop the tears. Her baby was taken by who knows who. Her son. Her little Gabriel. She felt like she was gonna pass out.

Jodi tapped her on the shoulder. "Come on, sweetie, we're gonna have a prayer in the living room."

Lizzy nodded and followed Jodi. Right now the only ones here were her twin girls, and Laynah, and Jodi. Jodi was a rock. She was both Lisa's and Lizzy's best friend. She was an angel, and when things went bad, it was always Jodi and her husband John, who rose to the occasion. Lisa was at home taking care of the young ones. Jason and his team hadn't arrived yet. The seven women fell to their knees. Jodi prayed. It seemed like a small prayer circle, but what they didn't know was there were people dropping to their knees all over the country.

First, in their little town of Pine Forest, Jodi had gotten the word out to their Pastor, so, all of the people in their church congregation were contacted, who also called everyone in their extended families. Gabe's teachers and coaches and teammates and classmates and their families and extended families were called.

On their knees in California Eric, Shelley, Ricky, Bree, Mark, Bella, Breez, Angel, Kimmie, young Eric, JoJo, Logan, Mickey, Daniel, Jeremy, and last but definitely not least, Taylor. Taylor, who was inconsolable. Taylor who believed she and Gabe would be together forever. Taylor who hadn't told anyone that she was in love with Gabriel Tanner. She hadn't told anyone because she was sixteen and people would just think it was dumb puppy love like it had been with Logan. But this time, she knew she would love Gabe forever.

And then Bree made a few phone calls with Jason's permission. One to Toby and Caroline Nash, who would reach out to all of the music and dance communities and their New York friends. The other was to Isla August of Teenspotter.com. She promised her exclusivity on breaking news if she would start a prayer chain for Gabe. The promise was made and when Isla found out that Gabe Tanner had been brutally taken from the side of the road and was officially kidnapped, she went at it like a woman possessed. She also went at it because she felt a twinge of responsibility. Once she broke the news and asked her millions of followers to get on their knees and to get the message out to any and all social media biggies, within two hours, Gabe's abduction and the request for prayer had gone mega-viral.

Isla asked her followers to write out their prayers in the comment section. Hundreds of thousands of prayers were being written. For Gabe, for his family, even for the kidnappers. The love and compassion being shown forth, it was a beautiful thing.

Meeting over for a few minutes until Jason and FBI arrived, Keegan went to find his wife. He found her on the front porch. She turned when he came out. Her face was wet and swollen. Her body was trembling. Her twins had been trying to console her. They'd

just told her that Heather was on her way.

Keegan moved forward and touched her face. "Sweet Elizabeth," he said softly. "I swear to you, I will find him and I will bring him home."

She nodded, trying to believe him. "Just like you found Jeff, right?"

"Yes, baby, just like that."

She put a shaking hand to her head, looked up into his eyes, and almost passed out. He scooped her up into his arms and carried her inside.

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"Gabe."

He heard the call but didn't want to answer. He'd finally gotten a little comfortable lying on his side on the floor.

"Gabe, answer me."

He sighed, drew a breath. "I don't want to talk, I'm sleeping. Leave me alone."

The kick hit just the right spot and he grunted, the pain immediately bringing tears to his eyes. "Please, stop doing that," he begged.

"Gabe, I have more questions."

"So, ask them."

"What is your opinion of women?"

"Well, my opinion of you right now is pretty low."

She laughed. "That's fair. But really now, how do you feel about women?"

He sniffed. "My mother is a woman, my sisters are women, and I love them very much." His voice broke and it made him mad at himself for showing emotion, but he was thinking he may never see them again.

"Is your mother abused?"

"Abused? What are you talking about? You mean like, by my father?"

"Yes, I understand he's a deadly man."

"That's just stupid. My mother is not abused in any way. My father practically worships her. She's his partner in life, in everything. He would give his life for her, to protect her."

"To protect her? Why would he need to protect her?"

"Who knows?" he said, the exasperation evident in his voice. "For whatever comes up. A robber in the house, or a snake in the garage. Whatever." He was breathing hard and he rolled onto his back. "Please—can we stop talking now?"

"Just a few more questions. I find you very interesting."

"Yay."

"So, your mother is unable to protect herself?"

"I didn't say that. My mother is a strong, capable person, and she would do anything she could to protect herself and her children." His voice broke again, and he sniffed loudly. "But it's a man's job to protect his family, to protect the ones he loves and to protect the innocent people who can't protect themselves."

"It's a *man's* job, huh? Why is it a man's job?"

For the first time there was a little bit of emotion behind the voice and Gabe realized he'd hit a sore spot. He decided to push it. "Because, like it or not, lady, men are stronger than women. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It's not. It's just science.

Testosterone and stuff, ya know?" He closed his eyes as the pain in his thigh started coming back in a rush, and with the pain came nausea.

"Well, regardless of what you think, Gabriel Tanner, I don't need a man in any way."

He drew a ragged breath. "How do you think you got born?"

"By a woman."

"How do you think that woman got pregnant?"

"It could've been through in vitro fertilization," she argued.

"Look, I'm just a kid, but even I know that even with that, there has to be sperm, and that ONLY comes from a man."

"I'm just saying, Gabe, that we don't need a *relationship* with a man. What do you think about that?"

"I don't care."

"I don't need a man, and my organization doesn't need men."

"Except four," he retorted.

"What are you talking about?"

"Except the four *men* you needed in order to take me off the side of that road."

Gabe rolled quickly in order to protect his leg. The problem was, that gave them access to his face. He raised his bound hands to try to block. He was grateful when they finally stopped hitting him. He tried to wipe the blood gushing from his nose with his shoulder.

She gave him time to catch his breath. When she spoke again she was back to her calm, sweet voice.

"How many girls have you taken advantage of, Gabe?"

Breathing hard, he shook his head as he tried to recover. "I– I don't understand your question. Every girlfriend I've ever had—when we broke up it was a mutual decision. I mean like, this isn't working, no hard feelings."

"That's not what I meant."

He sighed. "What *do* you mean, then?"

"How many girls have you had relations with and then just left them?"

"Relations? You mean— sex?"

"Yes."

"None."

"Yeah, right. Maybe you just don't realize that you hurt them."

"No, I'm telling you there are NONE."

"Are you saying that... "

"That I'm a virgin? Yes."

She laughed a long time.

"Why is that so funny?" he asked.

"Because, here you are, being called the ultimate male, and you haven't even had sex."

"Well, there are two things wrong with what you just said," Gabe began. "First, the ultimate male, in my opinion, is not a guy who's gone around having sex with every girl he meets. Anyone can do that. The stronger guy is one who has complete control over his baser instincts and can save himself for the girl, or for the woman, he marries. That's

much harder, and much more commendable, in my opinion."

"Interesting. And what was the second thing that was wrong with my statement?"

He took several deep breaths before he spoke. "Because— that lady called me that by mistake. She told me later that she was trying to call me the ultimate fighter, like in the UFC, ya know? But she forgot what it was called and in the moment called me the ultimate male. It was all a mistake. I am not the ultimate male. I'm just a kid, who, like a million other kids, likes to do martial arts and play some ball. That's it. Nothing special."

Grunting in pain, he rolled back to his side, his breathing shallow and labored.

"Gabe? Why are you breathing so hard?"

"I told you, if you don't get this bullet out of me, and stop the bleeding, I'm gonna die. That's what's wrong." He stopped and drew a deep breath. "I'm dying. I can't catch my breath—because I've lost so much blood, and so my body isn't getting enough oxygen."

"How do you know this? Are you pre-med or something?"

"No, my mother is a nurse."

"That's a lie. Your mother is a singer."

"She used to be a nurse. Do your research," he barked, losing his patience. "Please, whoever you are, please," he begged. "You gotta get me to a hospital. You HAVE to do something or I AM gonna die."

There was silence for several minutes.

"Okay. Hold on. We're gonna fix you up."

He closed his eyes. "Thank you, Father," he whispered.

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Romans 6:12-13

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness."

Chapter Fifteen

"Dad," Ricky said the moment Eric picked up his phone. "I need your help. It's Taylor. She can't eat. She can't sleep. Her body won't stop shaking. She's in shock."

"You and Bree, and young Eric—all three of you lay your hands on her and pray over her."

"That's what I want you to do."

"Ricky, you can do this."

"So, you're saying you won't help?"

"Of course I'll help. As a matter of fact, you guys come stay with us. We need to be with family. All of us. I'll call Mark. Joey and Jeffy are in Georgia, but we'll get Breez and the kids over here. But at this very minute, as soon as we hang up, you three put your hands on Taylor and bless her. Rick, if I weren't here, what would you do?"

"I'd do just that."

"Then do it, son. You've got this."

"Yes, sir."

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Jeffy, Cam, Jason, Chaz and Keegan went to the Stewarts' horse stable. Jeffy wanted to go to the place where Gabe had had the strange premonition. She walked slowly around the stable, going from stall door to stall door. Finally she stopped right in front of Rocky's stall. She jerked upright, gripped the back of her thigh and sank to her knees. She was breathing hard in great gasps.

"He's alive," she said. "He's hurt. I think he's been shot in the leg." She shook her head. "He's right on the edge."

"On the edge of what?" Keegan asked.

Jeffy looked up into his eyes. This strong man was almost broken. She wished she hadn't said those words.

"Just say it," he said brusquely. "Don't cushion it for me."

She nodded. "He's on the edge, hovering between life and death. And he's sad. So sad." She drew a deep breath and opened her eyes quickly. "He's in an old barn maybe. Or stable, or," she paused trying to figure out the images she was getting. "Or, chicken coop? Chickens?" She groaned, closed her eyes. "He's struggling to breathe." She passed out.

Cam scooped her up, knelt down on the floor with his wife in his arms and waited for her to open her eyes again. He'd grown used to this procedure. But he didn't like it, knowing she presently carried their child. Thankfully, it didn't take long for her to come to.

She put a hand to her head. "Jason, I don't think he's that far away. He feels really

close."

Jason nodded and took out his phone as they headed back to the Tanner house. "I want to know every single home, building, farm, barn, chicken coop, every single thing that is or has been in this county. Especially anything abandoned—the more obscure, the better."

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When Gabe opened his eyes he didn't understand what was going on. He was still in the same old, dusty, barn, or maybe a warehouse and he was still on the floor. But there was now a table sitting right in front of him, a table with a white sheet on it. The rope that had held his wrists together was gone. His baseball uniform shirt was gone. And currently two of the men who had delighted in kicking him were now pulling his bloody baseball pants from his body, none too gently.

When they'd accomplished that, they lifted him onto the table on his stomach. It finally dawned on him what was happening. He started to panic. "Oh Jesus, please help me," he half whispered, half sobbed. He struggled against the men who were holding him.

"It's gonna be okay."

He stilled. It was the woman's voice, but this time not in his ear. She was standing beside him. He looked up at her. She was young, like he'd thought. Maybe in her late twenties. And she was pretty. Long, black hair, big brown eyes, slim, muscular.

"Sit him up a minute," she said.

They accomplished it, again, not very gently. He grunted with the pain.

She pushed a cup at him. "Drink this."

He took the cup from her and sniffed the contents. It smelled like whiskey.

"I don't drink," he said.

"You'll drink this or wish you had," she countered.

"What are you gonna do? I need to get to a hospital," he pleaded, tears in his eyes.

"I already told you that's not gonna happen. But I've watched some videos and I can get that bullet out myself."

"Watched some videos? Are you freaking crazy? You know in the leg there's like, the femoral artery. If you nick it, I'll bleed out, I mean, really fast."

She shrugged. "Yes, I know. You'd be surprised at what you can learn online. Almost anything. Now drink that down. I won't give you another chance."

He forced himself to gulp the fiery liquid until it was gone, coughed a few times and handed the cup back to her.

"Let's see, we're gonna have to tie him down real tight, because when I start cutting, he's gonna go crazy. I don't want to accidentally nick his *femoral artery*," she said pointedly.

Gabe reacted to her words. "Please, don't do this."

"You want to die?"

"No."

"Then it's our only alternative."

"Uh, Ms. Casellas, we don't have any more rope."

She cursed and then shrugged. "Well, we can't wait any longer. I'm running out of

time. You'll have to hold him down."

"That won't work," Gabe said softly.

"Why not?"

"Them just holding me, they won't be able to keep me still enough," Gabe said quietly, resigning himself to his fate. "Do you have any tape, like, duct tape?" His own words surprised him, but if he was gonna go through this, he wanted no slips of the knife, or whatever she planned to use, and he was afraid to ask what that was.

"Yeah, there are several rolls of it in the van," one of the men answered.

She nodded. "Get it."

Fifteen minutes later they had him face down on the table, his entire body and leg taped down so that he was completely immobile.

He quickly said a prayer aloud before she began. "Father guide her hand, use her as your tool, I want to survive but Your will be done. I turn it over to you. In Jesus' name."

She began to cut into his thigh and the pain completely engulfed him. He was unconscious within thirty seconds of the surgery.

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Every single teammate had been interviewed by the FBI. Every teacher. Every coach. Friends. Old girlfriends. Enemies. And Isla August. In California, his opponent in the Mini-MART, Julian Washington, was interviewed, and his close friends and family members. Comments on social media were run through programs looking for key words. And for locations near Pine Forest.

Keegan drove every road. He thought he would lose his mind but kept it together for Lizzy's sake. Currently their family sat in their den with the Stewarts and the Appels, Jason Lee, his second-in-command, Joey Adams, and Jeffy and Cam. Their conversation had moved to the day Gabe was born.

"And I remember trying to run so fast," Heather was saying. "From the first cottage all the way down here to the house to get Dad."

Keegan nodded at his oldest daughter, trying to keep his mind on the conversation. "You were only six years old and so brave, and your fast action saved Lily's life."

Heather's eyes filled with tears. "And Mom, you fought that man, and I remember he kicked you in the stomach and that's what put you into labor. And you had Gabe right there in the parking lot on a blanket that Aunt Lisa brought out. And Uncle Chaz delivered him while Dad was out chasing down the guy who took Lily."

Heather turned to Jodi. "And Miss Jodi got shot in the head and she was lying right next to you, like she refused to leave your side."

Lizzy smiled through her tears. "Jodi is the best friend anyone could ever ask for."

Lisa nodded. "Yes, she is."

"And when Keegan came back with Lily in his arms, I've never been so relieved in my life," John added.

"Me too," Chaz and Lizzy and Lisa and Jodi said at the same time.

"And he'll do that again," John said softly. "It's just taking a little while for him to know where to go get him."

Lizzy's tears started flowing again. No one knew what to say to comfort her, except Jeffy.

She closed her eyes. "I can tell you, that he's still alive."

"Are you positive?" Rose asked.

Jeffy nodded. "I'm absolutely positive. Not only is he still alive, but he's currently breathing a lot easier."

"If you can feel him, can you see where he is?" Violet asked.

Jeffy tried again. Shook her head. "Chickens. All I see are chickens."

Daisy had been scrolling on her phone and looked up suddenly. "Have you guys seen this?" she asked.

"What?" Lily responded.

"There are hundreds, thousands, maybe even more, people posting prayers for Gabe all over the internet. I mean, just this one page on Instagram, look at this!" She turned her phone and used her thumb to scroll and scroll. It seemed to go on without end. "And that's just this one account. There's hundreds of them doing the same thing. And that's just Instagram. So, I went over here to YouTube, and there's hundreds more. Right now, there are live streams of people having prayer circles for Gabe Tanner. Look at this! And then go to Twitter, or, X, I mean, everything is about Gabe. And then go over to even Facebook. There's hundreds. Look at TikTok, Gabe is trending on every social media site!"

Everyone took out their phones and started reading prayers, listening to live streams, reading memes with Gabe's pictures and scriptures being quoted. It was actually beautiful to see the whole country come together, except for a few hateful comments from people determined to make this into a political fight. But the rest were only wanting safety for a high school kid and praying for his safe return to his family.

There was a rumble of more than one motorcycle coming up the drive. Keegan glanced at Jason. "You expecting someone?"

Jason smiled. "No, but you are. John and I thought you could use some backup."

Keegan rose and went to the door. Brayden, Tristan and Kaleb were taking off their helmets. They had been on his and John's team in Afghanistan. Special forces. Special guys. His brothers. Now all three worked for Jason at Ameritech. They were part of the Elite Team, led by Joey.

Smiling they came up the steps. Brayden placed his hands on Keegan's shoulders, his forehead against Keegan's. "We'll find him, bro."

Keegan nodded, his emotions close to the surface. Brayden simply mussed his hair and moved away.

Tristan moved up, wrapped Keegan in a giant hug, pulled back. "How ya holdin' up, Keeg?"

Keegan sighed. "Not too good at the moment."

"We'll get him if we have to kick down every door in the state."

Keegan nodded. Tristan smacked Keegan's cheek and moved inside.

Kaleb moved up the porch steps, put his hands on either side of Keegan's head, looked deeply into his eyes and smiled. "We got this?"

Keegan nodded.

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Gabe opened his eyes. He was no longer on the table. He wasn't on the floor either.

He lay on a small mattress on the floor of the barn, or whatever this building was. His leg was neatly bandaged. He wore only his boxers. His wrists were now taped together instead of being tied with the nylon rope.

"How are you feeling?"

He startled at the voice and turned over to see his female captor sitting on the mattress. He took a moment to assess his body. "Better, I think. I'm thirsty."

"Any pain?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it still hurts pretty bad, but at least I can breathe. That's a big help. You got the bullet out?"

"It wasn't very deep." She touched his bare chest. "You seem to be a decent guy, Gabe."

"Thanks. So, does that mean you've decided to let me go?"

"Sorry, can't do that yet."

She was watching his face so he tried to school his features. Her hand lowered to rest on his stomach, just below his navel. She looked into his eyes, gave a slight smile. "Gabe, what would you think about me relieving you of your virginity?"

He closed his eyes a moment. *Please, dear God,* he silently prayed*, do not let this happen to me*. He opened his eyes and looked hard at her. "Please— don't," he pleaded.

She nodded and quickly stood up. "Just thought I'd ask," she said quickly.

He blew out a relieved breath.

"What do you need at this moment?" she asked shortly.

"I, uh, I need to pee. And, I also need some water. Maybe some food."

"Jack. See to his needs," she ordered before she turned to leave.

"Wait, please," Gabe said softly.

She turned. Eyebrows raised.

"I just wanted to say thanks for, you know, for saving my life."

"You're welcome."

"And, like, I don't mean to be pushy, but how long are you gonna keep me?"

She smiled. "The big movie starring Gabe Tanner and produced by the feminist group *Fems First* is going out this evening, prime time. Once that airs, either the FBI or the little company your father works for should be able to deduce where you are and your father will come to save you, and he will die doing it."

Gabe's face drained of color. "What? What are you talkin' about?"

She came back and stood by his side. "Remember I told you, I would eventually tell you who I am?"

Gabe nodded.

"I guess this is a good time. So, Gabe Tanner, I'm gonna tell you a story. It goes like this: Once upon a time, there was a man who met a beautiful Italian woman in Italy. Her name was Gabriella. Funny how close the name is to yours, huh? That's actually what caught my attention when all the ruckus about you winning that martial arts thing and playing baseball, when all that was happening. Anyway, Gabriella and the man, Dario Casellas, they fell in love and got married and came to America to find the great American Dream. You should know what that is, because you're living it. Anyway, the problem was, Dario Casellas was having a hard time finding work. But then, he ran into

another Italian living in America, his name was Anthony Celados.

"Celados hired Mr. Casellas as his bodyguard. It was a great job, he made good money and worked his way up into security for Celados' businesses. The Casellas were so happy. They had a daughter and then a few years later had a son. They were a happy family." She stopped and sighed.

"They were happy," she said vehemently. "But then something terrible happened. Ya see, Mr. Casellas was just doing his job and he found there was a traitor working for Celados. When Casellas confronted the traitor, the traitor killed him in cold blood and ran. Gabriella and her children suddenly had no money coming in. No one to take care of them. No one to 'protect' them as you put it," she said, making air quotes around *protect.*

"They were kicked out of their home. They lost everything. Then one day, Gabriella, unable to handle the loss, decided she was gonna kill herself and her children. So, she shot the girl, who was only ten years old. Then she shot the little boy, who was only eight years old, and then she turned the gun on herself and pulled the trigger."

She shrugged. "Funny thing happened. The little girl didn't die. She was put into foster care after she recovered from her injuries and she grew up to be a proud and strong female who has no need for men. She started her own feminist group and has accomplished amazing things since then. But she swore that one day, one day she would get even with the traitor who killed her father."

Gabe knew the story she was telling, but from a completely different perspective. "What was the daughter's name?" he asked softly.

"Mia."

Gabe sighed. "Okay, Mia, listen, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Oh, yeah, I bet."

"I swear I am. I don't lie. I'm sorry. I can't even imagine what you must have been through. The trauma of what happened to your family and to you. But still, I need to set you straight on some things, because there are a few facts you're missing."

"Like what?"

"Like the man you say was a traitor, was actually an undercover FBI agent."

"I know that. Same thing."

"It's not the same. Not in any way," Gabe argued. "Do you know that he was there trying to break up a child trafficking ring and ..."

"I'm done talking to you right now," she said. She left abruptly.

"That's always the way it is with people like you," Gabe called after her. "Ya get presented with a few facts and you suddenly don't want to talk anymore."

"Jack," Gabe heard in his earpiece. "Let him pee and feed him."

Great. Just great, Gabe thought. He thought all this was about to be over. Now, he had to figure out a way to keep her from killing his father, and in order to do that he had to know how she intended to do it.

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Gabe was a thousand times more comfortable now that he'd been allowed to relieve himself and had food in his belly—and water. Man, water can sure taste good when you're really and truly thirsty. His hands were free. They'd cut off the tape so he could

feed himself and hadn't bothered to tape him back. He hoped to be able to take advantage of that soon.

Now that he felt better physically, he had to figure out a way to save his dad. He needed information and there was only one way to get it and that was by talking to Mia. Besides, he had a burning desire to set Mia straight on how she was seeing things. She'd been a young child. She had probably been told a different story, but she needed to know the truth. For that matter, he didn't know firsthand either. He hadn't even been born yet, but he knew his father wouldn't lie about what happened and he had proof to back up what he said.

Gabe needed Mia to talk to him. Up until now she'd certainly been willing to talk. He'd spoken to her every time she spoke. He wondered if she was listening to him even though she wasn't speaking.

"Mia? Are you there?" He sighed. "I just want to talk to you."

Silence.

"Well, I don't know if you're listening or not, but I feel like I need to say some things."

Silence.

"Hello, Mia?"

Silence.

Gabe looked around him. There was no one in the barn. Grunting, he pulled himself up, waited a few seconds for the dizziness to go away, then began circling the large area. He looked up at two high small windows, at opposite ends of the structure. And there were two doors, large doors like in a stable or barn. The doors to his right had a splintered hole in one of them and he could actually see a sliver of light. He moved close and put his eye to the opening and saw two of the men who were guarding him. He turned and limped over to the doors to his left. He couldn't see out of them. He put his ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything. He tried to open it, but it was firmly bolted or maybe even nailed shut. He looked up at one of the cameras trained on him and started talking again.

"Okay fine, Mia, you don't want to talk to me, then just listen," he began as he slowly limped around the room. "My father was there because he was an undercover FBI agent. The Celados dude was trafficking children. He was taking little kids away from their parents and selling them. Some he sold to people just cuz they wanted a kid and were willing to pay exorbitant fees. Many were sold into slavery for sexual or even more deviant purposes. It was an evil organization and it had been goin' on for years. The dude was a sicko. Yeah, it was nice of him to give your dad a job, and maybe at first your dad didn't know all the stuff Celados was into, but, Mia, after a while, he had to know. He HAD to, Mia. He had to know he was working for a criminal."

Gabe drew a breath. He had no idea if she even heard him but he went on. "When your dad found out my father was FBI he didn't go to confront him. He was sent to *kill* him. And he would have if my dad hadn't come out on top of that fight. Look, Mia, you said I seem like a decent guy. Well, you seem like a decent girl, uh, woman, so I know you can't think stealing babies is right or good. You were a kid, you had a little brother, how would you feel if some bad guys grabbed you or your brother and took you away

from your family? And, Mia, they really WERE stealing babies. There's proof. There were hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. It'd been goin' on for years. Some of them were like, already grown up. I'm not sayin' your dad was a bad guy. Maybe by the time he figured out what was going on it was too late. Maybe your dad had no choice but to continue to work for Celados. But *my* dad had no choice other than to kill your dad so that he could save those kids. Try to understand. Please, Mia."

The doors burst open and the four men came in, two of them with their guns drawn. They backed him up against the wall where his mattress was and ordered him to have a seat. He contemplated for just a second the odds of him being able to take a gun from one of them before the other could shoot. That was training he hadn't yet had, though he'd seen it done numerous times and knew the gist of it. Still, he was wounded and wasn't sure if he could accomplish it, which would mean he shouldn't try unless it was absolutely life-or-death. He did as he was told, leaned back against the wall and slid down to sit on the mattress.

He watched as the other two men measured the room with a tape measure, made markings on the floor, measured again from the other side, made more markings. One of them left and came back in with wood and a box full of power tools. Gabe had a quick flash in his mind of an old western movie where they were building a gallows to hang some dude and he was having to watch them do it. Gabe swallowed hard, shaking his head to clear it.

They were building some sort of box on the floor. Not a very big box. About three feet square and maybe a little over six inches high. They re-measured before they screwed the wooden box to the floor. It looked to be in the exact middle of the floor widthwise and lengthwise, maybe a little closer to the back of the building. It seemed to be important to the men that it be exact, whatever it was supposed to be. One of the men constructing the box left the building. Gabe eyed the two guys watching him. He started to stand back up just to see what they'd do.

"Sit," one said, raising his pistol.

Gabe slid back down. He looked at the man. He was maybe a little younger than his father. On the heavy side. He carried his weapon like he'd been military. His hair was short, while the guy next to him had longish hair. Gabe caught the short-haired dude's eye.

"Whaddya lookin' at, kid?"

"Not much," Gabe answered with a smirk.

The man grinned. "You were thinkin' about takin' me on."

Gabe shrugged. "Maybe."

"I'm game."

Gabe realized the guy thought it would be no problem fighting a gimpy kid. But Gabe also knew his own strength and abilities were usually underestimated. The man was just looking for some sport, probably to break up the boredom, but Gabe was looking for a way to get a gun in his hand.

Gabe raised his eyebrows. "Okay. So, give me time to stretch?"

The other men chuckled.

"Sure, kid, you go ahead and do your thing," the man said.

Gabe rose slowly, stepped off the mattress, bent his body in half, grabbing his ankles and pulling hard. Pain shot up his thigh. He was stiff and sore and his leg was pretty weak. Still, he felt like he could hold his own for a minute. This was not a tournament fight where he had to last a long time. The goal here was more like flag football, and the gun was the flag. Gabe finished stretching and circled around the guy. The one who'd left a few minutes earlier came back in carrying a wooden chair.

"What's goin' on?" he asked as he eyed Gabe.

"Just playin' around," the short-haired dude responded.

Gabe grimaced as he watched the guy pull his gun and toss it onto the mattress. Okay, it was now a game of "capture the flag" instead of "flag football." Gabe would have to get to the mattress. Might even be easier.

They circled each other and as soon as he got to the place closest to the mattress, Gabe didn't wait. He started right in toward the guy, the guy went to block Gabe's punch as Gabe knew he would. Gabe grabbed the guy's blocking arm, twisted it, turned his body and delivered a devastating elbow to the guy's nose, putting all of his strength into the blow. The guy crumpled. Gabe immediately dove for the mattress, grabbed the gun and instantly squeezed off a shot into the leg of the guy with the longer hair at almost point-blank range.

The one whose nose he'd broken was crawling toward Gabe. But Gabe was taking aim at the two guys who'd been building the box, because they'd laid their rifles against the far wall and had started toward them. Gabe jumped on top of the wooden box. "Stop," he ordered. "I WILL shoot you."

One started again toward his rifle and Gabe pulled the trigger, hitting him in the leg.

The guy fell down screaming and then started laughing. "Ya missed. You shoulda killed me kid, cuz now, I'm gonna kill you."

"I didn't miss. If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead," Gabe stated firmly. He'd been taught that "when you shoot, you shoot to kill," meaning you go for center mass to stop the threat. He hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. He'd never shot at an actual person. He hoped the fact that he didn't shoot to kill didn't bite him in the butt later. He'd told Mia earlier he would shoot without hesitation, but apparently, that wasn't true.

He glanced down at the guy with the broken nose to make sure he wasn't coming at him, and then at the guy who was standing with his hands in the air. And then... a shot rang out and the gun Gabe held flew out of his hand. Gabe fell backwards, grabbing his hand. Four more men came running into the building. Two of them were on Gabe before he could stand. He wasn't sure how many punches they got in, but he was sure if there were judges, they would declare Gabe the loser.

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"Look at this," Joey said to Jason and Keegan. He unfolded a large, old map of the area and laid it out on the dining room table. There were three circles in yellow highlighted on the map.

Joey pointed to the three. "These were not on the other maps. These are old abandoned buildings. This one," he said as he pointed, "used to be a storage facility for farm equipment. But these two," he said, pointing to two other yellow circles, "these were both part of a poultry farming operation. One for raising chickens and one for

eggs."

Keegan's heart began to beat harder. This was it. It had to be.

"These are only about ten miles from here," Joey went on. "Backroads, dirt roads. Apparently when the main highway was restructured, it took all the traffic in this direction," he pointed off toward the state highway. "These roads here, are overgrown, but still accessible."

"Okay," Jason said calmly, knowing Keegan was ready to go in guns blazing. "Let's get some recon on the area, if this is the place we'll need to pinpoint Gabe, get the setup, and do this right." He looked at Keegan, brows raised. "Do you read me, Agent Tanner?"

Reluctantly, Keegan nodded. "Roger that."

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Gabe struggled with everything he had against the four men who currently had hold of him. The two men he'd shot and the one whose nose he'd broken had been taken out of the building. Gabe wondered what would happen to them. After all, Mia wouldn't take *Gabe* to the hospital. Would she get her own people medical care?

The one man Gabe hadn't hurt had finished the original project. He'd taken the wooden chair and used nails to attach it to the wooden box which was attached to the floor. Now the four new guys, the ones he hadn't seen before and had just beaten him to a pulp, were wrestling him into the chair. He may not have succeeded in his attempt to escape, but at least he was giving them a hard time trying to get him into the chair. He could feel some pride that it was taking four grown men to wrestle one kid into a chair.

They finally slammed him into the chair while the fifth guy started using duct tape to secure him. By the time they were finished he was fastened securely. Arms, legs, hips, chest, all taped so tight he could barely move. They let go and backed up, everyone breathing hard, including Gabe.

They all looked him in the eye, shook their heads and exited the room. Gabe sat there, catching his breath and tried to figure out what was coming next. He'd lost track of what day it was. He had to think. Okay. They took him on Friday night. He was pretty sure he'd slept through the next night after the homespun surgery. So, this is Sunday, and the sun was going down. Mia said tonight she was airing the video. That means they were preparing him for the moment his father would come for him because her goal was to kill his father.

He looked around trying to figure out what was happening. They'd built a box to attach a chair to sit him in. The measurement had to be exact. It resembled a throne. He looked up at the small window in front of him at the top of the wall. That's where the bullet had come from that knocked the gun out of his hand. And probably broke two of his fingers, he surmised as he tried to wiggle them. It would take a sniper-worthy crack shot to make that hit. And the person had to be up high, or this structure was down in a valley, in order to fire that bullet through the window and hit his gun. And then it dawned on him. They built the box to put his chair exactly in the frame of the shooter's scope. He was literally, a sitting target, and when his father moved in to free him, he would be directly in the line of fire.

He decided it was time to pray again. As soon as that thought hit his brain a kind of

peace came over him. He closed his eyes and spoke aloud. “Father, I guess I’ve called out to you enough lately that you know I’m in trouble. I bet my family has been calling out too. I wanted to make sure I said, thank you, cuz I really can’t remember right now if I did, you know, about getting help for my gunshot wound. So, thank You, for that. It wasn’t the help I thought it would be, and it was a lot more difficult than just going to the hospital, but I just remembered my mom telling me that You don’t always answer prayers the way we think You should. It was hard but I made it through. And Mia actually did a good job as far as I can tell, so I hope you will forgive her for what she’s doing.

“You probably heard her tell the story, so you know she’s had a hard time. I get it, Father. I really do. I hope you’ll forgive her. Right now, I’m pretty scared and I’m hoping you’ll soften her heart and she’ll change her mind about all this stuff. I tried to help myself, Father, because I thought You would want me to at least try. I hurt a few people, and I’m sorry about that, but I know sometimes we have to defend ourselves against the enemy. She wants to kill my dad, so, at this time, I ask Father, that you will protect my dad. Please, please don’t let him die. If someone has to die, then let it be me. Yeah, I’m scared, and I don’t want to die right now, but as I’ve heard my dad say in his prayers, *Your* will be done. So, whatever Your plan, I’m good with it. Just help me to be strong, and help me to do the right thing.”

His throat tightened with emotion. He sniffed back the tears. “Whatever happens, please give my mom, and my sisters—and Taylor peace. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.”

He sniffed again, trying to keep the tears and snot from running down his face, since he didn’t have his hands free to wipe it away. He took a few deep cleansing breaths and settled in to wait. It could be hours before the action began.

“Figured it out yet, Gabe?”

The voice startled him. She’d been quiet for so long he’d forgotten she was there.

He breathed. “I think so,” he said quietly.

“That was quite a ruckus you caused.”

“Sorry. I had to try.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Will you get them to a hospital or something?”

“It’ll be something. So what did you think about that shot?”

“Uh, it was a good shot.”

“It was a great shot and you know it. That’s my girl. She’s pretty good. Expensive though.”

“It’s a girl?”

“Yeah, Gabe, girls can be experts too.”

“I know. It’s just not the norm. But that’s cool. It’s just that I’m telling you that a girl being a crack shot is cool, but that girl is gonna try to shoot my dad and that’s not cool. Mia, do you think we could talk about this?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Did you hear anything I said earlier?”

“I heard everything you said.”

He blew out a breath. “So, you built this *Fems First* organization, something you’re

proud of, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, even if you succeed in killing my dad, you're gonna get caught. It will destroy everything you've worked so hard for. And I have to tell you, if you kill my father, if you survive the gunfight that would take place, you will go to prison. This is a no-win situation for *you*. And for the people working for you," he added in case they could hear him. "You also might want to know that my dad and my neighbors and most of Ameritech are special forces. You are not gonna get away with this. They are gonna tear– you– up. Your only alternative is to stop now. Let me go. Give it up."

"You're not scaring me."

"I'm not trying to scare you. I'm trying to talk some sense into you. I thought you were halfway intelligent," he said out of pure frustration, before he thought better of it. "Mia? Mia?"

He blew out a breath. He'd had a pretty good argument going, and then he messed it up.

One of the men came in and slapped some duct tape over his mouth. And that— was that.

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Computer expert Jensen Deal, Jason's son-in-law, at the Ameritech offices about forty minutes north of the town of Pine Forest, just got a hit and what he was hearing was gonna blow everyone away.

He quickly called his boss.

"Whaddya got?" Jason said immediately.

"Every social media site has Gabe Tanner video."

"That's not unusual."

"Yeah, except this video was recorded *after* his abduction. I haven't heard the whole thing. It's hours long. I called you immediately. I'm tracing the broadcast right now. It's coming from Pine County, and I pinpoint it to be one of the old poultry farms you were looking at. Hold on, I'm sending coordinates."

"Got it." Jason put his phone down. Looked at all the weary faces peering up at him. "We have confirmation."

There was a scream from the other room and the men ran to the sound. It was Rose. She was holding up her phone. "Look at this!"

They saw Gabe tied and lying on the floor of an old building. The audio was just as disturbing as the visual.

"I know you're upset right now, Gabe, but this had to be done."
"Why? What did I do to you?"
"Nothing really. You just offered me an opportunity I couldn't refuse."
"Who are you?"
"You'll eventually find out. For now, I'll be the one asking questions."
"Are you gonna kill me?"
"Well now, you just went straight to the heart of the matter, didn't you?"

On the video you could see one of the men step forward and kick Gabe. He cried out.

"What was that for?"

The men in the room were deadly silent. Jeff's jaw tensed as he eyed Keegan. The look on his face would break even the hardest of hearts. Jeff had been captured and tortured. Keegan had been captured and tortured. Now his kid had been captured and though Jeff saw no battery and cables, he was experiencing a form of torture.

Jeff looked around the room at the others. Even their youngest warrior, Jake, was deadly silent. Jeff was sure he was inwardly vowing to kill them all. Jake and his father, John, were essentially deputized, hired by Ameritech to support First team, which would be led by Keegan.

"Rose, turn it off, please," Keegan said quietly to his daughter. He looked up at Jason. "Are we ready?"

"Just about. Pack it up, guys. Vests on. We're gonna do this right. No mistakes. Do not go off on your own, Tanner. You're leading first team and you will work together as a team."

Keegan nodded. "Roger that."

"Briefing with the FBI in twenty minutes at the arranged meeting place. Let's roll."

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April 21st Sunday 4:00 p.m.

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Ricky," Bree called, her voice panicked.

He came out of the bathroom quickly. "What's going on?"

She held her phone up. "It's Gabe. It's a broadcast by the kidnappers." She played a few seconds of it for him.

"Where's Taylor?" Ricky asked immediately.

"She was walking on the beach with Eric."

"With my dad?"

"No, young Eric. Actually I think JoJo and Logan are with them."

Ricky pulled his phone, called his son.

"Whazzup, Dad. Any news? Did we find him yet?"

"No. But there is news. You guys get up to the house. Taylor is with you, right?"

"Yes, sir. She needed to talk about Gabe so, we walked with her."

"Thank you for that. See you in a minute." He ended the call and looked at Bree. "Let's get everyone together."

Ricky ran downstairs to find his father in his study just getting off the phone with Jason.

Ricky held up his phone. "You heard?"

"Yes, and there's more. They've pinpointed Gabe's location and are moving in. They are about to brief with the FBI."

"Yes," Ricky said fiercely, bowing his head briefly. "Thank you, God," he whispered and looked back up. "Okay, so, we're gonna need something to keep our minds occupied while the op is going down and I think we should, as a family, watch this broadcast. We can put it up on the big screen. I don't want Taylor sitting alone somewhere watching whatever's happened to Gabe."

"I agree. And for Gabe's sake, we need to see what's happened to him. He'll know that we know and understand what he's been through. It will help him to heal."

Ricky nodded thoughtfully. He'd once been kidnapped and almost tortured to death. He was wondering if it would have helped to have a video of it. He shuddered.

Eric put a hand on his shoulder. "Deep breath. You got this."

They headed to the living room. Eric looked around at people he loved with a fierce love. Taylor sat on one sofa with her mother and father on either side of her. Young Eric sat on the floor in front of them. On the second sofa was Mark and his wife Bella with little three-year-old Emily on her lap. Their sons, JoJo and Logan joined young Eric on the floor. Beside Bella was Joey's wife, Breez, with two-year-old Ledger on her lap and next to her was Jeff's wife, Mickey. Mickey's oldest son, Daniel, sat on the floor too, while his brother, eleven-year-old Jeremy volunteered to take Joey's two girls, Sophia, age six and Kelstyn, age three, down to the playroom. On the third sofa was Jason's brother and Eric's dearest friend, Justin, with his wife Lori. Next to her was Shelley, Eric's love, his companion, his confidante, his all. Before he sat down next to her he spoke a few words.

"Okay everyone. I think we need to watch this together. I'm not sure what we're about to see, so I may decide at some point to turn it off and do some pre-screening. But I know if we don't do this together then you will all do it alone, and I think this way we can pause and talk about things. Now, before we play it, I have some news. They've found Gabe." He stopped while everyone got out what they had to say about that.

He nodded in response to a few questions being thrown out. "He's being held at an old poultry farm. They're briefing with the FBI soon, making tactical decisions. They're moving in soon to get him, Jason will keep us posted on how that's going. It's getting dark there, so it will be a little more difficult, but as soon as it goes down we'll know something. Okay, Ricky, hit play."

Once it began and they were able to see Gabe being dragged across the floor by a rope that was tied around his wrists, leaving a trail of blood from a wound on his leg, and in a great deal of pain, Eric had Ricky stop the video.

"This is gonna be difficult. Anyone feeling like they can't watch, there's no shame in that. If you need to get up and leave or take a break, feel free to do so. Okay, Rick, let's do this."

"Taylor?" Ricky said softly to his daughter. "Do you want to stay? You don't have to watch it if you don't want to."

Taylor looked up at her father, tears streaming down her face. "I have to know what's happened to him, Daddy," she began, hiccupping between her sobs. "I have to know so that I can help him, so that I can be a strength for him. I love him, Daddy. I know you all think I'm too young to know what love is, but time will tell, won't it? I'll stay and I'll watch, because I have to share his pain."

They were all blown away by her answer.

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April 21st Sunday Evening

Old Davison Poultry Farm, Pine County, Georgia

Tonight's First Team consisted of Keegan, Jeff, Brayden, John, Jake, and three FBI

agents. Second Team was led by Joey, and included Tristan, Kaleb, Chris Coley, Jon Sweet and three FBI agents. Perimeter team included eight more Ameritech and eight FBI.

Jensen at Ameritech's base spoke. "There are"—he took a second to count—"eight heat signatures, twenty yards out from your current position. Also four at the front door of the target structure and two on the north side. There is one in the center of the target structure. Assume that to be our hostage. There are three at a smaller structure on the south about a mile away."

Second team proceeded slowly and quietly. Spread out, they took out the eight bad guys guarding the perimeter of the building in only a few minutes with only one casualty and the rest secured.

First team lay flat on the ground, just outside the building where Gabe was being held. Keegan motioned John and Brayden to take the two on the north side. FBI secured the south side. Keegan and Jake moved to the east side, Jeff moved to the west for cover.

Keegan leaned against the east side of the building and spoke to Jake. "You stay here until I say."

Keegan and Jeff rounded the front of the building. "Drop your weapons, now!"

The four men guarding the door froze, but didn't do as told.

"Do it, now!" Keegan yelled.

Two of the men complied. Knelt slowly, placed their weapons on the ground.

"Get on the ground," Jeff yelled. The two who'd dropped their weapons complied. One of them was yelling expletives in Spanish.

Keegan looked in their direction for only a second. It all happened so fast. The other two guys swung their rifles up, and opened fire. Keegan and Jeff jumped back just in time. Jake stepped out from the side of the building, quickly squeezed off two bullets and put the two guys down. He stood there, frozen, breathing hard.

"Let's move," Keegan said, not giving Jake time to think right now about what just happened, because he knew it was Jake's first kill.

Carefully, they entered the building.

Gabe was secured to a chair in the center of the room. He had tape over his mouth. The chair was on a platform. They could see no explosive devices. They started forward but Gabe was shaking his head frantically. Screaming from under the tape. Keegan stopped. "Hold up."

"Can you hear me, son?"

Gabe nodded.

"Are you trying to warn me?"

Gabe nodded.

"Are you booby trapped?"

Gabe didn't know how to answer that one. Finally he nodded his head.

"Can you work on getting the tape off your mouth?"

Gabe nodded. He'd been trying to do just that it seemed forever. The tears he'd cried had actually helped. He leaned his head toward his shoulder and rubbed his cheek against it, slowly at first, and then with exaggerated jerky, panic-stricken movements. He leaned his head back and grunted in frustration.

"Okay, calm down, son. You can do this. Spit. Use the moisture to weaken the tape. Stay calm, Gabe. This is almost over."

"Everyone hold your position," Jason ordered.

"Gabe, did you hear me?" Keegan asked.

Gabe nodded, the fresh tears coursing down his cheeks. His strong, calm father was standing just feet away, but didn't realize he was just feet away from his own death. "Please, dear God, please take this tape from my mouth," Gabe prayed.

It was the tears that helped. He spit, he rubbed his face against his shoulders and then against his chest, and finally the tape started to loosen. Gabe used his tongue to push it farther away. And the next rub against his shoulder the tape came away.

"Don't come into the room, they have a bead on me. But they don't want to kill me, they want to kill you, stay back," he said quickly.

A shot rang out and Gabe's left shoulder exploded with pain. He cried out.

Keegan immediately started forward to help his son, but Jake and Jeff both grabbed him and wrestled the man down.

"No, Dad, don't come to me," Gabe screamed in a panic. "Just listen. Please, just listen. They shot me because I wasn't supposed to tell you that. I have an earpiece. They can hear me, they can hear you, there are cameras, just wait. Please, Dad, listen to me," Gabe cried.

Keegan closed his eyes a second, then nodded. "I'm listening."

Gabe sniffed. "She wants me to tell you..." He started to cry when he heard what she was saying to him. He began again. "She wants me to tell you that they're gonna shoot me exactly every ten minutes until you get up here to release me. But Dad, listen to me, they're not really gonna kill me."

Another shot rang out, grazing the other shoulder.

Gabe cursed, then gritting his teeth he went on. "Stay calm, Dad, they're just trying to scare you. They shoot me when I say more than I'm supposed to."

Jake leaned in to whisper in Keegan's ear. "Think about it, Uncle Keegan. Shooter is sniper-quality. He's purposely just grazing him, so stay calm."

Jeff was on his back looking up at the window, judging where the shooter would have to be to make that shot. "I'll be back," he said.

"Where are you going?" Keegan asked.

"Goin' huntin' for the shooter," Jeff said and left the building.

Keegan and Jake heard several more shots, but they weren't coming inside the building. They hoped Jeff made it to cover.

"Jason, are you getting this?"

"I got it. Jeff is heading to take out the shooter. Joey's team is looking for the leader. You stay put. Stay down and do not advance."

"Looking for the shooter," Jensen said as he surveyed the area on his screen. "Can't see any heat signature for him. He may be using a stealth sheet."

Keegan sighed and changed his attention to gaze at his son. His face was bruised. Both shoulders were bleeding.

Gabe caught his eye and actually smiled at him. "I'm okay, Dad," he said. Then he spoke to someone else. "May I tell him who you are?" He frowned. "Okay, okay, I

won't, just don't shoot me. It hasn't been ten minutes."

Keegan searched his memory for who would want to kill him and would be willing to harm an innocent kid to do it. It could be any number of people. Keegan had hurt and killed a lot of people in his lifetime and once again it was coming back to hurt people he loved. Just like his sweet wife had suffered once he'd come into her life, now his son was suffering. He snapped out of it when a shot rang out and Gabe cried out with the pain.

Jake leaned over. "I have an idea, but we need to take out the cameras."

Keegan nodded. "Do it."

Jake quickly shot out the cameras.

Gabe cried out again as another shot grazed his upper arm. "Okay," he said loudly. He drew a ragged breath and whimpered. "She says it doesn't matter. She can still hear me, and now they're gonna shoot me every five minutes as punishment for taking out the cameras."

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2 Samuel 7:14-15

"I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you."

Chapter Sixteen

April 21st Sunday Evening

Old Davison Poultry Farm, Pine County, Georgia

Keegan thought about what his son just said. "Gabe, you said 'she.' So, it's a woman?"

Gabe nodded.

"That's who we heard talking on the video that came out a little while ago?"

Gabe sniffed. "Yes, sir. Did you watch it?"

"Only the first minute or so. There was no time. But don't worry, we can watch it together, later. So, this woman who wants me dead, it's revenge for me taking out her husband?"

He shook his head.

Keegan thought. "The kid of someone I killed?"

Gabe nodded. "She says you can stop with the twenty questions or they're gonna shoot me again. It doesn't matter, Dad. Just stay back."

Jake whispered to Keegan. "From the shooter's vantage point he can only see Gabe from the chest up."

"How do you know that?"

Jake shrugged. "If I were shooting at someone, looking to just graze them, I'd hit both arms and then both legs. Every shot has been upper body. The shooter can't see anything below. I'm sure of it. Look at the window. There's nothing out there high enough. That's why they put the chair on that riser. I'm moving in. I'm gonna cut him free. After he's free, I'll wait until the next time she shoots, then I'll have about four seconds to jerk Gabe outta that chair."

"Sounds good, except I'll do it. I don't want you in there in case the shooter can see lower than you think."

Jake shook his head. "No offense, Uncle Keegan, but I'm smaller and can move faster and easier than you. I'm not in danger. Let me do this."

"Your father will have my head."

"My father would agree with me."

Sighing, Keegan made the quick decision and nodded. He watched as Jake crawled on his belly forward all the way to Gabe's feet. Jake drew his knife and started cutting away at the tape that secured Gabe's legs to the chair. He went slowly and quietly so that the woman in Gabe's ear wouldn't hear what was going on.

The five minute mark hit again and another shot rang out and Gabe only grunted this time. His head fell forward. Bright red ran down from his upper left arm.

Keegan thought he would lose his mind. "Gabe? Talk to me, son," Keegan said.

He lifted his head, breathing heavily. “Not feeling too good, Dad. Listen, please tell Mom and the girls how much I love them.”

“Gabe, don’t start with this goodbye stuff. You’re not going anywhere. We’ll figure this out,” he said, hoping to make the woman think they were just sitting and waiting.

“And Dad, I want Taylor to know that I love her too.”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

Jake finished freeing Gabe’s legs and scooted around behind him to start on the tape holding his body to the chair.

He finished it pretty quickly and reached up toward the arm of the chair, hoping his hand couldn’t be seen as he worked on freeing Gabe’s right arm from the chair. But another five minutes had gone by and another shot rang out. Gabe only whimpered this time as another spot of red appeared a little lower on his right arm.

Finally, a full minute later, Keegan heard what he wanted to hear. Several more shots rang out and Jason said, “Go! It’s a go.”

Keegan moved forward immediately. Another minute later, Jake finished cutting the last of the tape. Keegan scooped his son’s limp body up into his arms and carried him to safety.

Outside the place was crawling with law enforcement personnel, ambulances, medics. Keegan laid Gabe down on a gurney and paramedics took over. Gabe opened his eyes. “It’s over?”

“Yes, son.”

“Anyone hurt?”

Keegan smiled. “Um, other than you? No, no good guys anyway.”

Gabe nodded. “Is Mia still alive?”

“Mia?”

“Mia Casellas. She’s the mind behind this.”

“Not much of a mind.”

“Right? I tried to warn her,” Gabe said, breathing hard. “I told her there was no way it was gonna work out in her favor.” He moaned.

Keegan stepped back as a paramedic wrapped a BP cuff around Gabe’s arm. “How ya doin’?” the young man asked as he took Gabe’s blood pressure.

“Not so good,” Gabe answered. “Hurts. Everything hurts. And I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Keegan spoke to one of the paramedics. “I’m his father. Can you give him something to take the edge off?”

“Yes, sir, I can.” He turned and touched Gabe’s hand. “Hold on, son, you’re gonna feel much better in a few seconds,” he said as he started an IV.

Keegan looked up as Jason came forward. “Good job in there Tanner. I thought we were gonna have to carry you out in a bag, but you stayed in control and did the job.”

“Not so controlled. If not for Jake and Jeff, well, let’s just say it could’ve gone down a lot different.” He looked around. “Where’s Joey? Was he able to find this Mia person Gabe told me about?”

“Yes, they’re making their way here now. Intel is she is the daughter of one of the men that worked security with Celados. One of the two you killed when your cover was

blown all those years ago."

Keegan closed his eyes. "Seems no matter what I do, it always comes back to hurt the people I love."

"You're a warrior, Keegan Tanner, and your family knows they are the family of a warrior and unfortunately, that is risky business. You stopped a trafficking ring. You helped people. Mia did this. Not you."

Keegan shook Jason's hand. "Thanks for all the help."

"Like I said, we take care of our own."

Keegan looked over to see Tristan and Kaleb ushering a pretty cuffed woman toward a waiting police escort. She saw Keegan and tried to run at him. "You shot her. You killed her!" she screamed.

He'd only shot one bad guy this time around, and it was a man. He shook his head. "Not me. Not this time."

They shoved her into the squad car.

"Who's she talkin' about?" Keegan asked Joey as he approached.

"The shooter."

"The shooter was also a woman?"

"Yep."

"Does Jeff know?"

"He didn't when he got her. He does now. Why? Would it have made a difference?"

"I would normally say it wouldn't, but actually, I'm not sure. All I know is I'm extremely grateful for what Jeff did tonight."

"Me too," Joey agreed.

"My wife is gonna be grateful too. I need to call her."

"We've been keeping all family informed. They all know that we have Gabe and he's alive and headed to the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries," Jason said.

"And that's where I'm headed too."

Jason nodded. "I'll have an agent escort Lizzy to the hospital."

Before he left, Keegan looked around, trying to find Jeff. Finally, he spotted a silhouette coming down a hill in the moonlight and across a field. Once he got closer Keegan could see that he was fine, no injuries. He held his hand out. "Thanks, man," Keegan said, his voice filled with emotion. "Really, thank you."

Jeff grinned. "No problem. Guess this makes us even?"

Keegan chuckled. "Guess so."

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April 21st Late Sunday Night

Pine Forest Memorial Hospital, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe finished telling Mia's story and his eyes drifted shut. Lizzy took his hand in her own and cradled it as she watched him sleep. His wrists were red and bruised. Wasn't it just yesterday that she'd given birth to this tiny baby in the parking lot of the Inn? He'll be eighteen in June. How does time go by so fast? You just blink your eyes and it's gone. Now, that baby has turned into a young man. A fine young man. She felt so blessed to have him in her life. Gabriel Tanner was definitely her angel.

Keegan was staring out the window. Mia's story was a sad one. And now she would

go to prison. Poor kid, she was doomed almost from the start. He knew to blame those responsible, and not himself. Still, there was such a sadness. Evil infiltrates every part of this world now. It touches everything. And as far as Keegan was concerned, Jesus couldn't come back soon enough. Until then, he—they—will occupy. He and his family, they will do all they can to dispel darkness. His son is a bright light, Keegan thought. He'll always be a target. Grandmaster Kino had once told him, "Whenever there is a bright light in this world, the dark forces gather to put it out."

Keegan went to his wife, placed his hands on either side of her shoulders. Rubbed her neck and back. "Sweetheart, let's let him sleep awhile. We can go get something to eat downstairs and come right back."

Lizzy nodded. "I'm so tired, but I don't want to leave his side."

"He's gonna be okay. You know, actually, rather than go downstairs, you really need to go home and get some sleep. You'll make yourself sick."

She looked up at her husband. "You're tired too. I'll go home and get some sleep if you will."

"Good. Let's do it."

He smiled as she immediately started to chew on her bottom lip.

"Elizabeth, there's an agent at his door. He won't let anything happen to Gabe."

Lizzy sighed. Nodded. "Okay."

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April 22nd Monday Morning

Pine Forest Memorial Hospital, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe laughed hard as his father's brothers-in-arms told stories. His mom and dad were on their way back. They'd gone home to get some rest. Gabe was feeling much better this morning. Brayden, Tristan, Kaleb, and Master Appel were making Gabe laugh so hard, his stomach actually hurt. Jake was also in attendance, but hadn't said much.

"So, Gabe, do you have a girlfriend?" Brayden asked.

"Uh, yes, sir, but she doesn't live around here."

"Where does she live?" Tristan asked. "Cuz we can get her here for you if you want us to."

Gabe smiled. "She's in California."

"Oh, you're talking about the Kino girl, aren't ya?"

Gabe nodded, suddenly feeling a deep need to speak with her.

"Well, it's better that she's not here," Brayden offered.

Gabe frowned. "Why?"

"Ever heard of post-trauma excessive sex drive?" Brayden asked.

"That's not what it's called," Kaleb said.

"It's close enough," Brayden said.

"Post trauma sex drive?" Gabe repeated.

"Excessive sex drive," Brayden corrected.

"No, what's that?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like. I have two daughters and I wouldn't let them near you right now."

Gabe snickered. "Like I would mess with the daughters of a man as lethal as you

are."

"Um, ya do know who Taylor Kino's dad and grandfather and uncles are, don't ya?"

Gabe chuckled. "Ya got me there. But you guys are just makin' this stuff up anyway, right? Cuz I don't feel anything now but grateful to be alive, and that my dad is alive. So, this is not a real thing."

Kaleb jumped in. "It's called primal post-war reaction syndrome, and yeah, it's real. I mean, it's not an actual medical term, but it's very real. Just ask a soldier, or a cop. It has to do with going through a life and death situation and surviving. Afterwards, your body goes into like a sexual hyperdrive."

"Interesting," Gabe said.

"It should be interesting since it's how you got born," Brayden put in.

"Uh, guys," John finally said.

"What?" Brayden laughed. "You did know you were conceived in a hospital bed very similar to this one, didn't ya?"

"I was?"

"Sure. It was right after your dad saved Jeff. He was in the hospital down in Savannah. Coincidentally, your dad had also been shot in the thigh. So anyway, your mom and dad had a fight, well, falling out and..."

"They didn't actually fight," Tristan interrupted. "Your dad kinda just walked out on her."

Gabe frowned as he tried to digest what they were saying. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he thought being around her and her little girls would be bad for them, since he was like, hmm, let's say he was an ill-tempered, savage terminator."

"Geez, Tristan. You make him sound like a monster," Kaleb put in. He smiled at Gabe. "Your dad was tough, and he was the first guy you'd want standing by your side in a fight."

"Anyway," Brayden continued. "So, he broke up with your mom and your mom walked into that hospital room looking about as fine as any woman has a right to be. And boom. You were conceived."

"They weren't married?" Gabe asked.

The room got quiet.

"Oops," Kaleb said.

"Oh, man," Brayden said softly. "I, uh, I think I just messed up."

The guys looked at John who only sighed and shook his head.

"In a hospital?" Gabe asked.

"Wow, I'm sorry, Gabe," Brayden said with a sigh. "I just thought you knew all that. Oh man, you can't tell them I told you, cuz then, you'd be responsible for my death."

Gabe laughed. "Your secret is safe."

They turned as a pretty, young nurse came in the room. She smiled. "Well now, this room is full of people, isn't it?" She moved forward as the guys all backed away from Gabe and gave her room to do her thing.

She took Gabe's temp and blood pressure. Smiled at him sweetly. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Pain on a level of one to ten?"

"Um, maybe about a four."

She nodded. Smiled again. Either she was just a sweet person, or she was sweet on her patient. Her next statement made it clear. "I'm so glad they found you and you're gonna be okay. I prayed hard for you. My whole family did. My little sister went to your game Friday night with some of her friends. They've all been so worried. Me too. So, it's my pleasure to take care of you. If you need anything, you let me know."

Gabe's cheeks turned a bright pink. He smiled at her. "Thank you."

She turned to leave and nodded politely at the large men occupying the small space.

"Um, ma'am?" Gabe called.

She turned back.

"Your sister, does she go to Pine Forest?"

"No, she goes to Lakeland High School, but she follows you on social media."

"Oh. Which one?"

The nurse laughed. "All of them. You're pretty popular, ya know?"

He cleared his throat, looked down. "Yeah, I've been told. Well, anyway, tell your sister I said thanks, I mean, for the prayers."

Smiling, the nurse nodded. "I will. Her name is Sam. As in Samantha. And this is gonna make her day." She turned and left the room.

The men gathered back around Gabe's bed.

"Whaddya think about her?" Brayden asked.

"She's nice." He shrugged. "She's cute."

"Does she get ya goin'?"

The men all groaned.

"Hey, everyone," Lizzy said as she came through the door, Keegan right behind her.

The men moved back from the bed again. Lizzy put down her purse and a canvas bag and moved to the bed to hug her son.

"Hey, Mom," Gabe said softly. It felt so good to have his mom hug him when at one point he'd thought he'd never see her again.

"Son," Keegan said, clasping his hand and pulling him forward for a hug. Gabe grunted.

"Sorry," Keegan said. "I'll try to be more gentle."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Tristan said.

"He can be gentle," Lizzy put in, making everyone chuckle.

John stood to offer Lizzy the only chair. "Well, these guys just wanted to stop by before they had to leave."

Keegan started shaking hands, saying goodbyes and thanking them. He noticed them all taking time to shake Jake's hand, hugging him, mussing his hair and slapping his face. Something they only did to a brother. Jake was abnormally quiet and Keegan knew exactly why. After they'd all ribbed Gabe one more time about Taylor, and kissed Lizzy's cheek, they took their leave.

When the only people left in the room were his parents and Master Appel and Jake, Gabe pushed the button on his bed to lie back a bit and sighed. He was suddenly tired.

"You need to rest," Master Appel said. "We'll head out."

"Wait," Gabe said. He looked at his friend who was four years older than him and had always been more like a brother. "Jake, I, uh, just wanted to say thanks. You were a huge help last night. You and Jeff saved my dad and I really can't say 'thank you' enough. If you guys hadn't held him back, they would've had him."

Jake nodded. "No big deal, Gabe. Anyone would've done the same."

"But it wasn't anyone. It was you, and I'm grateful."

John watched as his son struggled to control his emotions. He'd killed two men. Two shots. Two bullseyes. It's one thing to train for it. Totally different when it's real. Jake had been deployed only once and that was at the German embassy. He hadn't experienced real combat. Actually still hadn't, and yet he now had his first kills.

"He did more than just hold me back, Gabe," Keegan said softly. "He had to put down two bad guys before we ever came in to get you. So, he saved me twice. And only disobeyed orders once to do it." He raised his eyebrows at the young man.

Jake looked down. "Sorry, sir."

"Well, I can't say that I am, since it was me you saved. Though, it was supposed to be your dad at my side, not you, and I'm sure he would've done the same."

"Maybe," John said. "But Jake's quicker, and I'm thinking God put him exactly where he was supposed to be."

They all murmured an agreement to that.

"Jake," Keegan said. "It *will* get better. You won't forget, but God will grant you peace. You knew it was gonna eventually happen, you taking a life. It's a hard thing. But like Grandmaster Kino says, 'we do the hard things that no one else wants to do, to protect the innocents of this world.'"

"Roger that," Jake murmured.

Lizzy stood and went to Jake, took his face in her hands, kissed each cheek. "Thank you, Jacob Appel, for saving my husband's life and for helping to save Gabe. I'm so grateful that God sent you to us."

Jake nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

They said their goodbyes. The Appels left the room. Lizzy reached into the canvas bag she'd brought and pulled out Gabe's phone. She checked the time, then handed the phone to Gabe with a sweet smile. "Here, you're gonna need this."

He nodded. "Thanks. I would like to give Taylor a call but it may be a little too early out there on the west coast."

"Maybe wait just a little longer," Lizzy said.

Gabe nodded and glanced at his phone. He had dozens of messages and missed calls. He sighed. "How long do I have to stay in the hospital?" he asked.

"They want you to stay twenty-four more hours," Keegan answered. "So, by this time tomorrow, we should be on the way home."

"But I feel fine."

"I get it. But you were shot seven times, Gabe. Seven. Six of them just grazed you, but a couple of those were deep grazes. The other one was the one in the back of your thigh and they did surgery to repair that, remove the nylon thread she used and stitch it up right. Also, the middle finger on your right hand is broken. They just want to monitor you, hydrate you, get some antibiotics into you and allow you time to rest."

Gabe nodded. “Okay.” He shook his head. “Well, baseball season is—” He looked up, tears filling his eyes as he realized. “I guess it’s over for me, huh?”

Keegan nodded. “I’m afraid so, son. Your finger won’t be healed for weeks. Your shoulders and arms are gonna be prone to infection and we really have to keep them clean and dry. Your thigh is weak and needs complete rest to heal.”

Gabe shook his head. “I know it’s stupid to feel so sad about a stupid baseball season when I should just be grateful that my dad is alive and I’m alive. Don’t know why I feel like bawlin’ my eyes out.”

“It’s not stupid, and it *is* normal. You had a lot taken away from you. What happened intruded into your norm. It’s a violation, and you feel it deeply. Son, you’re gonna have a lot more uncomfortable feelings to deal with, and I’m gonna get Grandmaster Kino to recommend a professional to help you through this. But please believe me when I say, you will get through it, and it won’t be easy and your mom and I, your sisters, and so many more people who love you, we are all here for you.”

Gabe nodded as his FaceTime started to ring.

He smiled big and accepted the call. “Hey, Taylor!”

“Hey Gabe. Oh, wow, I didn’t think I would cry right off the bat.” She wiped at her eyes. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ve been doing the same thing,” he admitted.

“I’m so happy you’re alive, Gabe. I prayed so hard. We all did. I wish I was there to hug you. I don’t think I’d ever let go.”

“I feel the same, but don’t worry, you’ll be here in a few weeks. I mean, you are still gonna go to prom with me, aren’t you?”

“Of course. Nothing could keep me away. I’m counting the days. Mom says I can miss some school and come out a few days earlier so I’ll have plenty of time to visit with you.”

“That’s awesome.” He squinted at the screen. “So, where are you? Are you on the beach?”

“Yes. We just finished a morning workout.”

“We?”

“Yeah, the whole fam is here at Granddad’s.” She reversed screens. “Everyone say ‘hi’ to Gabe,” she said.

They all waved, or blew kisses, yelled things like, “Good to see you alive,” and, “We love you.”

She reversed the screen back.

“Isn’t today Monday? Aren’t you going to school?”

“Yeah. It’s only 7:00 AM here, and I do have to get going, but I wanted to speak to you. I’m so happy you’re alive. I’m so happy they found you. I’m so thankful I can’t even tell God enough times. I was so scared. But I watched the video, and you didn’t seem a bit scared. You are so brave, Gabe. So, brave and strong and I am totally in— ” She stopped. Gasped. “Uh, I mean, uh, anyway, I have to get to school, but will you call me later? I’ll be home by four.”

He smiled at her, almost sure of what she’d stopped herself from saying. “Yes. I’ll call you at four. Can’t wait to talk to you again. Have a great day.”

She giggled. "Oh, I will. The best day ever, cuz you are alive!"

She was laughing as she ended the call.

Gabe looked up at his parents as he put the phone down. They were grinning at him which made his face redden.

"She's such a sweetie," Lizzy remarked.

"Yep," Gabe agreed.

Keegan chuckled. "Well, Gabe, your mom and I have to actually go do an interview with the local news. You need to rest. And then when you feel like it, as you can see from your phone, you have a few people you need to call back. Peyton has called a number of times. Your coach has called. And that woman, Isla August, has called several times as well. So, get a nap, and make a few calls and we'll be back in a few hours."

"Yes, sir."

"Agent Dalton is just outside your door, so feel safe," Lizzy said.

Gabe frowned. "Are we expecting trouble?"

"No," Keegan answered.

"I guess you don't actually know what's going on," Lizzy said.

"What?"

"There's people everywhere outside the hospital. There was a bunch of girls inside earlier, until the police made them leave. There's news trucks from news stations in Atlanta. The FBI being involved makes this a high-profile story, honey," Lizzy said. "We promised an interview to one station and to join the press conference that's gonna be happening soon. That's why we have to go."

Gabe frowned. "So, as far as my social media status dying down, that's not happening any time soon."

"To be honest, son, it may never happen. You are a phenomenon. Even the Kinos say they have underestimated your public appeal."

"In other words, kiddo, you're a star, a celebrity and you're gonna have to make the best of it."

They turned as Joey Adams and Jeff Davis walked into the room.

"Hey guys," Keegan said, shaking hands with them, and pulling Jeff in for a hug.

It was Joey Adams who'd made the statement. Joey, whose sister was THE Breanna Adams. He was an eight-time Kino Challenge Champion. The same Joey who'd made a few movies with his brother-in-law/stepbrother, Ricky Kino, and whose sister was Nobel Prize-winning Dr. June Flower Kino, and whose brother was a former Heisman candidate, and whose mother was MART champion Shelley Kino and stepfather was Grandmaster Eric Kino. He knew all about being in the spotlight and how difficult it could be. "I don't know what to tell ya, Gabe. You have the 'it' factor. I don't see it dying down unless you go into hiding and you can't really do that because you can't let them dictate how you want to live your life."

Gabe sighed. "Man, I just wanna be normal."

"Yeah, but you're not normal. You are extraordinary. I know Mia Casellas cut some stuff out of your video. She also included some stuff from after the cut, like one of the most beautiful prayers I've ever heard. This is your cross, Gabe. Are you gonna bear

it?" He looked at Keegan and Lizzy. "I don't mean to overstep my bounds. But I'll just give my opinion and you guys think about it. Some people are given a little to work with and they do what they can. That's kinda like me. And some people are given a lot to work with. That's you, Gabe, and you have an amazing opportunity to spread God's light and God's Word. His light is shining on you right now. Are you gonna do something with it? Or try to hide it under a bushel by trying to 'just be normal?' No one says it's gonna be easy. That's why I said it's YOUR cross to bear. You're allowed to heal. You're allowed to make boundaries. But kiddo. You are a bright light. Are you ready to pick up your cross and carry it?"

Keegan regarded the younger man thoughtfully. Joey Adams was the guy Jason Lee would eventually turn his company over to. Joey would one day be Keegan's boss. He was more than ten years younger than Keegan. Keegan didn't know Joey that well, but he was beginning to see what Jason saw in him.

"Wow," Gabe said with a sigh. "My whole life is changing so fast."

Jeff shrugged. "You're a high school senior. It was about to change anyway. It's just that now, you actually have more opportunities, a broader scope to see through."

Gabe nodded, trying to understand, but it was just too much at once. "How do you know that Mia cut stuff from the video and added stuff onto the video?" Gabe asked.

"Jensen told me. He has it all. Everything."

"You've already watched it?"

"No. No time yet, but I heard a little bit this morning and part of what I heard was when you prayed. It's hard to believe that's some high school kid talking."

Gabe decided to change the subject. He smiled. "By the way, Agent Davis, I wanted to say 'thank you,' for last night. I mean, for saving my life by taking out the shooter."

Jeff's jaw tensed. He nodded his head. "Just doing my job."

Gabe recognized that phrase. It was what his father said when he didn't want accolades for killing someone. Gabe nodded, letting Jeff know he understood.

Jeff smiled. "Well, we gotta head back west. Got a ride waiting on us. Just wanted to stop by, see how you're doing and say goodbye for now."

"Thanks for coming by," Keegan said.

They hugged Gabe, shook Keegan's hand, kissed Lizzy's cheek and took their leave.

A few minutes later Gabe's parents also left the room.

Gabe decided to make the calls his father said he should make. The first was to his baseball coach who had already spoken with Gabe's father and been told of his inability to play. However, Coach said the team was in desperate need of Gabe's support, and even his presence and he would have a place of honor in the dugout if he would like to come and support his teammates. Gabe assured him he would love to support them and he'd just have to get permission from his parents and probably also from the doctors. The fact that they wanted him there on the sidelines helped Gabe to feel more grounded immediately and he blew out a sigh of relief as he ended the call to his coach.

The next call was to Isla August. She answered on the first ring.

"Gabe!"

"Yes, it's me."

"Oh my gosh it's so very good to hear your voice!" She sniffed, squealed. "Ugh, I'm

so sorry. I'm all emotional. I prayed so hard for you and now, here you are speaking to me."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For praying for me."

"You are so welcome! You just don't understand what you did for me!"

"Okay, I'll bite. What did I do for you?"

"Gabe, when we first started the prayer chain, I mean, I was willing. I mean, how can someone get a call from Breanna Adams asking you to start a prayer chain and say anything but yes, right?"

"Oookaay. I didn't know about this."

"Oh, sweetie, of course you didn't. You were being held and you probably haven't had time to be able to see what all is happening. So, anyway, she, Breanna, gave me the information and it was an exclusive. The world went crazy when they found out what was happening to you. I asked people to pray for you, and for them to contact other media sites and ask them to pray for you, and so on, and so on."

"Yeah, that's how a prayer chain works."

She laughed. "Of course, and boy did it work! And Gabe, now, a little honesty. I haven't been to church since I was a kid and haven't thought about God in years except to curse. But Gabe, when I decided I couldn't just ask other people to pray and I needed to try to pray myself, and I sat at my desk and bowed my head, heck, I didn't even know how to begin. But the very coolest thing happened. When I asked God to please protect you and bring you home safely, I actually felt this amazing warm feeling move through me. It was the most comforting, peaceful feeling I have ever felt in my life. It was like, I don't even know how to describe it. It was like pure love was moving through me. I started crying, right then. And then I remembered from when I was a kid that you're supposed to pray in Jesus' name, so I said that, and oh, my gosh, Gabe, the feeling magnified. Doubled, tripled. I've never felt God's presence before in my life, but when I prayed for you, for the first time ever, I felt it. And I had the thought, God is real! And it's all because of you!"

"Um, that's a nice story and all, but it's not because of me. It's just because you really prayed. And it tripled when you used Jesus' name because his name IS powerful. I don't know much, but that much I know."

"Oh my gosh, it just happened again! I don't know what's happening to me, but I love it and I want to feel this feeling all the time."

Gabe smiled. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Oh Lord, I've been going on and on and I haven't even told you why I called."

"Oh, so, all that is not why you called?"

"No. Okay, so listen. So, we had this prayer chain going, right? And literally millions of people started posting their written prayers online in either the comment sections of social media sites, or on their own websites. Not thousands, Gabe, but millions. Some of them weren't prayers. Some of them were testimonies about what people were experiencing when they prayed for you. And, Gabe, they were exactly what I just told you, almost word for word! It was so amazing. This phenomenon was happening to the

whole country."

Gabe's eyes filled with tears. What in the world was going on?

"But that is also not what I wanted to tell you."

"There's more than that? Because that is big!"

"Yes, and here it is. Some of those people got together and started an 'Ultimate Warrior Fund for Gabriel Tanner' account. Gabe, it has almost twenty-two million dollars in it."

"What? Is that legal?"

"What do you mean?"

"They're using my name to get money?"

"No, silly. The money is yours."

"Why? I don't need money. If it's for the medical bills, my father has good insurance. I don't get it."

"Sweetie, it's just what people do. You were in trouble. They prayed for you and then, they feel like they want to do something else. Something more. So they donate money. I think I've come to know you a little bit, so I understand you wanting nothing to do with this money. But Gabe, you can pay it forward. Maybe these people are trusting you to use it in a way that would help the most people. Maybe God moved them the way He moved me. Look, I told the people who started the fund that I could reach you and give you their contact information. Talk to your parents, talk to an attorney. All I know is, knowing you has completely changed my life. Completely. And I'm grateful that God sent you to me."

Gabe was silent. He didn't know what to think. He had several people lately tell him that he's special, that he changed their life. But it wasn't him. It was Jesus. He was nothing. Just a normal all-American kid who loved to play ball, and fight in martial arts tournaments, and shoot guns. He wasn't special. He didn't even know where he was gonna go to college or if he even *was* gonna go to college. And if he did, he had no idea what to study. It was all too overwhelming. He was tired and couldn't really deal with all this right now.

"Gabe, are you still there?"

"Yes, sorry. Just thinking."

"So, can I give you these people's information?"

"Yeah, um, I don't have anything to write with right now. Can you just shoot me a text?"

"Yes of course. I'll do that as soon as we hang up. Now I just have one more little small favor to ask you."

He sighed. "Okay."

"I'd like to interview you."

"I'm a little tired right now."

She laughed. "Not now. I'm in California. I want it to be in person and not rushed like I usually am. If you'll talk to me about your recent experiences, and about your faith, I will get out there ASAP."

When he didn't answer right away she went on.

"I promise it won't take long. And you can tell me what you want to talk about ahead

of time and if there's something you don't want to talk about, we won't."

"I guess that would be okay. I need to talk to my parents."

"Wonderful! It will take me a few days to make the arrangements and I'll get back to you."

"Okay."

"You are the best," she gushed as she ended the call.

He sat there stunned. Tears streamed down his face and he used the edge of the sheet to wipe at them. He just wanted to be normal. But he did love that people like Isla were finding God. That part was totally cool. He needed to talk to his parents. And to Master Appel. And Uncle Chaz. And mostly, to Grandmaster Kino. And, he reckoned, to an attorney. But right now, he needed to call Peyton and then sleep.

"I knew it," Jeffy said as she came in the room.

Gabe looked up to see June Flower Kino and her husband, Cam Wallace, one of Jason's Elite. He quickly wiped away his tears.

"Oh, hey," he said.

Jeffy moved forward. "We were at the airport getting ready to head home but I felt strongly that I needed to come back here and see you. I can feel your heart is in turmoil. Ugh, and your body is in pain. Your mind is confused, on overload. I can help if you want me to," she said.

Cam smiled as he watched his sweet Jeffy do her thing. She was always a chatterbox, even though lately she'd worked very hard on not giving a running commentary.

Gabe smiled. "I'd be dumb to turn down your help, cuz you're right about all those things." He looked at her husband and nodded. "Hey Cam."

Cam moved forward and shook his hand. "Hey buddy. Gotta say, it's really good to see you all safe and sound."

"I didn't know you guys were here."

"Jeffy was consulting on the case, trying to find you."

"Oh. Cool. Did you find me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nope. I failed. I could feel you, so I was able to tell your family that you were still alive."

"Yeah," Gabe said thoughtfully. "I didn't think about the fact that they wouldn't know if I was dead or alive. It must've been really hard on them."

"It was, so at least I was able to help in that way."

"And she helped find you too. She kept saying 'chickens,' and that made them able to find you at an old poultry farm."

"Huh, I didn't know that either."

"Anyway," Jeffy said. "We were gonna leave with everyone else but I came back because I could feel your heart and thought you might need some help, so, may I?"

Gabe nodded.

She came to him, lowered the side rail of the bed, placed her hands on either side of his head and leaned her forehead against his.

"Oh, sweetie," she said softly. She began to cry. Gabe did too.

"You're blocked," she added.

Gabe had no idea what that meant.

"You've put up a block to guard yourself from the pain. But you need to release it in order to completely heal emotionally and physically. Your heart is strong, your mind is strong, once I release the block you're gonna heal super fast. But it's gonna hurt."

Gabe started to breathe hard.

"It's like, all the pain you've blocked will rush at you for a few seconds. It will be pretty uncomfortable for about fifteen seconds, which doesn't sound long, but it will seem like forever. Do you want me to do it? Normal healing requires time. We can speed this up."

Gabe looked into her eyes. This woman was the person who was special. She was healing the world. He trusted her. He nodded.

Jeffy nodded at Cam. "Honey, help hold him down."

Gabe immediately had second thoughts.

Cam moved to the other side of the bed and placed his hands on Gabe's chest.

"Here we go," Jeffy said.

She closed her eyes. Gabe moaned, then grunted, then bucked. Jeffy also moaned. And then it was over. Gabe's head fell back on the pillow. Jeffy kissed his forehead. "*You* are special," Jeffy whispered. "God is with you. Get some sleep."

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Proverbs 16:3-4

"Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. The Lord has made everything for its purpose,
even the wicked for the day of trouble."

Chapter Seventeen

April 23rd Tuesday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

After a discussion with Grandmaster Kino on the pros and cons of Gabe watching his own abduction video, the Tanners sat together in their den, the video cast up on their large-screen TV. The two youngest twins, Daisy and Lily, had already seen it and had no wish to watch it again, so they took Iris out for the day.

Just like in the training video Grandmaster Kino had made to allow Keegan to see what Gabe had been through without having to explain it, the family getting to see what happened to him without him having to explain it would be a relief. For Gabe specifically, facing things he'd already blocked out helped him begin to process what had happened.

Mia had taken out the part right after his pseudo-surgery, where she'd touched him and sexually threatened him, and he was relieved, because he didn't want the world to know about that part. It was embarrassing. She also took out the part where she told her own story. Still, she added in the part after that where he tried talking to her even though she didn't respond, and where the men built the box and Gabe fought with them. And the part where he tried to tell her that it wasn't gonna end well for her no matter what.

Three hours later, when it was over, they sat quietly. Gabe didn't say a thing, because he truly didn't know what to say.

Heather came and knelt down in front of him. "Hey little brother, I'm so proud of you. You were so strong. And you tried to reason with her, and you tried to fight. I hope you see it like that."

He shrugged. "Thanks, Heather. So, pretty much everyone, like all my teammates, everyone at school, they've all seen this, right?" He glanced around at his family and they all were nodding their heads. His eyes welled with tears but he choked them back.

Gabe stood and cleared his throat. "Well, nothing to do but face it. I told Coach I'd come and support the team in the dugout for today's game. Is that okay?"

Lizzy looked at Keegan. Physically, she thought it would be too much too soon. But emotionally, it might be the best thing he could do. Just get the embarrassment over with and be there for the team. She nodded.

"We'll all go," Keegan said. "I have to check in with work. Let's eat a late lunch and then we'll go. You take a few minutes to rest."

Gabe nodded.

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Jake pulled away from the kiss when his cell phone vibrated. It was serendipity because he'd been toying in the back of his mind with the idea of breaking vows he'd

made to God, breaking promises and giving in to weakness. Laynah was being the most comforting balm to his broken soul. Or maybe it was the primal post-war reaction syndrome the guys had been talking about yesterday morning. Whichever it was, pulling away from her at the present moment, with her lying there on the soft grass, under the tree beside the meadow, her gorgeous red hair loose and blowing, his fingers on the top button of her overshirt, it was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

He glanced at the phone. "Hey, Dad, everything okay?"

His father chuckled. "I can tell that means you don't want to be disturbed, which probably means I should absolutely disturb you."

Jake took a deep breath. "Yep, you're probably right."

Laynah reached up, splayed her hands over his chest. He closed his eyes in defense.

"Gabe has watched the video and is struggling a bit. He's decided to attend the game today, a place of honor in the dugout. I was hoping you and Laynah would tag along in support, at least for the first half. If you want to disappear after that, then go ahead."

"Hold on," Jake said then raised his brow at Laynah. "Did you hear?"

"Yes," she said, giggling.

"Well?"

"Of course I want to go."

He smiled at her and shook his head in wonder. "Where have you been all my life?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Uh, right here."

He laughed. "Oh yeah, it was rhetorical," he quipped then turned back to the phone. "Yeah, Dad, we'll be there."

"Sounds good, see you there."

"Hey, Dad?"

"Yep?"

"So, is that primal post-war thing a real thing?"

John chuckled. "Yes, son, it's real. And I'm not gonna preach at you because I know you know right from wrong, but, if you don't have protection then you'd better put it on ice."

Jake nodded. "Copy that."

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April 23rd Tuesday Evening

Buxton Hills High School, Pine County, Georgia

They all came. The Appels, the Stewarts, and the Tanners. It wasn't a home game so they found seats in the bleachers on the third base side. They thought at first that it was so crowded because Buxton Hills was a larger high school, but once they really looked at the crowd, they realized it was still happening. Everywhere they looked were *Pine Forest* shirts, the majority with Gabe's name printed on the back.

Gabe didn't go up into the bleachers, but instead made his way on crutches to the gate that opened onto the field. He didn't have his uniform to wear except for his cap, which he wore with pride. Jake stayed on one side of him, Laynah on the other. However, once Peyton spotted him, there was no need. A whoop and holler went up. His teammates all ran to greet him jumping up and down all around him, but being careful not to touch his shoulders or to knock him over. They rubbed his head, pulled on the bill

of his cap, patted his back and escorted him into the third base dugout.

The crowd had seen him as well and was chanting, Tan-ner, Tan-ner. At his team's insistence he went to the side of the field and tipped his cap, he added a tap on his heart, to show his gratitude for their support. That sent them into a frenzy.

Back in the dugout the coach gave a speech about keeping up their spirits. Then asked Gabe if he had anything to say.

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, I do, and here it is; you guys don't need me. We're good because we're a team. You got this. Focus. Support each other."

Coach nodded. "He's right. We got this. Okay. Anyone who wants to pray, can pray. Anyone who doesn't want to pray. Don't. No judgment, no division, all good, all team."

"All good, all team," the boys repeated.

"Gabe, you ain't good for nothin' else tonight so give us a prayer," Coach said as the guys all laughed.

They took off their caps while Gabe prayed.

The announcer started introducing teams as they lined up along their respective lines. At the end of the intros, Gabe looked up sharply, surprised to hear them actually speaking about him. This wasn't even his home field. They spoke about him being taken, about him miraculously being back and invited him to the middle of the field to shake hands with the captains and coaches and umpires. It took him a bit to make it out there on his crutches. It was painful, not because of his leg but because using the crutches required him to use his arms and shoulders which currently were damaged goods. At one point he swayed and a few guys from the other team ran out to help steady him. This touched him more than anything and apparently the crowd felt the same way for they applauded a very long time. It was a much better feeling than being thrown at, well, unless he scored, he thought with a smile.

Gabe stayed on the field for the National Anthem. Instead of simply turning toward the flag, this school had their ROTC color guard perform the Presentation of the Colors. Before that though, they invited the veterans and active military onto the field. Gabe watched as his father, Master Appel, Jake and Uncle Chaz and others made their way to the field and instead of waiting for the song to begin they came immediately to attention for the Presentation of Colors. Gabe's heart swelled with pride, but unfortunately, his body began to tremble from the strain of standing for so long and he began breathing hard. The anthem ended, the vets remained at attention until the flag left the field. Gabe thought he might collapse. He looked up at his father as he turned and he and Jake came immediately to his side and helped him back to the dugout.

"Lookin' a little pale there, son," Keegan stated. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

"It was just a long time standing. I'm okay. I'll sit down and drink some water. Don't tell Mom."

"You really think she doesn't know?"

Gabe smiled as he sat down and was handed a bottle of water. "Well, tell her I'm okay anyway."

He did tell her. Several times. The game turned out to be a long one. The Rebels battled hard, against the Buxton Hills Bulldogs, with Gabe yelling and whistling, talkin'

'em up and calling out encouragement the whole time. By the seventh, the Rebels were barely holding on to a seven-to-six lead. They just had to get three outs. First batter struck out. Second batter got on. Third batter walked. Meeting on the mound. Next play, a 1-6-3 double play. Rebels win!

After the game guys from both teams made it a point to shake Gabe's hand, which he appreciated. After that, girls from the whole county crowded around him, which he did not appreciate. Not because he was being snobby, but because he was feeling pretty shaky and thought it would be really bad if he were to throw up in front of them. He was very glad when Jake and Laynah came to rescue him, made apologies and excuses, having the girls all worrying about his well-being, and stole him away to his family's vehicle. He closed his eyes and fell asleep before they even got out of the crowded parking lot.

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April 23rd Tuesday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jeffy looked around the dinner table. Finally, her whole family was together. They'd been there during the Gabe abduction, but she and Cam and Joey had not been. She'd asked them all to stay for dinner now that everyone was back home. She smiled at her husband. He took her hand and squeezed it. She nodded at him and he spoke.

"Okay, everyone, if I can have your attention," Cam said.

The table quieted. Eric and Shelley smiled.

"Jeffy and I would like to make an announcement." He nodded at his wife.

Jeffy smiled. "We're gonna have a baby," she said quickly.

The people at the table remained quiet.

"Doesn't anyone have anything to say?" Jeffy asked.

"We figured you had more to say," JoJo laughed.

"Yeah," young Eric said. "Like, I mean, that's it? No lecture on ovulation and conception and the statistics on the odds of you conceiving at this particular point in time?"

"Haha, very funny you guys."

Everyone then burst into laughter and went about congratulating the couple. Bree got up from the table and came to hug her sister. They cried for a second or two and excitedly discussed how much fun this is going to be.

Taylor watched with pleasure. She's gonna have a new cousin. It was beautiful and wonderful. And she sighed, because the first thing she wanted to do was call Gabe and tell him. She wondered what he thought about babies and stuff like that. Would he be excited, or just shrug it off like he didn't care? She looked up at the large clock on the wall to her left. 6:30. It would be 9:30 in Georgia right now. She wondered if she could eat quickly and slip away and make the call before Gabe was asleep. She knew he had a game and was gonna go sit in the dugout and watch. She wondered how that went. She wondered if he was even home yet. She wondered if his team was able to pull off a win without him playing.

Having a hunch that people would've been there at his game and probably put up videos and pics of him, she quietly pulled her phone from her jeans back pocket, held

it down in her lap and pulled up TikTok. She was right. There he was, standing in the middle of the field on crutches, shaking hands with umpires, his hat in his hand and his hand over his heart during the national anthem, some guys from the other team each holding him by the elbow, a close-up of his face, bruised on one side, but his blue eyes clear and beautiful, his long dark lashes framing them perfectly, his dimple on his left cheek visible. She sighed.

"Taylor."

Her father's deep voice startled her. She dropped her phone, bent over to pick it up, then looked up at him.

"No phones at the table," he reminded her.

"Sorry."

"May I ask what is so important that you just had to look at it right now during dinner?"

"I was, um, I was looking to see if anyone had put up pics of Gabe from his game today."

"I see."

"I'm sorry, but I just miss him so much and I wanted to see if he's doing okay."

"I understand."

"Do you, Dad? I mean, really." Her words were said a bit sarcastically.

"I believe I do, Taylor. But when you're in a long-distance relationship, which apparently you are, then you have to learn how to focus on the present moment, on the here and now, take care of the business at hand."

Her eyes filled. "How can I do that when all I can think about is him? Or, you probably don't understand that because you men, you men can just turn your feelings off at the drop of a hat. Focus. Do your job. Ugh!"

JoJo, young Eric, and Logan all raised their arms in a "what did we do," kind of gesture.

"Where is she getting this stuff?" Ricky asked, appealing to his wife.

Bree shook her head. "Well it's certainly not coming from me, if that's what you mean. It must be from school."

"I ought to pull her outta that place right now, and I would if I thought that would help," Ricky said.

"May I be excused?" Taylor asked.

"No you may not," Ricky stated firmly.

"Taylor, calm down," Bree said softly. "Your father said he understood your feelings, and if he said that then it's true. He wouldn't lie to you."

"Why does he have to tell me to stop thinking about Gabe then? He wouldn't say that if he understood."

"Honey, he was trying to give you direction in how you can stop hurting by focusing on the current situation, which is sitting here having dinner with your family. He was telling you that to keep YOU from hurting. And, Taylor, it's not fair to state that men can just turn their feelings off. First, if they can, I'd say it's a good trait to have. But I know that they hurt too, just like we do, when they can't be with the ones they love."

"Then how can he expect me to just stop thinking about Gabe? It's like he doesn't

have any emotions."

Ricky drew a deep breath, shook his head.

"Taylor," Bree pressed on. "In general, us girls may be a bit more emotional than men, but not always. There is nothing wrong with men being men. Their masculine qualities are not a bad thing. They are not toxic like you may be hearing lately. Men being masculine is a good quality and it's what attracts us to them. I love how strong your father is. It makes me know I can depend on him. And I know he knows he can depend on me, like right now for example. And I also love how your dad is able to focus on solutions and do what has to be done, even when he'd rather just lie down and cry."

Taylor glanced up at her father, thinking about the fact that she may have hurt the feelings she'd said he didn't have.

"What do you like about Gabe?"

Taylor looked up because the question had come from her Grandma.

She shrugged. "He's kind. He's funny. He's smart. He's strong, and responsible, and he works hard, and he..."

"Don't stop," Shelley prodded. "And he what? What were you gonna say?"

She sighed. "And he takes care of business and he takes care of me."

"Bingo," JoJo murmured.

"And don't forget that he's totally hot," Breez said, trying to break the tension.

There was a murmur of laughter.

Taylor glanced at her Aunt Breez. She was married to Uncle Joey, the second in command at Ameritech, a Kino Challenge champion several years over, a very badass kind of guy. Aunt Breez was a strong lady, an amazing artist, and she was not intimidated by her husband at all. They had two girls and baby Ledger, and Uncle Joey took over with the kids whenever he wasn't at work. Taylor had to admit that badass Uncle Joey was really sweet when he was playing with Sophia and Kelstyn. He was much rougher when he played with Ledger who was only two. It was endearing. Not insulting.

Taylor looked over at Aunt Bella, who was Breez' sister and married to her Uncle Mark, who was Joey's older brother. Uncle Mark was a defense attorney, a former football standout, and a Kino Challenge champion. He had to work a lot. He was Logan's, JoJo's, and Emily's father. Emily was only three and currently being rambunctious and sitting on her daddy's lap so Aunt Bella could have a few minutes to eat. Taylor knew that her Aunt Bella had been terribly abused during her first marriage to Logan's father. She'd heard the stories how her Uncle Mark and Uncle Joey had been trying to rescue Aunt Bella when Logan was forced to kill his own biological father to save his mother's life. Now, Uncle Mark was taking such good care of his family. He adopted Logan, and loves Aunt Bella so much, that you'd never know she was once a shy, timid, abused lady.

These men in her life were definitely strong men, and their hearts were definitely filled with love, and she felt contrite to have said the things she did. Her own brother, Eric, had been her constant companion and protector, and he in no way was toxic, though he was very masculine and strong.

"I'm sorry, Dad, for what I said. I just don't know what to do with how I feel. I just

love him so much, and I want to be close to him."

"Again, daughter, I understand. Let's talk about this love for a minute. When you truly love someone you want to be in service to them."

Taylor nodded. "Yes, Daddy and I'd do anything for Gabe."

Ricky smiled. His little girl was always so wide open with her feelings. "What do you think he would want you to do? Would he want you sitting here hurting and yearning for him because you're not together?"

"No, I guess not."

"*He's* taking care of business, is he not? He went to the game today, he was focusing on helping his team win that game in any way he could help, right?"

"Yes," she said with a pout.

"So, what can YOU do for HIM?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Do you mean like, give myself to him?"

Several people choked on their food.

Ricky closed his eyes. That was most certainly not what he meant. "Why would you think that's what I meant? No, that is NOT what I meant. Taylor, you cannot serve Gabe by breaking God's laws, and he wouldn't want you to, at least I don't think he would. But I now know where your mind is at and I'm thinking the rest of this discussion will be had in a more private situation."

She looked down and sighed. "Yes, sir."

"I want TayTay," Emily said loudly.

Taylor looked up. "May I take Em down to the playroom for a little while?"

"Go ahead," Ricky said.

Taylor got her cousin and left quickly.

"What the hell was that?" Ricky murmured after she'd left.

Eric, who'd been silent the whole time, laughed. "I think it's an omen of what the next few years are gonna be like. Better get ready. It's gonna be a roller coaster ride."

Jeffy glanced at her father. Their eyes met. He gave her a smile.

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Taylor was glad when she finally made it to her own home and her own room to be alone. It was late and she was relieved that though her father said they would continue the discussion in private, he hadn't meant tonight. She'd told her family goodnight. She sat on her bed and pulled out her phone and scrolled through some of the videos and pics from Gabe's game today. She was totally stalking him, she thought with a smile. She looked at the time. It was after eight which meant it was after eleven in Georgia.

She couldn't resist. She called him. He answered on the third ring.

"Hey Taylor," he said sleepily.

"Hey. It sounds like I woke you up."

"It's okay. It's good to hear your voice."

"Yours too. I'm sorry it's so late, but we had a family dinner at the Grands' house and I just got home."

"Sounds fun." He yawned. "Any special reason?"

"Yes actually. Jeffy wanted to announce that she's gonna have a baby."

"Really? That's cool."

"Yeah, everyone is pretty stoked."

"I bet. We were all pretty excited when my mom got pregnant and had Iris a few years ago. She's the best."

"She's really cute," Taylor agreed, smiling. She was glad he had a good attitude about it.

"So, when is the baby due?" he asked.

"In seven months. So, November."

"Fun stuff."

"Yep, so, how did it go at your game today?"

"We won."

"Yeah, I saw that."

"Saw it?"

"Yeah, it was online. A bunch of people posted videos and stills of you at the game and I saw the score."

"Oh. Then why'd you ask?"

"I wanted to know how it went for *you*."

"Oh, well, it was tiring, but it was pretty cool. I mean, I wasn't nearly as embarrassed as I thought I would be."

"Embarrassed? Why would you be embarrassed?"

"Uh, because everyone in the world has watched the video of my abduction. They've seen me cry, they've seen me bleed, they've seen me scream in pain."

"There is nothing on that video that should make you embarrassed, Gabe. It should make you proud. You were so strong. And you fought those men. And shot a couple of them. That was pretty badass. And you were nice to the girl who had you kidnapped, and you tried to reason with her, and that prayer you said, that was so sweet."

He sighed. "Yeah, well, when I was praying I forgot about the fact it was being videoed."

"That's exactly what was so cool about the prayer. You were not thinking about performing for the camera, you were just being you. That's why everyone loves it. That's why I love it."

"Well, thanks, but it's still embarrassing. I mean, I flat out said I was scared. And I cried more than once."

"So? So, you have feelings. That's cool too."

"You know, there are parts to the video that aren't in the video she put out. Like when she took the bullet out of my leg, or when she told me why she went after me, and other stuff."

"Really? I'd like to see that, or at least know what happened."

He sighed. "Ask Jason. He has the whole thing." He paused. "Except—I just remembered that there's one part I don't want you to see. Hmmm. Never mind, don't ask Jason."

"What don't you want me to see? Tell me."

He was silent.

"Gabe?"

He blew out a breath.

"What happened?"

"I don't know how to say it. I wish I hadn't told you at all."

"I feel like I could tell you anything. You don't feel the same about me?"

"Yes, I do. But you are so young and innocent."

"What does that have to do with anything, and I'm only a year younger than you."

"Yeah, I know, but it's ugly, Taylor, and I really don't want to put that picture in your head."

"Gabe, just tell me."

He sighed. "She had thoughts of—" He stopped. "Ya know what? I just really don't want to talk about this. I can't. Not now."

"Okay. I'm sorry I pressured you. I won't ask again."

"Thank you."

She was silent for a few moments and then redirected. "I miss you so much," she finally said.

"Me too, I mean, I miss you too."

She giggled. "I know what you mean."

He chuckled. "I wish you were right here beside me."

"Me too. What would you do if I was there beside you?"

"I would kiss you a long time."

"That sounds really good." She sighed. "What else would you do?"

He was quiet for several moments. "I, uh, I don't think we should play this game."

"Yeah, I think you're right. I asked my dad tonight if I should give myself to you."

He sat straight up. "What? Why? Why would you do that?"

"We were having a discussion. Why? You sound upset."

"I am upset. I don't want your family to have any reason to not bring you here in two and a half weeks. Why, Taylor? Why would you ask that?"

"We were talking about what I could do for you to show you that I lo—" She stopped. Wow. She'd almost said it again. And it's not that she needed him to say it first, but what if he doesn't feel as strongly as she does and it scares him away, then she would be devastated.

"Hello?"

"Sorry. I mean, we were talking about ways that I could show you how much I care. And I said I could give myself to you. My dad was not in agreement about that."

"Good grief, I'm surprised he didn't ground you right then and there."

"Hmm, I didn't think about that. The words just popped out of my mouth."

"What did your dad say, I mean, exactly?"

"He said God wouldn't want me to break his laws even to show you how I feel."

"I agree with your dad."

"I could say, 'of course you do,' in a good way or in a bad way."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I could say, of course you agree with my dad because you're both guys, and guys tend to stick together. Or, I could say, of course you agree with him, because you are very close to God, and always try to do the right thing."

"So, that means *you* agree with him too."

"How does it mean that?"

"You just said it would be the *right thing* to obey God's laws. That means YOU think it's the right thing."

She sighed. "Well, aren't you just so smart."

He gave a short laugh. "Taylor, I don't want to come off as 'holier than thou' so I have to be honest. I've thought about what I would do if you were lying next to me, I've thought about it a lot. I just hope when the time comes, I'll be strong enough to do the right thing."

"I'm not sure if I hope that or not."

"Well I AM sure, Taylor. Because when you lo— , um, when you care about someone, you do the right thing, no matter how hard it is."

She was silent a long time and finally said, "Oh Gabe, the things you say. You just made me cry."

"Sorry."

"No, they're happy tears." She made a quick decision. "What you said makes me so happy, Gabe, because... I am so in love with you. I just want you to know that. Don't say it back. Just know." She hung up.

"Hello?" He smiled, stretched out and closed his eyes– completely satisfied with himself.

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April 24th Early Wednesday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Chaz looked out across the field at a horse and rider galloping toward him. He hoped it wasn't an emergency.

Jake pulled back on the reins and brought Santana to a halt right in front of him.

"Hey, Jake, everything okay?"

Jake smiled. Nodded. "Uncle Chaz, do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure."

Jake swung off the horse.

"It's about Laynah."

"No kidding?" Chaz said with a chuckle.

Jake smiled. "Uncle Chaz, how do you think she's doing? I mean as far as her recovery from the assault."

Chaz gave a final tug to the fence he'd just repaired. "I think she's doing well. Physically, she's almost back to normal. The bruises are gone. She doesn't limp anymore. Mentally or emotionally, she's gettin' there. Shelley and Jeffy were a huge help along with the EFT from your father. The counselor recommended by Eric seems to think that she's well on the road to recovery. How do YOU think she's doing?"

"I think she's doing great. We talk about it. She doesn't break down anymore. She seems happy and back to her playful self. I realize it's normally not this easy, but maybe Jeffy worked a miracle, or maybe that EFT. I know miracles are possible. Still, all in all, she seems a thousand times better." He looked down for a second. "My dad told me he used EFT to help you, but he wouldn't tell me what you needed it for. He said I should ask you. Was it PTSD from your military days?"

Chaz nodded. "Yes and no. It was PTSD, but not from when I was in the military."

"Is it too hard to talk about? Cuz I'll just shut up."

"No, it's not too hard. The EFT helped me and that's why I *can* talk about it. Before your Aunt Lisa, I was married to my high school sweetheart. Her name was Cari."

"Oh, I had no idea. Does Laynah know?"

"Yes, of course. We don't talk too much about it, though. It's done. I came home from the Marines, became a paramedic for the county, married Cari and had the cutest little girl, Julie."

"Oh, wow. I didn't know you had another child."

Chaz nodded. "I was on duty. We got a call of an accident. A vehicle hit by a drunk driver. When I got to the scene, I discovered the victims were my own wife and daughter. They were both gone. It was a pretty gruesome scene."

"Uncle Chaz, I'm sorry for your loss. Wow. So sorry."

He nodded. "Thank you. I could not get over it. I was dying slowly every day. Three years later I met your Aunt Lisa and fell madly in love with her, but almost every time I kissed her, in my mind's eye she became the bloody corpse of my dead wife. I had dreams, visions, episodes that made me want to take my own life. Then, your mom and dad came here, moved into what is now the Inn, and your father saved my life with his EFT. It works."

"I had no idea. All because of a drunk driver. Such a loss."

"Well, as it turned out, it wasn't a drunk driver after all, they were murdered. But that's another whole story for another time."

Jake's mouth opened, but he had no words.

Chaz smiled. "So, you think Laynah is doing well, almost back to her normal self."

Jake brought himself back to the original subject. He nodded.

"And?" Chaz asked.

"And?"

"And what's your point? You didn't ride all the way out here to ask me how Laynah's doing."

"Oh, yeah. It's just that, I've been home almost a month. That only gives me five more, unless I'm called back early. It's not a lot of time."

"A lot of time—for what?"

"To plan a wedding."

"No."

"No?"

"Jake, you're jumping the gun."

"I know that I love her. I know I want her to be my wife. I know I want to take care of her and protect her."

"And what does she want?"

"She doesn't know. She's not sure about the vet thing anymore. She's not sure about much of anything other than her love for me."

"Have the two of you already talked about marriage?"

"Not in so many words. I mean, we know we're gonna be together. I haven't proposed to her, if that's what you're asking."

"Jake, Laynah was raped a little less than three weeks ago. The week before that she wouldn't even speak to you. We've already had this discussion. I would love to have you as my son-in-law, but when the timing is right."

"When will that be, Uncle Chaz? She's apparently been waiting on me for years already. That's my fault. And I don't want her to have to wait another minute. When I leave on deployment, I want her to know I'm coming home to her. I want her to know that I am totally committed to her. Please, I need for you to understand."

"I understand where you're coming from, Jake. I do. But she'll know you're totally committed to her if you're engaged to her. It's only been three weeks since she was assaulted. She's not in her right mind yet. Maybe when it's been three months, then you can propose and when you come back, we'll have a giant wedding."

"And what if I don't come back?"

Chaz stood there looking into the sincere eyes of a young man he loved. A young man who loved his daughter. And a young man whose father was Chaz' best friend. He didn't want to even consider Jake not coming back. But he's right. If they weren't married and he didn't come back, Laynah would have nothing left of him, not even his name.

Finally, he placed his hand on Jake's shoulder and nodded. "Tell ya what, this decision cannot be made right here by me alone, so, let's have a meeting. You, your parents, and Lisa and I. We'll get together and discuss every single angle of this, and we'll see what happens. Is that fair enough?"

Jake nodded with a sigh. "Fair enough, sir. I guess," he added. He turned, whistled for Santana, mounted. "I'll arrange the meeting," Jake said shortly, and rode off quickly.

Chaz watched him go, sighing heavily. The young man was angry right now, and determined. He shook his head. Heroes. Warriors. Why couldn't he simply want to take over his father's martial arts studios? Why do these young bucks feel they have to go off and put their lives on the line to prove their manhood? He grimaced as he admitted, that he himself had done the exact same thing.

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April 24th Wednesday 3:10 AM

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor woke from a sound sleep, glanced at her phone. It was just after three in the morning. She could hear voices. Her father's deep voice. And her mother, it sounded like she was crying. She heard her brother say something too. Her heart started beating hard. She was almost afraid to open her door to see what was happening.

She peeked out, and saw her brother's bedroom door open. She went quietly downstairs and headed to her parents' bedroom. She stopped at the head of the corridor. Her brother was standing in their bedroom doorway. He turned his head and looked at her.

"What's happening?" Taylor asked.

Eric came to her, put his hands on her shoulders. "Grandpa Robert has passed away."

Taylor's mouth fell open. "Oh no. How? Was he sick?"

"It was a heart attack."

"Poor Grandma Camille. She'll be all alone."

Eric nodded. "Mom's gonna fly out in the morning with Uncle Mark and Uncle Joey. We'll come out later for the funeral."

"Is it okay if I go in and hug Mom?"

"Of course."

Taylor padded down the hall and peeked into her parents' bedroom. Her father was standing in the middle of the room. Her mom was leaning against his chest and he had her securely wrapped in his arms. She was crying softly and he was kissing the side of her head. It was a beautiful sight. And she suddenly remembered her little tantrum earlier at dinner and felt ashamed. Because at this moment she was indeed grateful for her father's strength, for him being a rock for her mom, for him being able to offer her the comfort and support her mother needed at this hard time.

Taylor thought of her grandpa Robert. He was her mother's biological father. It was weird to think that Grandpa Robert and Grandma Shelley used to be married. She couldn't imagine her beautiful grandmother with anyone but her Granddaddy Eric. Taylor didn't get to visit with Grandpa Robert and Grandma Camille very often. They lived in San Francisco and they almost never came down the coast to visit. Still, Eric and Taylor had gone up to visit them at least twice a year. They were always loving and nice. It was weird now that it would no longer be possible to see Grandpa Robert.

Taylor took a deep breath and finally walked into the room. Her mom turned from her father's embrace to hug her.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Taylor said quietly.

Bree sniffed. "It's okay, sweetie. Thank you. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm just worried about you. I'm just wondering about your relationship with Grandpa Robert. You didn't get to see him much, did you?"

"No, not really. Before I got married I visited with him most every summer. We weren't real close, but it's strange how strongly I feel the loss."

"But he was a Christian, right?" Taylor asked.

"He was at the end. He said he could see how being a Christian had changed his children's lives, and he was intrigued and he started learning and he even got baptized."

"So, don't worry, Mom, you'll see him again."

Ricky smiled.

Bree started to cry again. "Ah Taylor, you are so faithful. Thank you, sweetie."

They hugged again, then Bree looked up. "I need to call and tell Mom." She sat down on the bed and picked up her phone.

Taylor looked up when her father rubbed his strong hand over her hair. He smiled warmly at her, his eyes moist, and she felt tears come to her eyes. Her strong father was not void of emotion like she'd accused him. He was not only her mother's rock, but her rock as well. She turned and threw herself against him. "I love you, Dad. Don't you ever leave me."

He hugged her close. "Not anytime soon, baby girl."

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April 24th Wednesday 3:30 AM.

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Shelley startled when her phone went off. She quickly reached for it and almost

knocked the lamp over, but was able to grab it before it fell.

Eric sat up immediately and turned on the light. A phone call in the middle of the night was never good. He heard Shelley's gasp. Saw the tears come to her eyes. He stood and went around the bed to sit next to her, praying it wasn't about one of the children or grandchildren.

She laid the phone down and turned to him. He waited patiently.

"Robert had a heart attack," she finally said.

Eric blew out a breath. "He didn't make it?"

She shook her head. "No."

He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "I'm sorry, Shelley."

She leaned against his chest and sniffed. "I know I said it before, but death is so surreal, and yet, it's the ultimate reality, isn't it?"

"Well put."

"The boys and Bree are flying out in the morning. I'll call Camille in the morning to see what I can do. I want to talk to the kids before they fly out."

"Whatever you need me to do, let me know. We'll get through this together, like always. I know you have mixed feelings, but I also know he was the father of three of your children. You can talk to me, you know that. I will never judge you, sweetheart."

Shelley smiled at her strong husband who was so kind and compassionate and always willing to serve in any way he could. "I know, Eric. Thank you. I'm not sure how I'm feeling or what I need, but I know you'll help me figure it out. I love you so very much."

He held her tight. "And I love you."

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Matthew 5:4

"Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted."

Chapter Eighteen

April 24th Wednesday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky eyed his son as he sat down at the table next to Taylor. No one really felt like eating breakfast, but Ricky had been able to talk them into a piece of toast.

"Eric, what's your shooting schedule like the rest of this week?"

"It's pretty much a wrap. I have to go in today for a little while. I'll be done by two or three this afternoon. Whaddya need?"

He sighed. "Your mom looked so alone when she left this morning. I was thinking I need to be there with her. She insisted she was okay, but the more I think about it, the more I think I need to join her."

"Go, Dad. Taylor and I can get along fine for a few days. Right, Taylor?"

She nodded. "Of course we can. I promise to drive carefully. I won't go anywhere but school and home."

"I'll be back before she gets home from school today. We'll order pizza and watch a movie. We'll be fine."

Ricky frowned.

"Dad, from what I understand, you were living alone for almost the whole year while Granddad was training Grandma for the MART."

"I was older than you."

"By one year. Come on, it's you who has taught us to take care of ourselves, who taught me survival skills, and life skills. I can handle watching out for one very mature, self-reliant teenage girl for a few days. Just let us know the funeral arrangements when you know, and we'll be there. Besides, we'll have Granddad, and Uncle Jason, and Uncle Justin. We're fine!"

Ricky nodded then shook his head. "Don't know when I got to be such a mother hen." He looked at Taylor. "You'll be okay?"

"Yes, Dad. And I can always call Grandma, or Aunt Angel or Aunt Lori."

"Okay, then. I'm gonna pack real quick and fly out. Jason has a chopper headed that way."

Eric nodded. "Don't worry about us. Give Mom another hug from us."

"Will do."

Taylor finished her toast and went to finish getting ready for school, but was too tempted to call Gabe and let him know what was going on.

He answered on the first ring.

"Hey, Taylor. Is everything okay? You usually don't call in the morning. Are you home sick?"

"No, I'm getting ready to go to school, but I wanted to talk to you because my grandfather passed away from a heart attack last night."

Gabe was silent. "Grandmaster Kino is dead?" His eyes filled with tears immediately and his voice choked with emotion.

"Oh! No! No, it's my other grandpa, my mom's biological father, Grandpa Robert."

Gabe blew out a relieved breath. "Oh, okay. I mean, that's sad too. I didn't know him. Or, actually I think I met him once at one of the big family gatherings. I'm sorry, Taylor. For your loss. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I didn't really know him that well myself. I maybe saw him a few times a year. But my mom is pretty torn up. She and my dad are going up to San Fran right now, and Eric and I will go up for the funeral."

"When will that be?"

"They don't know yet. We'll probably know by the end of the day." She paused a moment. "So, what are you doing today?"

"Right now, I'm working on a term paper that was actually due today but they're gonna give me some extra time to work on it. Then I have a bunch of studying to do for the end-of-the-year exams."

"So, I've never asked you this before, but what are your grades like?"

He chuckled. "Not bad."

"Hmm, that sounds pretty evasive."

"Well, what are yours like?" Gabe asked.

"I have to get all A's."

"Have to? Or what?"

"Or I'll have to do two million pushups and run thirty thousand wind sprints."

"Wow. That's harsh," he said with a laugh.

"What happens to you if you get a bad grade?" Taylor asked.

"I don't know."

"Haha, aren't you just so smart."

"Takes one to know one."

"Well, I really gotta run. Have a good day, Gabriel Tanner."

"You too, Taylor Kino. And sorry again, about your grandfather."

"Thanks. Love ya bye." She hung up quickly.

He grinned, laid his phone down and went back to his laptop.

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April 26th, Friday Evening

Upton County High, Upton, Georgia

Gabe looked around at the full bleachers and immense crowd. It was like a replay of Tuesday's game. People everywhere. The only difference this time was this school didn't have the Color Guard. Almost the entire Tanner family was here, minus his mom and Heather. Heather had to head back to Tennessee and his mom was helping out at the Inn. Lisa and Laynah were also helping out at the Inn and the Appels had to sit this one out too. The Inn and all the cottages were booked solid because someone posted about the place and the fact that the Kinos had stayed there when they'd been in town. But here at the game, Uncle Chaz and his boys, Gabe's dad, with Iris on his lap, and both sets of

twins, were representing. He thought the attention would die down, but it hadn't and Gabe didn't understand why. He shook his head.

He'd again been asked to the pitcher's mound to shake hands. He'd been patted on the back and had people wish him well. It made him emotional, this outpouring of kindness. If it was just a bunch of young teen girls he would think it was silly, but it seemed to be girls and boys, men and women alike. He wondered what was the big attraction. The FBI had taken down the violent abduction video, but it had been mirrored so many times there was just no scrubbing it from the internet.

It looked like the other team this time, namely Upton County, had all bought and were wearing Team Gabe shirts. They'd played this team in their first game after spring break a few weeks ago, and it had been the first team to throw at him. Somehow, their tune had changed. He truly didn't understand. Maybe it was their way of apologizing. Maybe they were showing a united front of hometown kids who loved to play ball, shoot, take care of their women and love the Lord, all the things Mia had discussed in the video. He wondered if she thought her video would make all those things look bad, when instead it had done just the opposite.

Peyton put his arm around Gabe as he sat in the dugout. "How ya feelin' Gabester?"

Gabe smiled. "Doin' okay. Wanna play really bad."

"Believe me, we want you to play. Still, I'm just so glad you're alive and sittin' here with us. I didn't say this over the phone, but, geez Gabe, I was scared. I heard you tell someone that you were embarrassed because you cried on that video."

Gabe rolled his eyes, drew a deep breath, started to protest the direction the conversation had taken.

Peyton held up his hand. "Hear me out. I'm just sayin' I cried too, man. And I didn't have a bullet in my leg."

"Me too."

Gabe looked past Peyton to see Elias talking.

"I'm serious, man," Elias said.

"I didn't cry," Carlos added. "But I punched a hole in my bedroom wall."

Gabe felt the seemingly ever-present emotions well up again. He nodded his head. "Thanks guys."

A couple teammates leaned over and patted his cap.

"Now, let's win this game," Gabe added.

They all agreed, prayed, huddled, yelled "Go Rebels," and went to work.

Gabe's phone buzzed and he pulled it out and glanced at the text.

Taylor - We're getting ready to take off. Just wanted to say hi and go rebels before I have to put my phone away

Gabe - Jason's jet?

Taylor - No, flying commercial. All AMT jets are currently committed. So, you guys winning?

Gabe - idk yet. Game just starting.

Taylor - Take some vid

Gabe - k

Taylor - gotta go (with a blowing a kiss emoji)
Gabe - Heart emoji

"What's this?" Lucas said as he grabbed Gabe's phone from him.

He read the text. "Who's Taylor?"

"Luke, give me the phone back," Gabe said.

"I will, just as soon as you tell me who Taylor is."

"She's Ricky Kino's kid," Peyton supplied.

"You're kidding me? You lucky SOB."

Gabe smiled. "I am lucky."

"You're lying. You do not know Taylor Kino," Deion argued.

"Didn't you see the tournament?" Liam asked. "She was actually part of his coaching team."

"So, you're friends with a girl who can kick your butt," Deion joked.

Liam laughed. "She doesn't have to kick anyone's butt, her father and brother see to that."

"Yeah, and I'm pretty sure Gabe can take her," Peyton said.

"I bet," Jared said with a laugh.

"Peyton, you're on deck," Coach yelled. "You guys better start payin' attention or there's gonna be a lot of wind sprints in your future."

Lucas handed the phone back to Gabe. "Sorry Coach."

Coach smiled at Gabe. "Taylor Kino, huh?"

Gabe smiled back.

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April 27th Saturday Morning
Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake and Gabe had been given some time off to shoot. Gabe wanted to see if anything was keeping him from his usual marksmanship, like maybe pain in his shoulders, or if he was off-balance because of his leg.

Laynah had been invited, but she was taking care of the horses and wanted to give Jake some "guy" time. Besides, she wanted to go over to the main house on the Stewart Ranch and visit her grandparents, Charles and Patricia Stewart, both of whom were in their seventies. Grandpa Charles still rode out most every morning, so Laynah saw him pretty regularly, but she hadn't seen Nana Patty in awhile, and that's bad because they live on the same property, so there is certainly no excuse. Gabe had told everyone about Taylor's grandfather dying and it reminded Laynah that life could end pretty quickly and it was time to stop licking her wounds and start reaching out to others.

The guys finished shooting and instead of heading home, went into town to grab a late breakfast. They'd chowed down on some pancakes and sausage links drowned in maple syrup at a local diner. Their conversation had centered mostly around pending court dates for both Brett Adderman, and Mia Casellas– and around two young ladies.

Jake confided in Gabe that he wanted to ask Laynah to marry him and the problem with Uncle Chaz vetoing the decision.

Gabe confided in Jake that he was head over heels for Taylor, but knew they were

young and feelings could change. Until then, he would just let it play out, cuz, for now, he loved every single minute they spent together.

They drove along, winding through the residential neighborhoods in Pine Forest when Jake slammed on his brakes. Gabe grimaced in pain as his body pressed into the seatbelt.

"Oh, sorry man," Jake said. "You okay?"

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, what's wrong? Why'd ya stop?"

Jake nodded toward an older brick home. The grass was fairly high. A small elderly woman was pushing a tiny little lawnmower slowly through the thick grass. "You see that?"

Gabe nodded.

"Whaddya think?"

Gabe smiled. "I can probably handle the mowing part. You'll have to do the edging."

Jake agreed. "We'll play it by ear. I don't want you to overdo, cuz my mom would have my head if I did anything to slow down your recovery."

They pulled into the woman's driveway and walked over to speak with her. As soon as they told her they wanted to cut her yard for her she started to cry. Jake put his arm around her and listened to her story. Her husband had recently passed away and he usually did all the yard work. The people at her church were gonna come and cut it for her but they couldn't come until next week, and code enforcement had already given her a warning. She just didn't know what to do.

"We'll take care of it for you," Jake said kindly.

"Is this the only mower you have?" Gabe asked.

"No, my husband has a riding mower for this big ol' yard, but I don't know how to use it."

"Well, I do," Gabe said with a smile. "Don't you worry about a thing."

He was glad he wouldn't have to push that tiny mower through the thick grass. He was feeling much stronger, but still a little on the gimpy side.

The woman took the young men to her backyard and showed them the tool shed. Gabe started on the mowing right away while Jake did the weeding and trimming. Jake also found some hedge trimmers and set her hedges to rights too. Gabe was mowing out near the street when a car slowed down, and came to a halt beside him.

For just a second he had a flashback. Jake started forward. No way was he gonna let it happen again.

"Hey Gabe!"

Gabe breathed out a breath, smiled and waved. It was a car full of girls from school, one of them, Trish, his old girlfriend from tenth grade.

"Whatcha doing?" Trish asked.

"Uh, what does it look like?"

"You don't live here."

"Just helping out the lady."

"That's so sweet," another girl said. She held up her phone. "Let me get a pic."

Gabe shook his head and went back to mowing.

"Aww, come on, Gabe," the girls said, giggling. They stayed there shooting pics or

taking video, whichever, Gabe didn't want anything to do with it. He ignored them and kept working.

They finished both the front and back yards and were putting the mowers and other tools away when Gabe's phone went off.

"Hey, Mom."

"Gabe, where are you?"

"Oh, sorry, I meant to call you, Mom. So, like, Jake and I saw this lady, her name is Mrs. Buckley over here on Old Barnesville Road, she was having a hard time cuttin' her yard, so we stopped to help. We're almost done."

"Well, Gabe, that was a nice thing to do, but did you forget that you had an appointment with Isla August?"

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "Man, yeah, Mom, I did forget. Is she there? How late am I?"

"She just got here, Gabe, and I'll entertain her. But you boys hightail it home please."

"Yes, ma'am, we're on our way."

"Trouble?" Jake asked as he returned to the truck from giving Mrs. Buckley his information in case she needed help with anything else.

Gabe nodded. "I forgot an appointment I made with that Isla August lady for an interview I promised her. She came all the way from California and I'm not there."

Jake smiled. "Okay, well, don't panic. She's not going anywhere if she came all that way for the interview. You're okay."

"I'm not panicked. My mom is not happy though."

"Oh, then, maybe you should panic." He put his hand up. "Wait a minute, did you forget to tell your mom about the appointment?"

"No, thank goodness, because if that was the case I'd ask you to take me to the airport instead."

Jake laughed as he tore down the road in his father's pickup. He had Gabe home in a little over five minutes.

Gabe jumped from the truck, grabbed his bag of guns from the truck bed and waved as he headed into the house.

He ran in the front door. Poked his head into the living room where his mother was speaking to Isla and another guy and holding on to Iris at the same time. "Hey, I'm so sorry," he said quickly.

Isla rose, came to him, held out her hand, which he took.

She looked him over, her eyebrows raised.

He self-consciously rubbed a hand over his sweat-soaked shirt. "Um, can you give me a few minutes to get cleaned up?"

She smiled her regular sweet smile. "Of course. You go do what you need to do. I'm a patient person. However, to make it up to me, would you let Dillon take a quick pic?"

Gabe blew out a breath, nodded and stood still while Dillon snapped off a few pics. Then Gabe turned and dashed up the stairs.

It took him only about fifteen minutes before he came back into the living room. "Excuse me," Gabe said, "but can I get anyone anything, cuz I'm gonna grab some water real quick."

"No, we're fine for now," Isla said.

Gabe grabbed two bottles of water out of the fridge and headed back to the living room.

Isla stood again, offered her hand again. "My that was fast and what a transformation," she said with a smile.

Gabe had to force himself to not roll his eyes.

"May I ask what kind of body wash you use, because you smell wonderful."

Gabe chuckled. He then looked at her again. "Oh, you're serious?"

She laughed. "Of course I am."

He told her the brand and then went on to explain. "I'd just use some good old Dial soap, but my sisters are adamant that I smell a certain way." He shrugged. "You like it so I guess they have good taste."

Isla laughed. "Aww, Gabriel Tanner, you are a total trip."

His jaw clenched and he wondered if the hometown boy was being made fun of. But he couldn't be anything but himself, so whatever.

She finally sat back down and motioned Gabe to the seat in front of her. He held up a hand. "Before we get started, I need some water."

"By all means."

Gabe picked up one of the bottles of water and drank the whole thing down.

She watched him, her eyes wide.

Lizzy gave a soft laugh. "Come on, Iris. We're gonna go start some dinner," she said. "I hope you two will stay," she asked Isla.

Surprised, Isla nodded. "We'd love to!" She turned to the young man in front of her. "So, before we get started, let me remind you that this is not live. So if we say anything that makes you uncomfortable we can always edit it out."

Gabe nodded.

The cameraman clipped a small mic to the ribbing of Gabe's shirt.

"Good. Are you ready?"

"Sure." Gabe watched as her personality brightened for the camera.

"Now, for the interview you've all been asking for, and I promised, we here at Teenspotter.com are just giddy to be here in Pine Forest, Georgia at the home of Gabriel Tanner. Hello, Gabe!"

"Hey." He gave a small wave at the guy with the camera.

"So, Gabe was actually late to this interview." She gave a slight laugh. "Gabe, your beautiful mother already told us why you were late, but will you fill in our viewers? What were you doing?"

He drew a deep breath. "I, uh, well, Jake and I, he's a friend of mine, we saw an older lady struggling to cut her grass and we stopped to take care of it real quick. I completely forgot about the interview. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"You are totally forgiven. Now tell me more about this lady you stopped to help."

"I don't really know her. She was older and tiny and trying to push a small lawnmower through the grass which was overgrown, so it would take her all day if not longer. She said her husband had just recently passed away and she had no one to help, so Jake and I, we fixed her up real quick. No big deal."

"Oh, I think it's a very big deal. So, do you often do this kind of thing?"

"If I do, it's not a thing I like to go around bragging about."

"When's the last time you stopped to work on someone's yard?"

"Well, not since last fall. It's spring now, so there's gonna be a lot of people like that lady today, who'll need a helping hand. Jake and I always try to keep an eye out."

"Is this Jake guy a classmate?"

"No, he's older than me. We're friends because he lives next door. He's more like my brother, but I don't get to see him very often."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a Marine."

"Oh! Well, that's interesting."

"Miss August, are you staying at the Inn next door?"

"Yes we are. It's a lovely place."

"He's there. You'll probably get to meet him. His parents run the place."

"Lovely!" She drew a breath. "I think it's wonderful that you stopped to help the lady."

"Really, it's no big deal. People all over the country do that kind of thing all the time."

"Ahh, yes, but we're not talking to other people, we're talking to Gabe Tanner. So, let's get down to it. Gabe, if it's not too difficult to talk about," she said dramatically, "our viewers want to know about when you were kidnapped. We've been told you were simply taken from the side of the road."

Gabe frowned. "Well, it wasn't simple. I had a flat tire..."

He went on to describe how he was taken, how he was shot, how he tried to fight off four strong men and failed. He ended with, "and the next thing I know I was being dragged across the floor in that old farm building, and I'm guessing you know the rest from there."

He was surprised that she actually had tears in her eyes and wondered if they were real or she was just really good in front of the camera.

She sniffed, wiped at a tear. "We saw everything up to the point where they strapped you down to that table."

He nodded.

"Did that terrible woman give you any anesthesia?"

He gave a soft laugh. "Uh, no."

"Oh Gabe, I can't even imagine what you went through."

He shrugged. "I pretty much passed out after the first cut, so I made it through okay."

"You are such a strong young man, not just in your body, but mentally tough. Did you know that the whole country is in awe of you?"

He shook his head. "There are a lot more people in this country who are stronger, and suffering and could use the accolades."

"Like who?"

"Just ask a veteran what they've been through."

"I actually have. But they pretty much won't talk about it."

"With good reason." Gabe paused a few moments, frowned. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean

to sound rude."

"No worries, Gabe. I have a feeling you are never rude."

"Oh, I am," he laughed. "Just ask my mom, or the guys on the other team."

"What other team?"

He grinned. "*Any* other team."

"So, let me redirect back to that time after Mia Casellas operated on you. The next thing we see is you sitting on a mattress, eating a hamburger and drinking a bottle of water. And you start talking, explaining something that happened with your father when he worked undercover for the FBI. We get the idea that there was something cut out of the video."

Gabe nodded.

"Can you fill us in?"

He blinked several times. "She took out the part where she told her own story, when she told why she was doing what she was doing. It was a sad story and I feel sorry for what she's been through in her life."

Isla nodded. "Well, the FBI has given an official statement about that story, and we, the information seekers, have dug up everything we can find. Have you seen any of the reports?"

He nodded.

"Is it pretty much the same story she told you?"

"Yes."

Isla could see that he was shutting down so she moved on. "The next part we could see on the video, those men were building that riser and then you challenging them. What are your thoughts on that?"

Gabe shrugged as he thought about what took place. "I had to try to take some kind of action. I'm not the kind of person who can just sit and wait for someone to come rescue me if there is something I can do for myself. I tried. I failed. I got beat to a pulp because of it. But I had to try."

Isla smiled prettily. "You were awesome. I want to ask about something you said. You told that one guy that you didn't miss. If you wanted to kill him he'd be dead. Those are pretty tough words coming from a teenager who told me when I asked about your guns that you do some shooting."

Gabe frowned trying to put into words what he should say. "When you asked me about the guns I played it down because this country is pretty on edge about that topic and I was worried about that coming back to bite me. As a matter of fact, when those men took me, my first thought was these are people who want to make a statement about guns."

"But they used guns to take you."

"Exactly. That's the way they think." He sighed. "In answer to your question, I am a gun enthusiast. I believe totally in our second amendment. I shoot a lot. Some people think that that makes me dangerous, but what that actually makes me is your protector. Cuz if I was carrying, which I don't cuz I'm a minor, but if I was and you and I were in, like, a grocery store and some guy came in shooting, I would give my life to protect you."

"So, when you told that guy if you wanted him dead, he'd be dead, that's the truth?"

"I believe so."

She smiled. "Gabe, I'm trying to get you to say how good you are. I heard you are an expert sharpshooter."

He blew out a breath and shook his head. "Sharpshooter is a term and title used in the military."

"I heard it can also be applied to a civilian."

He nodded. "Look, you don't go talking about what a great shot you are because then people will challenge you. You may have to take this part out of the interview. Just sayin'. For my own safety and for the safety of people around me."

She turned to her cameraman. "Make a note here."

"Got it," he said.

"Let's go back to what that man said to you. Do you now think it was a mistake to only shoot him in the leg?"

Gabe shook his head, trying to think how to make her understand. "There's a rule. When you shoot, if you have to shoot, you shoot to kill, meaning you shoot for center mass to stop a threat. I broke that rule because I chickened out. I've never shot at anyone. I couldn't bring myself to do it. If I had done what I'd been taught to do he wouldn't have been able to speak and I wouldn't have been standing there arguing with him and the shooter wouldn't have been able to shoot the gun out of my hand." He paused for a second, wiggling his middle finger that still had a splint on it. "Then again, even if I had killed him, I still may have not been able to get away, but maybe I would have. It's hard to say. But not killing him for sure put my father in danger, and that I totally regret."

"Wow, Gabe Tanner. Every time you say something, I am more and more intrigued." She smiled. "Let's move on. I'd like to talk about your prayer and your faith."

Finally, Gabe felt that he could relax. He was comfortable talking about his relationship with the Lord. He listened as she went over the prayer he'd uttered in his moments of anguish. He listened to her expound her own experience with prayer and its effect on her. She spoke of others who had described the same experience. She asked him his thoughts. He answered the best he could. She broke down and cried, had to take a break. Gabe drank down his second bottle of water. They'd been talking for a couple of hours. He was pretty tired. Drained.

She straightened her hair, touched up her makeup.

"Just one more subject before we close. Everyone is wondering what you're gonna do with all the money that was donated when you were abducted."

Gabe nodded. This was the one question he'd actually been ready for because Justin Lee, Jason's brother, had consulted with him and his parents and they were working together. "I have consulted with an attorney and we are working to create a foundation that will be used to help people in one way or another. We don't want to help just one group, like just the homeless, or just the veterans, or hungry children, or victims of crimes, like Mia Casellas was. I couldn't choose just one, so we are looking to address several categories and figuring out how we can grow the funds to cover a lot more people. We'll eventually come up with a name for the foundation or just keep the current

fundraiser name because it's already familiar. These are all things we're looking into. We'll keep everyone posted."

"Wonderful. Until that happens, you can all still donate to the Gabe Tanner Ultimate Warrior Fund. Gabe, my viewers and I, we just want to say thank you for this interview. We also want to say thank you for the amazing young man you are. I think the whole country has fallen in love with you just a little bit." She laughed. "Well maybe some young girls more than a little bit."

Gabe's face reddened.

"In closing, Gabe, what would you like to say to all the people out there watching?"

Joey's words suddenly popped into his head. *Are you gonna be normal or shine your light for all to see?* What could he do right now, given this opportunity to speak in front of millions of people? He didn't know what to say. He closed his eyes a moment. *Father, please tell me what to say. Please tell me what you want me to do. How can I serve You?* The idea popped into his head and his eyes opened.

"Gabe? You okay?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"I thought maybe you fell asleep," she laughed.

"Sorry, I was praying," he stated softly.

"Really? What were you praying about?"

"I was asking how I could be in service."

"And did you get an answer?"

"I think so."

"We're all listening."

Gabe smiled. "Well, I'd like to offer a challenge. Like we talked about already, it's spring, and all across the country, there are gonna be people who need help cleaning up their yards, or repairing their homes, or whatever your neighbors need. I'd like to challenge you to be in service to someone in your neighborhoods in some way. It doesn't have to be yard work. You don't have to spend money. It could be anything. Even just taking a minute to have a conversation with someone and ask them how they're doing. Video what you do, and upload it to Teenspotter. Let's see how innovative everyone can be. But remember, this is not to brag about what you did. It might inspire others to do something too. Oh, and like, get permission before you video someone."

Isla clapped her hands together. "This is wonderful! Okay everyone, you heard him. I'm looking forward to seeing all of the things you do because I know my viewers are truly capable of miracles. Gabe, I'm hoping you will grant us a second interview in the future."

Gabe was cornered and couldn't say anything but "yes."

"Until then, don't forget, I'm on the lookout for remarkable teens everywhere. If you know a remarkable teen, shoot us an email. Thank you again, Gabe, and God bless."

She sighed. Smiled at Gabe. "Tired?"

"A little."

Just then they heard Iris scream, "Daddy!" And then a deep voice say, "Where's my little flower?" And then laughter and giggles and more screams.

Gabe smiled. "My father just got home. Let's go into the kitchen and I'll introduce

you."

"May we video?"

Gabe shook his head. "I wouldn't if I were you."

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April 27th Saturday Morning

Green Street Mortuary, San Francisco, CA

Mark Adams looked down at his father's body where he lay in the casket. It was such an odd feeling. His mother said it was surreal, and that was the perfect word for it. Death was such a strange thing. He'd faced it himself a few times. Everyone in his family had come close to death, some, more than once. But the reality of his father's body lying in the casket, was an awakening of sorts.

Their family was very spiritual. They were strong Christians. They believed in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ. They believed in the resurrection, in the Bible, in the Gospel and in living to be holy and good, and noble. This moment, looking down at a body that once moved and spoke and interacted with people, it was really what the gospel was all about. This death, this separation from loved ones, it is what brings us all so much pain. And overcoming this death and being together forever with the people we love, it is what we crave, it is the only thing that will give us comfort. That promise, that hope, is what Jesus' life, sacrifice and resurrection is all about.

Mark was feeling mixed emotions about his father's death, and for that he was feeling guilt. He loved his father, because the man was his father. But his father was a difficult man to love. He had been harsh and unkind to his mother. He eventually apologized for that, sort of. He was prideful and a little narcissistic. But who knows what made his father like he was. He didn't talk about his own upbringing very much. Maybe he'd had a difficult childhood that made him the way he was. It wasn't for Mark to judge. It was for Mark to forgive and let it go, which he had done a long time ago. He felt compassion for the man, and for his stepmother, Camille.

His father and Camille had no children of their own and now, she was left all alone. She had a sister who lived nearby, so that would be some help for her. Mark was sure his family and his brother, Joey, and sister, Bree and even his mom, Shelley, would do anything they could to help her with whatever arrangements she needed to continue on in this world. He shook his head at the strange empty feeling that surrounded his heart.

He looked up as Joey, his younger brother joined him at the side of the casket. Joey would be thirty-eight years old in a few months. Mark would be forty this year. It was strange that standing here over their father's body made him feel like a little boy again. Mark put a hand on his brother's shoulder.

"You okay, Joey?"

"Yeah. I guess. Feeling strange. It's surreal."

Mark smiled. "Exactly." He turned to look into his brother's eyes. They'd been through a lot together. Joey had tears in his eyes.

"I was just thinking about the time we thought Mom was dead, you know, in the water, under the rock," Joey said.

Mark nodded. "I'll never forget it."

Joey sniffed. "And I was thinking that eventually, one day, this will be..." He

stopped.

"I get it," Mark said softly.

They embraced.

"Life is strange," Joey went on. "Thank God we have a knowledge of our eternal selves. If we didn't have that, think how hopeless it would be."

"Yeah, you're right. It would be more than hopeless. Every minute of every day would be scary. We would be full of fear. Think about it. That's how some people go through life. So afraid of death. And we've been blessed to have the Holy Spirit bear witness to us of what is on the other side, and even *we* are terrified of losing a loved one. How must they feel with no hope at all?"

Joey nodded. "But our comfort is in Jesus."

"Amen to that."

"What's going on here, guys?" Bree said softly.

They turned and smiled at their sister, parted, included her in a group hug. "Just talking about life and death," Joey answered.

Bree nodded. Wiped at her tears. Looked from face to face. "Have I told you guys lately how much I love you?"

Mark smiled. "Not lately."

"Well, I do."

"Shoot, Bree, we know that," Joey said with a soft laugh. "But did you know that we love you too?"

She smiled. "I do."

They turned to find their seats and saw their families smiling at them.

Their mom and Eric were seated two rows behind Camille. Even though their mom was "the ex," she and Camille had become good friends and that was as it should be. They were sure their mother was a huge comfort for the woman. As Robert's children, Bree, Mark and Joey took their place next to Camille, while the grandchildren sat on the row just behind, with Ricky on the end as sentry. The entire chapel was packed.

Bree frowned just before she sat when she realized their pictures were being taken by people in the pews, their phones held high. Even though Jason had provided security for the event, they couldn't take away people's phones and therefore, the Kino/Adams families couldn't escape the publicity.

There was a fairly large number of people in attendance. Robert Adams had run a prominent dinner theater here in San Francisco, and there were a lot of actors and performers who came to pay their respects.

Taylor, young Eric, JoJo and Logan all sat together with Ricky in the aisle seat of that row. It was silly to watch people come up to the casket, then turn to go back to their seats and see them sneak pictures of that particular young group. The three young men had caused quite a stir for a while when they'd decided to make some music and put out a video a few years earlier. But the boys had gone off in other directions and only Logan remained pursuing music. Still, whenever anyone spotted them together, they caused quite a stir.

Taylor too, was a much-sought-after pic, but people were very careful about taking and posting her picture because they didn't want to tangle with her father. There were

times when they were in public and there was no expectation of privacy when in public. However, this funeral was a private event.

The pastor of the church Robert and Camille attended gave a loving and beautiful eulogy. Then only the family members were invited out to the gravesite. Shelley and Eric stayed behind but all of Robert's children, grandchildren, daughters-in-law and son-in-law went to the gravesite along with Camille and her sister and her sister's children.

The graveside service was short. Afterward, friends and family were invited to the house to eat and offer comfort to Camille.

Shelley was glad to see members of Robert's church there. Shelley herself had arranged for the catering of the event and made a mental note to leave a good review for they were doing an excellent job. She was surveying the crowd, trying to assess where she might be needed. She saw Bree hugging Camille, then pull away and clasp her hands. Shelley nodded. She saw Mark shaking the hand of Camille's sister's husband. She saw Joey kneeling down, speaking to his two oldest, Sophia and Kelstyn. She turned to find Taylor surrounded by a group of teen boys looking like she wanted to escape. Shelley caught Young Eric's eye and motioned toward his sister.

He immediately left the group of people he'd been conversing with, and went to join Taylor's conversation. Shelley knew that within a few minutes he'd have a reason to take her hand and steer her away.

"Good move," Eric said as he came up to stand behind his wife.

Shelley smiled. "Poor girl. Someone needed to save her."

Eric turned her toward him. "So, how are YOU feeling?"

She shrugged, shook her head. "I don't know. I feel a little like crying. I feel a little confused. Life sometimes seems so strange, and death is even stranger. I told the boys it was the ultimate reality. It's one thing to say we believe in eternal life and will be with our loved ones again after we die. When we're confronted with actual death, it's harder. Surreal, but ultimately very real."

"Do you believe in our eternal lives, Shelley, or do you know?"

"I'm not sure at this moment."

Eric nodded. "I love the honesty, Shelley girl. Don't let the fact you have doubts discourage you. Doubts are normal. It's part of our human existence. So, let's go back to the basics. How many times do you think you've heard God's voice?"

She sighed. "Really, it's been too many to count."

Eric smiled at her. "How many times have you felt something move through you, a tingly warmth, that told you something was true or real?"

"Again, too many times to count."

"How many times have you thought maybe God was giving you a sign, and then He confirmed it by offering you at least one, or sometimes even more than one, synchronicity?" Eric asked.

"My journal is full of accounts of those things."

He nodded. "And how many miracles brought you and me together?"

"Several."

"Name one."

"You had dreams about me and recognized me the moment you first saw me."

"Name another."

"Well, I know I set my alarm the morning of that first tournament but it didn't go off so I was running late, and you went looking for Ricky and I ran right into you."

"A coincidence?" Eric asked.

"Not when you consider how many miracles have taken place in our lives."

"Name one."

"I heard a voice tell me not to give up when James was trying to get me to kill myself."

"You actually heard it?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Name another."

"I had my tubes tied after Joey was born but somehow still got pregnant with Jeffy."

"And what has Jeffy done for the world?"

"So much. She is helping eradicate cancer, AIDS, heart disease and much more. She's been responsible for millions of lives saved in Africa, and in the whole world."

"Do you think she was meant to be?"

"Absolutely."

"Was she one of God's miracles or was she a coincidence?"

"She was definitely a miracle."

"Have you ever met someone who's seen an angel, who was trapped inside the earth but there was light, who should have been dead, but was found alive, whose cousin most definitely should have been dead, but lived?"

"Only you."

"Have you met others or read about others who have seen or been touched by an angel?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Can you think of these few things, and know there are so many more that we could talk about, and still deny them?"

She shook her head, her eyes filled with tears. "I cannot deny."

He reached out and cupped her face in his strong hands. "We know these things. We cannot deny them. Even so, it's still hard for us, as humans, to integrate these things into our psyche. We have talked the talk. When someone passes to the next phase of life, it is time for us to walk the walk."

The tears ran down her cheeks. "It's so difficult."

"For me too," he agreed. "Really. I mean, there are so many times when someone in our family came close to death, I couldn't stand the thought. I thought I too would die from anguish. Why, when I know of a certainty that God is real? When you died under that rock. When Ricky was taken. When Joey was shot, when Mark fell over that cliff, when Jeffy snuck up to Seattle, and even recently, when Gabe was taken. And then there were the actual deaths, when Beth died, and when Ann died, and now, Robert. But when am I gonna stand up and show God that I indeed believe?"

Shelley nodded. "I *do* believe."

"I know you do, my sweet Shelley."

"I'll try harder to walk the walk."

"Me too," Eric added with a firm nod.

"So, how can we do that?" she asked.

He used his thumbs to wipe away her tears and kissed her softly on the mouth. "Let's start here, by being in service to these people."

"In service how?"

"By doing exactly what you were doing when I walked up to you a minute ago. Except instead of standing off observing, let's jump in and talk to every single person we can and assess what we can do to help them. They may just need a quick prayer. Or maybe a healing. Or maybe some bills taken care of, or even just a kind word. God will lead us. Listen to Him."

Shelley smiled. "Let's do it."

They went to work.

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Psalm 40:5

"Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done,
the things you planned for us. None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare."

Chapter Nineteen

April 28th Sunday Afternoon

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, GA

Everyone had already put in their two cents' worth...twice. Jake sighed in exasperation. No one could come to a decision. He looked around the room. He was pretty sure at one point that he'd had his mom and Aunt Lisa on his side. Then that seemed to switch and it looked like he had his father on his side. Even Uncle Chaz started to waver for a few minutes but then went back to his stance that it's just too soon for Laynah to make such a big decision. Jake looked from face to face. This was much harder than he thought it would be.

John sighed. "You've been silent for a while, son. What are *you* thinking?"

"Honestly?"

"Is there another way to answer?"

"No, sir. I just know that you wouldn't like what I was thinking."

"The reason for this meeting is to be open and honest and come to a conclusion where everyone is satisfied. So, go ahead, be honest."

Jake blew out a breath. "Well then, honestly, I was thinking we should just elope."

There was a sharp intake of breath from the women. A thunderous look from Chaz, and a chuckle from his father.

Chaz turned on John. "I can't believe you think that's funny."

John shrugged with a smile. "Well, if he was seriously considering it he wouldn't have told us what he was thinking."

Jake sighed. "I wouldn't do that. We wouldn't do that. We respect you all too much to do that. Besides, I want to live."

The four parents nodded their heads as if that was a logical statement.

"Look, let me just say this," Jake went on. "There are lots of pros and cons to what I want to do as far as Laynah. It wouldn't be a difficult decision if I wasn't being deployed in a few months. But I am. That's just the way of it. You guys know, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. It would be a hurried thing to pull off, but bottom line, Laynah loves me and has been waiting for me for a long time. Yes, that means she can wait a little longer. But I feel like that's not fair to her, because there's a possibility that I won't come back."

"Stop saying that," Lisa said.

"We have to face reality. You never know what's gonna happen. We almost lost Gabe last week. Who would've ever thought that what happened to the kid next door, would happen? I love Laynah. Yes, it's only been a few weeks. Not a few weeks that I've loved her. A few weeks that I've admitted to loving her. I think we were meant to

be together since the beginning. I would give my life for her, I swear."

"Would you drop out of the military?" Lisa asked.

"Yes! In a second."

The answer surprised everyone.

"But she won't let me. She said she loves me and wants me to be who and what I am and she understands my feelings of the Marines being a calling." He sighed. "Listen, if I were to not come back, the worst tragedy would not be my death, it would be Laynah waiting for me almost her whole life and having nothing to show for it. Not my name, and not my survivor benefits, heck, not even the flag from my coffin."

Jodi's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, honey," Lisa said as she put her arm around the best friend she'd ever had.

There was silence in the room for some time. It was Chaz who finally spoke.

"Well," he paused and nodded. "These kids obviously truly love each other because he loved her enough to give up the only thing he's worked for his entire life, and she loved him enough to not let him."

Everyone nodded.

Jake looked into his father's eyes, then at the rest of the group. "I have one more thing to say. We're sitting here discussing the future of the most important person in this conversation, and she isn't even here to give her opinion. Who knows. I may propose to her and she may turn me down. Or I may propose and suggest we marry before I leave and she may say it would be better to wait. You know, she may want the big dream wedding, with like, the flower girls and stuff. I don't know. So, at least, at the very least, let me ask her to marry me, and then we'll include her in the rest of the discussion."

"What if we said 'no'?" Chaz asked.

Jake's eyes moistened. "Well then, I guess I will abide by your wishes, of course," he said softly in defeat.

Another silence. This one, deafening.

Finally Chaz nodded. "You have my permission." He looked at his wife. "Lisa?"

Lisa smiled. "Yes, mine too!"

Jake blew out a relieved breath and hung his head in complete exhaustion, then looked back up. "Thank you."

Jodi looked up with a gleam in her eye. "Would you like help in planning the proposal?"

Jake smiled. "Sure, Mom. I'll always want your help."

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April 28th Sunday Afternoon

Tanner Home → South Kino Estate

"How was church?" Gabe asked.

"It was actually really good," Taylor replied. "But I was super sleepy. We didn't get in last night until after midnight. We got up, went to church, ate lunch and I just told my mom I was gonna go take a nap."

"And then I called and now you don't get your nap. I'll call back later," Gabe offered.

"Don't you dare hang up," Taylor ordered.

Gabe laughed. "Yes, ma'am."

"Ugh, Gabe I miss you so much."

"Me too. I mean, I miss you."

She giggled.

"This long-distance stuff sucks," Gabe declared.

"I know, right?"

"Well anyway, just two more weeks until prom."

"Are you wearing a tux?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I have to go be fitted Wednesday after school."

"Oh, you're going back to school already?"

"Yeah, tomorrow. Can't lay out any longer. Gotta make sure I graduate."

"I guess so. What color tux are you getting?"

"Color? Why? You wanna coordinate?"

She giggled. "Well, not really coordinate, but I wanna make sure we don't clash."

"Knowing what you know of me, Taylor, what color do you think I'm getting?" he asked curiously.

"I figure you're getting black."

"Shows all you know."

"Oh, then what color *are* you getting?"

"Think about it, Taylor. TEAM colors of course."

"Uh, your tux is red, white and blue?"

"You don't like that?"

"Not really."

"It's also the colors of our nation's flag," he reminded her.

"I realize that, but this is the prom, not the Fourth of July."

"I can't believe you don't like my tux colors."

"I can't believe you do."

"Is this a deal breaker?"

She sighed. "No, I'm not that shallow. But I'll have to go get a different dress cuz I can't stand when colors clash. It's like nails on a chalkboard to me."

"So, you'd get a different dress for me?"

"I guess I would. It's your prom, I want you to be happy."

"Taylor, you just scored big time. But you don't have to do that."

"Uh, yeah, I do."

"Tay, I'm just kiddin' around."

"Really? You mean like, your tux is not red, white and blue?"

"Of course not. It's black. I'm pretty conservative in my clothing choices."

"That's what I thought! That's why I guessed black."

He chuckled. "A red, white and blue tux, that would've been hilarious. I don't think I could get one of those, not around here anyway."

"Here in L.A. you can get anything you can imagine," she said with a laugh.

"I bet. So, what color is your dress?"

"That is my secret. But don't worry. We won't clash. Everything goes with black."

He laughed again. "I wasn't worried a bit."

They were silent for a minute.

"So, um, did you wanna talk about the funeral?" he asked.

"I guess. It was weird."

"How so?"

"I've never had anyone die that I know personally. I've never seen a dead person before. It's like it's not really them. That person lying so still in that casket, that didn't even look like my Grandpa Robert."

"Did you go up to the casket by yourself?"

"No, and it was a good thing. My dad went with me and I'm really glad he did cuz once I got up there I started shaking."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It felt so weird. And then my dad put his arm around me, and I immediately felt calmer. He talked about the circle of life and death, talked about that being only Grandpa's mortal shell, and that he was no longer in there. His life force was now with Jesus, awaiting the resurrection. I mean, I knew all that, but having my father so calmly state it as if he absolutely knew it to be fact, it was very reassuring." She sighed. "Ya know, the other day my dad and I had a little spat. Well, it was more like I had a little tantrum and he just listened. I was pretty mean to him. I accused him of having no feelings, no emotions, of just being a man, you know like, the thing going around the country of masculinity being toxic?"

"Yeah," Gabe answered simply, not sure where she was going with this.

"And then my grandpa died and I watched my strong father take care of my mother, and my strong brother offer to take care of me and it didn't feel toxic at all. I felt comforted and secure and I was grateful for their strength."

"I'm glad you feel that way. Because I believe in being as strong and as skilled as possible. And I don't think that makes me toxic. I think it makes me responsible. I strive to be as strong and confident as both of our fathers. And my father, known as a killer to some, if you were to see him with my baby sister, or with my mom, he is the most gentle, caring, loving person you could know."

"I have watched him and I've seen how sweet he can be."

Gabe laughed. "Well, he might not want to hear that he is 'sweet'."

Taylor giggled. "Hey, you know how you said you'd like to be like both our fathers?"

"Yeah."

"I read that girls always search out their mates for someone like their fathers. Sometimes they don't even realize it. Maybe that's why I'm so attracted to you. Because you're so much like my dad."

Gabe smiled. "I'll take that as a huge compliment."

"So, how did your interview go with Isla August?" Taylor asked.

"It was okay. We talked a long time. I was late to the interview because Jake and I stopped to help a lady mow her grass. But my mom covered for me until I got there. After the interview she and Dillon, her cameraman who also happens to be her brother, by the way, stayed for dinner. It was kinda fun. Everything our family said or did, she acted like it was fascinating to her. She asked my dad several times if she could say something in the video about certain things."

"Like what certain things?"

"Like, how he didn't adopt my five older sisters so they could keep their father's name to honor him and always remember him because he was a hero. Or about his time as an FBI agent and why he sometimes got a bad rap."

"And did your dad give Isla permission to talk about him in the video?"

"'Yes' to the first one, because Bradley Anderson's heroism should be told, and 'no' to the second because it's personal." He shrugged. "Then I walked them out to their car and she couldn't stop talking about how amazing our family is, my mom, a Grammy winner, who made a delicious dinner and was happy doing it, my dad known as this strong, fierce guy, with Iris on his lap giving him wet, slimy kisses all over his face, my sisters, well, just that they're twins and so freakin' beautiful, and then there's me."

"What did she have to say about you?"

He laughed. "She said several times that I smelled good. She went over this list of accolades, the martial arts, the baseball, the guns, my charming personality, it was silly, ya know?"

When Taylor didn't answer right away he thought the call had gone dead.

"Hello?"

"Hey. So, she thinks you smell good?"

"Yeah."

"Were you wearing cologne?"

"No, I had to take a shower when I first got home, because I was sweaty and dirty. You sound upset."

"No, I'm not upset. Just remembering how you smell right after a shower and she's right, you do smell really good. And it just makes me miss you so much. I can't even."

"Yeah Tay, I feel the same way."

"That's the second time you've called me that. 'Tay'."

"Sorry. We have a way of giving everyone a nickname. Sometimes it's shorter. Sometimes, it's longer. It just slipped out that way."

"I don't mind. It's kinda cute. My brother and the little ones call me TayTay. My brother not as much now as he used to. But I like the way you say, 'Tay.'"

"Cool."

"What do they call you?"

Gabe paused because he heard his mother call him. Then he said, "They call me Gabe." He laughed. "Cuz you know, that's already a nickname. But a few of my friends call me 'the Gabester,' ya know, like a gangster."

She laughed. "Yeah, I think I'll stick with 'Gabe.'"

Lizzy called him again.

"Tay, Mom's calling me, guess I gotta go. Hold on a minute." He turned his head away from the phone. "YES, I HEARD YOU I'M ON MY WAY!" "Tay? You still there?"

She giggled. "Yes. I've never heard you yell before."

He laughed. "I gotta go, but I wanted to tell you, the interview is coming out tonight at 8:00 PM my time, so that will be five your time. If you want to hear it. You can critique and tell me what I should have said."

"Right, like I would do that."

"Shoot," he grumbled when he heard his father call. "Yes, sir!" he yelled. "Gotta go. Talk to you later." He ended the call.

He headed quickly down the stairs. He must've run down the stairs a million times in his life, and a few of those times he'd taken a tumble. This time he tripped halfway down and he tumbled head over heels, landing with a final thump and letting loose a few curses.

"My, that's lovely," Lizzy said, frowning at his language. "Are you okay?"

He gave a soft grunt as he rose. "Sorry, and I think so."

He walked gingerly toward a kitchen chair and sat down, rubbing his shoulder. But when he glanced up he saw that Isla and Dillon were standing in the kitchen. He stood back up. "Oh! Sorry, I didn't see you."

"That's why I called you down," Lizzy said. "What were you doing?"

"Sorry Mom, I was on the phone."

Isla smiled her sweet smile. "So, am I getting a look at the real Gabe Tanner?"

He grinned and shrugged. "I'm always just me. But if you mean getting to see a klutz tripping down the stairs or letting loose a few bad words, well, I never said I was perfect."

His mom laughed. "Oh, he's definitely not perfect, but sure I wouldn't trade this guy for anyone else."

Isla nodded. "I wouldn't either. I think even his imperfections are perfect."

Gabe shook his head. His father, who'd been cooking something on the stove turned and looked at Gabe. Their eyes met. He knew he was in trouble for not coming when he was called and probably for yelling at his mom. Especially since he yelled in front of a freakin' reporter. He sighed.

"So, we are headed back home to Cali," Isla said brightly. "And we just wanted to stop by to thank you again for the interview and say 'goodbye,' and to thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Tanner for the wonderful meal and allowing us to visit with your amazing family last night."

"It was our pleasure," Lizzy replied. "You're welcome to stay for Sunday dinner. It'll be ready soon."

"Ahh, you are just too sweet. I wish we could, but we have a plane to catch. But maybe we can come again sometime."

"You'll be welcome here," Lizzy said, smiling at the looks she was receiving from her two guys.

"The interview will be coming out in a few hours," Isla informed them. "But it will be available to stream anytime after that. If you have any problems with anything on there, let me know," Isla said.

"We will," Keegan assured her.

Gabe moved forward and shook their hands. Then Isla hugged him and kissed his cheek with a big smacking sound.

Keegan wiped his hands on a towel and shook hands. "Have a safe trip," he offered cordially.

They ushered their guests out, closed the door. Gabe sank down at the kitchen table, deciding not to wait for the boom. "Sorry, Mom, I wasn't really yelling at you. I was just

yelling loud enough for you to know that I heard you and I was coming."

"She shouldn't have had to call you a second time," Keegan said sternly.

Gabe blinked. "Yes, sir." There was nothing else to say to that.

"Who were you talking to?" Keegan asked.

"Taylor."

Keegan nodded. "You two gettin' pretty close?"

Gabe shrugged. "I think so."

Lizzy smiled. "I think that's wonderful. I really like her. She's very sweet, and smart, and she's humble, not all caught up in that Hollywood stuff."

"And she ain't bad lookin' either, huh Gabe?" his father asked.

Gabe smiled. "She's all of that."

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May 1st Wednesday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe was trying to study and catch up on schoolwork he'd missed during the week he was out, but it currently felt impossible. He felt overwhelmed. He sat at the desk in his bedroom. Usually, he'd crack open the books at the kitchen table, but today he just couldn't concentrate. So, when his phone buzzed he was a little irritated.

"Hello."

"Hello, Gabe, this is Isla!"

"Hey," he said shortly.

"Listen, I'm sorry to bother you, but I have some information for you and your parents and it's simply mind-blowing!"

"Okay," he said.

"Remember the other day when I asked you what body wash you used? If you heard the interview, you know I left that in the interview. Well, I just got off the phone with the company that makes that body wash and they are floored by the popularity of Teenspotter.com and by the extreme popularity of Gabe Tanner. They said their sales have literally doubled."

"Cool. Good for them."

"I'm thinking you don't quite understand what that means. They're gonna want to sponsor you. They're gonna want you to represent them. Gabe, they're gonna pay you very big bucks to tell people how much you like their body wash. And they want to advertise on MY site!"

"Okay, well, I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Gabe, but I think you still don't understand what this means. It means other companies are gonna be contacting you. You, Gabe, are gonna make millions in endorsements."

"Really? Why? I don't get it."

She sighed heavily. "Because, Gabe, you are so likeable, you are a superb athlete, a superb marksman, a hometown boy from the American South who loves his family, loves his sisters and mother, girls love that stuff, and you're hot, in two ways. You're hot as in trending as in extremely popular right now, and you're hot as in young girls think you are extremely good-looking. I get it. They see that you are all muscular and your

cute face, your blue eyes, your thick dark hair, you have it all. You are exceptionally photogenic, wholesome and the girls love that. Do you get it yet?"

He sighed. "I get what you're saying. I don't understand how or why all this can happen so fast, about me, just a normal kid."

"Gabe, there is nothing normal about you. Look, these people are gonna call your parents, so it would be best if I speak to them first."

"Okay, I'll give my parents your number and tell them to call you, if you'd like."

"That would be great. I'll touch base with you soon."

Gabe ended the call and started to yell downstairs to his dad, but realized he didn't have the energy, so he called him instead. His father picked up and Gabe filled him in on a little of what Isla said.

"Interesting, Gabe," Keegan said. "You know I'm just down in the kitchen. Why don't you come down and we'll have a real conversation and discuss this with your mom."

Gabe thought about it, but didn't answer.

"Gabe?"

"Yeah."

"Why are you breathing so hard?"

"Don't know."

Thirty seconds later Keegan was at Gabe's side and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Son?"

Gabe turned slowly, gazed up at his father.

Keegan saw immediately that something was not right. Gabe's eyes were glassy, his upper lip was sweaty, his mouth pale. "Lizzy!" Keegan yelled.

Lizzy and two of Gabe's sisters came running into the room.

"He's burning up," Keegan said.

"Gabe?" Lizzy said.

"Not feeling so good, Mom," he answered.

"Take his shirt off," Lizzy ordered. "Lily, get me the thermometer. Daisy, get me a washcloth and a bowl of cool water."

Keegan got his shirt off and what Lizzy feared was evident. Red streaks around one of his wounds. She carefully removed the bandage and saw the whitish pus around the edges.

"He's infected," she informed her husband. "He needs antibiotics. It could be sepsis and we need to get him to the hospital before it gets bad. There was no sign of infection last night when I changed the bandages so, it's come on quickly, which means we caught it quickly, but that also means it's moving fast and we have to act quickly."

Lily came back with the thermometer. It registered 103.8. Daisy placed the cool cloth on his forehead and he gasped in surprise.

"Son, can you stand?" Keegan asked.

"Yes, sir," he said as he rose and immediately swayed.

Keegan caught him and lifted him into his arms with a grunt. "Lizzy, grab my wallet and keys. Daisy open the doors."

Gabe went completely limp.

"Man, he's gotten heavy," Keegan mumbled.

Keegan laid Gabe in the back seat and Lizzy climbed in next to him as she was giving instructions to her daughters to make dinner and take care of Iris and call Jodi.

On the way to the hospital Lizzy called Gabe's doctor who would meet them there. Twenty minutes later they were being ushered into an emergency treatment room.

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May 1st Wednesday Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky finished his phone call and sighed. Gabe was in the hospital again. Rose Anderson realized that Taylor would want to know, but she didn't want to be the one to tell her so she called Ricky. This was not as big a deal as the poor kid being kidnapped, but they would still pray for him and ask everyone again to pray. The dark forces were definitely gathering to put out this kid's light, for Gabriel Tanner was indeed a bright light. An infection can turn into sepsis quickly and sepsis has a relatively high mortality rate.

He went to find Bree first. He and his wife always handled all emergencies as a team. She made one quick well-placed phone call to her mother, which started the ball rolling. Once that was done, they went to speak with Taylor, but it was too late. Taylor was on the phone with Peyton. She'd called him when Gabe wasn't answering his phone and she wondered if there was some kind of school activity she didn't know about.

She looked up as her parents came into her room, her eyes already filled with tears. She quickly told Peyton to keep her informed and that she had to go. "This is making me crazy," Taylor cried.

"They caught it quickly. He's gonna be okay," Bree said.

"Your mom's right, honey," Ricky said.

"Where's Aunt Jeffy?" Taylor asked.

"She's not feeling well right now," Bree answered. "Gabe is on his own."

"No, he most definitely is not," Ricky stated. "We'll get the family together on a Zoom call and we'll do a prayer circle for Gabe."

Taylor nodded her head.

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May 2nd Thursday Early Dawn

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Laynah and Jake worked side-by-side in the stables, cleaning stalls, watering, feeding and washing or brushing horses. Earlier, before they started working, they'd knelt together in prayer for Gabe, and something happened. It was strange. It felt as if they'd done this very thing hundreds of times. They'd been overcome. Jake had gazed into her eyes, reached out and touched her face, whispered his love for her. They'd kissed and next thing they knew, they were literally rolling in the hay. It took every ounce of strength Jake had to pull away before things got out of hand.

Now they worked silently. It was a beautiful, companionable feeling. Laynah was thinking about and thanking God for the lusty thoughts she'd had, because she'd been worried she would never want to give herself to anyone ever, since the assault. But she definitely wanted to this morning. It was a relief to know.

Jake was thinking that he was glad he had the strength to stop when he did, because he was sure Laynah was willing, and that was not how he wanted to begin their sexual relationship. He wanted to do things right, because what Gabe said to that woman was correct, it takes a much stronger man to withhold himself than one who takes every opportunity to gratify himself.

He thought about the proposal he planned for this Saturday, just two days away. Gabe was in the hospital. It all depended if Gabe was out and the Tanners still willing, because Gabe was kind of a big part of the proposal. Laynah had been told that Gabe had to finish a big school project. So, Jake and Laynahbug met with Gabe. He explained very convincingly that he had to make a short film. Two people, the girl in a long feminine dress, the guy dressed nicely, ride across a field on horses, come to a group of people having a picnic, they dismount, he helps her down and they join the picnic.

Laynah had scoffed about the dress. She'd said, "No one goes riding in a dress." He'd asked her to just go with the script. She agreed, but said she would wear shorts under the dress. Jake smiled. That's his Laynah. Common sense, no frills. She also scoffed at Gabe asking Jake to help her down off the horse. Gabe had quickly explained it was only because she would be wearing a dress and it seemed the gentlemanly thing to do. Melaynah had rolled her eyes, but went with it.

Now, Jake realized it may not happen, not this Saturday. And the following Saturday was prom, though, he thought, they still may be able to get it in before Gabe had to get ready. Guys don't take that long to get dressed. All he had to do was take a shower using the body wash everyone was gabbing about and get dressed. Jake chuckled at the thought. He too, used the same body wash, and his mom and his Aunt Lisa and Grams and Laynah almost always commented on how good it smells.

Laynah's phone buzzed, pulling them both out of their reverie. She pulled up the phone and her mouth dropped open. "Look at this, Jake. It's happening again."

"What?"

"Gabe is trending. People are praying for him again." She scrolled. "Most of the pics are stills from videos people have made of him, close-ups of his eyes, his abs, his beat up face from the abduction video, him standing on the box with the gun in his hand. Actually, that is a good-lookin' pic of him," she said as she stared at her phone. "He looks really tough."

Jake's eyebrows rose.

She laughed. "Jealous?"

"Should I be?"

"No, my big gorgeous man, Gabe is a little boy."

Jake raised his eyebrows. "Not so little, and I promise not to tell him you said that."

She scrolled some more. "Oh, Lord, someone let on that Taylor is going to prom with him. There's a bunch of pics of her now. He's not gonna be happy about that."

"Neither will she, but I guess she's used to it. It won't matter because Gabe's dad is handling security and ain't no one getting into that place who doesn't have a ticket."

She scrolled some more. "People have taken older pics of Taylor and superimposed them next to Gabe. They are blowing up. He already has over a million views on the Teenspotter pics. Gabe's life is never gonna be the same, is it?"

Jake shook his head. "I doubt it. I hope it doesn't change him. He's a good guy."

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May 2nd Thursday Morning

Pine Forest Memorial Hospital, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe slept through the night and awoke the next morning feeling much better. The antibiotics being pumped into his body had acted on the infection quickly. He opened his eyes in the wee hours of dawn to the same pretty nurse who'd cared for him before. She pointed a thermometer at his head and it beeped. She nodded in satisfaction. She slipped the BP cuff onto his arm.

"How ya feeling, Gabe?" she asked as the cuff inflated.

He yawned. "Better I think. Are my parents here?"

"They went to grab a cup of coffee. They're gonna be happy to see your eyes open."

"Yeah, I've put them through a lot lately."

"You don't worry about that. You just concentrate on getting better."

He smiled at her. "I will. How's Sam?"

The nurse grinned. "She's fine and she's gonna be super pumped to know you remembered her name and asked about her."

He sighed. "Ya know, I'm no one special."

"The fact that you said that is part of what makes you special."

He decided to change the subject because he was tired of everyone thinking he's so special. Taylor must be really tired of all that stuff since she's had to deal with it her whole life. Thinking of Taylor, he remembered the prom. "Do you know if they're gonna let me out of here today?"

She smiled sweetly. "I very much doubt that."

He blew out a breath.

"Why so anxious to get out? Just try to relax and get well."

"I have the prom coming up a week from this Saturday and in order to go to the prom I have to be in school and I have to have all my makeup work done. The more days I'm out, the more work I have to do."

She smiled and reached up to adjust his pillow. "Maybe someone can bring your work to you."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's a good idea."

"So, Gabe Tanner, do you have a date for the prom, cuz if you don't, Sam would be happy to go with you."

He smiled. "Oh, yes, I have a date."

"Who's the lucky girl?"

"Taylor Kino."

"Taylor Kino, why does that sound familiar?"

Gabe grimaced. He shouldn't have said her last name. Well, it's not like it's a secret, he thought. When she gets there everyone will know who she is. "She's uh, Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams' daughter."

"Oh yes! That's right. Sam told me you had some famous friends but I work so much I haven't paid attention to the details. That tournament, that's what started your friendship?"

"No, I've known the Kinos my whole life. My father and Ricky became friends a long time ago before I was born, when my father saved a bunch of babies from being trafficked back when he was with the FBI."

"I've been hearing that story recently, though I was just a kid when all that happened." She finished checking his wounds. Five of the seven were almost healed. The infected one was still wet and oozy. She finished applying a dry bandage, then went to adjust his bed. "Breakfast will be here soon, so I'm gonna sit you up." She handed him a urinal. "I bet you need to use this. I'll give you some privacy." She stepped out.

His parents came back just when he finished and his mom took it from his hands and went to the bathroom with it.

"How ya feelin', son?" Keegan asked.

"Good. Can I go home?"

"No, you may not," his mom declared as she came out of the bathroom.

She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "You're almost as bad a patient as your father was way back when."

"Really? Tell me about it."

Keegan raised his eyebrows at his wife, because he was pretty sure she wouldn't want to share those details with her son.

"Um, your dad might tell you someday," she said.

"Mom, did you happen to bring my phone?"

"No, honey, I wasn't thinking about your phone when we left the house. But I'll bring it to you when I come back."

He nodded. "Thanks. So, can I borrow your phone a minute?"

"Why in such a hurry?"

"I need to call Peyton and ask him to get my work for me while he's there at school and then bring it to me after practice."

"Why don't you just relax?" Keegan asked.

"It's the end of the year, Dad, I can't relax. I have to have all my work done. I have to graduate. I have to go to prom next Saturday. All my work has to be done."

"I understand all that, and I appreciate your willingness to get all caught up on your work, but you have time."

Gabe blew out a breath. Nodded his head. He was suddenly tired. He looked up quickly. "Will I be out by Saturday morning? Cuz, you know, Jake and Bugs."

"We'll see," Lizzy said.

Gabe frowned but closed his eyes.

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May 2nd Early Thursday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Grandmaster Eric Kino picked up the landline, which didn't ring often. "Hello?"

"Hello, please, I need to speak with Eric Kino, uh, Eric senior, por favor."

Eric frowned. The person on the other end seemed panicked, fearful. "This is he," he responded. "How can I help you?" he asked wondering more, how did you get this number, but the person, a woman, was frightened, so he went into service mode.

"I need to speak to you personally. You have to meet with me. Please."

"What's this about, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I can't talk about it over the phone. Please trust me, you want to hear what I have to say."

Eric thought a moment. "Hold on for just a second." He placed the line on hold, picked up his cell, called Jason.

"What's up, Eric?"

"Can you record and trace my landline?"

"Sure, give me a second or two."

"Okay, I'm switching over to it now."

"Are you still there?" Eric asked.

"Yes, I'm here."

"You say you want to meet with me?"

"Yes, please, I know this sounds strange but I need you to trust me. I HAVE to meet with you personally."

"And you can't tell me what this is about?"

"No, not on the phone. Oh, no, I have to go. I'll call back."

"Wait, where are you? Hello? Hello?"

He hung up and picked up his cell. "Were you able to get that?"

"Got a recording. Did not get an immediate location but I can find it in a few minutes. Call you back."

"Thanks."

†††

May 2nd Thursday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Please, Mom," Taylor cried. "Please, you have to understand, I have to go to him."

"Sweetheart, we do understand. I know you miss him. I know you're worried about him, but you are NOT missing a week of school to go see him. Besides, he needs to rest, not entertain you. We are scheduled to leave here one week from today and we are not leaving a second earlier."

"Why won't you understand?" she cried.

"Taylor," Ricky said quietly. "I'm gonna ask you to take a deep breath, get out of panic mode, and trust us. We do understand your need to see him. But Gabe is fine."

She did as he instructed. Took a deep breath. Calmed her mind. "But how can you know? I can't reach him. He's not answering his phone."

"He probably left his phone at home," Bree offered.

"Will you call Mrs. Tanner?"

"Now, *that* is a much better request," Ricky said.

Bree pulled out her phone and made the call.

"Lizzy?"

"Hey Bree!"

"How's he doing?"

Lizzy laughed. "Well now, you're the third person to call in the past ten minutes."

"Who were the others?"

"Jeff Davis and Isla August."

"Well, I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Not at all. You are the sweetest to take time to call."

"So, he's doing well?"

"He's so much better. He's a little tired, but he's already a thousand times better. I mean, last night he was actually unconscious. He really gave us a scare."

"I bet. So, are you with him right now?"

"Yes I am. Why? Is there somebody there who would like to speak with him?"

Bree smiled. "How'd ya know?"

"Ha, mother's intuition. Hold on, I'll put him on the phone."

Lizzy handed the phone to Gabe for the third time. "Hello?"

"Hey," Taylor said, sniffing back the tears that came when she heard his voice.

"Hey Taylor, don't worry, I'm okay."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I wouldn't lie, especially not to you."

"Why especially not to me?"

"Because, we have to always trust each other."

"I do trust you."

"I know, and I trust you. So, we are still on for next Saturday, right?"

She sniffed again. "Yes, absolutely. We're coming in on Thursday afternoon. I can't wait to see you."

"Me too. I mean I can't wait to see *you*."

She laughed. "Thanks, I needed that. Now I know you're back to normal."

"You'd better warn your parents that no matter who's standing around, as soon as I see you I'm gonna kiss you."

"Um, you're on speaker."

"Oh shoot. Sorry, Grandmaster Kino, Mrs. Kino, or whoever is there with you. Uh, Taylor, please let me know stuff like that a little earlier."

Taylor giggled.

"If that's your worst, I can handle it," Ricky said.

"Are you coming too, Mr. Kino, or just the ladies?"

"We're all coming," Taylor replied. "And even my brother too this time, cuz he's finished with his movie shoot, and he's trying to talk JoJo and Logan into coming along."

"That'll be fun!" Gabe said. "Jake will be stoked for that."

"Yeah, you just remember who is the main person coming."

"I could not forget you, Taylor. Nobody could."

Ricky rolled his eyes while Bree grinned.

"Okay, well, I'm gonna let you get some rest. I just needed to hear your voice. I feel so much better. I love you, Gabe. Bye."

"I... "

"You cut him off," Bree said.

Taylor smiled. "I know. I always do. I won't let him say it back to me."

"Why not?" Ricky asked. "I was interested to hear what he had to say."

"I don't know. I guess cuz I don't want him to say those words just because I've said

them. So, I don't give him a chance."

"That's not fair, Taylor, and it's also cowardly," Ricky informed her.

"Cowardly? What do you mean?"

"First, if he feels that way, you should allow him to express it. And it's cowardly because you cut him off to keep your own feelings from being hurt in case he doesn't say it back to you. It isn't honorable."

She thought a moment and then nodded. "I understand, Daddy. I promise I'll fix it when I'm face to face with him."

Ricky nodded. "Good. See that you do."

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Romans 12:10
"Love one another with brotherly affection.
Outdo one another in showing honor."

Chapter Twenty

May 3rd Late Friday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Here's what I have so far," Jason Lee said as he tossed a folder onto Eric's desk containing several 8x10s. "As I told you yesterday, the call came from a diner in Compton. The phone belonged to a waitress there by the name of Nora Grace." He pointed to one of the pics Eric had spread out in front of him. "She says a woman said she had an emergency and asked to borrow her phone. Ms. Grace says she heard the woman ask for Eric Kino Senior, but that's all she heard. She says a few minutes into the conversation, a car drove up to the front door of the diner and blew its horn. The woman put the phone down on the counter and hurried out.

"These are pictures of the woman from the camera inside the diner. The outside cams are not operational."

"Of course," Eric said softly. He looked at the brothers, Jason and Justin Lee who over the years had often sat in his study with him, either trying to figure out solutions to problems, or praying together, or talking about nothing in particular. They were the best friends a man could have. "Now what?" Eric asked.

"Good question," Jason answered. "Looking at these pics of the woman, I'd say she appears to be in her thirties. Long, dark hair in a ponytail. Medium height, medium build. Possibly Latina, or just a good tan. Ms. Grace says the car that picked the woman up was not a cab. It was dark gray. She thinks it was a Hyundai Santa Fe, and that is only because she used to have one herself. She says the woman seemed scared or nervous."

Eric shook his head. "She said she'd call me back and yet, I've heard nothing. I mean, really, I hope she's still alive."

Jason sighed. He'd been running Ameritech Security for almost thirty years and he'd seen more evil in this world than he ever dreamed existed, and he was no innocent. "I hope so too. Though I have to say, Eric, there is a strong possibility she is not."

Eric nodded. His jaw pressed tightly together.

"I know that look," Justin Lee said.

Eric glanced over at his best friend and raised a questioning brow.

"That look tells me you think you should have jumped in quicker. Thrown caution to the wind and offered to meet her or come get her. It's the guilty look you so often try to tell everyone else not to have."

Eric shrugged. "Guess you have me pegged."

"Eric," Jason jumped in. "There is no way that you can run out of here to meet up with just anyone who calls. At least not without backup."

"Then maybe I should have immediately offered to meet her and called you for backup and taken off."

"And now you're playing 'what if,'" Justin said. "Another useless game."

Eric nodded. "Just hoping some poor innocent female didn't call me to help her as her last resort and I let her down."

"Understood," the brothers said at the same time.

"So, what's next?" Eric asked. "Can we find this Santa Fe?"

"Working on it. We're pulling video from other buildings in the area and trying to get a plate number. There are over three thousand Santa Fes registered in California. So, it'll take a few days."

Eric nodded. "I have a strong feeling about this. I can't just let it go."

"We'll do everything we can to find this woman," Jason said.

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May 4th Saturday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

It was on. Jake was suddenly acting like a ten-year-old kid before his big birthday party. Except maybe he was more nervous than excited. Jodi and Grams laughed at him as he went over the checklist of all of Laynah's favorite foods they were preparing for the picnic, at least all that were appropriate for a picnic.

She loved sub sandwiches with all the trimmings. Loved Miss Maddie's chocolate brownies. Loved watermelon. Loved potato salad. Check. Check. Check.

"Don't forget anything," Jake said.

Jodi laughed. "We won't. You don't forget the ring."

"I won't. I hope." He looked around. "Dad, try to get out of class fast, okay?"

"Stop worrying. I'm gonna leave class early. Master Gene is gonna finish it out for me."

Jake nodded. "Okay, then I'm just gonna call Aunt Lisa to make sure all the blankets and hay bales, and chairs for the grands are ready, and... "

"They are and I know that because I just spoke with her. And I also just spoke with Lizzy. Lily and Daisy have gone into town to pick up the flowers. Keegan already has the sign and the clips to attach it to the bales. We got this Jake. Now you go take some time to calm down, and to start this day with the most important thing."

"A shower?"

"A prayer."

Jake nodded. "Will you guys pray with me?"

"We'd be honored," John said.

"Thanks Dad, and will you honor me by saying it?"

"Of course."

They stood in a circle, John, Jodi, Jacob and Maddie, their hands clasped, as John gave thanks for the day, for their family, for his son, and for his soon-to-be daughter-in-law. He asked God to bless Jake's and Laynah's relationship, to bless their union to come, and to bless himself and Jodi with lots of little grandbabies, which paused the prayer while he waited for the giggles to subside. He prayed in Jesus' name and ended it, looking up at his son with all the love he felt as the father of a remarkable young man.

Jake smiled at his dad before he was grabbed and hugged.

"Lots of grandbabies, Dad? Gettin' a little ahead of yourself, aren't you?"

John grinned. "I have faith in you."

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"What took you guys so long this morning?" Lisa asked in exasperation as Chaz and Laynahbug came in the kitchen door.

Chaz nodded at his daughter. "She insisted on washing Santana this morning since he's gonna be starring in Gabe's video today. And then she decided she wanted to braid Honey's mane with ribbons."

Lisa sighed. "Well, y'all have some breakfast please, and then Bugs, I want you to take a shower and let me do your hair."

"Why?"

Lisa rolled her eyes. "For Gabe's video and because you smell like horses."

"I'll just spritz some body spray and put on the dress. No one will care what I smell like. And I'll just stick my hair up into my hat."

Lisa's eyes got big. "You will take a shower and you will let me do your hair and that's the end of that. No daughter of mine is gonna be on some video looking like something the cat dragged in."

"It's just a video for a school project, Mom. The horses are the stars."

Lisa glared at her husband, obviously asking for his help.

He jumped in. "Um, the video is being made by a guy who is currently trending across the country. It may end up streaming right alongside everything else, so, Bugs, placate your mother and let her do your hair. Please."

Laynah sighed. "Okay, fine, but I don't see the big deal."

Lisa blew out a relieved breath. One day, she just might strangle this hard-headed girl.

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"How ya feeling, kiddo?" Heather asked as she poked her head into Gabe's bedroom.

Gabe sat up, stretched. "Feelin' pretty good."

"Feeling good enough to come watch our friends get engaged?"

"Of course. I'm really excited for them both and I'm glad it's happening and I'm really glad I got to come home last night."

"Me too. And I'm glad I got to come home. I didn't want to miss this."

Gabe frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"It's just that, ya know what, Heather? I hardly ever get to see you anymore. I don't like you living up in Tennessee."

She came in, sat on his bed and took her brother's hand. "I miss you too, little bro. But ya know I can't stay home forever. You know I'm working with several ranches up there, I'm doing what I love."

"But Heather, can't you do what you love down here?"

"Well, I suppose I could." She sighed. "I'll tell you a secret, though."

"Okay."

She looked into his eyes so he would understand how serious she was about what she was about to say. "I've met a guy, and I think he's the one."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Heather said with a sigh. "He's the son of one of the ranchers I'm consulting with. He's a veterinarian, but I think he also helps run his father's ranch."

"How old is he?"

"He's twenty-eight."

Gabe thought a moment. "Does he believe in God?"

Heather smiled at her brother, so like her father. "Yes, I actually met him at church. I didn't even know he was the son of one of the ranchers. It's like it was meant to be."

"So, is he a good guy, like is he kind?"

Heather's brow wrinkled. "Of course."

"Is he nice-looking?"

She frowned. "Well, I think he is. He's almost as cute as you."

Gabe frowned. "Does he have a temper?"

"Uh, no. At least not that I've seen," she said slowly, wondering what her brother was thinking. "He's very calm and happy."

Gabe thought. "So, what's the deal?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Just wondering, why are you keeping him a secret? Why have you not told Mom and Dad about him? What's wrong with him?"

She laughed. "Well, he robs banks as a sideline and I'm trying to figure out how to let Dad know without him blowing his top."

"Very funny, sis, but I'm not kidding."

She smiled sweetly at her brother. "Oh, Gabriel Tanner, I just love you so much."

"You're stalling."

"Okay. I didn't want to get Mom and Dad's hopes up that I might be getting married if it doesn't work out. It's only been a few months. We've only dated a handful of times. If it starts to get more serious than just a casual relationship, then I'll tell our parents. Until then, this is just between you and me."

"And four others."

"Nope. Really, I haven't even told the twins yet, for pretty much the same reason."

Gabe nodded. "Okay."

"So, because you understand how difficult it is to be away from someone you think you may be in love with, you can understand how much I want to be near my guy."

"Yeah, I get it, cuz, I really miss Taylor."

"I know you do. And I really miss Nolan. And he misses me too."

"Nolan?"

"Yes, Nolan Sawyer."

Gabe smiled. "I think I'll google him, check him out."

She shrugged. "Google away. He knows all about you."

"Me?"

"Yes, silly boy, everyone knows about you. I'm so proud to have you as my brother. I'm so proud of the young man you're becoming. Hey, do me a favor."

"Shoot."

"Don't let all this stuff change you. Stay humble."

He nodded. "I won't let it change me. I won't get all caught up in being famous. I've been praying to God to help me figure out how to use this opportunity to serve Him."

Her eyes teared up. "Little bro, what you just said, it makes me so proud of you."

"Well, those words didn't really come from me. They came from Joey Adams."

"Again with the humility. I can't even." She hugged him. "I love you so much, Gabe. Oh, and I almost forgot the reason I came up here. Mom wants to know if you are coming down for breakfast or would you rather she bring it up to you?"

"I'll come down."

She rose, started to leave. "Remember, our secret."

He smiled. "Got it."

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"I love your hair," Lisa sighed as she moved the wide-toothed comb through the thick red tresses.

Laynah giggled. "Well, Mom, I mean since it's exactly like yours, I guess you have no choice."

"Do *you* like it?" Lisa asked.

"I admit there are times I'd like to just chop it all off, but I have so many people tell me how pretty it is, I kinda hate to do that. But it's okay, cuz I can just braid it back out of my way whenever I don't want to mess with it, which is most of the time."

"Well, it is beautiful. My mother hated my hair. I used to grow it out to impossible lengths just to spite her. She always wanted me to chop my hair off. She made me keep it short when I was younger, but not because it looked good that way, but because she didn't want to be bothered with brushing it."

Laynah shook her head. "I've heard all the stories, you know, the mean things your mom did to you. The mean things she said. I can't even imagine. I mean, you and I, we're so close. I don't understand how a mother cannot care about her child. And Grams is so sweet, so, it's not like your mom got it from *her* mother."

"I've tried to understand it myself, sweetheart. I don't get it either." She stood back suddenly, her face pale. "I'll be right back."

Laynah watched her mother as she left the room. She'd been acting strange lately. Getting all teary-eyed. Dizzy spells. She was thinking it probably had to do with

Laynah's assault. She would have to let her mom know she really was okay. Melaynah looked up as her mom reappeared, smiling a sweet smile.

"I'd like to give this to you," Lisa said. She held out a rectangular velvet-covered box with a white ribbon tied around it.

Laynah opened it. It was a gold heart-shaped pendant necklace. "Oh, Mom, this is beautiful. Thank you so much. What's the occasion?"

Lisa shrugged. "Do I have to have an occasion to give my daughter a gift?"

"Well, no."

"Open the pendant."

Laynah opened it and there were tiny pics of her and Jake. "Oh, Mom, I love it so much." Tears came to her eyes. "Thank you."

They hugged for a long time. Laynah noticed her mother's hands trembling. "Mom, are you okay?"

"Of course I am."

"Are you sick? I mean, you've been a little weepy and sentimental lately. And you're pale and your hands are shaking."

Lisa pressed her lips together. "I'm not sick, honey."

"Then what's wrong? Is it what happened to me? Because I am really okay, I promise."

Lisa nodded. "I'm glad to hear that, Bugs. You're such a strong girl, not just physically, but mentally tough."

Laynah smiled. "Yeah, I'm a lot like my mom."

Lisa nodded.

"And I'm also not stupid, Mom, so tell me, what's wrong? I can tell there's something."

Lisa sighed heavily. "Okay, I'll tell you, but you have to swear to me you won't tell anyone until I have a chance to tell your father."

"You're scaring me."

"Promise me."

"Okay, I promise."

Lisa bit her lip. "I'm pregnant."

Laynah's mouth dropped open. "No way."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't know how it happened."

Laynah laughed. "Well, when two people love each other very, very much—"

"Haha, very funny, my silly daughter. I mean, we've been really careful. And, like, I'm old."

"You're not that old, Mom. You're what, about to be forty-six in a few weeks. But I'm still trying to get out of my mind the visual of what you two being careful entails."

"Don't be shallow sweetheart. Not only young people have sex."

Laynah wrinkled up her nose. "Anyway, have you been to a doctor, how far along are you, and when do you intend to tell Dad?"

"I have been to my doctor. She says I'm eight weeks, and I am gonna try to tell him tomorrow."

"But why wait, Mom?"

She smiled. "I'm just planning a time when he will be relaxed and in prayer mode."

"Cool! So Sunday after church. Can't wait to see his reaction."

"Okay, now," Lisa said, "let's get your hair done. I don't want you to keep Gabe waiting, with him being just out of the hospital and all."

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Jake had both horses saddled and ready. Laynah waved sweetly as she made her way down to the stables. She looked breathtakingly beautiful. The dress she wore had short little sleeves with a flounce at the shoulders. It was a pinkish coral color that went with her hair. It had pale green flowers printed on it and two tiers of ruffles near the hem. The square neckline was flattering, and she wore a gold heart pendant. Her long curls were pulled up on the sides and left hanging down in the back and they were blowing in the breeze. His body immediately reacted to the sight.

He could just get a glimpse of her boots under the long skirt, and it made him smile.

"You look beautiful, Bugs," he said as she approached.

She smiled sweetly. "Thanks. You don't look half bad yourself in your Marine Corps dress blues. That is what it's called, right?"

"Right," he murmured as he pulled her forward and kissed her softly.

He glanced at his phone, shoved it in his pocket, patted his other pocket to make sure the ring hadn't magically disappeared, and gestured toward the horses. "Shall we? We don't want to keep Gabe waiting."

"Yeah, let's do this. And then afterward, let's grab a pizza. I'm starving."

He grinned. "Let's see, how are we gonna get you on the horse without tearing that dress?"

"Exactly," she said. "I told you, no one goes riding in a dress."

"Okay, well, we'll have to make do. You pull the dress up, step in my hands and I'll toss you up onto the horse."

She frowned, but pulled the skirt of her dress up to her waist. She was wearing little white shorts, but that didn't keep Jake's mouth from going dry. She stepped into the little stirrup he made with his hands and he tossed her up onto the horse.

He then went around the horse, pulling her dress down around her until she sat very prettily. "You are somethin' else, Bugs," he murmured.

He turned and mounted Santana.

They rode across the pasture to the meadow and down the hill. Laynah could see the group of people at the picnic they were supposed to join.

"Wow, I didn't know so many people were gonna be at the picnic. Looks like he recruited everyone in the family," Laynah remarked.

"He did," Jake said softly.

Laynah looked at the set up. She could see two cameras on tripods. Four large red and white checkered tablecloths spread out on the thick grass. A huge spread of food. Several large hay bales in a row on the other side with a long white folded sign attached. She wondered what that was about.

There were beautiful arrangements of flowers, on the table cloths, along the hay bales, and also in large milk cans around the whole area. She thought Gabe had gone to quite a bit of expense to make this video.

Some people were sitting on the table cloths– her younger brothers and sister, Aralyn, and also Gabe, holding little Iris. Standing were her mom and dad, Jake's mom and dad, Heather and both sets of the Anderson twins and their mom and dad.

She turned to Jake, "Look! Even Grams is here, and my Grandpa Joe and Grandma Shirley! And grandpa Charlie and Nana Patty, sitting in those chairs over there! Oh and Aunt Cindy and Aunt Stephie and Aunt Megan and Uncle Josh, and Uncle Ty and Aunt Jenny! And my cousins! What the heck is going on?"

He grinned at her. "Well, I guess Gabe didn't want to leave anyone out."

"You guys must really expect this video to be a big deal."

He smiled. "Absolutely."

As they approached the group, several of the younger ones pulled out their cell phones and started taking video. Laynah puzzled about that. She pulled back on the reins and came to a halt. Jake dismounted, came to her and helped her down off of Honey.

She smiled up at him as he led her to the spot he'd marked off earlier. He stood her right there and stepped away a second. "Pictures of the pretty girl first," he said as pictures were taken. Someone told Laynah to turn toward them which she did. When she turned back, Jake was on his knee holding the ring box in his hand.

She gasped, stepped back. "What, what is happening?"

"Come on, sis, I know you're smarter than that," Charlie said.

Everyone laughed.

Jake smiled up at her, his eyes glowing with the love he felt.

"Bugs," he said, being mindful to speak loud enough for the grandparents to hear. "Hear me out. I didn't know that I loved you, but you knew it. I didn't know that I needed you, but you knew it. I didn't know that we were meant to be together from the very beginning, but you did. And you showed me, and you taught me, and you put me in a very precarious position. That position being that I cannot live without you. I know you've waited for me to come home to you, to come FOR you, and I don't want you to wait any longer. I do love you, Melaynah, with all of my heart, and I would love the chance to tell you that every single day. I would love to have the chance to take care of you and protect you and love you, and for you to do the same for me. I'm asking for us to worship God together, to learn and grow together, and to create a real family together. So, I'm asking, Bugs—" He motioned to the people stationed at the sign on the hay bales. They quickly unhooked the long sign and it came unfolded and in giant red letters read, *"Will You Marry Me?"* He repeated the phrase. "Will you marry me, Melaynah Stewart?"

Laynah looked around at all the people in the world that she loved so much. It was completely silent. They were waiting for her answer. She glanced at her mom who was crying, and at Jake's mom who was smiling so sweetly. She wanted to pause, and take in the whole situation. She wanted time to look into everyone's eyes and see what they were feeling, because she wanted to remember this moment forever. But she realized she was making it uncomfortable for everyone, especially Jake, who was looking a little worried. She smiled at him, reached down and touched his face. "I thought this moment would never happen, and now, my fondest and greatest wish is coming true. I love you too, Jake, and of course I will marry you!"

He rose, placed the ring on her finger, pulled her close and kissed her. He wanted to go on kissing her, but they were pulled apart as people cheered and congratulated them and hugged them and celebrated the moment.

Lunch was served and enjoyed by everyone. Instead of champagne, there was beer and sodas and sweet tea. The grandparents were served. Little Iris was pulled away from the brownies and fed a PB&J sandwich instead. Everyone else heaped food onto paper plates, grabbed a drink and sat to eat.

One of the twins turned on her playlist. There was lots of laughter and love. Then Gabe asked Lily to turn off the music a second.

"Hey Jake," Gabe said. "I just wanted to say congratulations to you two."

"Thanks, Gabester," Jake said.

"And these guys also have something to say." He turned his phone around. "Hey Jake. Congrats, man. You're a lucky guy," young Eric Kino said. "I second that," Ricky Kino said. "Congrats you two," Bree and Taylor said together.

"Ahh, thanks y'all," Laynah replied.

"Yep, thanks guys," Jake echoed.

Gabe turned his phone back to his own face. "Less than a week now, Taylor."

"I can't wait to see you," she said softly.

"Me too. I mean, I can't wait to see you too."

She giggled.

"Hey Mom," Rose said. "Before Lily turns the music back on and while we have everyone's attention why don't you and Dad make your big announcement."

Lizzy turned to her daughter, her eyes wide.

"What announcement?" Keegan asked.

"You know," she prodded.

He raised his eyebrows. "No, I don't know."

Shocked, Rose turned to her mom. "I thought you said Dad knew."

Lizzy looked like she would pass out. "No, I said he DIDN'T know."

"Oh, Mom, I'm so sorry. Me and my big mouth."

Keegan was frowning. "Anyone wanna fill me in?"

Lizzy's eyes immediately filled with tears as she realized there was no getting out of it now. "I'm, I'm– pregnant."

Gabe's mouth dropped open right along with his father's.

"Elizabeth, why didn't you tell me?" He put his arm around his wife.

"I was going to, but I just found out myself. I'm sorry you had to find out this way."

"Well, I'm not. What better way than to find out right here with all the people we love around us. Too bad my parents aren't here. Though, this IS Jake's and Laynah's time and I hate to rain on their parade."

"Uh, uh, it's not raining from where I sit," Jake said. "I think it's awesome!"

"Me too!" Laynah said with a grin. "As a matter of fact, I believe my mom has her own little announcement to make."

Lisa turned on her daughter, the exact wide-eyed expression on her face that Lizzy showed moments earlier.

Jake looked over at Laynah. "Is your mom pregnant too?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes," she whispered back.

"Uh, are you sure about doing this?"

She smiled, shrugged. "Too late now to reconsider. I've already said too much."

Chaz had been leaning against a hay bale, his feet crossed, his arms folded across his chest. Instead of everyone turning to look at Lisa for the news, they all looked at Chaz, who was looking at his wife. She gazed into his eyes and simply nodded. His eyebrows shot up. His folded arms slowly dropped to his sides.

"Yes, I'm pregnant," she said softly. "I don't understand how it happened."

"Well," Laynah said loudly, "When two people love each other very, very much—"

Everyone laughed.

When Chaz didn't say anything, Jake decided to break the tension. "Well Uncle Chaz, looks like you still got it!"

Everyone laughed again.

Chaz smiled and came forward to take Lisa's hand and pull Lisa to her feet, put his arms around her waist and kiss her.

"That's how it begins," Tyson yelled. More laughter. "I want to toast three happy couples," Ty continued.

But Rose interrupted. "Wait . . . All girls, DON'T– drink– the water."

More laughter.

Ty finished his toast. "To Laynah and Jake, may you be as happy and fruitful as Lisa and Chaz and Lizzy and Keegan! And may you all be happy and healthy and receive amazing blessings."

"Hear, hear," the men yelled and everyone drank.

Chaz sat down with Lisa on the grass. "Were you afraid to tell me?"

Lisa shook her head. "Not really afraid, but apprehensive."

"Did you think I'd be upset? Or that I wouldn't want another child?"

"Well, we hadn't really talked about it. You've never said anything about wanting another baby. Aralyn is seven, and you've never said anything."

"Darlin', you're in your forties, though, let me just say real quick, you don't look it. It would be selfish of me to ask you for another child."

"Chaz, don't you know that I would give you anything you want, or at least, whatever I could give to you? Anything at all."

"That's a beautiful thing to say, my love. The question in my mind though is, did you want to have another baby?"

"Honestly? I hadn't thought about it. I figured that part of my life was over. And you know, as you get older, there can be complications." She placed her hand protectively on her belly. "But, oh I want this baby so much." Her eyes filled with tears. "But it's gonna be hard."

"Well, Lisa, hard has never stopped us before, has it?" Chaz asked.

She shook her head.

"I'll take care of you, Red. I'll hire some more hands to help with the ranch so that I can spend more time with you. It's gonna be okay. Besides, we needed a change. Always good to stir things up a bit. And it's time for the boys to work a little more."

Lisa shook her head. "When? There's no time."

"School is about to be out."

"Yes, but then there's baseball, and Aralyn has her dance classes, and don't forget martial arts, because they all want to be as good as Gabe and Jake now, and then there's the guns, gotta be crackshots, even Aralyn is wanting to shoot."

"Okay, okay, don't get all worked up, sweetheart. Even if the boys don't do much more, they can do some, and Aralyn too. I'll take care of it. I'll take care of it all, Lisa. Don't worry, babe, we got this."

At the same time Keegan and Lizzy were having a similar conversation.

"And the girls can help out more, and Gabe too, since he'll be out of school and hasn't decided whether he's going to college or not."

Lizzy shook her head. "The girls are getting jobs and working for the summer, and don't forget that Rose and Violet are getting ready to graduate. And Gabe, he's gonna be busier than all of us, and it's him we're gonna need to help."

"Elizabeth," Keegan said softly in his deep voice. "We got this, sweetheart. I'll take care of you, I promise, if I have to work from home. I'll talk to Jason. I'll take care of you and the kids. I'm pretty sure I can handle it. You do remember when we first met, right? Did I handle five small little girls with no problems?"

She smiled. "You were magnificent. And when Gabe was born, you were amazing and so in love with that child. And since Iris came into our lives, you've been so adorable with her. I know you can handle it. But can I? I mean I just turned forty-two and," she stopped, put her hand up to her mouth.

Keegan smiled when he realized what she just realized. Except for Gabriel, she always conceived around her own birthday.

He reached out and cupped her face. "We got this, Elizabeth. I promise."

Jodi and John Appel smiled at each other. They were gonna need to plan their son's wedding and now, both of their neighbors and best friends were gonna need their help. They were about to be in service big time. But they would do it, because that was what they were here on this Earth to do, and they loved serving the Lord.

Jake and Laynah sat cuddled together on the edge of a blanket.

"Were you really surprised, or are you just a great actress?"

Laynah laughed. "I was really surprised. I bought into all this Gabe stuff so easily. Not very smart of me, huh?"

Jake brushed his hand over her cheek. "You are brilliant and you know it. So, did you like the proposal?"

"It was perfect. Did our moms help?"

He chuckled. "How'd ya know?"

"I know how they are." She sighed. "Two new babies coming. Isn't that amazing?"

"It's pretty cool. One day, that will be us."

"How many children do you want?" Laynah asked.

"I guess as many as you'll give me."

She laughed. "I'll give you as many as you want."

"Well, let's stick with as many as we can afford."

"Just think, Jake, you and me, and little ones. You'll be such a good father."

"Think so?"

"Of course I do. I wouldn't marry someone who wouldn't be."

"So, now that you've accepted my proposal of marriage, the next question is, what kind of wedding do you want, *and, when* do you want to get married?"

She sat quietly, thinking, then looked up at him suddenly as the reality hit her. "You're leaving again."

He nodded solemnly.

"When exactly?"

"I don't have an exact date yet. I had six months, with times to report for training, which I have to leave for again in one week. I'm down to about four and a half months as long as I'm not spun up early, which is always a possibility."

She nodded, trying not to show how scared that made her. She knew he was a Marine, she knew it meant the world to him to serve his country in some way, she would never interfere with that dream. But it did scare her. She looked up into his eyes. "So, what you're really asking me is, do I want to marry you before you leave, or after you get back."

He nodded. "I guess that is pretty much the question."

"And if I wait– " She stopped, thinking of the possibilities. She cleared her throat. "If I wait, I would have time to plan a big elaborate wedding. But also, if I wait, there's a possibility that..." She couldn't bring herself to say it. The tears spilled over.

"Aww, come on now, Bugs," he comforted. He pulled her close and let her cry.

"Already made her cry?" his father teased.

Jake looked up at him as he held Laynah. "She's crying over my impending death."

"Don't say that so casually," Laynah said loudly.

He chuckled.

"And it's not funny," she rebuked him.

"Sorry."

"She's right, Jake," Jodi put in. "It's not funny, however, it is the reality of being the wife of a Marine. And the mother of one," she added softly. "It takes a strong woman to volunteer to do that, and I happen to know that you, Miss Laynah, are about as strong as they come."

Laynah looked up at the sweet woman who was about to be her mother-in-law. She sniffed. Wiped her tears. Nodded. "I can do this."

She looked at Jake. "Let's get married before you leave. I want to know what it's like to love you completely before you go off to save the world."

Jake's gut tightened at her words. He nodded, kissed her again. He looked up at their parents who were apparently following their whole conversation. "Looks like we're gonna have a wedding within the next four months!"

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"So, sis, you are coming to my Hooding ceremony, aren't you?" Marissa Coley asked on the video call. She squinted at the phone, pulling at a few strands of her bangs to straighten them, then blinked back at her sister's face.

Mickey Davis smiled at her little sister. She was so proud of her. They'd come through a hard time back when Marissa was just sixteen and she'd floundered a bit. Who

wouldn't? Marissa's father, Mickey's step-father, a United States Senator, had tried to kill Mickey *and* Jeffy Kino, and had been found to have murdered many people, pretty much anyone who got in his way.

Their mother, Marion, had sided with her husband, and ended up in a mental hospital and eventually passed away from a weak heart from doing so many prescription drugs. Their mother had been as much of a victim as Talmond Daley's other victims. It just took her longer to die. Marissa had gone from being a relatively happy teenager to being confronted with the realization that her father was a monster and her mother an addict. She got lost for a bit. Had some bad relationships. But Grandmaster Kino had stepped in, counseled her, prayed over her, and set her on her present path.

Not only did she finally meet and marry an amazing man, Chris Coley, introduced to her by Jeffy Kino, but she was about to achieve an amazing feat. She was about to receive her PhD in psychology at NYU.

"You know it, sweetie. I'll be there with bells on and Jeff and the kids too."

"Okay, good. I was just checking. You do know it's only a week away, right?"

"Yes, hon, I know. Grandmaster Kino and Shelley and Jeffy and Cam are all coming. We're flying out together on Friday on one of Jason's jets."

"I can't wait to see you. And I have a surprise for you!"

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Psalm 127:3-5

"Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.
Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame when he speaks
with his enemies in the gate."

Chapter Twenty-One

May 5th Sunday Evening
South Kino Estate → Tanner Home

"Just four more days," Taylor said.

"Yeah, I gotta say, these past four weeks have seemed like a lot longer," Gabe said.

"Well, in those four weeks a lot of stuff happened. You were shot, kidnapped, rescued, became a national hero and a model for a body wash. I mean, it's a lot," she said with a giggle.

"I'm not a model, or a hero."

"Whatever you wanna believe, Gabe." She decided to change the subject. "So, how's the schoolwork coming?"

"I'm almost caught up. Finally got the term paper done. Just have a few more assignments, easy stuff."

"Are you still going to all the games to sit in the dugout?"

"Yeah, but it's not as hard now as it was at first."

"Are there still a bunch of people at the games?"

"I think it's starting to die down."

"Maybe they finally figured out that you're really not gonna play anymore."

"Hmm, may–be."

"Maybe–they figured it out? Or maybe–you're gonna play?" she asked.

"Well, Coach asked me if I'd like to practice with the team. And I do. I really want to, but I don't know if my mom will let me. I don't think she gets it, ya know, the very last of my high school sports. Do you get it?"

"Well, I've never played on a team, but I still think I get it. I can put myself in your place, and it makes me hurt to think this is it and you don't get to play anymore."

"Thank you."

"That reminds me, guess where I'm going tomorrow night?"

"Where?"

"My dad and brother, and uncles and Logan and JoJo and Jeff and Daniel and Jeremy and I are going to the Dodgers' game!"

"That's great Taylor."

"I'm really excited about it."

"I wish I could go with you. So, you realize you're the only girl?"

"Yeah, and that's okay except the bathroom thing."

"What's the bathroom thing?"

"So, if I had like, my mom, then I could go with her, but sometime in between all seven innings I'm gonna have to use the restroom, so that will be awkward having one

of the guys standing outside the restroom waiting on me."

"It wouldn't be awkward if it's your dad, but even so, it's worth the awkwardness to make sure you're safe. And by the way, it's nine."

"Nine what?"

"Nine innings in pro baseball. It's only seven innings for high school ball."

"Oh. Well, that's good to know."

"I'm sure your dad will fill you in."

"Yep, probably. So, I have a question."

"Shoot."

"Can you, like, I mean, do you know how to dance?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, I do."

"Really? I'm surprised."

"Why would that surprise you? I mean, I'm a martial artist, I'm an athlete, I can control my body."

"There are a lot of guys who are athletes who can't dance."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, but that's kind of a stereotype. Have you seen some of those end zone dances?"

"End zone dances? Never heard of it."

He sighed. "Google it, watch a few vids. And one day I want to take you to a football game."

"Oh, that's football? Oh, yeah, I think I know what you're talking about. So, back to the subject, I think it's cool that you can dance."

"Yeah, well I have five older sisters. We all dance. We used to make up little choreographed dances and skits and perform for the parents."

Taylor giggled. "Oh, now that is such a cute visual. Your parents must have some video. I gotta see that."

"You can ask my mom."

"Oh you can believe I will! Anyway, so if you can dance like you say you can, wanna put together a little choreography to do together at the prom?"

"Sure."

"Awesome! I'll pick something on TikTok and send it to you so you can work on it."

"Sounds cool."

"How hard should I make it?"

"You can make it— as hard as you want," he said.

"Ah, a challenge! I like it. Okay then, be ready for it!"

"Always ready for a challenge."

"I'm beginning to see that about you."

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May 6th Monday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Dad," Gabe said as he stuck his head into his father's home office.

"Yep, whatcha need, son?"

Gabe came in and sat down. "I need a big favor."

"Hmmm, must be important." He glanced at the time. "Are you going to school?"

"Yes, sir. I'm about to leave. And yeah, it's important, I mean, to me."

Keegan put down the pen he had in his hand so Gabe knew he was giving him his full attention. "Go ahead."

"I, uh, so, you know I've healed really fast, and I was running in the hall at school the other day and Coach Wilson stopped me." He smiled at his father's look, knowing he was thinking Gabe got in trouble. "He saw that I was running pretty fast and said it looked like I was my usual self and he asked me if I'd like to come out and practice with the team."

Keegan's brows rose and he nodded. "And I'm guessing you want to?"

"Yes, sir. Very much."

"You're feeling up to it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You just got home from the hospital Friday."

"I realize that. But I feel good. I feel strong. My leg doesn't hurt at all anymore. Not at all. That last wound on my shoulder is healing. My finger is a little sore, but if I were to tape it up good, I really think it'll be okay."

"I see. So, you're saying that you think you're good to go, except for one thing."

"Yes, sir."

"And that one thing is, you need to get your mother's permission to do this."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sure you realize that this practicing with the team can only mean one thing?"

"I'm hoping it does. I mean, it goes, if I can practice, then I can play. Dad, you understand it's my last ball experience before I graduate? It's one of the things I truly love in my life and I'm gonna have to leave it behind. It's killing me."

"I'd appreciate it if you don't use those words."

"Sorry."

Keegan smiled at his son. "I want you to have this final experience, Gabe and you've been cleared medically. You go ahead and go to practice today. I'll try to reason with your mom."

Gabe's eyes lit up and he smiled broadly. "Thanks, Dad."

"Don't thank me yet, kiddo. We might both be in the dog house by the time you get home this evening."

"Well, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

Keegan laughed. "Get outta here before I change my mind."

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May 6th Monday Morning

Ameritech Central Offices, Los Angeles, CA

"Got anything?" Eric asked.

"Well, yes and no," Jason said with a sigh. "We found the Santa Fe, it was registered to a Roger Chen, who is an Uber driver. The ride was requested online without the app and paid for by a prepaid Visa gift card. The name given was Marilyn Monroe. Obviously fake. Fare was dropped off at the Gateway shopping center."

"And what's there?"

"Pizza place, ice cream shop, Home Depot, Starbucks, Marshalls, several fast food establishments, PetSmart."

Eric sighed.

"I sent an agent with her picture to ask at every place, but no one recognizes her. I'll send someone again, ya know, different shifts."

Eric nodded. "Thanks, Jason. This is not a freebie. Make sure you bill me."

"We'll see."

Eric rolled his eyes. "Bill me or I'll stop asking you for help."

"Whatever, Master Kino."

"That's Grandmaster," Eric said with a grin.

Jason bowed. "I'll let you know what I find. Are you still flying Ameritech's friendly skies to New York on Friday?"

"Yes, of course. I can't let Marissa down. She finally has her act together and I'm proud of her and want to make sure she knows it."

"Of course. Kimmie is thinking she'd like to go too. Jensen is on assignment, but that still gives you guys Jeff and Agent Coley as far as protection."

"And me," Eric added.

"That goes without saying, *Grandmaster* Kino."

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May 6th Monday Evening

Tanner Home, *Pine Forest, Georgia*

Being downstairs alone and working on the choreography Taylor sent, was actually relaxing for Gabe. He'd come home from practice to his mother not speaking to his father and his sisters divided on the subject. Rose and Daisy took his side, Lily and Violet took their mother's side. He hated to be the cause of contention between his father and mother. He just wished his mom had played some sports in school. Then she'd understand.

He'd eaten quickly and headed downstairs to avoid all the contention he'd caused. First he did a little strength workout, because it was evident at practice that he'd lost a little bit of strength. He seemed to still have his speed, but his throwing arm was a little weaker. Not good for a shortstop. Still, it was all muscle memory and he was almost back to his old self after just one day of practice. The team had been ecstatic for him to be back, especially Peyton. Even the guy who'd been pulled off the bench to play right field appeared glad to have his teammate back. The original right fielder had moved to left, the left fielder moved to third and the third baseman to short in the shift to compensate for Gabe's absence. If Gabe was good enough to play tomorrow, that would change. But Gabe was pretty sure he wasn't quite ready.

Now, he was working on the choreography. The music Taylor chose was *'Uptown Funk*.' She chose choreography with some current moves mixed with some older pop styles. It was a challenge, but he had it down. He was breathing a little harder than normal, but he knew it wouldn't take much to get his fitness back. He decided he would work on the dance for thirty more minutes and then head upstairs to finish some schoolwork. Then he'd probably grab a snack before he fell unconscious into bed. He needed to sleep so he didn't get sick again and give his mom the opportunity to say, "I told you so."

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May 7th Tuesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Gabe!" Rose said sharply.

Gabe gasped, sat straight up in bed.

"Oversleeping won't help your cause very much."

He rubbed a hand over his face, glanced at the bedside clock. "Good grief," he muttered as he jumped out of bed. "Thanks, Rose."

She smiled. "I got your back, hon. Better move fast." She tossed a paper bag at him. "Here's some breakfast. You owe me," she said with a laugh as she left the room.

Gabe dressed quickly, gathered his books, his sports bag, and his breakfast and headed downstairs, poked his head in his father's office.

"Good morning, Dad. Gotta go. Running late."

Keegan frowned. "Good morning and I don't care how late you're running you'd better speak to your mother before you leave this house."

Gabe nodded, ran in the kitchen. Kissed Iris. Lizzy turned around, her hands on her hips. "You missed breakfast."

He held up the bag. "Got it right here."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling great."

"Uh huh. And will you play today?"

"I doubt it."

Lizzy sighed. "I love you, you know that, right? That's why I worry about you."

He drew a breath, came to her and kissed her cheek. "I know. I love you too. But I gotta go."

"Bye," she said softly.

Gabe ran out the door.

In his office Keegan lifted the phone. "Hello?"

"Yes, um, I'm looking for Agent Keegan Tanner."

"You found him, how can I help you?"

"Actually, I have some business I'd like to take up with you concerning a few members of your family."

He frowned. "Which members of my family are you referring to?"

"I'm speaking of your daughters."

"Are you? Interesting."

"Yes, sir. I saw a picture of your daughters recently online, I've tried to find their phone numbers, but it seems I can find very little information on them."

"Then I guess that means it's working."

"What's working?"

"Their security. You do know I'm with Ameritech Security, right?"

"Uh, yes, sir."

"Suppose you start from the beginning and tell me who you are and what you want with my daughters, and you have about five seconds."

"Right now I represent *Pure Life Cosmetics*. They have a line of all-natural makeup and skin creams called *Twin Wave Beauty*. I saw a picture of your daughters on Teenspotter.com and have been trying to reach them. I was able to contact a woman who

runs the site named Isla August. She refused to give me any information except that they were your daughters and I could reach you at Ameritech Security."

"I see. And your name is?"

"My name is Michael Moreland."

Keegan was silent a moment.

"Hello?"

"That's your real name?"

"Yes, sir. I don't think I understand."

Keegan didn't believe in coincidences. Michael Moreland was the false name he'd used when he was undercover with the FBI. It was the name Lizzy knew him by during the few months she'd taken care of him after his accident when he was hiding from the bad guys, and during the time they'd fallen in love.

"Mr. Moreland, how old are you?"

"I'm only twenty-four, sir, but I'm good at what I do."

"And what is it you do?"

"I plan ad campaigns or media campaigns for small companies that can't afford to hire a big advertising agency. I've successfully launched several young companies into the limelight."

"You won't mind if I do a little research on you?"

"No, sir, I don't mind."

"Which of my daughters are you interested in speaking with?"

"The twins."

"That doesn't narrow it down too much."

"From the picture I saw, it looks like there are two sets. I am interested in speaking with either of them."

"And what exactly is your focus?"

"Well, sir, if you don't mind, I'd prefer to take that up with them. From the little I've been able to find out, they are legally adults and capable of handling their own business."

Keegan counted to ten. "We're about to be done. You might want to rethink your approach and get back to me."

"But, couldn't I just get their numbers? I just want to talk..."

"And you might want to do some research on me." He hung up the phone. Picked up his cell. "Leslie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Put a trace on this number." He gave her the readout from his office phone. "Name is Michael Moreland. Age twenty-four. Find out everything you can get me about him, right down to a birth certificate."

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, and good morning."

"Good morning, sir," she said brightly.

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May 7th Tuesday Afternoon

Pine Forest High School, Pine Forest, Georgia

The locker room was awfully quiet. Gabe wondered what was going on. This somber

attitude was not the way to go out there and win. He walked over to where Peyton was stretching. “Hey, Peyton. So, what’s going on?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I mean, it seems more like we’re going to a funeral than out to play ball in the middle of a winning season,” Gabe complained.

Peyton glanced around. “I think the guys are just thinking about old times. Ya know, wishing you were still playing. Wishing you were back.”

“Well, that’s cool and all. I know I wish the same thing, but at least Coach let me practice with you guys yesterday. And at least I’m here in the locker room and not just meeting you guys in the dugout. It’s almost like I’m still part of the team.”

A few of the other seniors gathered around. “Yeah, but you ain’t part of the team, Gabe,” Luke retorted.

Gabe looked up at him, surprised by the harshness in his voice. Maybe the guys weren’t so happy to have him back. He nodded. “Okay, that’s cool. I get it.”

“Naw, I don’t think you do,” Elias said.

If something could break his heart, this was probably the thing that could do it. Gabe swallowed. “I think I do. You guys took up the slack and produced a winning season without me. And that is freakin’ awesome. But it was one thing to invite me into the dugout during games, and another whole thing to invite me back to practice and have me in the locker room. You guys did it without me, and you sure don’t need me now that you’re down to your last six games.”

Liam stepped forward. “Yeah and you think you can just waltz back in here and pick up where you left off, just like that. Well, that’s not how it is.”

Gabe stood up, an instinctive self-defense move. If this was heading where it seemed it was heading, he needed a little bit of room. “You’re right, Liam, that’s not how it is. It’s just that it’s my final season of...”

Elias shoved him back down. “Sit down and for once, just shut up, Tanner. Ya can’t just come back here and think you’re gonna join us as part of the team in that dugout...”

“Unless you have this.”

Those last words were spoken by Coach Wilson. The guys parted and the coach handed him a new uniform. The guys all cheered. Gabe blinked. Looked around at all the smiling faces. He breathed a huge sigh of relief. He hadn’t even thought about his uniform. The one he had was soaked with blood and in an evidence bag with the FBI.

“We had you goin’,” Elias said with a laugh.

Gabe smiled, nodded. “Yeah ya did. I thought I was gonna have to kick somebody’s butt.”

“I know,” Lucas said. “When you stood up I thought, uh oh, here we go.”

The team laughed.

“Well, Tanner,” Coach began. “The team, the other coaches, and me, we’re all glad to have you back with us. The seniors especially. You’ve played with these guys all your life from way back in t-ball, and they all came to me and asked if we could make this happen. So, welcome back, son. Don’t know how much playing time you’ll get, but at least you’re part of the team.”

Gabe nodded. “Thanks, guys.” He had to stop and clear his throat because of the

emotion he felt. "It's, uh, been killing me to think that all this was over. I mean, I realize it's about to be over anyway, but I really needed this. It means more than I can say. Really, thanks."

"We got you, Gabe," Peyton said. "For life."

"Gimme a break, Peyton," Elias said. "What's next, a pinky swear?"

The team laughed.

"Suit up, guys," Coach barked. "Five minutes."

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After several away games, they were finally back, playing at home. Gabe took in every single moment. He looked for his father up in the home side bleachers and there he was, as usual, bouncing Iris on his hip as he put his fingers to his mouth and whistled. Iris put her hands over her ears, making Gabe smile. He was surprised to see his mother sitting there too. She smiled at him, and his heart healed. His sisters, except for Heather, were there with dates it appeared. Jake and Laynah waved and Laynah let loose one of her deafening whistles.

He tried to take it all in, commit it to memory. The National Anthem, the vets on the field, the smell of dirt mingling with hotdogs and hamburgers cooking at the concession stand. The crowd cheering and chanting and screaming at the umpires. It was awesome.

Every time the guys came in from the field they wiped their hands on Gabe's new uniform. It almost looked like he'd actually played. At one point Peyton wiped his hands and face on Gabe's shirt.

"Ugh, you smell," Gabe said as he pushed him away.

"Guess he needs some of your body wash," Carlos suggested.

The team all laughed.

"You guys don't fool me," Gabe replied. "I could smell that stuff all over the locker room. Every single one of you has been using it."

They laughed again, but didn't deny it.

Gabe did not get to play, but he didn't expect to. He'd only been to one practice. They won the game which put them at eighteen wins, five losses for the season. He had a double header on Friday, the day before the prom, and that made him realize something. Taylor would be here, in Pine Forest. Would she want to come to his game? Would she be upset that he wasn't spending the evening with her? It was the classic not being able to have your cake and eat it too. Because he wanted to play ball. And he wanted to be with Taylor. He sighed. He'd been committed to his team before he and Taylor became interested in each other. He'd been desperate to be back on the team. He hoped she'd understand. He hadn't had time to speak to her. She was at the Dodger's game last night. He woke up late and had been at school all day. She hadn't texted him.

The game ended. His parents waited on him and drove behind him on the way home as they'd been doing since the incident. As soon as he got home he showered and went to his mom to reapply a dry bandage.

She was quiet as she dressed the wound.

"Um, are you still mad at me?" he asked.

"Not mad, Gabriel. Just worried."

"How does it look?"

"It looks calm and like it's healing. Just be careful. We have to keep it clean and dry."

"Yes, ma'am, I will."

"I'm sad that you think I don't understand," Lizzy said.

"I don't mean to make you sad, Mom. It's okay that you don't understand. You never played on a team before."

"I was a cheerleader in high school. My boyfriend was the captain of the football team. I believe I do understand."

"Oh, well, I didn't know that," Gabe said softly. "What position did he play?"

"He was the quarterback. And he was good."

"Get any offers?"

"Yes, several, from D1 schools, but he was also very smart and applied to MIT and was accepted. That's where he would have gone to school."

"Would have?"

"Yes. Instead, he ended up getting a girl pregnant and he ended up going into the military to support her and the baby."

"But he was your boyfriend, so, he cheated on you?"

She smiled. "No."

The light went on. "Oh. So, we're talking about my sisters' father?"

"Yes."

He was quiet a minute. "Why have we never talked about this?"

She sighed. "Well, it doesn't seem like the kind of thing a mother just brings up to talk to her son about."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Sounds like it was a hard time for you."

"It was, and that's very astute of you. But, Gabe, there are always consequences to our actions. Bradley and I should have resisted the sexual attraction, but it was too strong and we were too weak and that's what happened. His parents never forgave me."

"Forgave YOU?"

"If not for me their son would have gone to MIT, made something really big of himself. Instead, because of me, he's dead."

"Mom, you don't really think that do you?"

She shrugged. "Because of the pregnancies, Bradley joined the Army to support us instead of going to college."

"Sounds to me like he made a choice to love you and take care of you. That was HIS choice. So, don't think that."

"It doesn't matter what I think, Gabe. What matters is the moral of the story. Don't have sex until you're married."

He nodded, thinking of the story Brayden told him about being conceived in a hospital bed before his parents were married. He wondered if they still would have been married if she hadn't been pregnant with him. However, he couldn't ask her that question, because he promised Brayden he wouldn't tell his parents that Brayden had let slip the little secret.

He looked up. "I just want you to know, I love you, Mom."

She hugged him. "I love you too, baby boy."

"And you still love Dad too, right?"

"What a silly question. I love your father with all my heart."

Gabe smiled. "That's good to know. One more question, Mom."

She brushed a hand through his hair. "Go ahead."

"Are you really happy about this baby?"

She smiled. "Absolutely. Just as happy and excited as I was when I was expecting you. Children are such a blessing, a gift from God, and I only pray I will be equal to the task."

"You will be, Mom, cuz *you* are the best mom ever."

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May 7th Late Tuesday Night

Tanner Home → South Kino Estate

"So, Tay, how was the game?" Gabe asked.

"It was so much fun! I can't believe I've been missing this stuff all my life. I really learned a lot and the more I learn the more I love it. I want to go to more games. I want to get a Dodgers jersey and... "

"Uh, hold up, if you're gonna get a jersey, it should be a Braves' jersey."

"Why's that?"

"Cuz they're my team, and I'm gonna take you to a bunch of their games."

"Really? How are you gonna do that?"

"Well, I'm graduating in a few weeks and your summer vacation is coming up. Maybe you can come here to visit for a few weeks. And maybe I can come there too. We can actually go on real dates. And I'll take you to as many games as you want."

"That would make me really happy, but I doubt that will happen. My parents are very strict when it comes to my safety."

"My father provides security for thousands of cases. Your dad knows that. You'd be safe here with us."

"Well, *you* weren't."

He was silent a moment. "Point made. We can assign an agent to you."

"I'll put out feelers to my parents. See what they think."

"You do that. Anyway, I'm glad to hear that you want to see more baseball."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, because the coach asked me if I wanted to practice with them and they presented me with a new uniform, which means there is a chance I'll get to play on Friday."

"Oh, I would love to see you play again!"

"I'm really glad about that. I was worried you'd be upset that you came all this way and here I was playing ball instead of paying attention to you."

"You must know I'm not like that. I don't demand everything be about me. And I loved watching you play that first time and I'll love it again. I could watch you play all night."

"Cool, because it's a double header."

"What's a double header?"

"It's where we play two games back to back."

"Oh wow! That sounds like fun!"

Gabe chuckled. "Taylor, you are truly a very cool chick."

"You're pretty cool yourself, Gabriel Tanner."

"I need to get some sleep. But it won't be long now until we're together. I probably won't be able to talk to you again until I see you on Thursday after practice."

"Less than forty-eight hours. I can't wait."

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May 7th Even Later Tuesday Night

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Once Keegan put Iris to bed, he called the rest of his girls together in the den. He sat down next to Lizzy and smiled at the twins.

"I know it's late but we needed to have this meeting and there never seems to be a time when we have you all together. But this is important, so bear with me."

"Don't beat around the bush, Dad," Rose said. "If someone is sick or hurt, just come out and tell me."

He smiled. "No, it's nothing like that. I received a call early this morning from a young man who saw your picture on Teenspotter.com. He wanted your contact information. He said he was representing a cosmetic company called *Twin Wave*. Ever heard of it?"

"Yes," Lily answered. "We use a few of their products."

"My assumption is that he saw your picture and wanted to use you in some advertising for the company."

"Your assumption?" Daisy asked.

"Yes, he didn't get around to actually telling me exactly what he wanted because when I asked, he told me you ladies were legally old enough to make your own decisions and he preferred to speak with you personally."

Rose laughed. "Ha, I bet that went over well."

"Yep, that was pretty much the end of the conversation. I told him to call me back when he figured out a better approach."

"Good for you, Dad," Violet said. "I mean, he must not be from around here."

Her sisters laughed.

He shook his head. "The thing is, my flowers, he is correct. You are legally old enough to make your own decisions."

"What about the, you live in my house, you'll live by my rules thing?" Rose asked.

"That, is still true. That will never change. You girls chose to live here while you're in school. I have no problem with that. But no shenanigans, in or outside of this house, we all go to church together, etcetera. You know the rules. But I don't have the right to screen what may be a career opportunity for you without speaking with you first. Now, I've spoken with your mom, and she feels the way I do. She only has a problem with one thing, which we will talk about a little later."

"So, you checked this guy out?" Rose asked.

"Yes. He seems to be who he says he is. He's some kind of media prodigy. He devises branding and ad campaigns for small companies. So far, he has put every single company he's worked for on the map. My question for each of you is, do you want me to give him your contact information?"

The twins looked at each other. It was Rose who responded, as usual. "That depends

on something. You said you told him to figure out a better approach. If he does, and has the guts to reach out to you again, and you feel like he's adjusted satisfactorily, and you trust him, then, and only then, will I be willing to hear what he has to say. But that's only me. Sisters?" She looked pointedly at her sisters.

"We agree with Rose," Violet said.

The other two nodded.

Keegan sighed. "You girls are not stupid. You are all beyond beautiful. You are– sexy," he said with a sigh.

"Was that hard for you to say?" Lily said, making her sisters and mother giggle.

"I'm just trying to see you the way guys see you." Keegan frowned. "What I'm trying to say is, you are not naive concerning how the world sees beautiful, young ladies. I mean, two sets of twins. All blondes, all blue-eyed, all with, uh, with good– bodies. I don't want you to be exploited as sex symbols. If he intends to use you as models or spokespersons for the *Twin Wave* brand, that's fine, but I don't want you in provocative clothing, or doing provocative acts. That's my personal feeling about that." He looked at his wife. "Lizzy?"

She smiled and nodded her head. "What we want and what you girls want may end up being different, though I hope not. What you choose is between you and God. You know He wants you to be honest and clean and chaste. He wants you to represent His kingdom the best that you can. We've tried to teach you the difference between right and wrong. So far, you've done nothing but make us proud. But there is a time we have to let go and allow you to make your own decisions. I only ask that you pray about every decision you have to make, and listen, really listen for the answer, and then— actually obey."

"Well said, Elizabeth," Keegan said softly.

"So," Rose began. "What was the other thing? You said Mom has a problem with one thing. Is it a big thing or something small?"

Keegan nodded. "Yeah, I don't know if it's something good or bad. I know you've heard us say many times that there are no such things as coincidences. When something synchronistic happens or presents itself, it can either be a sign from God that we are on the right path, or possibly a sign saying to stand up, take notice, be alert, this is significant. It also could even be a warning. I probably would have just brushed off his phone call completely if not for this synchronicity."

"Good grief, Dad, I'm on pins and needles here," Rose said.

"The man's name is Michael Moreland," Keegan said quickly. "Which was the name I used way back when you first met me."

"Oh, I remember," Daisy said. "I was only three, but I remember. You told us you were just teasing us and it was later when we heard all the story that we understood you'd been undercover for the FBI."

"So, when this guy told me his name, it freaked me out a little."

"Me too," Lizzy said.

"It is kinda freaky," Rose said. "But think about it. Mom, the man you fell in love with had this name, or had it at first. So, this may not be a bad sign."

"Maybe," Lizzy said halfheartedly.

"But I was lying to your mother with that name. It was a deception. And 'the LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful,'" Keegan quoted.

"Proverbs?" Daisy asked.

Keegan smiled, nodded.

"So, you had him checked out, he's really who he says he is?"

Keegan nodded again.

"So he's not deceiving us," Rose said.

"Not in his name," Keegan said. "But I definitely think we should be very cautious in proceeding."

"I agree," Violet said. She glanced at her twin. Rose had always been hard-headed. She made snap decisions. Some of that was simply because her mind was quick and sharp. But part of that was her brazen personality. She hoped she would take their parents' advice and pray and be cautious.

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May 9th Thursday Wee Hours Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan glanced at the clock. It was two AM. He pulled his gun from the night table and headed downstairs. He checked the house, listened at the entrance to the den, entered the room and laid the weapon down on a table.

His son sat on the couch looking up at the tv screen, the video of his abduction playing with the sound turned down low.

"Gabriel?" Keegan said softly.

Gabe turned slowly and looked up at his father. "Yes, sir. Sorry, did I disturb you?"

Keegan ignored his question. "What's going on?"

Gabe shrugged. "Couldn't sleep. Had a nightmare. Thought maybe I could get some of this stuff out of my brain. You know, uh, I forgot what they call it."

"Exposure therapy," Keegan supplied. "Ya wanna talk about the nightmare?"

Gabe thought about the question. Shuddered. "No, don't think so."

Keegan sat down on the sofa next to his son and they watched the video for a little while in silence. Watching a full grown man kick his son made Keegan want to kill, and he knew that was not a good thing. It would be so easy to go down that road. He wondered what Gabe thought as he watched it. "So, Gabe, seeing that guy kick you, how does that make you feel?"

Gabe shrugged. "It just makes me remember how much it hurt every time he kicked me. It really hurt. Can't really describe how much it hurt."

Keegan's lips pressed tightly together. "It doesn't make you mad at the guy?"

"Oh, well, yes and no. I think he was just following orders. I mean, who knows how he got hired by Mia, or why he accepted money to do what she wanted to do to me. How much did she pay and why did he need the money? I'm trying not to judge. Still, he did seem to get some pleasure out of causing me pain."

Keegan nodded. "What if, let's say, that was one of your sisters he was kicking."

Gabe was silent as he thought. Finally he spoke softly. "Well, of course, that would definitely make me mad. It would actually make me crazy. It would make me want to beat the guy to a pulp, or worse."

Keegan nodded.

"Is that how you feel when you see it, Dad?"

"Yes. I'm trying to not feel that way. But I'm weak."

"You're human, Dad. And you're strong, and I'm grateful for your strength. What's that Chinese proverb? 'It's better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.' I believe in you, Dad. I want to be just like you."

"No, son, be better than me."

"Yeah, I don't think that's possible."

Keegan sighed. "You need to try to get some sleep."

Gabe nodded. Turned off the video. "Yes, sir. I think I can. Thanks, Dad. Good night."

"Good night, son."

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May 9th Thursday Afternoon

Pine Forest, GA

Gabe couldn't keep the smile off his face as he checked out his truck, jumped in and sped away from practice. What an awesome day. He was completely caught up with his schoolwork. He'd been told by two of his teachers that his grade was so high, he was exempted from having to take his end of year exams. He would be graduating summa cum laude. But all that was just the beginning. His practices the past two days had gone well, and he would probably get to play tomorrow, maybe even start. Most of all, Taylor and her mom had arrived and were currently at the Inn, talking to Jake and Laynah about their wedding.

He rushed home, flew in the house, straight into the kitchen, filled a glass with raw milk and drank it down. Then he went in search of his parents and found them in his father's office. He hugged his mother, kissed her cheek, and then told them the good news about his grades, about graduating with honors and about playing tomorrow.

He then went to leave the room in a rush.

"Where do you think you're headed to?" Keegan asked.

"Oh, to take a quick shower."

"Before you do that, you have some chores to take care of. The garage has to be cleaned out, the hedges in the back need to be trimmed, and the cars need washing."

Gabe's face fell. He drew a deep breath. Nodded. "Okay, but... "

Keegan laughed. "I'm just kidding, Gabe. Go."

He grinned. "Yes, sir. Thanks. Uh, where's Iris?"

"She's out back with Lily," Lizzy answered.

He nodded. "Okay, I'll see her later." He rushed up the stairs. Twenty minutes later he came down, dressed casually in jeans and a deep blue knit shirt. He started out the door.

"Wait," one of his sisters yelled at him.

He stopped, went into the kitchen, his impatience showing.

Rose looked him over, reached up and pulled a little bit of his hair down onto his forehead. She leaned forward and smelled him. Nodded. "You'll do. Walk over there, don't run, cuz you'll get sweaty."

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am? I think I like that." She smiled and kissed his cheek. "Go. Don't make her wait any longer."

He ran out the door, forced himself to walk. He went out the side security gate, punching in the code to unlock it. While he walked the short distance he pulled out his phone and called her. She answered on the first ring.

"Hi Gabe!"

"Hey! I'm about thirty seconds away from the inn."

The phone went dead. "Hello?"

No answer. He shoved the phone in his pocket, quickly moved along the walk to the front of the inn, looked up and a beautiful girl came running out the door, down the steps and jumped into his arms.

His heart slammed into his chest. The relief was immediate. The ache he'd been feeling for so long was gone. She had her body wrapped around him. Her arms around his neck. Her legs around his waist. Her head on his shoulder, which was a little painful but he didn't care.

He had one hand snug around her waist, holding her tight, and the other tangled in her thick, black, silky hair. She raised her head to look at him and he crushed his lips to hers. He let go of her waist and she slid down to stand in front of him. He used both hands now to cup her beautiful face and kissed her again, this time more gently, slowly, thoroughly.

"Lord, you smell so good," she said with a giggle.

"You do too," he whispered, and then kissed her again.

As soon as he pulled away she squealed in delight and jumped up again to wrap her legs around his waist.

"Ugh, this feels so good. Oh, Gabe I'm so happy to finally be near you again."

"Me too," he said softly. He smiled. "I mean I'm happy to be near you."

She laughed.

"Okay you two, come on inside," Bree called.

Giggling, Taylor took Gabe's hand and they walked into the inn.

Bree hugged the young man whom her daughter was so in love with. Put her hands on either side of his face and smiled at him. "I am so very grateful that you are standing here, alive and well, young man."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kino. Me too."

"How are you feeling? Strong? Back to normal?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Almost. Maybe a little weaker, but the strength will come back soon enough."

"How about in here?" she said, tapping his head.

"I think I'm good."

"Is anyone hungry for some dinner?" Miss Maddie called.

They gathered around the giant table along with other guests at the Inn. The other guests were full of questions for the famous people sitting at the table. They fawned over Bree and her latest movies. They cooed over Taylor and her beauty, saying she looked like a Polynesian princess, and they gushed over Gabriel and his ordeal. Gabriel used the opening to praise Jake, who'd been key in rescuing him, and that turned the conversation successfully to the sacrifices made by the military.

"Good move," Taylor whispered.

He smiled. "Thanks. So, you wanna go somewhere and, uh, work on our dance?"

"I would love to!"

He looked at his phone. "It's only 7:30. It'll be light outside another hour or so. We can go out back."

She smiled. "Let's do it." She glanced at her mother. "Um, Mom, can we be excused? We have to work on our choreography."

Bree nodded. "Where are you going?"

"We thought we'd go just in the back, on that little grassy area on the other side of the pool."

Bree sighed. An Ameritech agent had picked them up from the airport and brought them to the Inn and she was second guessing her actions. She thought they were secure for the night. "I shouldn't have sent Agent Dalton home for the night."

John Appel nodded at his son.

"Um, I can watch out for them," Jake volunteered.

Bree looked over at the young man. He was a Marine, special forces. He looked so young and innocent, but she understood he was indeed capable of taking care of business. She nodded. "Thanks, Jake. That would be great."

"Awesome," Laynah said. "I can't wait to see this dance."

Gabe smiled. He was pretty sure they all were gonna be pretty impressed. The youngsters cleared their dishes and headed out back. They got Laynah to hold the phone and play the music over and over. Taylor had spliced several TikTok videos together to make a longer dance. Laynah and Jake were highly impressed by the dancers.

"Geez, Gabe is there anything you can't do?" Laynah complained.

Gabe just shook his head at the silly remark.

They worked for over an hour and finally sat down on the grass to chat as the sun sank down behind the trees.

Taylor told Laynah and Jake about the baseball game she'd been to, and then they chatted about the wedding plans that were starting to take shape. Gabe didn't want the night to end, but he knew he had to get some sleep. He had school in the morning and a double header in the evening. So he finally stood, held his hand out to Taylor. "I need to get you inside and head on home."

She stood, but pouted. "I just want to stay with you."

He turned to her, pulled her close. "I feel the same way, but I have to get some rest. I'll call you in a bit."

Jake and Laynah moved away to give them some privacy.

Gabe kissed her. "Lord have mercy, Taylor, I want to bring you back home with me."

"I can't stand to be away from you," she whispered. "Let's sneak out and meet tonight."

He chuckled. "We could, if you want to make it so I'll never get to see you again. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, your parents, and mine for that matter, are counting on me to be responsible enough to take care of you and make the right decisions. As much as that sounds like a

really good time, I have to decline."

She sighed.

"Are you mad at me?"

She shook her head. "How could I be mad at you?"

He pulled her in hard against him, kissed her again. "Good night, Taylor. I'll walk you in."

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Luke 16:10

"One who is faithful in a very little
is also faithful in much, and one
who is dishonest in a very little
is also dishonest in much."

Chapter Twenty-Two

May 10th Friday Evening
Pine Forest High School, Pine Forest, Georgia

They'd already had a prayer and pep talk in the locker room since it was a home game. They'd just finished stretching and warming up and were back in the dugout getting ready for the opening ceremony. Gabe looked around. He could see his parents, his sisters, the Appels and Stewarts. Ricky Kino, son Eric, JoJo and Logan had arrived and they sat in front of his parents with Bree and Taylor. The weird thing was it was happening again. People everywhere. He leaned over and spoke to Peyton. "Look at all the freakin' people. What is happening? I thought all this stuff had gone away."

Peyton frowned, looked down at the ground, kicked at the dirt.

Gabe narrowed his eyes at his friend. "What did you do?"

Peyton grimaced. "Sorry, Gabe. Right after you were taken, that Isla lady got in touch with me because someone told her you and I were best friends. And so she called me the other day for an update on you because she heard you went back to the hospital. I told her about us seniors trying to get you to at least come practice with us. And then, she called me back yesterday and I told her you were gonna get to play."

"I am? How do you know?"

"Coach told me."

Gabe blew out a breath. "Okay." He shook his head. "But Peyton, can you please just keep your mouth shut about me?"

"Sorry, dude. I'm no good at keeping secrets. And like, now, Coach is gonna be pissed that I let you know you're gonna play before he told you."

Gabe shook his head. "I'll try not to let on that I know."

Peyton nodded, but didn't smile.

Gabe's eyebrows rose. "What else? What else are you not tellin' me?"

"I, uh, I may have let it slip to the Isla lady that Taylor Kino is coming to the prom with you and also that she'll be at the game tonight."

"Good grief." He sighed and turned away.

"You pissed at me, man?"

"I'm trying not to be."

"Look, I'm sorry. Is it gonna mess you up with Taylor?"

"Probably not. She's used to publicity."

"Well then, good. But, bro, you'd better get used to it too. Cuz, this is just the beginning."

Gabe nodded. "Yep, you're right. Just do me a favor and try to not talk about me to anyone with a camera, phone or mic pointed at you, okay?"

"I'll try."

"Alright, guys listen up," Coach Wilson said. "We have five games left. Two tonight, one Tuesday, and two next Friday. In light of what's taken place, Gabe you start tonight. It may only be for a few innings. We'll see how you feel. Got it?"

Gabe smiled, nodded. "Yes, sir, Coach. Thank you, sir."

Out in the stands Taylor, young Eric, Ricky and Bree signed a few autographs. Taylor kept looking up, trying to see Gabe peek out of the dugout. When they started introducing the teams Ricky nodded at Agent Dalton who then kindly leaned down and told the group there would be no more autographs during the game, but they would be happy to sign more after the game for a very short time.

When Gabe's name was called a giant cheer went up as the crowd welcomed him back. Taylor's face glowed as she watched her guy trot out, slap hands with the team and take his place along the first base line. He turned and smiled at her. She was wearing her Team Gabe shirt from the Mini-MART. She blew him a kiss. He grinned and pointed at her. Then he tipped his hat at his father, and at Ricky.

Gabe turned back around to take in and memorize everything he could about standing on the field with his team before a game. Elias, their left fielder, looking fierce as usual. Liam, the catcher, always calm. Luke, whose name was Lucas but they all called him Luke so they wouldn't get him mixed up with Peyton's little brother, Lucas. Luke was their first baseman, and he was smiling as usual. Carlos, tonight's starting pitcher, kicking at the dirt. Peyton, the center fielder, jumping up and down to loosen up, Deion, third baseman, rolling his shoulders, and second baseman Andre chatting with right fielder Drake.

He watched the military vets come to the pitcher's mound, watched to see all the teams and people in the stands remove their hats and place them over their hearts. Everyone turned to face the flag, the symbol of his country that so many men and women had died for. He felt the familiar emotions. Maybe that is what he needed to do. Join the military. Fight for his country. His mother and sisters would freak. Maybe his father too. As the anthem ended the crowd roared. Gabe went about his business of revving up his team. They took the field, warmed up, threw the ball around the horn and the ump yelled, "Play ball!"

After the fourth inning, Gabe sat on the bench. It was fair that he only played four innings. He was tired. Kyle went in to rightfield and everyone shifted. Carlos was pitching a heck of a game. So far he'd allowed only a single hit. Gabe had not done badly at all. Made a couple of great plays at short. His first at bat was a line drive single which he stretched into a double. When he flew past first and everyone realized he was going for two, the crowd went crazy. He was happy to feel like he was almost back to normal. His second at-bat he hit a little dribbler to third but beat it out. Both times he scored. Now he cheered for his teammates, calling encouragements.

When the first game ended, he came to the fence and motioned at Taylor. She glanced at her dad and he nodded. She went to join him at the fence. "Hey," he said, his body pressed against the fence, his hands gripping the chain link on either side of her head.

She smiled. "Hey."

"How am I doing?"

"I think you're wonderful."

"I think you're beautiful with your ponytail coming out the back of your cap. Where did you get a Pine Forest High School Rebel cap?"

She giggled. "I bought it off some guy."

He laughed. "Well, I'd better go. Would it be too much to ask for a little kiss, right here at the fence with probably everyone looking on?"

She lifted her chin, placed her mouth in the center of one of the links. He bent down and quickly kissed her. He backed away, grinning, his hand on his heart. The crowd was cheering and he took his hat off and waved. They went wild.

Taylor turned, glanced up at her parents who weren't smiling.

She went back to sit. Ricky leaned toward her. "You realize that is gonna make more than social media. It's gonna be on the news, main networks and probably most sports channels."

She shrugged. "It was worth it."

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May 11th Saturday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Taylor sat in the living room/lobby area of the Inn. Her brother and cousins sat next to her. They were scrolling and making comments on all the excitement from last night's game. Sure enough, the tiny kiss Taylor and Gabe shared was everywhere. Closeups. Their hands touching, their lips touching. Gabe smiling with his hand on his heart. There were other pics and videos too. Gabe sliding into second. Gabe sliding into home. Gabe running, Gabe batting, Gabe scooping up a hard grounder and firing it to first. He'd gone viral again. It was Saturday morning and he was still trending.

There were even memes and comments speculating on the relationship between Gabe and Taylor. Some about Taylor being with him because of his social media status. Some about him being with her because of her name. Young Eric had already advised her to not read the comments. She usually did not pay attention to that sort of stuff, but a few of the ones she glanced at were pretty hurtful. Still, the majority of them were positive and encouraging, calling them Hollywood's youngest power couple.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text.

~~Can you meet me in the Inn's kitchen in ten minutes?

She smiled, texted back.

~See you then-heart emoji

Eric nodded at her. "Just a warning, little sister. If he wants to take you somewhere, check with Mom or Dad first. I don't want you to mess up and get grounded."

She smiled, kissed her brother's cheek. She ran upstairs, checked her hair, added a splash of body spray and headed back down.

Gabe came into the Inn through the back door. The kitchen crew working turned and greeted him. Some congratulated him on the games last night, both of which they won. He knew the kitchen crew well because he'd spent many summers working in this kitchen. He chatted with them until Taylor entered the room. Then he lost all thought. She approached and he took her hand, drew her over toward the back door, turned and kissed her.

They stood face to face. Forehead to forehead.

"You smell good," he said.

"Thanks. Did I tell you last night how awesome you were?"

"About a hundred times. Listen, I just needed to see you. I couldn't wait until tonight. The thought of you being right next door and not all the way across the country, I had to take advantage of that."

"I'm glad you did. I just wanna make sure the time hasn't changed. You'll be here at the Inn at 5:00 to pick me up. Right?"

"Yeah, but just a little earlier, because I was told to make time for pictures. And Peyton and Avery are gonna meet us here and ride in the limo. The dinner reservations are at 5:30 at a place in Griffin called Angelita's which is about twenty-five minutes away."

"Oooh, a limo, how fancy!"

He smiled. "You don't have to act impressed for me. I know you're used to much fancier stuff. I mean, Angelita's is about the fanciest restaurant around here without having to travel all the way into Macon or Atlanta. A lot of the kids go there on big dates. And I know some schools have their proms at fancy hotels or ballrooms, but our little school decorates the gym. I kind of like it that way. Better memories of school."

She nodded. "Gabe, I may be used to fancy stuff, but I'm not a snob. I only remarked about the limo because I didn't expect it."

"Did you think I'd take you to prom in my pickup?"

"I wouldn't mind if you did. But no, I figured we would be riding in an Ameritech SUV, driven by an agent."

"Well, Taylor, you got that last part right."

She giggled. A sound he loved.

"So, can you go for a walk with me if we stay on the Inn property?"

"Let me see." She texted her mom real quick.

She frowned. "Mom says, where on the property?"

Gabe shrugged. "Um, how about down past the pecan grove? I could show you the creek."

"My mom says, okay and I have one hour. Then I have to start getting ready."

"You're kidding? How long does it take you to get ready?"

"She'll insist I have some lunch. And a nap. And my hair is so long, it takes it a while to dry after my shower. There's a lot of stuff to do."

He nodded. "Okay, we have an hour. Let's go."

He took her hand and headed out the back door and across the large lawn toward the pecan trees. As they did they heard gunshots. Taylor froze. Gabe smiled at her, tugged on her hand. "That's your brother and cousins and Jake and Bugs getting in some long range shooting."

"Oh. Wonder why they didn't invite us."

Gabe frowned. "Sorry, they did, but I told them we had other plans. Guess I should've consulted you."

She smiled up at him. "What exactly do you have planned?"

"Just being alone with you, for just a little while. We always have someone watching

us or with us. I just wanted some time alone. If you'd rather shoot, I can go grab my guns and we'll head over there."

"No, I'd rather be alone with you."

He smiled. "Good."

They walked slowly, talking about the game, about the prom and about Gabe's plans for after graduation. As they started into the woods that led to the creek she asked him if he figured out what he wanted to do yet.

He sighed. "Well, I've toyed with the idea to go the military route." He glanced down at her to see if she had anything to say about that but the only thing he saw was a slight frown. "If I'd like to go warrior mode but not join the military, I could apply to try to be one of Jason's Elite." He sighed, shrugged. "I could go to college, get a business degree, or a degree in non-profit management, or even criminal justice, something that would allow me to work with my own foundation and do some kind of good in the world."

Taylor nodded. "What school would you go to?"

"I've been accepted at UGA, Alabama, Florida State, Texas, and USC."

"USC? Really?"

He smiled at her. "Yes, really. I'm considering it. I could go to school, be close to you, and that would be cool, but," he hesitated. "But I shouldn't really make an important decision about my life based on wanting to be near my girlfriend."

She grinned. "Your girlfriend, huh?"

He smiled. "I mean, isn't that pretty much what you are? And if not, would you consider accepting the title?"

"Would you accept the title," she began, putting the word 'title' in finger quotes, "of being MY boyfriend?"

He stopped as they came to the creek. Turned, put his hands on her waist. "Sure. In a heartbeat."

"I would be proud to be your girlfriend." She turned away quickly.

He watched as she slipped her sandals off. She was wearing a cute little, he didn't know what it was called. It was one piece, but not a dress. It was like overalls, except short at like, mid-thigh, and frilly. It was a soft yellow and utterly feminine. She stepped in the water and squealed at it being so cold. Her long, dark brown hair was in a single braid and it fell forward over her shoulder as she bent down to study the water flowing over her toes.

She was the most lovely thing he'd ever seen. He walked over to a tree, sat down in front of it and used it as a back rest, crossing his legs at the ankles. He could sit there watching her all day. She turned to look at him, smiled sweetly and his heart began to beat hard in his chest. He crooked a finger at her. She came to him immediately. He expected her to come sit next to him. Instead, she straddled him and sat down on his thighs.

He drew a deep breath. She moved forward and offered her mouth for his kiss and he gave it gladly. She moaned softly in the back of her throat and pulled away.

"Now I can say this to you in person, Gabriel Tanner. I love you," she murmured as she kissed him again.

He drew a breath. "And now, you can't hang up on me before I say I think I'm falling

in love with you too."

"You think?"

"I'm just being honest. I don't want to say those words lightly. I know we're young, and I know we barely know each other. But if I were to sit and imagine the perfect girl, in looks, in personality, in temperament, in beliefs, in spirit, you would fit that image completely."

"Oh, wow, that was poetic."

He chuckled. "Ah, Taylor, how perfect is this moment? Ya know, when they, um, took me and I came to the realization that I may not live much longer, it made me stop and pay attention to every single moment in life. Like, right now, the most beautiful girl in the world, sitting on my lap, that cool breeze that's blowing a few of your hairs that came loose from your braid, the sun shining down between the leaves of the trees, the feel of your lips when they touch mine, the way you smell, I'm trying to commit it all to memory."

She leaned down and kissed him again. He groaned and pushed her off his lap onto her back on the soft carpet of leaves and pine straw, leaned over her and took control of the kiss. The feelings were so strong and he wanted to do much more than kiss her. When he had that thought, he raised up, pulled away. "Wow."

She giggled. "I agree."

Breathing hard, he looked down at her, placed his hand on her abdomen, moved his thumb back and forth. She closed her eyes, and he knew she was waiting for him to continue. He swallowed hard. Stood up. She opened her eyes. He reached his hand down to help her to her feet and she let him.

"I'm, uh, sorry. I didn't mean to take things so far," he mumbled.

"I could say I accept your apology, but it would be hypocritical because I wanted you to keep going."

He closed his eyes, wrapped his arms around her and they stood together like that for a time. "When they had me, and I thought I was gonna die, I was wishing I'd had the time to know what it was like to have sex. And I was actually given the opportunity."

"What?"

He sighed. "The woman who took me, offered it to me. It seemed kind of like, well—kind of like Satan trying to get me to break God's rules right before I died."

"Were you tempted?"

He shook his head. "No. Not even a little bit. I was actually worried that she would like, well, I don't wanna talk about that, but no, I didn't want to give in. Let me just say, it was a good thing it was her asking and not you. Because you, Taylor Kino, are hard to resist. But I want to be strong, for you, for my own moral standards, and I guess just so God can smile down on our relationship."

"Oh, Gabe, those things, those things you say, that's what makes me know that I love you. Because I love God, I love Jesus, I love my family and I love you."

He took out his phone, checked the time. "We'd better head back. We might be a few minutes late."

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Gabe and his entire family arrived at the Inn. Gabe was holding a box with a corsage

in it. He wore a black tux with a crisp white shirt and a gold bow tie. He'd argued about the tie color, but his sisters absolutely insisted. They came in the front door and Jodi and John Appel made a big fuss about how handsome he was. Jake, young Eric, JoJo and Logan made the appropriate amount of fun of him. Laynah kissed his cheek and remarked at how good he smelled, which made everyone laugh.

Ricky came over, shook his hand. "Lookin' good there, Gabe."

"Uh, thank you, sir. And, um, thank you for making this happen. I mean, for bringing Taylor all the way across the country for me."

"Actually, I did it for her," he said with a chuckle. "And because I'd never hear the end of it if I didn't make it happen."

Gabe nodded. "She can be pretty insistent."

"Are you speaking about Taylor or my wife?"

Gabe's mouth fell open.

Ricky laughed. "I'm just giving you a hard time, son. We were happy to do this. You're a fine young man, and we couldn't choose anyone more worthy to take our daughter to prom."

Gabe swallowed. "Thank you, sir."

Bree came downstairs. Pulled out her phone and everyone started recording as Taylor came down the staircase. Even the other guests at the Inn did the same. Gabe looked up and his mouth fell open– again.

Taylor smiled as she started down the stairs. She grabbed the railing. "Oh, Lord, don't let me fall," she said softly making everyone laugh.

She wore a long form-fitting white and gold gown. The shoulder straps were metallic gold damask lace which came down at a 'V' to cover the bodice. More gold strands reached down to skim the sides of the dress. Her trim athletic form was breathtaking. The only jewelry was a delicate gold cross and tiny white pearl earrings. Her shiny long tresses were down, flowing around her face and shoulders and down her back.

When she made it to the third from bottom step, Gabe moved forward to take her hand. She smiled at him.

He shook his head. "Taylor, you look amazing."

She made it down to stand in front of him, looking up into his eyes. "You clean up real nice, Gabriel Tanner."

He grinned. "This is for you."

He handed her the white box. She opened it up and took out a lovely white wrist corsage made of small white roses and baby's breath, tied with a gold ribbon. "It's beautiful. How did you know to get white and gold?" she asked.

He laughed. "I didn't. I guess my sisters have been in touch with your mom. If not, these flowers would have been much more patriotic."

Taylor laughed, then looked at everyone. "Private joke," she explained.

Taylor looked at her mother. Smiled. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. I know how you feel about clashing colors." Bree then handed her a small white rose boutonniere which she then turned and pinned on Gabe's lapel. "There, now we really match."

"Stand over here so we can get some pics," Lizzy said. They moved over in front of

the window and patiently waited for parents, siblings and others to get their fill of pics and videos.

About that time Peyton arrived with his girlfriend.

Gabe introduced them. “Taylor, you remember Peyton.”

Taylor held out her hand. “Of course. Peyton, that homer last night was spectacular!”

He smiled. “Thanks.”

Gabe continued. “And this is Avery, Peyton’s much better half.”

Taylor giggled, took Avery’s hand. “It’s so nice to meet you, Avery. I love your dress!”

“I love yours too!” Avery gushed.

Ricky and Bree eyed each other. If their daughter knew anything, it was how to handle herself around people. She was a pro.

More pics were taken of both couples. Finally the kids made their way out and down to the limousine after being softly kissed on the cheek by their mothers, and Gabriel’s hand shaken by both fathers along with admonishments to behave and have fun. The four kids were being escorted and driven by two Ameritech agents, whose instructions were to be followed to a ‘T’ or there would be consequences.

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The girls chatted the entire way to the restaurant. Taylor asked how Avery and Peyton met which led down a winding road. The guys put in their two cents’ worth when they could. At dinner, Taylor talked about the Dodgers game which perked the guys up. As it turned out, Avery played softball which intrigued Taylor and led to another delightful conversation. Dinner was lovely. They finally arrived at the school at 7:30 and Taylor was extremely impressed that the prom committee was able to take a high school gym and turn it into an elegant ballroom.

The moment they walked in, there was a buzz. Taylor looked around in amazement. The theme was “Star Shower” and there were tiny twinkling lights in every place, ceiling, walls, even circling the floor. White tulle and crystal ornaments, like icicles and tear drops, hung everywhere. Nowhere could you see the bleachers or concrete block walls. There were high tables graced with white tablecloths, glowing faux candles and beautiful blue and white floral centerpieces. It was lovely. Taylor was in heaven getting a chance to experience this amazing transformation. She understood what Gabe meant about better school memories. She’d been to so many fancy hotel ballrooms, but none of them could surpass the ambience she was experiencing right now.

People gathered around them and Gabe did his best to introduce Taylor to everyone. His teammates were easy for her to remember because she was a fan. She tried hard to remember all the other names. To rescue her, as soon as the DJ played a slow song, Gabe asked Taylor to dance. They made their way onto the dance floor and he twirled her around and then slid an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

She smiled up at him. “This is so awesome. I am so happy right now.”

He brushed a soft kiss on her cheek. “It almost feels unreal.”

“I know, right?”

When the kids saw Gabe and Taylor dancing, the dance floor quickly filled up. Gabe looked around him with a smile. “This is cool. It usually takes half the night to get kids

out here dancing. It's all you, my amazing girlfriend."

She laughed. "I'd say it's all you, the Ultimate Male."

"Please don't say that," he muttered.

The music changed but they remained dancing.

He looked up, his mouth falling open as he spotted someone.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He took her hand and moved toward the person he spotted. "Isla? What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

She laughed. "I spoke to your principal, last week, pulled a few strings. Don't worry, I'm not gonna interfere with your special night. But just so you know, we are live right now."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would you have tried to stop me?"

"Maybe."

"That's why. Hey, I promise we'll talk later. For now, just go about your business like I'm not here. This prom is so charming. I'm loving every bit of it."

Taylor pulled on Gabe's hand. "It's okay Gabe. Get used to it and don't let it throw you. Come on, dance with me."

She pulled him out to the floor and they danced. As they did, Taylor nodded at someone behind them on the side of the dance floor. "Look at that guy, Gabe. He's sitting all alone."

Gabe glanced behind him. "That's Steve Williams. He's actually the class treasurer. He's really smart. But socially awkward. He's a nice guy though. Just like that girl sitting over there." He spun her around so she could see over his shoulder. "That girl in the pink, her name is Tessa. She's so quiet, but she comes to all the games, all the school activities. Don't really know her story."

Taylor's eyes lit up. "You absolutely must know what we need to do, right?"

"No, what?"

"I'll go ask Steve to dance. You go ask Tessa to dance. Then after one song, we'll put them together."

"Um, I don't know about this," Gabe said.

"Why? Are you shy?"

"Not really."

"Are you scared?"

"No," he said quickly.

She stepped back. "Let's do it." She turned quickly and headed toward Steve. His eyes got big as she neared him.

"Hi," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm Taylor."

He shook her hand. "Everyone knows who you are. Um, I'm Steve."

"It's nice to meet you Steve. Come dance with me."

She didn't give him time to answer. Just pulled him until he stood. She walked out onto the floor beside him.

"Um, I don't dance."

"Nonsense. If you can walk you can dance."

She took his hand, placed it on her back, placed her hand in his other hand. “Now, just move your feet back and forth—good! You’re doing great!”

Gabe smiled at beautiful Taylor. So vivacious and full of life. Accepting his fate, he moved toward Tessa. He smiled at her. “Hey, Tessa, um, nice to see you.” She actually looked behind her, which made Gabe chuckle. “You know another Tessa around here?”

She shook her head.

He reached out his hand. “Come on, dance with me.” Like Taylor, he didn’t give her time to turn him down. He pulled her to her feet and moved out onto the floor. Gently, he put his arm around her waist and swayed back and forth. He smiled down at her. She looked up at him with a look of terror. He laughed. “I’m not gonna hurt you. Just wanted to dance with you. Is that okay?”

She nodded. The music changed then to a quick-paced pop song. He let go of her and got her to fast dance a little bit. He smiled and nodded at the girl, encouraging her the best he could. They danced the whole song and when it went back to a slow number, Taylor was there, handing Steve off to Tessa. “You two have fun,” she said.

Steve and Tessa started dancing with each other and Taylor and Gabe danced away. But a minute later, Elias was tapping Gabe on the shoulder. Sighing, he backed away and watched his teammate slide a hand around Taylor’s waist. He frowned.

Gabe didn’t have to go searching for a partner though. His ex, Trisha, was standing there waiting. “Dance with me,” she demanded.

He did. This went on for several songs, both he and Taylor changing out to dance with the next person waiting. Finally, he’d had enough. He made apologies, went and grabbed Taylor from the clutches of her current dance partner and pulled her away to the refreshment table.

They got punch and gulped it down. Got another full cup and sipped.

“I was starting to wonder if you were ever gonna rescue me,” she said.

“Hey, this whole dance with someone else deal was your idea.”

She laughed. “You’re right. But just look at them. Don’t they look sweet?”

He glanced over at Steve and Tessa. “Okay, that’s cool.” He pulled her close. “So, are you ready to do our thing?”

She grinned. “Let’s do it!”

Gabe walked over to the DJ. Pulled out his phone, showed him the music. The DJ took the phone and hooked it up to his speakers.

Gabe and Taylor headed out to the middle of the dance floor. The current music stopped.

“What’s up?” Peyton asked.

Gabe smiled. “Watch and learn buddy.”

Uptown Funk started and Taylor began first.

Gabe watched her. She looked oh so hot in her tight dress with a split up to mid-thigh. His part came next. He performed it flawlessly. Then they were in sync, side-by-side, dancing what they’d rehearsed perfectly. At one point, when he crouched low in a wide stance and moved his knees in and out, the kids went crazy. Then when Taylor joined him in sync with the same move, the gym exploded. The rest of the dance had lots of hip action. He lifted her, twirled her, set her back down, ran a hand down her side to her thigh

where the split in her dress started, pulled her leg up onto his hip, spun her around again and finally ended it.

The kids went crazy. The dance was phenomenal. They had each practiced their individual sections for days, and the hour together Thursday night had been enough to lock in the transitions.

The two Ameritech agents looked at each other with a smile.

"They're pretty darn good," Agent Crawford said.

"Yeah, well, it's also pretty darn, uh, provocative. I'm not sure what Ricky Kino is gonna think once he sees the video of this performance."

"Well, you know what they say about Gabe."

They both nodded and repeated. "Balls of steel."

Gabe retrieved his phone and he and Taylor went about chatting with Gabe's classmates. Gabe watched Taylor with admiration as she made it a point to speak with the ones who seemed shy. She was doing God's work, being a light. He smiled. She was an amazing girl. As the time went by and the crowd at the dance began to thin Taylor took Gabe's hand and tugged. "I want two things," she said with a cute pout on her face.

He ran a hand over her shoulder. "What's that?"

"One more slow dance with you, and then show me your school."

He nodded, led her out onto the dance floor and pulled her close. She laid her head on his chest and he thought his heart might explode. At this very moment, life was so good. Moving in tandem with Taylor's body, feeling her breath against his neck, getting to know her better and not being disappointed in what he was finding, it was an amazing feeling. It seemed the music ended much too soon.

He looked around, nodded toward the rear doors of the gym. "This way."

They first stopped to look into the glass cases that held special awards and trophies the school had won over the years. There was baseball, football, swimming, tennis, cheerleading, wrestling, girls' volleyball, both boys and girls basketball, softball, and a memorial for a coach who had died in a car accident. Taylor studied each one.

They headed down a long corridor which Gabe told her was the science hall. They turned left to go through the doors that led to the main building, but they were locked.

"Oh well," Gabe said softly. "Looks like that's the end of our tour."

He took her by the shoulders, gently pushed her up against the wall, lifted her chin and kissed her. He pulled away, shook his head. "Been wanting to do that all night."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Figured you wouldn't like PDAs."

"Normally, no, but with you, anytime, anywhere."

He groaned at her words, pressed closer to her and kissed her a long time. She moaned in the back of her throat as he ran his hand down her side, slipped it inside the split in her dress, grabbed her thigh behind her knee and pulled her leg up to rest on his hip, just like they'd done in their dance.

He kissed her cheek, her neck and then hooked a finger under the shoulder strap of her dress and moved it to kiss her shoulder.

Taylor gasped and he dropped his hand quickly at the clearing of a man's throat. He realized it was one of the Ameritech agents.

He sighed, placed his forehead against hers. “What am I gonna do about you Taylor Kino? You make me forget things I’ve been taught all my life.”

She sighed. “I guess we’ve been taught those things all our lives because when the time came to remember them, it wouldn’t be easy.”

“That is truth, Taylor, because pulling away from you is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” He took her hand. “Come on, let’s go find Peyton and Avery.”

He smiled at Agent Dalton as they turned the corner and passed him, giving a small shrug.

The prom was winding down. Kids were heading to after parties. Gabe and Taylor knew there was no way they’d be allowed to go. But a group of teammates always went to the local DQ after a dance to pig out on blizzards and when they asked the agents if that would be okay they were pleasantly surprised.

Gabe thought for sure they would lose Peyton and Avery to an after party, but the two had decided to “DQ it.”

The agents parked the limo over on the side of the lot away from the building, but stood beside the car, arms folded, eyes scanning.

Gabe, Peyton, Elias, Lucas and Liam and their dates sat at the outside tables in front. Gabe was having so much fun watching Taylor devour a cookies and cream blizzard, closing her eyes in bliss, moaning and licking the spoon. Everything she did stirred him up. He blew out a calming breath. She’d be leaving tomorrow. He quickly pushed the thought aside.

A car rumbled up and some more kids tumbled out. Gabe recognized them from school. He nodded at them, though they weren’t really what one would consider friends.

The agents didn’t like the looks of them and moved in closer.

As Peyton headed back to the table with his second blizzard one of the guys heading in, brushed shoulders with him, he stumbled and dropped his cup of ice cream.

“What the hell,” Peyton mumbled.

The guy who ran into him shoved him. “You got a problem, Murphy?” the guy asked.

Peyton shoved him back. “No, but you do.”

Two more guys quickly surrounded Peyton.

Gabe jumped up immediately, followed by Elias and went to stand between Peyton and the three who seemingly wanted to pick a fight.

One of the guys went to push Gabe out of the way, but Gabe quickly caught the guy by his wrist, twisted his arm and turned him around. “Uh uh, not tonight, Jesse,” he warned.

The six guys were suddenly broken apart by two large men.

Agent Dalton spoke to Gabe. “Think Gabe. Where’s Taylor?”

Gabe immediately looked for her and didn’t see her.

Before he could panic, Agent Dalton spoke. “She’s in the car where I just put her. Lesson learned?”

Gabe nodded. He should’ve seen to her safety first.

“You guys go,” Agent Crawford said to Gabe and his friends.

Gabe nodded and they backed away.

“You aren’t cops,” Jesse said to the agent.

"No, we're security agents and we don't have to obey the same rules as the cops, so that makes us your worst nightmare," Agent Dalton responded. "Now you kids run along. Get your ice cream and go."

One of the guys pulled a small knife.

The agent shook his head. "When I take that from you it will probably break your wrist. You wanna rethink that."

The kid didn't take the warning fast enough and Agent Dalton removed the weapon in the blink of an eye, leaving the kid grasping his hand in pain.

The agent folded the knife. "Shall we call the cops?"

The three who started the mess shook their heads, got in their car and sped away.

Agent Dalton turned to Gabe and Peyton. "And the night is over. Let's go."

They said goodbye to Elias, Lucas and Liam and got in the limo where Taylor and Avery were already sitting. The ride was silent for a few minutes. Then Gabe asked, "So, Agent Dalton, did you break his wrist?"

The agent laughed. "No, I was very gentle."

Gabe looked at Taylor who was smiling at him. "What?" he asked.

"My hero," she said.

He rolled his eyes because he knew that wasn't true.

"Mine too," Peyton said in a feminine voice, making everyone laugh.

They arrived back at the Inn. Peyton and Avery said their goodbyes, got in Peyton's old vehicle and drove away.

Gabe knew they would have no other privacy the rest of the night and so, before they went inside he stopped Taylor, took her in his arms and kissed her goodnight.

"I had the best time I've ever had," she said softly. "I will never forget this night."

He smiled. "Me too. I mean, I'll never forget it either. And, sorry about that last part."

"Oh, that part was fun too," she said with a laugh.

He brushed his knuckles over her cheek. "You sound just like your father. And thinking about him, I guess we'd better go in."

She sighed. Nodded.

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May 12th Sunday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jodi entered the Inn's kitchen early in the morning to find Miss Maddie sitting at the kitchen table, dabbing at her eyes.

"Grams? What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing, child," the sweet woman said, shooing away Jodi's concern.

But Jodi was a nurturer, a caregiver, a servant of God and she knew when she was being called upon. She poured herself a cup of coffee and went to sit next to Maddie. "You're not gonna get rid of me that easy, so you may as well tell me what's going on."

Maddie sighed. "It's nothing really. I had a dream early this morning. My Lawrence came to see me."

Jodi nodded. Lawrence was Maddie's husband who'd died of a heart attack some twenty-five years earlier. He passed before Lisa had been able to make it home to her grandparents.

"It was so real, Jodi. I know it sounds crazy, but it feels like he really did come to see me."

"That doesn't sound crazy," Jodi said, patting her hand. "We know we continue to live after we leave this earth life. I don't know what the actual rules are as far as our loved ones communicating with us. No one really does, though they say they do. There are many who spout that they KNOW it is absolutely not possible and if we think we hear from our loved ones, then we're actually hearing from demons. That's not necessarily true. The Bible doesn't specifically say anything about our loved ones communicating with us. The Bible IS specific about spiritualism and sorcery. So, we shouldn't seek out the dead, but instead focus on God. However, if a past loved one seeks *you* out, in a dream or in a whispering, or even in an appearance, we should keep our minds open and use the Holy Spirit for discernment.

"People don't really KNOW. Those people who are so haughty as to say they know are mistaken. That ***I*** know, because when Grandmaster Kino had his miracle in the cave experience, he first met an ancestor of his. So, we should keep our minds open and draw no conclusions, and that's exactly what Grandmaster Kino says in his memoirs. He says that nothing is as it seems and we should draw no conclusions. Just stay close to Jesus.

"Still, I know there have been many stories of people who are absolutely certain they've received messages from their family members. So there. There might be something to it. Tell me, Grams, did Lawrence say anything to you?"

She nodded. "He told me he loved me. I told him I loved him too and that I missed him terribly, more now than ever."

Jodi frowned. "More now than ever? Why?"

Maddie shook her head. "You know, dear, I don't even know why I said that. It was probably just a silly dream. But I do miss him. Maybe it's because I'm so old now, but I'm looking forward to being with him again. I've done so much in my life. Thanks to my sweet granddaughter I was able to see all of my dreams come true. I've taught people to cook. I've run my own restaurant. I was able to share my life with my granddaughter and see her marry Chaz and see her have her children, see her flourish. I'm content with that. I'm very blessed."

Jodi nodded, trying hard to hold back the tears that were threatening. They weren't tears of sadness necessarily, but the poignant tears of a time coming to an end. She had a feeling there was a purpose for Lawrence coming to visit Maddie and Jodi suddenly knew what she was now supposed to do.

"You know," Maddie went on, "with Laynah soon getting married, it won't be long before Lisa herself is a grandmother. It's strange how quickly time goes by. It's like a blink of an eye. It seems just yesterday Lisa came home to me and met her hunky cowboy," Maddie said with a sly grin, raising her shoulders up and down and making Jodi giggle.

"And now," Maddie went on, "her little baby girl is getting married. It's all so strange."

"It is," Jodi agreed.

"And it seems just yesterday that you and John arrived here to help change my home into the Inn and announced you were pregnant. Who would have guessed that your little

baby boy would grow up to marry my great granddaughter. It's hard to wrap your brain around, but that's the circle of life I guess." She sighed.

"It is indeed," Jodi whispered. She smiled at Miss Maddie whom she always thought of as Mrs. Claus. That was probably because that's how Lisa had described her and it just stuck. A tiny woman with white hair and an elf-like face. So sweet. She rose and put her arms around Miss Maddie from behind and squeezed. "Ya know what? I love you, Miss Maddie. Since my parents passed away, you've been like my son's only grandparent. And mine too. You've made mine and John's and Jake's lives ultimately better just for allowing us into your world."

"Oh, thank you dear. I love you all too. So, so much."

"What's going on in here?" Lisa said as she and Laynah came in through the kitchen door. "Are you trying to steal my grandmother?"

Jodi grinned. "It was worth a try, but she only has eyes for you."

"Uh, what about me?" Laynah asked nonchalantly.

"Oh, pooh, I love you all," Maddie said, dabbing at her eyes with her napkin.

Lisa looked to Jodi who gave her an, 'I'll tell ya later' look.

"Well, let's get this show on the road. We have a huge brunch to prepare," Lisa said.

Maddie went to stand and get to work.

"You just relax today," Jodi said. "The kitchen crew has been well-taught by you and we can handle it. Why don't you go spend some time with Laynah and Jake and give them words of wisdom for their upcoming nuptials."

Maddie smiled. "That would be such a pleasure." She held her hand out to Laynah. "Come on, Bugs, go find your sweetie and indulge this old woman and let me tell you all about my Lawrence."

Laynah smiled sweetly. "Absolutely, Grams. You go find a seat and I'll run find my man."

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They didn't attend church this morning because the Kinos had to leave soon. So, instead, they had their own morning prayer meeting with Ricky and John as speakers, Lizzy and her girls offering some praise songs, and Miss Maddie's kitchen staff serving a delicious brunch.

Breakfast over, the Inn guests were taken on a tour of the Pine Forest Gardens, a beautiful botanical park put together by the women of the Pine Forest Gardening Club.

While the guests were gone, Lisa and Laynah Stewart, Lizzy and her twins, Bree Kino, Jodi Appel and Miss Maddie sat at the large dining room table and tried to get in some more wedding planning before the Kinos had to leave.

They'd decided on a June wedding at the ranch, in the barn. Talked about putting a rush on invitations and getting them out in the next ten days. They went over pics of wedding gowns to narrow it down. Laynah was a simple girl with simple tastes, which was much harder, believe it or not, to accommodate. Everything was too fancy, too frilly, too tight, too big, too sleek, not country enough. It was easier for Jake for he would be wearing his dress whites uniform and inviting his fellow military friends to do the same, including Uncle Keegan, and Jake's own father, and of course, the father of the bride.

Colors were decided on, yellow and blue and no pink, because it clashed with

Laynah's hair. Maddie was in charge of the menu. Cakes, the couple would go pick out after Jake gets back from training next week.

While the women planned the wedding, the men went outside to talk. They turned chairs around at the pool and sat in a circle. Anyone looking out would think it was a somber discussion. Ricky, John, Keegan and Chaz listened to Jake, young Eric, JoJo and Logan as they spoke about their future plans, while young Charlie and Matt listened intently or maybe just politely.

It had begun by Jake asking young Eric about the movie he just filmed.

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"Oh, Tay, don't cry, please."

Gabe and Taylor had slipped away to walk down to the creek and Taylor was making it very evident that she didn't want to leave.

She sniffed. "I can't help it. I can't stand being away from you. This time together, it just went by way too fast."

"I agree, it really did. But hey, listen, I graduate in two weeks. I'll find a way to come to Cali to see you."

"You promise?"

"Absolutely. I'll figure it out. I'll figure out what I'm gonna do with my life and whatever that turns out to be, I'll come see you."

"I hate this." She threw her arms around his neck and buried her face against his chest.

He closed his eyes and breathed her in, committing the moment to memory. His life, his perspective, everything it seemed, had changed over the past two months. He felt strange. Like he was outside his own body. He felt like he wanted to go back in time to where the most pressing thing was looking forward to doing some early morning shooting, washing the car, or cutting the grass or teaching his baby sister to catch a ball.

Everything had changed. This morning he was told that he and Taylor were trending everywhere. That they were definitely the youngest celebrity power couple. That the money in the fundraiser had almost doubled. That talk show reps were trying to reach out to them through Bree's and Ricky's and even young Eric's agents. There were agencies reaching out for endorsements, anything from sports equipment and shoes, to clothing and lingerie.

Earlier Gabe and Taylor had scrolled through thousands of pics and videos. Their dance at the prom already had over a million views. There was a story about them dancing with all the shy kids. There was speculation, of all things, about them getting married. It was all just too much. Gabe never paid much attention to social media. He was too busy living his life.

He needed to have a long talk with his father. And he needed to speak with Grandmaster Kino. That thought, Gabe suddenly realized, gave him much comfort.

He pulled back from Taylor, lowered his head, kissed her softly, deeply. "I'll come see you soon. I promise. And I just realized, you guys are coming to Jake and Laynah's wedding, right? I mean, that's just a little over a month away. It's actually the day after my birthday. So we'll see each other then too."

She nodded. "I want to see you every day. Every single day."

He blew out a breath. "So do I. I mean, I wanna see you, but sorry, Tay, I don't see

how I can make that happen."

"But you'd like that, right?"

He gave a short laugh. "Uh, yeah, that would be awesome. But Tay, we have to be mature about this. We have to be responsible, and we have to be realistic. You're still in school. I'm about to graduate and I'll be eighteen in June."

"I know that, and I hate it."

He laughed. "Well, sorry. Why would you hate me turning eighteen?"

"Because, when you turn eighteen the world considers you a man and I'll still be a kid. Do you realize that when you turn eighteen, it will be illegal for us to be together?"

"Um, we can still date. We just can't have sex, and that wasn't gonna happen anyway."

"Well, you just remember this, Gabe Tanner, you and I, we are gonna have sex one day. You just wait and see."

His brows rose. "Maybe we'd better start back to the house."

She giggled. "Scared ya, didn't I?" She ran her hands up his arms and across his chest. "Big, strong, Gabriel Tanner is afraid of little old me," she said softly as she touched her fingertips to his lips.

He grabbed her hand and jerked it down, shoved her down onto the ground, covered her with his body and kissed her hard. He lifted his head, a fierce look on his face. "Yeah, you scare me, Taylor. You scare me because I want you so bad I think I'm gonna die. I wanna make love to you with every fiber of my being." He kissed her again. "But I care about you Taylor. I care enough that I won't use you like that. I won't make you feel dirty and used. And I hope you care enough about me that you would want me to keep my covenants with God."

He lay there looking into her eyes. She was breathing hard, her chest rising and falling and he swallowed hard and got off her. "I'm, uh, I'm sorry. I lost it for a second. Did I hurt you?" he asked as he helped her to her feet.

She smiled at him. "Of course not. I like it when you're intense like that."

He shook his head. "You're a little wildcat, you know that?"

"My dad has said that very thing."

"That doesn't surprise me."

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Proverbs 1:7

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction."

Chapter Twenty-Three

May 13th Early Monday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jason arrived at the Kino home early, before he went in to Ameritech. He smiled at Cam who answered the front door for him. "Cam, good morning."

"Morning, sir," Cam said, holding a sleeve of saltine crackers in his hand.

"What are you doing here so early?" Jason asked.

"Jeffy and I have moved back in. She's not feeling well and decided she wants to be near her parents."

Jason nodded. "I bet Shelley and Eric are very happy about that decision."

Cam smiled. "They seem to be."

"And you?"

"Oh, me too. You know I love being here. It's like my home."

"So, have you heard from your parents?"

He shrugged. "Two years ago they were on different sides of the world, my father living on his yacht and my mother living on a remote island in the Caribbean."

"I'm guessing you haven't heard from them since then?"

"That would be correct."

Jason sighed. "Cam, have *I* told you lately how very proud I am of you and what you've made of yourself?"

"No, sir, not lately, but hey, I'm good. Really, Agent Lee. I'm good. I, uh, I think Eric's in his study. I gotta head back upstairs," he said holding up the crackers.

Jason watched him go. He'd met Cam when he was only seventeen. He was now twenty-nine and one of his top agents, and definitely one of Joey's right-hand men. One of Jason's Elite which was Ameritech's version of special forces, Cam was physically, mentally, and spiritually at the top of his game.

Jason headed to find Eric. He knocked softly, poked his head in.

Eric smiled. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"To me giving you an in-person report."

"That either means you've discovered pertinent information or you've found nothing and thought seeing me in person would soften the blow."

"It's the latter."

Eric sighed and nodded.

"We've reached a dead end, but we'll keep digging. Hopefully, she'll try to contact you again. So, we'll keep a trace on your phones, and we'll patrol the area where the diner is and where the Uber driver dropped her off. We've left instructions at the diner about what to do if they see her again."

"I hope she's okay."

"I know, me too. But no guilt."

Eric nodded.

Cam poked his head in. "Sorry to interrupt but Jeffy says I have to tell you this immediately."

"Go ahead," Eric said.

"You're in danger and need to have an agent go with you everywhere you go."

"Well, that's just great," Eric muttered.

Jason nodded. They'd learned to never take Jeffy's warnings lightly. "Are you on assignment?" he asked Cam.

"Yes, sir. I'm supposed to report in two hours."

"Stay with Eric. I'll call Joey and get a replacement."

"Yes, sir."

"Eric, I'm gonna go a step further and put a man on the cameras here."

Eric nodded. "Whatever makes you feel comfortable."

Jason frowned. "I expected an argument. What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Just tired. We just got in last night, ya know."

"Yes, so, how was it? How's Marissa?"

"She's doing well. She's now a doctor of psychology, *and*– she's also pregnant."

Jason smiled, looked at Cam. "So you and Chris are both about to become fathers. Must be something in the water. I just heard from my wife that Keegan's wife is also pregnant and Lisa Stewart too."

Eric smiled. "I know. Good news travels fast."

Jason frowned. "Yep, and so does bad news, so be careful, Eric."

"Will do."

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May 14th Wee Hours Tuesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan quietly placed his gun softly on the coffee table and sat down next to his son on the sofa. It was 3:00 AM. "Another nightmare?"

"Just couldn't sleep."

Keegan glanced up at the TV screen. It was the video his abductor made, the part that hadn't been seen by the public; the surgery and the discussion afterward where Mia told her story. "I'm not so sure about your choice of entertainment."

Gabe shrugged. "Can't seem to get this stuff out of my head."

"It will take time. When is your next appointment with the therapist?"

"I'm checking out of school Wednesday morning."

Keegan nodded. "And how do you think that's going?"

"It's okay. I mean, it's hard to tell, but you told me to trust the process and so that's what I'm doing."

"But do you feel like it's getting better, or worse?"

Gabe looked down because his eyes teared up. "Worse."

Keegan put his arm around his son. "It's okay to cry, ya know. When I was taken that time back in Afghanistan, I cried for weeks afterward."

"Really?"

"Hell, yes. And you need to talk to Jeff. After he was taken he cried. It was so bad, he couldn't even talk about it without bawling his eyes out for months. That doesn't make him any less of a man, Gabe. You know that, right?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't make Jeff any less of a man. But, what I went through wasn't as bad as what you guys faced."

"I don't know how you figure that. Were you in pain?"

"Yes."

"Did you believe you were gonna die?"

"Yes."

"In your mind and heart, did you say goodbye to the people you love?"

He sniffed. "Yes."

"Then it was the same. The difference was, Jeff and I, we were hardened men, and you were young and innocent. It's a hell of a way to become a man."

Gabe let loose and the tears came, his shoulders shaking with the force of his sobs. Keegan held him against his chest, hurting every bit as much as his son. Maybe more.

When Gabe quieted, he looked up at his father, so calm, so strong. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"I've thought about going into the military."

Keegan swallowed. He knew this was coming. He nodded. "Are you asking for my blessing in this, or for my opinion?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I guess I just want to discuss it. Like, I'm always so proud of you, and Master Appel and Uncle Chaz and Jake and I want to be like you guys. I want to be as strong and capable as you guys are."

Keegan sighed. "You are strong and capable, Gabe."

"No. I'm not. I'm potentially strong and capable."

"So, what are you saying? Because I'm not sure I'm following your train of thought."

"I'm saying that though I want to be like you, I'm not sure if I want to go into the military."

"Did you think that I expected you to go into the military? Because I've tried to be very careful to allow you to decide things without me pressuring you."

"No, I don't feel pressure from anyone other than myself."

"Are we still talking about the military?"

"How would you feel if I said I don't think I want to go that route?"

"I would be fine with that. It's not for everyone."

"You wouldn't think I'm a coward?"

Keegan blew out a breath. He didn't expect that.

"Of course not. Why would you say that?"

"Because, I think I am."

He was beginning to understand. "Son, what you just went through would put fear in anyone's heart. You might be fearful for awhile, but you son, are no coward."

"You just say that because I'm your son."

"No, I say that because I know you— maybe better than you know yourself."

Gabe sighed, filed that information away and went on to the next thing. "I'm also

thinking about applying to be one of Jason's Elite."

Keegan nodded. "That would also be a commendable goal. It's a long process and it's difficult. And you'll still have to go to school, though Jason has made a program where you can train and go to school online at the same time."

Gabe nodded. "I'm leaning that way."

"I will support you in anything you choose."

Gabe smiled. "I wanna join the circus."

"Except that."

"But really Dad, I have a huge fund to manage. I could go to school for that. And Dad, the body spray endorsement thing, and some of the other companies who've reached out, they're already making me some big money."

"Is big money your goal?"

"No. Not at all. But if I have that cushion, it could free me up to do more things."

"What things?"

"I would like to do something to spread the Word. Some kind of ministry to help kids stay close to God. Since I seem to have a lot of young people following me on social media, I was thinking I could somehow put that to good use."

"These are all worthy goals, but it sounds like too many irons in the fire."

"I know. I don't know what to do first. I don't know how to prioritize. I've miraculously been blessed with all these opportunities and I don't know how to proceed. I'm so confused."

"All that and not being able to sleep. This is not optimal for your health."

"Right?"

"There are some of these opportunities that need to be taken advantage of right away or you'll lose them. Other things can wait, but not too long. I agree, it's confusing. I think we need to call in some professional help."

"I'm already doing therapy."

"No, I mean an agent, an attorney, or even a business manager. Things I'm not real familiar with but we know people who are. I think you and I need to meet with Jason and Justin and from there get an agent and/or business manager. We'll discuss your goals and help you figure out the best course of action."

Gabe nodded. "That sounds really good, Dad, but there was one more person I was hoping to get to meet with."

"Who's that?"

"Grandmaster Kino."

Keegan nodded. "I agree."

"You do?"

"Yes. He's one of my heroes. He, and Ricky and Jason, and since your mind is in a precarious condition, I think Eric would be a perfect place to start."

Gabe sighed in relief. "I feel calmer already."

"Good. I'll make some calls and arrange a trip and a few meetings. How about right after graduation? Does that sound doable?"

"That would be great, Dad. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. Think you can sleep now?"

"Yes, sir, I think I can."

"Will you be playing in your game this afternoon?"

"As far as I know."

"We'll be there."

"Thanks again." He stood, stopped. "Dad, I know I say thanks a lot, like it's, you know, just habit or something, but I want you to know that I really do appreciate everything you do. You get up in the middle of the night to protect us, you take time to help me figure out my life, you do the same for my sisters, you're going the extra mile to take care of Mom and Iris right now and along with all that you work a full-time job. You do chores around the house, keep the cars up, yard work. You never act tired or grumpy or angry. *You* are *my* hero."

"Thanks for the nod, son. Just trying to do what God has called me to do, and though I fail sometimes, I'll keep trying. I'm grateful. I'm so grateful for you all that I'll do whatever it takes. Now, go to bed and get some sleep."

Gabe smiled. "Yes, sir."

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May 14th Later Tuesday Morning

Tanner House, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan glanced at the phone before he picked up. Michael Moreland. "Tanner," he said abruptly into the phone.

"Agent Tanner, this is Michael Moreland."

"Yes, I know. Did you get all your ducks in a row?"

"Yes, sir, at least I believe I have."

"I'm listening."

"First, let me apologize for how I came across the other day. I did not do all my research in my haste to be the first to call."

"Apology accepted, but here's a tip; not doing your homework can get a person killed."

"Oh, uh, yes, sir. So, I would be honored if I could sit down with you, face to face and discuss some ideas."

"Face to face?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're coming here from Portland?"

"You know I'm from Portland?"

"I do *my* homework."

"Oh, yes, sir, of course you do. So, yes, I'll come there to meet with you."

"Then I will hear you out."

"Thank you so much!"

"Don't get too excited yet."

"No, sir. I just truly believe in what I'm doing."

"What you believe will be ascertained. Call my assistant at Ameritech's main number and set up an appointment."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Keegan hung up. This should be interesting, he thought.

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May 15th Wednesday Night

Joe's Family Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Joe's was a pretty cool place, Mike thought. Not what he'd imagined at all. It was large, clean, modern, but with a country flair that gave a hint of its roots. The food was good enough, equal to any sports bar he'd ever been to. The wait staff was friendly and efficient. He sat at the bar, but it was hard to miss the pretty waitresses and the good looking young men who manned the place. The joint was jumpin'. There were a lot more people here than he thought this little town could provide. He found that very interesting.

"Can I get you anything?" the older guy tending bar asked.

Mike looked for a name tag but didn't see one. "No, I'm good, thanks. Have you worked here long?"

The man arched a brow. "A pretty good amount of time, why?"

"Well, you don't have a name tag, and everyone else does," he said as he gestured around. "So, I guessed you're either new or have been here a long time."

The man smiled. "Most people know who I am and I only come in at night when we're short on staff."

"Then I'm gonna venture another guess and say that you're Joe?"

He smiled, nodded. "That'd be right. Joe Carter." He held out his hand.

"Mike Moreland." He stood slightly and shook Joe's hand.

"I own this place goin' on forty years. Of course, it was a lot smaller back then."

"Really?"

"Yep, 'bout a third of the size it is now. Once my daughter came back and opened the Inn, we can barely keep up with all the progress."

"I'm staying at one of the cottages at the Inn. So, your daughter is Jodi?"

"No, Jodi is my daughter's business partner. My daughter is Lisa Stewart. Excuse me." Joe turned away.

While Joe went to take care of a couple who'd just sat down at the bar, Mike glanced around and immediately noticed the girl who came in the door. One of the most beautiful girls he'd ever seen, and he'd seen a lot. She was alone. She had light blond hair and big blue eyes, and a gorgeous smile. She wore tight jeans and a casual light blue shirt with the placket unbuttoned. She glanced in his direction and then waved.

"Hey Joe!" She called, her voice deep and sweet.

Joe waved. "Hey Rosie posie. Where's Violet?"

"She had a date so I'm on my own tonight."

She glanced at him again, smiled, and he almost fell off his stool.

"Hello," she said with a nod as she passed.

He smiled and nodded.

She headed straight to the pool tables on the far side. He watched her as she strode up to an empty table, grabbed a rack, fished balls out of the pockets and tossed them into the triangle. Then she went about rearranging them, pushed the rack in place and lifted it. He watched her grab a stick, chalk it up and break. She was remarkable. Her blond hair was stick straight, thick, parted on the side and came to her shoulders. Her face was a perfect oval, her nose turned up slightly, her lips, luscious with just the hint of a smirk on them.

He thought about joining her, but that would mess up his plans and possibly get him killed. He'd done his homework as he'd been advised to do by this girl's father, who was special forces, ex-FBI, head of Southeastern branch of Ameritech, the father of seven and lethal. His only son was the one and only highly sought after Gabriel Tanner, and his daughters would become the same, if Mike had any luck in getting through to them.

Still, if he were to approach Rose before he had his meeting with her father, she would surely tell him. Then Agent Tanner would assume he'd gone over his head and straight to the girl, and that was definitely not gonna work. This family was close, and the children had an enormous amount of respect for their father. So, he would keep his distance and wait to be formally introduced to her and her sisters.

He stayed at the bar watching the gorgeous girl, totally intrigued by her. He watched as she was approached by a young man, they clasped hands as if they knew each other, flirted, one of them challenged the other to a game. They ordered drinks. They played for almost an hour. Finally, Rose glanced at her phone and walked to the bar. "Kurt lost so he'll pay for the drinks. Tell Miss Shirley I said, 'Hey!'"

"Will do," Joe replied.

She smiled at him again as she went by.

Once she was gone he realized he also needed to get going. He had an early meeting at Ameritech. Silly that he had to drive thirty minutes to get there, when the man lived right next to the Inn, which Mike didn't know until he got to town. He'd asked the lady at the convenience store just inside the city limits if she knew where the famous Tanner family lived. She was full of information. Mike quickly surmised that what they say about small towns is correct and it doesn't matter how big of a security organization you run, you can't beat the small town information line.

He also surmised that Agent Tanner probably didn't think that Mike would get a room at the Inn. It actually was a fluke. The first time he'd tried they were booked solid for weeks. But he left his name in case there was a cancellation and sure enough, a guest got sick and cancelled. If he hadn't been able to stay at the Inn he'd be in a motel up on the highway, much closer to Ameritech.

He left the bar and made his way toward his car. It was then that he noticed Rose bent over her car with the hood up. Deciding it would be okay to help, he walked slowly toward her and when he was about six feet from her and about to speak, she whirled on him, drawing a gun from her hip and pointing it straight at him.

He jumped back, throwing his hands in the air.

"Back off, bud," she commanded.

"Wait, wait, d– don't shoot. I was just gonna see if you needed help. That's all. I swear."

She looked him over. Raised her chin. "Back up about three feet."

He stepped back. He couldn't keep his hands from shaking.

She smiled. "You're not from around here, are you?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm visiting. I'm staying at the Pine Forest Country Inn. You can call them, they'll vouch for me."

"Hmm, all alone?"

"Yes."

"Most people come with someone to enjoy the Inn and the countryside. Why are you here all alone?"

"I'm here on business. I have a meeting with *your* father in the morning."

She looked him over again. "How do you know who my father is?"

"I spoke with him on the phone and when you walked into the bar I recognized you from the picture I saw online."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you Michael Moreland?"

He nodded. "So your father *has* told you about me?"

"Of course."

"May I, uh, put my hands down now?"

She nodded permission, pointed her gun up, and then down and shoved it into the holster inside her jeans. "Sorry. But you should know better than to approach a woman you don't know at night. You wanna help, you stand back and speak before you approach."

"I guess I should know I'm not in Kansas anymore."

"Oh, so, you're from Kansas?"

"No. I was quoting the *Wizard of Oz*. I'm from Portland, and in Portland you actually cannot carry a loaded firearm in public places, not even in your car."

Rose laughed. "Well isn't that silly. A gun doesn't do you a bit of good if it isn't loaded."

"So, uh, you had a loaded gun pointed at my chest?"

She grinned. "Loaded, chambered, and aimed straight at your heart."

"Chambered? What's that?"

She only shook her head. "Don't worry, I didn't have my finger on the trigger."

"Good grief, the gun could have gone off," he said, showing a bit of temper.

She snickered. "That's highly unlikely."

"Unlikely?"

"Highly– and don't talk to me about guns if you don't know anything about them."

"I know they kill people."

"People kill people."

He sighed. "You're right about that," he conceded.

"Look, sorry if I scared you. Our family has had some trouble lately, so we're a little nervous when approached by a stranger."

He nodded. "I know about your family's trouble."

She laughed. "Yeah, I guess everyone does, huh?"

He smiled in agreement. "So, do you know what's wrong with your car?"

"I already took care of it," she said as she let the hood drop closed.

She moved around and climbed behind the wheel, started up the engine of the bright red Ford Edge, lowered the window, smiled at him. "Well, enjoy your stay here in beautiful Pine Forest, Georgia," she said with an exaggerated southern accent.

He smiled. "I intend to."

Rose pulled away and headed home. "Call Dad," she said.

"Hello Rosie Posie," he answered with a chuckle.

She laughed. "Joe is awesome, isn't he?"

"Yes he is."

"So, how'd I do?"

"You were awesome too, my little flower."

"I know, right? I should go into show business."

"I believe that is exactly what we're contemplating."

"Well, he didn't try to talk to me, so, are you satisfied that he has good intentions?"

"Not quite yet."

"He's kinda cute," she said, thinking of the young Zac Efron looking dude.

Keegan shook his head. "Hmm, Rosie, you say that about pretty much every guy you meet."

"Oh, Daddy, it's like a box of chocolates, they all look so good," she laughed.

"And like a box of chocolates, it's what's inside that counts," Keegan countered.

"Hmm, well then, I guess I'll have to find out what's inside. But don't worry Daddy, he already has two strikes."

"Really? What are they?"

"Strike one, he's pretty citified and strike two, he's scared of guns."

"Well, to be fair, Rose, a healthy fear of guns is a good thing."

"See Dad, that's why I love you. You could have let me go with strike two and you'd just be one strike away from ousting him from my mind, but then you go and be honest. You are the coolest dad in the world."

"Yeah. Are you on your way home?"

"Driving up as we speak, but I know you know that."

"Good girl. See you inside."

Keegan ended the call and then called John at the Inn.

"What's up, Keeg?"

"First, just wanted to say thanks for letting me know Mr. Moreland checked in."

"Yeah, well, I'll never forget that name or that time in my life. The synchronicity was too much to ignore."

"Me neither. We put him to the test and he passed, so far. He ran into Rose at Joe's and did not approach until he thought she had car trouble."

"Good for him."

"Do me a favor and don't notify him that Chaz is running his cattle down the road tomorrow morning."

"Hmm, there's already a notice on his door. Hold on. Jake!"

"Yes, sir."

"Do me a favor and run to Cottage three and take the notice off the door, and hurry before he gets back."

Jake frowned but didn't argue. "Yes, sir."

"Okay, consider it taken care of," John said to Keegan.

"Thanks."

"Keegan, do you think this is a little bit cruel?"

"I'm not trying to be unkind. I just wanna see what he does under adverse situations. He should call me and explain to me that he'll be late because of the cattle. He should then offer to see me nearby. We'll see what he says."

"Poor kid. He should never have tried to strong arm you."

"He's young. He'll learn."

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May 16th Thursday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Michael Moreland took one last look in the mirror, drew a deep breath and practiced his disarming smile. "Agent Tanner, it's nice to finally meet you."

He shook his head. "Hello Agent Tanner, it's good to meet you, sir."

He shook his head.

He felt way over his head and it was the first time since maybe he was six years old. What was his problem? He'd always been in control of every situation. He was smart. Naturally found his way around to charm pretty much everyone, be it real or faked. And if he couldn't charm them, he could usually be firm enough and confident enough to get them to do exactly what he wanted them to do.

That's why at the age of twenty-four he was running his own advertising company, *Viral Media*. He was tenacious. He didn't stop until he succeeded. And he was so sure of himself that he didn't get paid until he produced results. He could help anyone, companies, artists, personalities, comics, authors, even high school athletes who needed hype for college scholarships. He was intuitively smart when it came to the media. Maybe it was because he pretty much spent all his time online since he was a kid.

He was an only child of a single parent. His mother worked two jobs to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. By the time he was thirteen, he'd learned he could make a buck online, helping others to navigate the complexities of media. It was second nature to him. So, why was he having so much trouble handling this particular man, this Agent Tanner?

Time to go, he grabbed his keys, wallet, phone, bag and headed out. In his rental and at the gate he looked up in wonder. What was this? The wrought iron gate to the road was closed. He got out of his car and went to the gate to see if he could open it himself, but it was electronic. There was a sign that said something about a cattle crossing. "A cattle crossing? You gotta be kidding me," he grumbled.

He peered down the road but didn't see anything. He drove back to the front of the Inn and went inside.

Jodi smiled at him. "Can I help you, Mr. Moreland?"

He pointed toward the gate. "The gate says it's closed to a cattle crossing?"

"Yes, sir."

"A cattle crossing?"

She smiled. "Yes, sir. That cattle crossing has happened every year at least twice a year for a hundred years. The Stewart ranch runs their cattle down that road from their winter pastures to the spring pastures every spring. If you'd like to watch, we have an upper balcony to get a better view." She sweetly motioned up the stairs.

"No, I don't care to watch," he said abruptly. "I have an important appointment. Could you not have warned me?"

"Oh, dear, Mr. Moreland, you weren't home last night and we put a notice on your door."

"There was no notice on my door."

"I'm so sorry. I have no idea what could have happened." She bit her lip because she didn't like to lie. She justified it as being for a good cause. So far, he was showing anger to a stranger under a stressful situation. She wondered if she should report that to Keegan.

"Is there another way off the property?" Mike asked.

"Well, you can walk off the property certainly, but if you want to drive, there is only one way, through that gate and down that dirt road. It's part of the charm of our Inn."

He frowned. He wasn't finding it very charming.

"It will only delay you about forty-five minutes to an hour," she said sweetly.

"Five minutes late is too late," he snapped. He blew out a frustrated breath. Nodded at the woman and went back to his car to do the only thing he could do.

He picked up his phone and made the call.

"Tanner."

"Agent Tanner, this is Mike Moreland."

"Yes— I know."

"Oh, right. Well, I have a little problem. Can we reschedule our appointment?"

"What's the problem?"

"I'm staying at the *Pine Forest Country Inn* and there is a cattle crossing event thing going on and I can't get out of the gate."

"Ah yes, it is that time of year."

"Yes, sir, and so I'm sure you know that I can't get out of the gate since I discovered that you live next door and are experiencing the same dilemma."

"Unless I left my house earlier," Keegan countered.

Mike was silent. "Yes, sir, I understand. Well, apparently the notice they left on my door must have blown away and I didn't know about this amazing event and therefore I can't make our meeting. Would it be possible to reschedule?"

"I think we can do that."

Mike blew out a relieved breath. "What time would be good for you, sir?"

"Tell ya what, I'll meet you at the Inn in about ten minutes."

"At the Inn? So, you're not already at your office?"

"You seem like an intelligent young man so I'm gonna assume that's a rhetorical question."

Mike sighed. "Yes, I guess it is."

"See you soon."

"Thank you, sir."

Mike pulled his car into a parking space and got out. He could hear the lowing of a cow or a steer or whatever one calls cattle. He looked toward the gate and farther down the road. He could see some dust and heard more sounds, yelling, and whistles and a thundering sound, which he assumed was the hooves of the cattle or possibly horses. And there was definitely a smell in the air of earth and sweat and grass and dirt. One cow came trotting by, then another, and another and soon the roadway was completely filled with cattle. He stood watching, his mouth agape. It actually was quite a spectacle to see in person. He walked toward the gate and peered to his left down the road. It seemed to go on forever. There were a few cowboys on horses on either side, yelling and whistling

and swinging a rope in the air.

"Pretty interesting, huh?"

Mike turned to the voice and looked up at Agent Tanner. His appearance was formidable. He was a good three inches taller than Mike. Muscular, dark hair, dark eyes, chiseled jaw. He looked as lethal as he was. He was in his late forties but had no paunch and looked like he was in his twenties. Mike could see where Gabe got his looks, only Gabe had blue eyes, like his sisters. He nodded at the question. "Yes, sir, pretty interesting. I've never seen anything like this except on TV. It's different in person." He offered his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Keegan shook his hand. "That remains to be seen." He gestured toward the gate. "Did you want to finish watching or shall we head in?"

Mike nodded. "Let's go in."

They went inside and were met by a young man with dark hair and broad shoulders. "Hey, uh, Mr. Tanner, Dad says to take his office. He won't need it for awhile."

"Thanks, Jake."

Jake nodded at Mike. "Mr. Moreland, hope you're enjoying your stay."

Mike nodded and followed Keegan into the office.

"That's another nice looking guy," Mike said, gesturing back toward Jake.

Keegan nodded, a puzzled look on his face.

"Oh, I'm just, I mean, I'm always looking for new talent."

Keegan chuckled. "Well, that new talent is a Marine on leave and is special forces and I wouldn't mess with him if I were you."

"I'll make a note of that," he said, pointing to his head.

"You do that." Keegan sat down behind the desk and motioned for Mike to sit in the chair in front of the desk.

"I, uh, I noticed Jake called you Mr. Tanner. Would you prefer that?"

"Jake called me Mr. Tanner as a show of respect in front of you. He usually calls me Uncle Keegan since I've known him since he was a toddler. Now that he is a fellow Marine, he can call me anything he likes. As for you, I'm interested, what would YOU prefer to call me?"

Mike smiled. "Well, at this point in time I wish I could call you Uncle Keegan, if that would mean I'm in your good graces. For now though, I guess I'll just stick with Agent Tanner."

Keegan smiled. Nodded. "Well said." He gestured toward Mike. "So, make your pitch."

Mike drew a breath. Keegan Tanner didn't mess around. "Agent Tanner, I'm gonna level with you. I would normally first pitch the company I'm representing, tell you all about them, get you on their side, hoping to have you wanting to do what you can to help them succeed. But you sir, have thrown me off my game. You are not like anyone I've ever dealt with, and I'm smart enough to realize that you know that."

Keegan nodded. "So, that also means you're smart enough to realize that you can try to stroke my ego and it won't work."

Mike sighed. "See, that's what I mean. You throw me time and time again. Look, I'll just shoot straight. I represent this company, *Twin Wave Beauty*. They produce skin

creams, all-natural cosmetics and makeup, deodorants, shampoos, conditioners. They are a small company and find it hard to compete with the big guys. The two women who started the company were looking for products that achieved the same results as the big guys, but without the harmful chemicals and dyes like the big guys."

"That's not a new concept."

"No, but there are a lot of them who claim to be all natural, all organic, no animal testing, but they aren't or they aren't totally. They don't have the integrity of *Twin Wave*, and integrity is what makes *Twin Wave* stand out. They are not willing to sell their souls for a buck. They truly want to offer a quality product and make a reasonable profit."

"So, this *Twin Wave* company is all about integrity. What are you all about and why do you want to help this company?"

"I've been helping people to grow their brand and therefore grow their income using social media and their online presence since I was in middle school. For a time I was all about the money. My mom worked two jobs to try to support us and I was determined to help her. But I quickly learned that the entire system was based on dishonesty or trickery. I made a decision to go the road less traveled and be totally and completely honest. It worked. Funny thing, people find honesty and integrity intriguing. I became a force to reckon with. Every company I've ever dealt with has made big time strides, doubled and in some cases even tripled their profits. I've done well. My mother now only works one job. I was able to buy her a real home, a good car, some furniture."

"And your father?"

"My father is a vague memory. If I hadn't seen pictures of him I wouldn't remember him at all. He wanted nothing to do with me or my mother. I think he was into dealing. Not sure. Don't care. Look, I don't usually discuss my personal life with anyone. Bottom line, I want to put *Twin Wave Beauty* on the national map and when I saw your twin daughters I just knew they were the answer. Especially when your son has become a giant celebrity. As soon as it's known they're Gabriel Tanner's sisters, their word would be gold."

"My son is not a celebrity. He's just a kid."

"At the risk of alienating you again, sir, I have to disagree. Your son is the hottest thing there is right now. He's everything this country needed. His looks, his honesty, his talents, his toughness, his realness, even his innocence. He really is the ultimate male. Your son has more sway over a giant portion of the country's employable youth than you may know. He is powerful. You have to believe me."

Keegan didn't like it, but he knew it was the truth. He nodded. "Okay, so what are you suggesting?"

"If your daughters are amenable, if they like *Twin Wave* products and would speak for them honestly, they would be seen on every social media outlet, they would be extremely popular. I'm sure you, as their father realize they are not just another pretty face. Your daughters have a uniqueness."

"Because they're twins?"

"That and because their beauty is exceptional. They are breathtaking. The moment I saw them, I was blown away. And I've seen a lot of pretty girls. Most of them want me to make them a star."

"And are you capable of doing that?"

"I am. But I have to believe in what I'm doing. For example, you've probably heard of Andre' Yukoma. I knew him personally. I knew how talented he was on the football field because he was a friend of mine. But his coach had a problem with him and he was getting no playing time. I hated to see the injustice of that talent going to waste. So, I made a few highlight videos. Placed them strategically on social media. Next thing I know the coach is playing him more, I was able to make more highlight videos, he ends up having college scouts come look at him, he gets a full ride to Oregon and now he's playing pro ball and touted as rookie of the year last year."

"Not bad work," Keegan said.

"Thank you, sir. So, is that what you want for your girls? To be stars?"

"No. I asked that just out of curiosity. I have close friends who are, what you call, stars, and if I wanted I could simply ask them to give me an in. That's not what I want and I don't think it's what interests my daughters."

"Yes, sir, I saw that your family is close friends with the Kinos. That's what makes me so interested in your family. You're not seeking after fame and fortune. You seem to be much more grounded."

"What grounds us is our faith."

He nodded but said nothing because he knew nothing about religion.

"We don't seek after fame or money or power. We seek to do good in this world. To right wrongs. To protect the innocent. And to teach as many as we can about God and His Son Jesus Christ, and we do that through example. So, if my girls were to agree to be spokespersons for your client, it would have to be done with complete integrity. That means if the product doesn't do what it's supposed to do, they won't represent it. That means that if you choose to do a little commercial, it will not be provocative in any way. They won't wear revealing clothing. They won't perform intimate acts."

Mike nodded. "Completely understood, sir. None of those things you see employed by mainstream would be necessary because just an innocent shot of your daughter putting a drop of moisturizer on her face would drive men wild. Their innocence is what men crave."

Keegan's brows rose.

Mike realized his mistake and tried to backtrack. "I mean, well, okay, you have to know how beautiful your daughters are and you have to know what effect they can have on men."

"I know all too well."

"So, I'm not gonna pretend that they're not sexy, and as I'm sure you know, sex sells. You want honesty, there it is. Why else would a beautiful girl be needed to sell beauty products? Because everyone wants to be as pretty as that girl on the screen."

"And my daughters are naturally beautiful and you want to claim that your client's products made them beautiful? Tell me that you do see the dishonesty in that?"

"Yes, sir, I do. But that won't be the claim. The only claim would be that these girls, uh, these young ladies, use these products for the reasons they would state, their real reasons and that is all it would take."

"Which means they would have to actually use the products."

"Yes, of course. Look, they may try them and not like them and that would be the end of that. But I'd simply like the opportunity to give it a try. Truly, that's all I'm asking."

"Maybe once you meet my daughters, you'll change your mind. Maybe in person they're not what you think."

"Sir, I saw your daughter Rose at Joe's last night. I practically fell off my seat when she walked in. She is 'take your breath away' beautiful. She was more than I expected."

"You spoke to her?"

"Not really. I didn't want to approach her without speaking with you first. But I ended up speaking to her because she had some car trouble."

Keegan nodded and then smiled. "No, she didn't."

"She did, I approached her and she almost blew me away."

"No, she didn't have car trouble. It was a test. One you passed. And she didn't almost blow you away. Either she blows you away or she doesn't. There is no almost."

He looked down, and then back up. "A test?"

"Yes. Please understand, I have to be able to trust you when we're talking about my daughters. This morning was also a test. Your notice of the cattle drive didn't blow away."

"How did you know I was even staying at the Inn? Small town information grapevine?"

"No, the co-owner of the Inn, John Appel, served with me in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not much gets past him. Besides that, I heard you tell Rose last night where you were staying when you thought she was about to"—he paused and used finger quotes—"'blow you away.'"

"She told you that?"

"I heard that. Catch up."

He slowly nodded his head. "Wow."

Keegan smiled, gave him a moment. "If you feel a little out of your league, I understand. And if you want to back out, I also understand."

"No, sir, I do not want to back out. I admit I'm out of my league but I'll learn as I go. And I am a fast learner."

"I believe you. Let's set up a meeting with the girls."

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Jeremiah 17:10

"I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

Chapter Twenty-Four

May 18th Early Saturday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

It appeared they were on a beach. Everything was happening so fast it was hard to tell what was going down. All he knew for sure was Taylor was hurt. There was blood on her face, and he fought with several guys at one time trying to protect her. He rolled her over, tried to get her to speak to him. There was so much anguish in his heart. He woke with a giant gasp, sitting straight up.

It took Gabe a moment to figure out he'd been dreaming. He sat there replaying the dream in his head, the picture of a bloody Taylor flashing in his brain over and over. He scrubbed his hands over his face and said, "Stop," out loud. He was breathing hard, glanced at his clock. It was 3:00 AM. He drew a breath. He would never be able to sleep without making sure she was actually okay. He picked up his phone and called. She picked up on the fourth ring.

"Hello?" she said sleepily.

"Hey Tay, I'm sorry to call you so late."

"No worries. It's always good to talk to you, no matter what time it is. Is something wrong?"

"Not really. Just had a bad dream. Wanted to hear your voice."

"Aww, how sweet."

He rolled his eyes. "So, you're okay?"

"Of course," she said as she yawned. She snuggled down on her side. "Just pretending that you're actually beside me talking in my ear."

"That would be nice," he admitted.

"I watched your game tonight, or, let's see, it's after midnight so it would've been last night. It livestreamed on Teenspotter."

"Yeah, Isla spoke to me after the game. She wants to set up a meeting with me about my future, and hers."

"She's not a bad sort. It's because of her your face is known across the country, and also because of her you have a huge fund to manage."

He laughed. "She pretty much said the same thing."

"Gotta give her credit," Taylor said. "Anyway, you were awesome last night as usual. The senior ceremony at the end was cool."

"Yeah, last game sort of thing, and goodbye to the seniors. It wasn't a bad night, though I struck out twice."

"Yeah, what's up with that?"

Gabe chuckled. "That dude was a good pitcher. But I had seven total at-bats for both games, three solid hits, the two strikeouts and two BBs. I scored four times and I rocked it in the field. It was not a bad night."

"What's BBs?"

"Base on balls. A walk."

"Oh, guess I'm still learning."

"You're doing fine."

"Anyway, you're right. You rocked it."

"Thanks. Kind of hate for it to end, but I'm also looking forward to what's next."

"And have you decided what's next?"

He sighed. "No. But Dad and I are coming out there to meet with your grandfather the Monday after graduation to try to help me figure it out."

She smiled. Yawned. "That is so awesome."

"Hmmm, I thought I'd get a bigger reaction than that."

"Why? I'm not surprised. You said you'd find a way to get out here after graduation, and you did."

"Oookaaaay."

She giggled. "I'm just kidding. Granddad told my dad you were coming out and he told me. I already screamed and yelled and jumped up and down and did my happy dance."

"What are you doing on the phone this time of night?" young Eric asked.

"Hold on, Gabe, my brother is at my door being nosey." She sat up. "It's none of your business. Go away."

"Well, you're making a lot of noise."

"I am not, you're just using your Ninja super ears, now go away."

"Hey Taylor, let me speak to Eric a minute."

She sighed, held out her phone. "Here, Gabe wants to talk to you."

He came in, took the phone. "What's up, Gabe? It's like three in the morning there."

"Yeah, oh how I know. Listen, walk away from Taylor a minute."

Eric nodded at his sister. "Be right back." He walked out into the hall. "Okay, what's up?"

"Do you remember the time I was in the stable and had like, a vision thing and felt a lot of pain in my leg, right before I was abducted?"

"Yeah."

"And so, what I saw and felt actually happened."

"Yeah."

"Okay, well, tonight is the third time I've had a pretty disturbing dream about Taylor, and in it she is hurt and bloody."

"Not good."

"At first I thought it was just a silly dream, but it's so real. And it's three times. I'm not claiming to be psychic or anything, but when you just interrupted our conversation I felt strongly I should share this with you. Watch out for her."

"Got it, and you know of course, I have to pass on this information to my father."

"Yep."

"Alrighty then, thanks for the heads up. Here's Taylor."

Eric went back to Taylor's room and handed her the phone. "Here, sorry sis, bro secrets."

She rolled her eyes, took the phone. "What was that all about?"

"You heard him, bro secrets."

She was silent.

"Okay, I will fill you in when I get there. I graduate in one week. It won't be long at all."

"Okay, but every minute without you seems like forever."

Gabe let out a heavy sigh. "I feel the same. Hey, Taylor, I think I hear Iris crying. I'll let you go and sorry I woke you up."

"It's only midnight, I still have lots of time to sleep. Go see to Iris. I love you, Gabe."

"Love you too."

He ended the call and headed straight to Iris' room and opened the door. "Hey sweetie," he said softly.

Iris sat up, reached out her hands to him. "Gabe."

He came to her, scooped her up into his arms and sat on her small youth bed with her. "What's wrong, honey?"

She nestled her head against his chest. "I want Mommy."

"Mommy is sleeping. Can I get you something?"

"No, I want Mommy," she cried.

"Shhh, sweetie, it's okay. I know– what if we go downstairs together and have a cookie and some milk?"

She got quiet.

"Do you want to do that?"

She sniffed and nodded her head.

He put a finger to his lips. "We have to be very quiet so we don't wake up Mommy or Daddy, okay?"

"Okay," she muttered.

Gabe looked up to see his father standing outside the bedroom door. He nodded at him to let him know he had the problem taken care of. Keegan gave a thumbs up and backed away and went back to his room.

Gabe headed downstairs with his baby sister and broke out the milk and cookies. In the morning he was supposed to go shoot with Jake before Jake had to leave for a training week. Then Gabe wanted to attend Master Appel's class which he hadn't been to in several weeks because of prom and getting an infection and being abducted and a few other minor reasons. It was time to get back to it. Get strong. Train hard. He was in good form just a month and a half ago at the Mini-MART. He needed to get that back and more. So, he really needed to get some sleep because he had no intentions of sleeping late in the morning.

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"Now that, is really sweet looking," Lily whispered.

Daisy nodded. "Someone had a heck of a night."

They were looking at Gabe, sound asleep on the sofa in the den with Iris splayed across his chest. Lily squeezed off a few pics.

"Gabe," Lily said softly.

He moaned, opened his eyes, his hand moving softly over Iris' back to make sure she wasn't falling off. "Hmm?"

"Sorry to wake you, but Jake is on the phone." She held out his phone.

He reached out and took it. "Hey Jake," he said softly.

"Guess you're not coming?"

"No, I am. I'll be there in fifteen minutes." He ended the call, sat up, cradling the sleeping baby in his arms.

"Give her to me," Daisy ordered.

He gently handed her off. "Thanks, sis."

He ran upstairs to dress, say a quick prayer and grab his guns.

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"Man, Gabe," Jake declared, "Do you realize how freaking good you are?"

Gabe shrugged. "Uh, I think I do."

"Gabe, you're a freak. You could be a scout sniper. You have what it takes. You're only seventeen and you can shoot like that." Jake shook his head.

"I'll be eighteen in four weeks."

"Oh, well, that just negates everything I just said."

Gabe smiled. "Just sayin'. I've thought about it, ya know, joining the Marines, goin' to sniper school."

"But?"

"But I just don't know if it's for me."

"I get that. I just hate to see your talent go to waste."

Gabe nodded. "That's why I'm going out west, to consult with Grandmaster Kino and Jason and Justin Lee and figure out how I can not let my skills go to waste and still do all the things I want to do."

"I hope you get some clarity, little bro."

"Thanks," Gabe said with a smile at the endearment. "So, are you coming to your dad's class this morning?"

"Yep, and then I have to get ready to head out to Camp LeJeune. Come on, let's go kick some butt."

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May 21st Tuesday Afternoon

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe was not happy. Breathing labored, mostly from his temper, he tried to sneak in the front door rather than come in through the kitchen. He didn't want to have to deal with or speak to anyone. He could hear Iris and his mom in the kitchen. He went quietly to the steps and started up.

"Gabe, is that you?" Lizzy called.

He muttered under his breath. "Yes. I'm goin' upstairs."

"No you're not. You come here please. I want a word with you."

He sighed. "Okay, I'll be down in a few."

"Right now, Gabe. Now. I want you to grab your sheets out of the dryer and take them up and make your bed. You know, the bed I asked you to strip this morning and bring down and put in the washer and it didn't get done?"

"Sorry, Mom, guess I forgot. I'll be down in a bit."

"Right now, and Iris wants to see you."

"I said– I'd be down– in a minute."

"You might want to rethink that, Gabe." Keegan's deep voice sounded from the door of his office. He was obviously not pleased.

Gabe blew out a breath and glanced down at his father, trying to keep the right side of his face averted.

"Nope. I just need to go upstairs for a few minutes."

"Her request is not unreasonable."

He took a few more steps up but came to a halt with his father's next words.

"Gabriel Tanner, if you go up those stairs you're gonna have to deal with me and I don't think you wanna do that."

He turned. "I don't see the big deal," he muttered as he quickly ran back down the steps and toward the kitchen.

"The big deal is you're being rude and disrespectful to your mother and I will not have it."

Gabe went into the kitchen, noticed his mother at the island measuring something into a bowl and Violet pulling some muffins from the oven. He went immediately to Iris who was having a snack in her booster chair. "Hey, Iris," he said shortly and kissed her cheek. He didn't look at his mother but gave a quick, "Hey Mom, hey Violet," and headed to the laundry area which was back opposite the large pantry. He reached into the dryer, pulled out the sheets, held them close to his face and headed out.

He heard a gasp.

"Gabe!"

He stopped, his heart pounding.

"Gabe, come here! Oh my goodness, what happened to your eye?"

He just stood there, knowing good and well there was no escaping now. His lips pressed tightly together.

"Come in here and sit down, young man," Lizzy ordered.

He tossed the clean laundry onto the kitchen table and sat. He looked up as his father also came into the kitchen.

Lizzy tilted Gabe's face up so she could get a better view. "What happened to you?" Before he could answer she turned to Violet. "Put some ice in a ziplock bag for me please."

Violet turned to do as asked. Keegan tilted his son's face up.

"That's quite a shiner," he said quietly.

Gabe didn't answer.

"What happened?" Lizzy asked.

"It should be pretty obvious, Mom. I got the crap beat out of me."

"And it's about to happen again if you smart off to your mother one more time."

Gabe blew out a frustrated breath. He wasn't afraid. It was an idle threat. Still, for his father to say that, Gabe knew he needed to check himself. "I'm sorry."

"So, are we gonna play twenty questions or are you just gonna tell us what happened?" Keegan asked.

"I really don't want to talk about it."

"What you want at the moment is the least of my concerns. Speak."

Gabe heaved out a breath. "Okay, three guys jumped me."

When he didn't go on, Keegan shook his head. "So, I guess we are playing twenty questions. Where?"

"At school."

"Where at school?"

"Behind the junior hall beside the student parking lot."

"How was he able to get in such a clean shot?"

"He sucker-punched me. He was just passing me on my right side, he nodded at me, said, 'Tanner,' I nodded back, he passed, and then his right hook came outta nowhere."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Dad. They don't seem to need a reason anymore. I barely know the guy. I seem to be a target. I don't know why." He clenched his fist in frustration as his mom held a bag of ice to his eye.

"Did they all hit you or just the one?"

He was silent.

"Gabe?" his father prodded.

"Three guys all jumped in. There was a fourth guy, but he was only videoing."

Keegan frowned, thinking of three guys beating on his son while one recorded. He lifted Gabe's arms, looking for and finding the bruises and scratches he expected to find. He sighed.

"Okay so, did you get in any punches?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"May I go to my room now?"

"Gabe, honey," Lizzy said softly. "This doesn't make sense. Please talk to us."

"I'm just so tired, Mom. I don't wanna deal with this right now."

"Sometimes we have to deal with things even if we don't feel like it," Keegan said.

Lizzy reached out and stroked his cheek lovingly. Gabe closed his eyes in defense of the feelings the loving gesture brought up.

"Why didn't you fight back?" Keegan asked. "What were you thinking?"

Gabe blinked. "I was thinking of you, Mom, and my sisters, who are all looking forward to my graduation day."

"Explain," Keegan ordered.

"Anyone caught fighting will not be allowed to walk come graduation."

Lizzy looked up at her husband then back at Gabe. "But, if you didn't start it, then... "

"They don't care who started it, Mom. It's one of those no-tolerance rules. Anyone caught fighting will not be allowed to walk. Period."

Keegan's jaw tensed. He had a very low opinion of the blanket no-tolerance rules that required no thought process. It was the lazy way out of things rather than using one's brain to be just, and take responsibility for a real decision.

Gabe went on, his resentment evident. "So, for you, Mom, I put my hands in front of my face, curled up and just took it."

Lizzy's eyes filled with tears. She rose and left the room.

Keegan watched her go and then looked down at Gabe. "That was hurtful and very unlike you. Your anger at your mother is misplaced. Go up to your room and think about why you're mad at her. Do not come back down until I have time to come up and speak with you."

Gabe sat there looking up at his father, wondering how disappointed he must be in his

only son. He glanced over at Violet who'd been quiet during the whole exchange. She was currently tending to Iris as if she hadn't heard everything that had been said.

"Move," Keegan ordered.

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir." He stood and went up the stairs to his room. He knew his father would be headed in to speak with his mom, to comfort her. He wasn't sure why he was feeling such animosity toward his mother. It wasn't fair to her. She was the sweetest, kindest person. She worked hard all the time, tried to make their home a place of love and light. She was simply worried about him, so why did he feel so angry at her?

Up in his room, he went into his bathroom and stared in the mirror. His eye was turning blacker by the minute. Oh, how he wanted revenge. And he would get it. He'd invited the guys to come back for him after graduation. The ceremony would begin by 11:00 AM Saturday morning. It would be over by 1:00 PM. Given time for pics after the graduation ceremony, Gabe invited them to meet him at 2 PM behind the old elementary school on Main Street.

He had no doubt they'd be there, probably with reinforcements. And Gabe would have his own, just in case. Though, the purpose of reinforcements was not to have a gang war but to simply ensure certain rules of honor were adhered to.

He splashed cold water on his face, patted it dry, went to his bed and lay down on the bare mattress. Exhaustion overcame him. He was irritable and grumpy with his mom and he was sure part of that was from only getting a few hours of sleep every night. Sometimes it felt like he was losing his mind. Things came to him in flashes. Being dragged across an old barn floor. Getting kicked over and over. A van driving up as he looked at his flat tire. Four men wrestling him into that chair. Screaming at his father to not come any closer. Looking up at that window wondering when the next bullet was coming through it. And today, a sucker punch connecting solidly with his eye.

He felt so hopeless at the moment, but logically that was ridiculous. He was blessed. He had so many things going for him. So, some guys wanted to kick his butt? So what? No big deal. He could handle it. Why was he so angry? Why was he mad at his mom? Finally, the thought came to him to pray. He closed his eyes and began talking to Jesus. The delicious peace came over him immediately. The higher perspective became clear. None of this trivial, earthly stuff was important, and he needed to make amends with his mother. He could almost hear the words audibly, "Honor your father and mother." The people who gave him life, nurtured him, loved him unconditionally. His body relaxed with the clarity he suddenly felt and he slipped into a deep slumber.

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May 22nd Wednesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

When Gabe woke he was completely disoriented. He glanced at the clock on his nightstand. 5:30. But it was dark outside. He picked up his phone. It was 5:30 in the morning. He'd missed dinner and slept through the entire night. It was the first good night's sleep he had in a month. He quickly showered and dressed and headed downstairs in search of food. He glanced at the table and saw the sheets and pillowcases he'd left there, now all neatly folded. He pulled up short when he saw his mom standing at the kitchen sink staring out the window.

"Mom?"

She startled. Turned. "Gabe! Hi honey."

"Hey Mom. Didn't mean to scare you."

"That's okay. I was miles away."

"Mom, before you say anything else, I want to apologize for how I spoke to you yesterday."

"Oh, sweetie, it's okay."

"No, it's not okay. Not at all. I'm not even sure why I decided to take my bad mood out on you. I haven't slept in weeks. I was really tired and really mad and I took it out on you. I'm sorry. I love you, Mom, with all my heart and it hurts me to know that I hurt your feelings. I never, ever want to do that again, so, please forgive me."

She reached up and put her hand on his face. "Of course I forgive you, my baby boy. I didn't know that you haven't been sleeping until your dad told me last night. I'm sorry that I've been so focused on this pregnancy that I wasn't even aware that you were struggling."

"Mom, you don't have to apologize." He took her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

She smiled at him. "You're so grown up. When did that happen?"

He shrugged. "Not sure that I am. But I'm trying to be. I promise, I'll do better."

"That's good to hear," Keegan said as he came into the kitchen.

Gabe looked down, feeling ashamed of his behavior the past night.

Keegan came to him, lifted his chin, looked him over and shook his head. "Well now, that's not going away any time soon, is it?"

"I bet you're hungry after missing dinner last night," Lizzy said cheerfully. "How about some eggs and pancakes?"

Gabe smiled. "That would be awesome."

"Come to my office for a few minutes, Gabriel. We have things to discuss. Lizzy, will you call us when breakfast is ready?"

"Of course."

Gabe followed his father into his office. He sighed. Here goes.

"Dad, I'm sorry for how I acted yesterday. I apologized to Mom. I'm not sure why I turned on her. It was wrong."

Keegan nodded. "It was wrong, but it *is* understandable."

"It is? Well help me to understand."

Keegan smiled. "That's why you're in my office. First, your mother was the one who kept you from getting upstairs when you just wanted to go brood. Second, it was your mom who noticed the eye. Third it was because your mom is so excited about your graduation that you didn't fight. She was in the way and she received the fallout of your anger. Almost like collateral damage."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"I believe you. I explained some things to her and she understands."

"Thank you for doing that."

"You're welcome. Now, don't beat yourself up over this, because, like, someone already did that for you."

Gabe smiled. "Funny, Dad."

"Unfortunately, you won't think it's so funny."

Gabe grimaced, thinking his father was about to hand down one heck of a punishment.

"Because you said one of the guys was videoing, I had Rose look online to see what damage was done."

Gabe's lips pressed tightly together. "So, how bad is it?"

"It could be worse. He doesn't have a lot of followers. But the guy has labeled you the 'Ultimate Coward' on his Instagram page."

Gabe cursed, then looked up quickly. "Uh, sorry." He thought of how it must look, his arms in front of his face, his body curled up. Labeled a coward. It made his stomach turn over. He let the initial hurt of it fade away, and finally nodded his head. He accepted it. Let it go. He didn't care what the world thought of him. He didn't care that they thought he was some macho hero and he didn't care that some now thought he was a coward. It was what those he knew thought, what he himself thought, and what God knew.

"Well, I guess I'll handle it," Gabe said.

"How will you handle it?"

"I'll live with it. I mean, really, it's the same thing I myself said to you just last week."

"You didn't call yourself a coward. You asked me if I thought you were a coward."

"And you said 'no', so that's good enough for me."

Keegan eyed his son, not sure what to make of his calmness.

Gabe sighed. "So, last night, I prayed and I saw for just a second, things from a higher perspective. God told me that all of this earthly stuff was trivial."

"That's commendable that you thought to pray about it, and also that you actually listened to God's answer."

"Thanks. So, what's next?" Gabe asked.

"Next?"

"Yes, weren't you gonna punish me for being disrespectful?"

"No, Gabe. You're about to be eighteen. You're a man. A young, inexperienced man, but a man. I think all I can do from here on out is guide you, advise you and continue to love you. I don't think a punishment would accomplish anything now. I'm sure you realize there are always consequences for our actions, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, think before you act, which you actually did and is why you didn't fight. Though the no-tolerance rule is stupid, you won't pay any more than a few bruises and a black eye."

"Breakfast is ready," Lizzy called.

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Still Wednesday Morning...

Gabe still had some time after breakfast to make a quick call. "Jake?"

"Yeah, buddy, everything okay?"

Gabe sighed. "Not exactly. When are you coming home?"

"I'll be home Friday evening. What's up?"

"I, uh, need some extra training."

"Hmmm, you can't ask your dad, or my dad?"

"No."

"Gabe, what are you into?"

"Nothing illegal, I, uh, I hope."

"Geez, buddy, you're scaring me. Does this have anything to do with the video Laynah showed me?"

"Maybe. What video?"

"You gettin' jumped. She told me the whole thing."

"How did she know?"

"Violet told her. Gabe, you made a good decision."

"Yeah, and then I made a bad one."

"What?"

"I scheduled a rematch. After graduation."

"Okay. So, you're gonna fight some dude. What's the big deal?"

"Well, it's probably gonna end up three against one."

"Yeah, that's almost understood, so? I mean, I know part of your training has included multiple attackers. Your father is a pro at that and I know he's worked with you."

"I know, but I feel the need to brush up."

"Okay, well, confidence is key, but I won't be home until Friday, probably around six PM, so that doesn't give us much time. We can work on it Friday night or early Saturday morning."

"Will Laynah be upset?"

"About what?"

"Me taking up your time after you've been gone a week."

"Heck, she'll probably want to help train you."

Gabe smiled. "Cool. I, uh, I've had some friends come to me saying that this guy is a pretty bad dude."

"He goes to your school, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't know him. I only know that he's a junior, but he's my age."

"Why is he a grade behind?"

"Something about him spending a year in a youth correctional center."

Jake blew out a breath. "Do you know what for?"

"I tried to find out but the records are closed because he's a minor. But the rumor is it was for assault with a weapon."

"Good grief. So, you intend to meet some juvey after graduation to fight and there's a possibility things could go south."

"Possibly."

"Is there any way I can talk you out of this? Get you to just walk away?"

"I can't Jake. I'm sure you get that. Especially if you've seen the video."

Jake was silent a moment. "Do you know the guy's name?"

"Yeah, it's Will Cole. William Cole. Why?"

"Always good to know your enemies. I got a friend who can get me information."

Gabe frowned. "I mean, it's not that big of a deal."

"That might be true and I hope that's true," Jake replied. "But keep in mind the happenings of the past two months. Keep in mind that you're a household name across the

country. And mostly keep in mind that there's a fund bearing your name worth over forty-four million dollars. You're gonna have to get it through your head, Gabe, that your life has changed. You're not just some country boy gettin' in a school yard fight. There could be something behind it."

"Well, hopefully this is just a guy having a bout of 'Bruce Lee syndrome' and I'll kick the guy's butt and that'll be the end of it."

Jake smiled at the Bruce Lee reference. Because Bruce Lee was who he was, people were always challenging him, picking fights with him. He nodded. "Yeah, Gabe, hopefully that's all it is. So, when and where is the scheduled meet up?"

"Saturday, 2 PM, behind the old elementary school on Main Street."

"Okay, got it. Well, I have things to do bro. See you Friday."

"Thanks, Jake."

"No problem." Jake hung up and drew a breath. Gabe hadn't asked him to keep his confidence, but the trust was understood. He came to him because he didn't want to go to his father probably because his father would forbid him from fighting. But Gabe's safety was more important here and Jake wasn't sure how to handle it and he didn't have a lot of time. So, he called his dad.

"Early morning calls are frightening," John Appel said immediately.

"Sorry, Dad, didn't mean to scare you but I'm short on time. Listen, I'm about to break a confidence but I feel I have no choice because of safety issues. The thing is, if you can keep the confidence that would be great. But if you can't, I understand."

"I'm listening."

"I'm guessing you've heard about Gabe's little rumble yesterday. There's gonna be another fight, a challenge issued by Gabe. Gabe called me looking for some brush up skills against multiples. He called me instead of you or his dad for obvious reasons. I can't talk him into walking away—again, for obvious reasons. The guy he's gonna fight was in juvey for a year for assault with a weapon. Look, I know we can work this whole thing around to fix Gabe's rep and to protect him at the same time, but I have to report in a few minutes and I'll be busy all day and into the night. I need your help."

"You got it. Give me the information and I'll handle it. And just FYI, I'll probably have to break confidence also."

"Understood."

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Still Wednesday Morning...

Pine Forest High School

At school a little earlier than usual, Gabe pulled his phone when it vibrated. Smiled. "Hey Taylor."

"Hey."

"It's pretty early for you."

"I couldn't sleep and I got online and what do I see? I see a video of you."

He sighed. "Yeah, it's not pretty."

"I showed my dad and my brother and they said they were sure you had a good reason for not fighting back."

"You woke them up just to show them that stupid video?"

"No, we're about to train on the beach."

"Oh, yeah."

"So? Why didn't you defend yourself?"

He quickly explained the circumstances.

"Well, my father and brother were right, that *is* a good reason. I'm sorry you had to go through that. Are you okay?"

"I've been better. But I've also been worse. I got into an argument with my parents last night about it. That was no fun."

"What did you argue about?"

"Nothing really. I was just tired and irritable and I smarted off to my mom."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Yeah, well, I'm not perfect. I DID apologize to her this morning. To my dad too."

"Good. So, let me see your face."

He sighed and then switched over to video.

"Good grief, Gabe, that looks terrible."

"Yeah, thanks. Hey, I don't mean to cut you off but I have to go to homeroom."

"It's okay. I have to get down to the beach. Oh, hey," Taylor said to one of Gabe's friends who came up behind him and waved at the screen. "You're Liam, right? The catcher?"

He laughed. "Hey Taylor, wow, I can't believe you remember my name."

"Of course I do. I'm the team's biggest fan."

"Geez, Tanner, she's a keeper for real. So, Taylor," Liam began. "Whaddya think of the champ?"

"He's not lookin' so good."

"Right? But he'll look better Saturday at two. I'll live stream if you wanna watch."

"That's enough," Gabe barked.

"What is he talkin' about?"

"I'll tell ya later. Gotta go, Tay. Love you."

She smiled. "Love you too."

Gabe turned and glared at Liam.

"What?" Liam laughed.

Gabe only rolled his eyes and went into his homeroom. The teacher immediately called him to the front. "Principal wants to see you."

He let out a heavy sigh, spun and headed out.

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"Mr. Tanner, I see you are supposed to graduate Summa Cum Laude, with the fourth highest GPA in the school. I see that you have lettered in both football and baseball four times each, and have received numerous other smaller awards."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you want to tell me about this fight you took part in yesterday afternoon on school property?"

Gabe looked up at Mr. Briscoe, trying to decide how he was gonna handle this. He wanted to tell him to go, well, something he shouldn't say– or think for that matter. He would have to speak to the man respectfully, because that's how the Tanner family

operates. Besides, Gabe needed to be beyond reproach. He drew a deep breath. "Well, sir, I actually did not participate in a fight."

"Well, Tanner, besides the evidence on your face, I have been given a video of the actual fight. Let me remind you that adding lying to the charge will not bode well for you."

"Mr. Briscoe, you know me and you know my family. I don't lie. *We* don't lie."

"The evidence states otherwise."

Gabe's eyes narrowed at the slight to his family name. Gabe began to wonder if the videographer had somehow doctored the video, and if so, this was gonna be a complete disaster.

"You know, Mr. Tanner, there is a no-tolerance rule about fighting this last week of school. Anyone caught fighting will not be able to walk at graduation."

"Yes, sir, I know that. Mr. Briscoe, did you actually watch the video?"

"I saw enough of it to know it was you and Mr. Cole."

"I would like to respectfully request that you watch the video– in its entirety. If you do, you will see something completely different than what you were told."

"What do you think I'll see?"

"You'll see me walking along on my way to the parking lot, then you'll see Will Cole sucker-punch me in the eye. You'll see me fall down. Then you'll see the other two guys, whose names I don't know, start kicking me and punching me along with Will, while a fourth guy videoed the whole thing. You will see me cover my face and curl up my body to try to protect myself. You will see that I did not fight back at all. I simply laid there and let them hit me. I did that because I knew of the no-tolerance rule and I knew my mother would be very disappointed if she couldn't see me graduate, and so, for her, I just laid there. I was very careful to not fight back. So, I ask, sir, if you will please watch the video."

"I'll take that under advisement, Mr. Tanner. You are dismissed."

"No, sir."

"No?"

"Sir, I would like to respectfully ask you to watch the video right here, right now, so that I can see that you watched it and so that I can be sure that the video has not been altered in any way. Please understand, I mean no disrespect, but a very important part of my life is at stake here, and in the name of justice, please grant my request."

Mr. Briscoe pursed his lips.

Gabe smiled kindly at the man, thinking that might help. What he really wanted to say was; *this is a huge miscarriage of justice against me and my family and there will be hell to pay*. He wanted to say; *the Tanners are not just some poor scared people who cower because some guy who thinks he has authority, is trying to pretend he's powerful*. But he kept those thoughts to himself.

Mr. Briscoe pulled out his phone, turned on the TV in his office and cast the video up on the screen. Gabe held his breath, hoping he would see the true video and when he did, he relaxed. Thank you, Jesus, he thought.

They watched together as three guys beat on Gabe, and then it was over. Gabe looked back at the principal.

"Do you have anything else you'd like to say, Mr. Tanner?"

"Yes. As you can see, I wasn't fighting. I was careful not to fight. I can't control what other people do and shouldn't be punished for them. I didn't know these guys at all. I only found out the name of the guy who punched me in the eye after the fact. I've done nothing to these guys to have them attack me. It seems obvious to me that someone is out to get me."

"Why would they want to do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe for the same reason those pitchers threw at me at the baseball games. I've had a lot of attention lately. It brings challengers out of the woodwork. Bottom line, Mr. Briscoe, I did not fight. If we need to get my father in here, I can give him a call, but I believe he's busy putting together security for the graduation, since he was asked to do that by the school board. Would you like me to call him?"

"I don't think that will be necessary. Now that we've seen the video, I think I can say that you are welcome to walk at graduation."

Gabe nodded. "Thank you, sir."

Mr. Briscoe actually smiled. "I didn't see that you were on the debate team or the mock trial team, but you could have done well."

"Well, sir, I guess there's only so much time in a day," Gabe replied, right on the edge of sarcasm. "Am I free to go back to class?"

"Yes."

"Uh, sir, if you don't mind, I would like to say one more thing."

"Go ahead."

"That no-tolerance rule, it sucks. Because of it, I had to lie there and let some guys beat on me. Think about it. They knew I wouldn't fight back because of that rule and that means anyone could use it to get back at someone else. If I'd been a much smaller person, or just someone who didn't know how to protect myself, I could've been seriously injured. As it is, we don't know yet how serious this eye injury is. Ya know, stuff like this is a lawsuit waiting to happen. I could sue the school for setting up the opportunity for these guys to get at me. Ya might want to rethink things a bit," he said, knowing he was quoting his father, and hoping he didn't sound disrespectful. He shrugged. "Those are just my thoughts." He smiled, offered his hand. "Thank you, sir, it's been a great four years."

They shook hands and Gabe hurried toward his first period class. He thought about what he just said and hoped it wouldn't come back to bite him. He figured he probably needed to speak with his father and tell him what he'd said to Mr. Briscoe. He only had to stay today until third period. He'd go straight home and have that talk, then head down to the basement and work out.

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Still Wednesday...

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe pressed out the last one and eased the barbell back into its cradle. He sat up, picked up his towel and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He nodded his head slightly to the beat of the music coming through his ear buds. He was feeling pretty good. Stronger. His old self.

His talk with his father had gone well. His dad had been pretty angry that Principal Briscoe hadn't even taken time to watch the video, and was suspicious of his motives. His

father also had no problem with Gabe stating the obvious, that Keegan had been asked by the school board to offer security for the graduation. They'd approached him and asked him about it because they were worried about what effect Gabe's newfound popularity would have. Keegan offered to arrange security free of charge. The only problem his father had with what Gabe said was using the word "sucks," and that was only a minor infraction.

Gabe's mind went to Taylor as it often did when he wasn't occupied with the business at hand. Her beautiful smile, full of mischief and amusement. Her gorgeous mouth. That luscious body. All that dark hair tumbling around her shoulders at the Prom. He sighed. He missed her. He was truly looking forward to seeing her on Monday. She had a sharp mind, albeit innocent, and he loved talking with her and sharing his innermost thoughts with her. He hoped they could find some alone time.

He was snapped out of his daydream by an incoming FaceTime. He accepted the call.

"Well, hello there Gabriel Tanner!"

"Hey, Isla August."

"It's so nice to see you and hear your voice again. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Nope, just working out."

"Gabe, listen, I'm calling because I saw that video of you online."

He sighed. "Yeah, I thought that might be why you called."

"You know, Gabe, whenever I speak with you I get the feeling that you really don't want to talk to me."

He thought about that a second. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude. I'm just a little camera shy, so when I speak to you I guess I revert to that feeling. The first time I spoke with you was right before the Mini-MART and I was in fighting mode and didn't want to talk, but Grandmaster Kino thought it was a good idea to get one interview under my belt. So, I was maybe a little impatient then and I go back to that initial feeling."

"I understand the camera shy thing. But Gabe, I am not your enemy. I am more like your biggest fan. You have changed my life in so many ways, young man. If I was ten years younger I would be so in love with you."

"Um, well, I don't really know what to say to that."

She laughed. "Of course you don't. Your honesty is so refreshing. But listen Gabe, I have a few things I want to say to you. You've changed my life. First, my career has taken off. When I came up with the idea of Teenspotter.com I was about your age, maybe a year older. I knew I loved to talk to people. I knew I loved to recognize young people who were above the ordinary. I had no idea what I was doing, but slowly my videos were getting more and more popular. And I always believed in being kind to people and honest, so people began to trust me and began inviting me to things involving extraordinary teens.

"That's why Breanna Adams got in touch with me about the Mini-MART. And once I met you, Gabe, I was truly blown away. But my career is not the main thing that has changed in my life. What really changed me was when you were kidnapped and the whole country prayed for you. I already told you, when I prayed for you, God let me know He was real. He filled me with His spirit and I haven't been the same since. I am so grateful for that! I mean, Gabe, I even got baptized last week!"

Gabe smiled. "Wow, that is awesome, Isla. Really, I'm so happy for you!"

"But there's more. It seems God has blessed me since you came into my life. Suddenly I have huge sponsors. Like the body wash people, and sporting goods people. And, I've been hired by a major network to air my Teenspotter videos. They even sent me their own cameraman and lighting specialist and even makeup people, which is a riot," she said laughing.

"That's great. I'm really happy for you, as long as you don't let it change you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, I'm just a kid, but I know we can get all caught up in our careers and like, prosperity stuff and end up selling our souls. So, just don't let them get you to do anything dishonest or ya know, not in keeping with what you believe."

She was silent a moment.

"Uh, you okay?"

She sniffed. "Sorry, Gabe, but you just made me cry. Are you sure you're only seventeen?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, and I make plenty of stupid mistakes, but I've been a Christian all my life and so what I just said was something I've been taught since I was little. You're what they call a baby Christian. You'll learn all this stuff and you'll see that me saying that is no big deal. There are a whole lot more Christian teenagers who are much better spoken than me."

"Oh my goodness, you're right! I mean, not that they're better than you, but that there are a lot of Christian teens who could say some beautiful things like you just said. I'm gonna search for some and get them to let me video their message. I love it! My heart is just so overflowing right now. But hey, I'm getting way off what I was trying to tell you. Hmmm, let me get my mind back to what I was saying. Oh yeah, so, I told you all that so that you know I'm coming from a good place. I'm not trying to exploit you. I want to help you."

"Help me what?"

"I want to come and video your fight on Saturday."

He sighed. "How do you know about that? Let me guess, Peyton?"

"Not this time. He told me he wasn't gonna talk to me about you anymore. Ya know, he truly loves you."

"Yeah, we've been friends since kindergarten. He's a good guy. If you want to focus on a really good guy, you should look at him. His father left them. His mom works hard to support him and his younger brother. He's been working since he was old enough to push a lawnmower or rake leaves to help his mom any way he can. And he still does good in school and watches out for me, and he's a great ball player. He got a scholarship to play baseball at UGA and I hope it leads to big things for him."

"That's interesting. I will definitely look into doing a story on him. Tell me, what have *you* done to help him?"

"Whatever I, or my family have done is between us and God, and we don't want any credit or accolades for any act of charity. Please. Think how embarrassing that would be for him."

"Then you have helped him."

"No comment."

"Okay, I get the message, but we've gotten off topic again. I want to help you. I want to video your fight on Saturday afternoon."

"How does that help me?"

"In several ways. First, my presence there with the cameras will keep it honest. No weapons. No sneak attacks. And then, after the fight, I'll interview you on camera and you can tell your story. You can explain why you didn't fight the first time."

Gabe shook his head. "I don't know about this. I mean, this is not supposed to be a public fight. The guy may not show up if it's public. Besides, I'm pretty sure fighting on public property is illegal."

"Oh, it is. But I can take care of that."

"How can you do that?"

"I can talk to the mayor and arrange permission to use the property and have it presented as a supervised martial arts demonstration."

"You have the power to do that?"

"Not alone, but I have some powerful allies. I know I can get it done."

"Well still, even if you can, the guy probably won't show up if it's a big public spectacle."

"He will if he doesn't know. He shows up; we're there with cameras. He can either refuse to fight and look like a coward, or he can go through with it."

"And if he still won't fight?"

"Come on, Gabe, are you telling me you don't know how to goad someone into a fight?"

He sighed. "Of course I do. It's been tried on me enough times."

Isla laughed. "Okay, good, so, if this guy said, 'Hey, I'm not fighting you in front of all these people,' what would you say?"

"I'd probably ask him why. And then I'd ask him what he's so afraid of. I'd tell him it's three on one, how bad could it be? And then I'd point to the cameras and the people already videoing and ask him if he wants all these people to see him chicken out. I'd point out how he was so big and bad when he knew I wouldn't fight back."

"So, him not wanting to fight would be no problem."

Gabe gave a slight laugh. "Don't think I don't see what you did there."

She giggled. "Oh, I don't doubt your intelligence at all."

He sighed.

"Whaddya say, Gabe?"

"I guess it would be okay. Still, I was hoping my father wouldn't find out about this thing."

"It'll be after the fact."

Gabe nodded.

"Unless of course, you just tell him."

Gabe nodded again.

"Either way, are we on?"

"Yeah, we're on."

She asked him a few more questions to clarify time and place and he finally ended the call. He sat there dazed for a minute, not even believing he'd agreed to such a thing. He

shook his head, glanced at the time. He had to get to Master Appel's class.

As he got upstairs to the main level his dad was coming downstairs.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey, so, I'm headed out to help John with his class tonight. Were you thinking of coming?"

"Yeah, I was just getting ready to go."

"Great. Let's ride together."

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Luke 8:17

"For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."

Chapter Twenty-Five

May 22nd Wednesday Later Afternoon
Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe was pretty quiet as they drove the few miles to Master Appel's martial arts studio on Main Street in the heart of Pine Forest. He watched his father as he drove. His father had three inches on him, and about thirty pounds. He'd always looked the same to Gabe. Big, strong, safe. Gabe figured to others he might look big, strong and dangerous. He had olive-colored skin that tanned deeply, just like Gabe. But his father's eyes were dark, while Gabe had gotten his mother's blue eyes. His mother called his father ruggedly handsome. Gabe wasn't blind. He knew women found his father appealing. Some of Gabe's teachers over the years had said as much about his dad. At an open house once, Gabe had actually heard his science teacher say to his English teacher, "Now that is one amazingly sexy man," before they realized Gabe was standing right there.

"Something on your mind, son?"

Gabe shook his head. "No, sir, just thinkin' about stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

He shrugged. "Just life I guess."

"Hmm, come to any conclusions?"

"About what?"

"About life. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. And no, I haven't come to any conclusions."

"Well, I guess you know you can come to me about anything, son, if you need to ask me anything, or tell me anything."

Gabe's brow furrowed. "Uh, yes, sir, I know."

They arrived at the studio, grabbed their bags and went inside. There were a few students standing around before class, including Laynah and her brothers, Charlie and Matt. Gabe and his dad went to the dressing rooms, changed clothes and came out in their white uniforms with their black belts wrapped around their waists. They took a moment to bow to Master Appel, who was a 7th dan black belt in three different styles.

Gabe and Keegan stood in the front row of the class when the class lined up. Keegan was especially welcomed because he didn't get to class very often, though he did train at home almost every morning. To be an Ameritech agent, one had to be at least a 2nd degree black belt in two styles. Keegan had far surpassed that. Gabe decided that now that he had no more football or baseball practices or homework to do, maybe he should use the time to concentrate on moving up a belt.

Once they went through the initial opening exercises and warmups, Master Appel explained they were gonna take advantage of having Keegan in class by working on how

to defend against multiple attackers.

Gabe couldn't believe his luck. His eyes narrowed. Or was it? Pushing the suspicions aside, he watched and learned.

Master Appel made Keegan the one being attacked and had himself and other black belts do the attacking. When Gabe was watching he was blown away by what he saw his father do, how quickly he moved, how all his moves were practiced and came naturally. Of course, he knew that about his father, had seen him in action many times, but having been attacked himself now, it was a new perspective. When Gabe was one of the attackers, he came at his father with everything he had. When his father turned it around on him easily, he listened closely as Master Appel explained to the class what had actually taken place. He then had Gabe and his father move in slow motion so the rest of the class could grasp what was taking place.

By the end of class Gabe felt much more comfortable about what he was about to face. Later, once class was dismissed, Gabe had to ask.

"Master Appel, did you plan this class because of the video of me that's circling around?"

John smiled at him. "I admit, it was the catalyst that gave me the idea to address this subject. Not that I think you don't know how to do this stuff. I know why you didn't fight. I approve your reasoning. I simply thought I should go over this stuff for the benefit of my students."

Gabe nodded. "Well, it was a great class and I learned a lot, so thank you, sir."

"You're welcome. So, just two more days of school, huh?"

"Yes, sir, well, two half days. And Friday will only be for graduation practice, cuz there's a bunch of kids who can't seem to get down walking in a straight line. Go figure."

"Well, we all have our cross to bear," John answered. He turned to Keegan, offered his hand. "Thanks for your expertise, Keeg."

"It was fun. Let's do it again sometime."

In the car Gabe watched his father again. It was like he was seeing him with new eyes.

His father turned and smiled at him. "You okay?"

"Yes, sir. Uh, Dad?"

"Yeah?"

Gabe closed his eyes. Shook his head. "Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep. I wonder what's for dinner."

Keegan sighed. "I think your mom said Daisy was cooking tonight."

Gabe smiled. "Oh, good, spaghetti. I could do some damage to some spaghetti."

Keegan smiled. "I know you can."

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May 24th Friday Evening

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe, Laynah and Charlie were breathing hard. Jake was kicking their butts, literally. They were out in the back pasture, out of sight of searching eyes. They'd been at it for almost two hours. Jake finally called it quits.

"For now, it is what it is, Gabe. I think you're gonna do fine."

They all sat in the grass and picked up their water bottles.

Gabe had so much respect for Jake. He was not quite four years older than Gabe. Only four years. In four years would Gabe be able to hold his own against a Marine? He wanted to do just that and there were only two ways to do it. Join the military or go Ameritech.

"So, Jake, how close is what we've been doing tonight to what you do in the Marines?"

The smile left Jake's face. "Not very close."

"How is it different?"

He sighed. "As a Marine, if I was defending against multiple attackers, I'd be using all available weapons."

"Gotcha. So, let's pretend you don't have your rifle or your sidearm."

Jake frowned. "Then I'd use my knife and slit their... " He stopped quickly. Glanced briefly at Laynah and her fourteen-year-old brother, and shrugged. "Sorry."

Laynah only looked down.

"I know what you were gonna say," Charlie said.

"Yeah, well, just hope and pray you never have to do it."

Gabe sighed. The world was full of horrible, ugly things. His own father had taken many lives by the method Jake had started to say. It was not cool. It was a horror of war. Sometimes in the fight against the darkness of the world you had to do hard things. That's what Grandmaster Kino always says.

Gabe wondered how his father handled the feelings that must accompany having to do something like that. He was so quiet. So calm. Even the other night when Gabe had smarted off to him, instead of flying up the steps and tearing into him, he merely told Gabe to rethink what he was doing. And now Gabe was gonna do something without his father knowing, and he was pretty sure he wouldn't approve. There was no way Gabe could back out now. But he should at least have the courage to go to his father and tell him what he was gonna do. The thought made him queasy. Did he have the courage?

Gabe rose. "I guess I'd better be going home. Big day tomorrow. Jake, thanks for taking time for me. Laynah, Charlie, thank y'all too."

"No problem, Gabester," Jake said as he rose and shook his hand. "I'll be there."

"Really?"

"Sure. I'm not gonna let anything happen to you."

"No confidence in me?"

"I have every bit of confidence in you. I'm just backin' you up."

"Thanks."

"Bye, Gabe. I'm gonna try to be there too," Charlie said. "I mean, as long as Jake would let me come."

"We'll see," Jake said.

Laynah rose and kissed his cheek. "I'll be there too, sweetie. Kick some butt."

"Gonna do just that."

Gabe walked back to the small road that ran along the fence line, jumped in his truck and headed home.

He pulled up to the place he usually parked, behind the garage, and just sat there in his truck. He was seriously thinking about telling his dad what he had planned. It could mess up everything. Isla would be left high and dry if his father forbade him. He may have to

defy his father, but still, he should have the courage to tell his father. If he didn't, then what's the use of trying to prove he wasn't a coward?

Taking a deep breath he headed into the house. He'd left the house earlier, right after dinner and while he was gone training with Jake, his grandparents on his father's side and his sister should have arrived from Tennessee by now. His mother's parents had passed away before he was born. He'd have to greet Heather and his grandparents first, before he could speak with his father.

"Hey honey," his mom said as he came in the kitchen door.

He smiled. Kissed her cheek. "Hey Mom. How are ya feeling? Any better?"

"I'm having a pretty good day. Hopefully it will be the same for tomorrow."

"Yep. Is there like, anything you need me to do? Like hang up a sign or anything?" he asked with a smile.

She frowned. "What makes you think there's a sign that needs to be hung? Huh? You just get up to bed and get some rest."

He laughed. "I will. I just wanna see Nani and Grandpa and Heather and talk to Dad a minute. Is he in his office?"

"No, I think he's in the den with the girls. You'll have to wait to see Nani and Grandpa because they were tired and have gone to bed."

"Oh. Sorry I missed them."

"Me too, but you can see them at breakfast. Where have you been?"

"I, uh, had some stuff I needed to take care of."

Lizzy nodded, trying not to pry. Gabe headed to the den. "Hey y'all," he said as he entered.

"Hey Gabe," the girls sang sweetly.

"Where ya been?" Rose asked.

"I, uh, had some things to take care of."

He nodded politely to the stranger in the room, who stood and offered his hand.

"Hello, Gabe, I'm Nolan Sawyer. I've heard a lot about you."

Gabe smiled, shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. I've heard a little about you, but I've read a lot more."

"Gabe," Heather said with a smile. "Stop."

"How did you hear about him?" Rose asked.

Gabe shrugged. "I have my ways." He reached out to his eldest sister. "Uh, so do I get a hug or something?"

She giggled, stood, hugged her little brother. "Sorry. I'm a little tired. We just got in about an hour ago. The trip seemed to take forever and I don't recommend driving through the ATL on a Friday afternoon at the beginning of summer break. Traffic was ridiculous. The grands were so tired they ate and went straight to bed."

"Hmm, so if the grands are in the guest bedroom, where is Nolan staying?"

"Gabe!" Heather admonished.

"What? I'm just wondering if I need to give up my room for the weekend."

"I got a room next door at the Inn," Nolan said with a smile. "Don't worry, your room and your sister are both safe."

"I swear Gabe, you are so like Dad it's eerie," Heather said.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all. So, where have you been?"

Gabe sighed. "Just had a few details to take care of." He looked at his father. "Dad? Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Yes," he thought he heard one of his sisters whisper.

Keegan smiled. "Yep, how about in my office."

Gabe nodded and led the way.

He waited to sit until his father had gone behind the desk and sat down. It was too late now to back out, though that was exactly what he suddenly wanted to do. He glanced at his father who sat quietly, leaning back in his chair, his brows raised, waiting.

"I, uh, I need to tell you something."

Keegan nodded but said nothing.

"I'm not quite sure how to say it. I, um, said something I shouldn't have said. Well, I mean, it was a challenge. I issued a challenge. It was a bad decision, I guess. When those guys beat me up on Tuesday, at the end, I challenged them to come back and fight me again, AFTER graduation." He paused for his father's reaction but there was none so he went on.

"I told them I would teach them a lesson. I told them I would take on all three of them. They laughed at me and said they'd be there and they were gonna bring some friends for entertainment." He looked closely at his father but Keegan seemed very calm, though that usually meant the opposite.

Gabe swallowed. "So, maybe I shouldn't have issued the challenge, but I'm not sure if I would take it back. Maybe that's pride talkin' and if so then I guess I'm sinning, but I simply don't feel I should take it back, not that I could anyway. It's, uh, happening tomorrow, at 2 PM behind the old elementary school on Main Street. They'll be there. I've been assured by some kids at school. I'll have some friends there too, to back me up, not that I want this to turn into a big brawl."

When his father still didn't say anything he went on. "There's another thing too. Somehow, Isla August found out about it. She called me, said she wanted to help me, like, save face or something. She wanted to come video the fight and then interview me so that I could state publicly why I didn't fight the first time. At first I told her I didn't want this to be a big public event, mostly because fighting in public and especially on public property is illegal, but she said she could get approval from the mayor to sanction this fight as a martial arts demonstration and so, I, uh, told her she could video." He paused, blew out a breath, but his dad still didn't speak and that was worrisome.

"So, this guy, his name is Will Cole, he spent some time in a correctional facility. I don't know what for, but some kids say it's for assault with a weapon. I don't know what kind of weapon. Isla thinks her presence will discourage anyone doing anything stupid, like pulling a gun or a knife. Anyway Dad, listen, I've been told I should just walk away. I know that's what I should do, but I just can't, Dad. I can't make myself do that. It's not in me.

"And I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I'm not really telling you all this to ask your permission or to even get your support, because no matter what you say, I *am* gonna be there and I *am* gonna fight these dudes. The other day, when you didn't punish me for

smarting off to Mom, you said it was because I'm becoming a man, and you can only advise me now. So, I just want you to know, that I cannot walk away from this.

"If it's just pride making me do this, I'm sorry. If it's shame from being labeled a coward, I'm sorry. I don't know why I feel so strongly about it, but I can't walk away. I have no idea how Isla is able to get the mayor to sanction this fight, and so, like, if that isn't true, I could end up getting arrested. But Dad, even with that hanging over my head, I'm still gonna fight." He sighed and shook his head. "I don't even know why this whole stupid thing is so important to me." He stopped, looked at his father, shrugged. "Okay, well, I guess I'm done."

Keegan smiled. "You explained that very thoroughly. One question. Who told you to walk away?"

"Jake."

Keegan nodded. "Now, I have a confession of my own to make. Isla is not the one who got the mayor to sanction the fight."

Gabe's brow wrinkled. "Huh?"

"John and I went together to speak to the mayor and got it done."

Gabe shook his head. "But how? Oh, Jake?"

"Yes, and he's pretty torn up about it, so don't be angry with him. He loves you like a brother, and if you think your sibling is in danger, you do whatever you have to do to keep him safe, even if it means breaking your brother's confidence."

Gabe thought a minute. "Okay, but Isla... "

"I called her in. I knew she had the power to repair your online rep. I also used her to get the mayor to sanction the event. She'll give the mayor plenty of credit and will get lots of publicity for our little town which will eventually cause much growth and provide more jobs and maybe even get more kids to stick around instead of hightailing it out of here the moment they graduate."

While Gabe thought about that, his father went on. "Now, let's talk about this need you have to fight these guys. This need to complete what you started by issuing the challenge."

"I know it seems prideful."

"I'm not a doctor of psychology, but I do have a degree in psychology and I *have* spoken with Grandmaster Kino. It's not about pride, and it's not about you being labeled a coward. It's about healing."

"Healing?"

"Yes, son, give yourself a break. You need to heal not just physically, but emotionally. You've been struggling with this. All the things that you faced when you were abducted, and then, three guys beat you down, it's much more than pride. When these things were happening to you, you were experiencing certain emotions, certain feelings. You have to replace these feelings and emotions with different ones by having new experiences."

"I don't think I understand."

"Okay, let me use something completely unrelated and removed from you as an example. Let's say, a woman is sexually assaulted. After a rape, many women don't want to be intimate with their husbands for a long time, and those women may take longer to heal. Then there are some women who want to be intimate with their husbands quickly, they say it's because they want to replace the bad memory with a good memory. They feel

it will help them to take back a sense of safety and self-control. It doesn't erase the trauma, but it reminds them that the attacker does not own their body or their future. It's a kind of replacement therapy. Some therapists call it creating a corrective experience. You feel the need to replace your feelings of weakness and of vulnerability, with victory and strength. You feel so strongly about this fight because you have the need to feel powerful again. You feel like you need to regain your confidence. I actually believe it will go a long way to your healing. And therefore, I'm all in. I'm behind you one hundred percent."

Gabe couldn't keep his eyes from tearing up.

"So," Keegan continued. "Tomorrow, you will wake up, go to your graduation ceremony, go kick some butt, do an interview, and come home to the giant surprise graduation party that I know, you know, your mom is planning."

Gabe smiled. "Yes, I know."

"After your abduction, you went back into the dugout and that was helpful. Then you went to baseball practice and that was helpful. Then you got to play and did well, and that was extremely helpful. And now, this martial arts demo, will top things off. Do you feel confident?"

"Yes, sir, I do. Thanks to Master Appel's class Wednesday night and Jake tonight, I'm feeling pretty good."

"Good. And by the way, Will Cole did indeed serve time for assault with a weapon. However, that weapon was merely a broken bottle. It was kid stuff. He got in a fight with an older kid, thought his life was in danger, grabbed an empty beer bottle that was lying in the alley and used it to fight the guy off. He cracked the guy's head. The parents pressed charges."

"Oh, well, that kinda makes me feel sorry for the guy. But maybe he's not so innocent, since he sucker-punched me using full force and I didn't do anything to him."

"Maybe not. You just win this battle. We'll work on sorting out Will's life for him afterwards."

"But Dad, how can the mayor sanction this fight without Will's parents signing like a permission slip or something?"

"Will is eighteen. He just turned eighteen a few weeks ago. The two guys who helped, don't go to your school. They are eighteen and nineteen and they also spent time in the same correctional center as Will."

"You know their names?"

"Sean McMahon and Zane Thomas."

Gabe smiled. "Dad, you are amazing."

"That was not a difficult thing to find out when you have the resources I have."

Gabe thought a minute, going over everything he'd just found out. "So, you found all this out and took care of all this stuff in just a few days, cuz, Jake didn't know until Wednesday morning."

"Right."

"And you arranged Master Appel's class?"

"He arranged that. Jake told him first. Then John told me."

"Right," Gabe said, nodding his head. "And you've been watching me and waiting for me to come clean."

"Yes, and you didn't disappoint me. I'm proud of you."

Gabe blew out a breath. "Well don't be, cuz I almost didn't tell you."

"Almost doesn't count. You did tell me. You passed the test."

Gabe looked up quickly. "My sisters know?"

"Yes."

"That's why I heard one of them say, 'yes' when I asked to speak with you. They were relieved that I decided to speak with you."

"Yes. It was Rose. She had a bet on you and she won."

"Wow. So, who bet against me?"

"None of your business."

Gabe chuckled. "Does Mom know about all of this?"

"Yes. She and I always communicate about everything having to do with you kids. So, that's enough questions for now. It's getting late and you need to get some sleep."

"I'm gonna grab a snack and I'll go straight to bed."

Keegan nodded. "Don't touch that cake in there or your mom will beat us both. I love you, son. As I've said before, you can always come to me, no matter what."

Gabe nodded. "I guess you just proved that to me. Thanks, Dad. Good night."

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May 25th Saturday Morning

Pine Forest High School, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake held Laynah's hand as they stood on the upper level of the stands at the fifty yard line, gazing out over the football field at *Pine Forest High School.* They too had graduated from this school. Currently, their hearts were full of sweet memories of their teen years. Even back then they'd been attracted to each other, but they hadn't acted on it. They'd had other boyfriends and girlfriends, all the while, pushing down the feelings they had for one another.

Jake smiled down at beautiful Laynah. She was tall for a girl, 5'7", but he still had seven inches on her. Her beautiful red hair was down with only the sides pulled away from her face. She wore all white in deference to the coming hot day. Her flowy white skirt blew in the soft breeze. She wore a delicate, white, short-sleeved blouse and white sandals. Though the sky was bright blue and completely clear and a cool morning breeze was blowing, it would be up into the nineties by noon. They were about to be baked in the sun. They'd arrived early to get and save seats for the family.

"Guess we'd better claim our seats," Laynah said.

They started to turn and head up when they heard a voice call.

"Jake! Jake is that you!" There was a feminine squeal. "It IS you. Oh my goodness!"

Jake's former girlfriend from his senior year came running toward him. She jumped into his arms, almost bowling him over.

As quickly as he could he set her away from him. "Hi Becky, nice to see you."

"Oh, it's more than nice. Oh my goodness, I can't believe it's you. You look amazing! You're so big and strong!" She ran her hands over his shoulders and down to grip his biceps. "Well now, being in the military hasn't done you a bit of harm."

"Uh, Becky, you remember Laynah Stewart?"

Laynah smiled at the pretty girl. "Hello."

"Oh, hi. Um, I think I do. You were a junior when we graduated, right?"

Laynah nodded. "Right."

Becky immediately turned back to Jake. "So, what are you doing here?"

His brow wrinkled. "Uh, you know my family lives here in Pine Forest."

"I mean, HERE, at the graduation."

"Oh, well, Gabe Tanner is graduating. Our families are very close."

"Oh yeah, that's right! And *you* live right next door to Jake too," Becky said, nodding at Laynah.

"That's right I do," Laynah said, smiling at Jake, actually enjoying how uncomfortable he was acting.

Becky grabbed Jake's arm. "Oh my it's so good to see you, Jake. You'll have to excuse us, Laynah, but I just have to catch up with my old boyfriend."

Laynah's eyebrows rose and she giggled.

Jake gave her a stern look then turned back to Becky. "So, Becky, I'm guessing you haven't heard that Laynah and I, we're engaged."

Becky's mouth formed a perfect 'O.' "Engaged?"

"Yes."

"You mean to be married?"

"Yes."

Smiling, Laynah lifted her hand to show the ring. Becky took her hand, examined the ring.

"Well now, isn't that pretty," Becky said insincerely. "It's so tiny and sweet. When I get married, my ring is gonna be huge, I mean, at least a full two carats, but I guess everybody has different tastes."

"Or priorities," Laynah added pointedly.

Jake pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

"It was nice seeing you, Becky," Jake started, "but we have to go save seats for the family."

Becky nodded politely. "Oh, of course, y'all have a good day. It was nice to see you." She gave a salute. "Carry on, soldier."

Laynah couldn't stop herself. "He's not a soldier."

"Oh! Did you drop out of the military?"

"No, he didn't, but he's not a soldier. He's a Marine. Huge difference."

Jake tugged on her hand and he and Laynah headed up into the stands and started laying all kinds of things in the seats, hats, purses, programs, umbrellas, hand fans, sunglasses, car keys, and water bottles. Then they took their own seats.

Laynah giggled, rubbing her hand up and down Jake's arm. "Oh my, she is right, you are so big and strong."

Jake laughed. "And you are so bad."

"I know, right? Bless her heart."

Jake chuckled, tilted her chin up and gave her a quick kiss. "I am so in love with you, Bugs."

She grinned. "Backatcha."

About fifteen minutes later the Tanners arrived and eleven of the saved seats

disappeared. Next, Jodi and John arrived. Maddie wanted to come but they all decided the heat index would be too much for her, so she would join the family at the Tanners later. Only fifteen minutes before the ceremony was to begin did Chaz, Lisa, Charlie, Matt and Aralyn Stewart arrive and take their seats.

"What took y'all so long?" Laynah asked.

"Couldn't find a parking space. This place is packed," Lisa answered.

"Ya think that's Gabe's doing again?" Laynah asked.

"Probably." It was Rose who answered. She held up her phone. "Teenspotter is streaming live. And," she paused as she pointed toward the steps. "And here she comes."

They all looked up as Isla August came toward them, her new cameraman zeroed in on their family. As usual, she was smiling and effervescent, a pretty girl.

"And here we are!" Isla said brightly. "Hello Tanner family! Okay, people, you're in for a treat. I posted their picture when I did my last interview with Gabe, but today, here they are live and in person! The entire Tanner family!"

The camera panned, the Tanners all smiled. Little Iris waved, becoming a pro as she smiled at the camera.

Keegan nodded at Isla, but was busy speaking to one of the senior agents on security duty. While Isla conducted a brief interview with the family, Keegan stood and walked away to take care of business. Peering over the railing at the field, he could see twelve agents from where he stood. Others were manning the entrances to the field and the stadium. Today, because of the heat, they wore white polo shirts with their usual black pants. On the sleeve and chest was a black embroidered AMT an abbreviation of Ameritech. They wore their regulation belt holsters, sidearms, extra mags, taser, cuffs, knife and baton. They wore ear buds in their ears and were always in constant communication. The graduation ceremony would be held facing the home side of the stadium. The visitors stands were off-limits, so that made it easier. The graduating class was just under three hundred, which was a relatively small class. Some larger high schools in Georgia would be graduating closer to eight hundred.

"Is there a problem?" John asked as he joined Keegan at the railing.

"A small one. One of the agents got sick suddenly. I've had an agent escort him to an Urgent Care facility. Probably the heat getting to him, but just wanna be sure. I have two more agents on the way."

John nodded. "Well, I'm sure I don't have to tell you that Jake and I can be of service if you need us."

"No, you don't have to tell me. You would be the first person I'd call on. Thanks, John."

The music began, and the always recognizable 'Pomp and Circumstance' sounded over the loudspeaker. Keegan and John went to take their seats. Iris was clapping her hands as Lizzy was using the red, white and blue folded hand fan they'd passed out along with the programs to keep a breeze on her and Iris' already sweaty faces.

In keeping with the school colors, the boys wore blue caps and gowns, the girls wore white caps and gowns and the Valedictorian and the Salutatorian wore red. Though Gabe's last name would normally require him to enter near the rear of the processional, because he was Summa Cum Laude and had the fourth highest GPA, he was fourth in line. His

family cheered and waved and he turned and smiled at them. Laynah let go of one of her ear-splitting whistles and everyone laughed.

Keegan took Lizzy's hand and they smiled at their son. He wore a gold stole, two gold cords, and a green cord for community service. It wasn't the awards he achieved that made them proud though. It was how hard he always worked to be the best he could be, not for himself, and not for awards, but to be in service to God. Gabe was a blessing.

Keegan glanced down at Lizzy. She was sweating. "Honey, drink some water," he said kindly, opening her water bottle for her.

She nodded and sipped.

"How are you feeling?"

"To be honest, not great, but I'll make it. Check on your parents though." She grunted as Iris kicked her leg. Keegan rose, picked up the baby. "Daisy, take Iris for a bit please." He handed her off then leaned down to speak with his father. "You guys doing okay, Dad? It's pretty hot."

"We're fine, son. We have our water and our fans. We can make it."

"If you start feeling lightheaded, or dizzy, you tell me immediately," Keegan ordered. "It will be no trouble to get you back to the house and let you cool off and rest."

"Nonsense," his father said.

Keegan looked back up, and Iris was reaching for Heather, who gathered her baby sister in her arms and then fanned her. The toddler laid her head against her sister's chest and closed her eyes. Maybe she'd sleep through the rest of it.

Keegan sat back down as the salutatorian began to speak. The rest of the ceremony went off without a hitch. The valedictory speech was humorous and well-done. The principal kept his remarks to a minimum. That was also well-done because the heat was becoming a problem and because Keegan wasn't real happy with the man, since his meeting with Gabe. Keegan glanced back up to see a sleeping Iris now being held by Heather's new boyfriend. Points for him. Heather stopped fanning Iris for a second, kissed Nolan's cheek, and then continued fanning. Keegan wondered just how long they'd been together.

In deference to the sleeping child on his shoulder, everyone but Nolan watched and cheered as the students' names were called and they went forward to receive their diplomas. Mortarboards were thrown and retrieved, hugs abounded, the kids marched out and the stands emptied quickly. Outside the stadium families gathered for pics with their graduate.

Many families would be going out to eat to celebrate. Their family would head home for a giant party and celebration, but they had a little stop to make first. Gabe was hugged and photographed and was being videoed. Then Keegan told him to eat his energy bar and hydrate. He had work to do. He glanced at his watch. It was already after 1:00. Time to head to Main Street.

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May 25th Saturday Afternoon

Old Pine Forest Elementary School, Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia

There were only a few cars in front of the school because Gabe's friends and family had been told to park along main street and walk so that the amount of vehicles didn't

scare off Will and his buddies. Gabe pulled his truck into a parking place. Peyton and Liam were with him. Elias pulled up beside him with Luke, Carlos and Deion with him. They climbed out of their vehicles and headed to the back of the school. Isla August and her camera guy and a few others were already there, recording as the boys walked up.

Only a few minutes later Will, Sean, Zane and several other guys Gabe didn't recognize, came around the back of the building. Gabe's eyes met Will's. There was so much anger in Will's eyes and Gabe wondered what he'd ever done to the guy to produce such animosity. Gabe was the one with the right to be angry. He was the one who was attacked out of the blue by a bunch of guys he didn't even know. And as far as Gabe knew, Will didn't even get suspended from school, though Gabe had to fight just to get to walk at his graduation. It didn't make sense.

As soon as Will saw Isla and the camera he stopped. "What's all this?"

"They're gonna video the fight," Gabe answered.

"Oh, no, I didn't sign up for this."

Gabe shrugged. "You videoed me when you guys jumped me, didn't ya?"

"Yeah," Will smiled. "And it's given me hours of entertainment, watching it over and over."

"Good, so you shouldn't mind if I get the video this time. Unless of course, you're scared I'm gonna kick your butt."

"I'm not scared of you, Tanner. After your last performance, no one is scared of you. By the way, how's the eye?"

Gabe allowed a short laugh. "As I'm sure you can see, it's still healing, thanks for asking. And having people scared of me is not my goal. Exposing you to the world of justice is my goal. You know you blind-sided me. You even knew I wouldn't fight back."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because if you thought for one moment I would fight back, you would've been too scared to jump me."

"I already said, I'm not scared of you."

"Prove it. I'm giving you this opportunity to prove it. I told you, I'll take all three of you on and still kick your butts. The camera being here shouldn't make any difference at all, unless you think you can't win. Or maybe it's something else."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Maybe you don't like the camera being here because you intended to cheat."

"How could I cheat?"

"Well, let's start with the knife you have strapped to your leg."

Will looked down and back up, then bent down and removed the knife, handed it to a friend.

"So, does that mean you've decided to fight after all?" Gabe asked.

The two guys who had helped to beat on him last Tuesday stepped up. "Come on, let's do this," one of them said.

Gabe held up a finger. "One moment. There's gonna be one rule. No weapons."

"Whatever," Will muttered.

"Check 'em," Gabe said and motioned to what looked like a couple of classmates dressed in jeans and T-shirts, only Gabe knew they were Ameritech agents.

"Pompous ass," Will muttered.

"You call me an ass, I call it smart," Gabe responded as the agents removed two more knives and a set of hard-plastic knuckles.

When he saw what they removed, he realized either these guys were real criminals and thought nothing of using those kinds of things, or they truly wanted to hurt him. And since he didn't even know them, he wondered what the deal was. Did Mia Casellas hire somebody to hurt him for revenge? She didn't get out on bail, but she could work from the inside, he guessed. Or were these guys just simply thugs looking for trouble?

He sighed, as the two agents moved away and told everyone else to back up so the fighters had room. Gabe had no weapons on him, but he didn't need any. He was completely capable of hurting these guys and he suddenly realized he didn't want to do it. But he would if he had to. He was conflicted. Not a good way to begin a fight. Grandmaster Kino had taught him that.

With everyone backed up and several agents and Jake stationed at points around the large circle, Gabe stood there thinking.

"Are we gonna do this or not?" Will said, and then called Gabe a few profane names.

Gabe looked up with a calm expression. He knew the camera guy was zeroing in on his face, but he wasn't really bothered by that. He sighed. "I've had a change of heart," Gabe said.

"Aww, little boy gonna chicken out?"

Gabe glanced at the one who spoke. It was either Sean or Zane, Gabe didn't know who was who. "No, I've just decided that I'm gonna give you guys an out. Ya see, I intended to mess you guys up. In other words, you could get hurt. So, I'm giving you an opportunity to walk away. Go ahead. Just walk away and we'll call this thing over. It won't be because you're afraid. It'll be because you're smart. So, just walk away. Because if you don't, you'll probably get hurt."

"Uh, we'll take our chances."

Gabe sighed. Shrugged. Nodded. He suddenly looked up at the camera and smiled. "Hello and welcome to our little Martial Arts self-defense demonstration. Today, I'm gonna demonstrate how to handle multiple attackers. Now, watch closely. The first strike you'll see is something most martial artists begin with to stop an attack quickly."

The three advanced toward Gabe. He focused on Will, because he knew he'd strike first. Gabe moved backward a few steps to get in rhythm with them. One guy circled behind Gabe. Will moved in fast and swung hard at Gabe's face. Gabe merely bent his head down to dodge the punch, grabbed Will's fist, turned his body and smashed his elbow into Will's nose, while at the same time he kicked out to his back, knocking the one coming in from the rear to the ground. Will yelled and fell limply to the ground. Gabe had thrown one elbow and one of the three was down and wasn't getting up. Blood poured from his nose. That was the move he'd spoken about. In a real life and death battle, Gabe would've hit harder, breaking the nose.

Gabe danced around, moving quickly so that the two left wouldn't be able to coordinate their attack. The man he'd kicked came at him again from his left, trying to throw some kind of karate kick. Gabe merely kicked his knee at just the right moment, hyperextending the joint and the guy fell on the ground grabbing his leg in pain. Gabe

thought maybe he'd kick the guy in the face, just to be sure he didn't wanna get back up, but decided against it. He turned quickly toward the other guy who'd stopped in his tracks. This guy seemed unsure of what to do. Then it seemed he nodded at one of his friends who was standing behind Gabe.

Gabe was aware of the interaction and was ready for a surprise rear strike from behind. Gabe then nodded at the guy in front of him. "Bring it, or walk away." The guy ran at him, grabbed Gabe's shirt in both fists and pushed him backward toward the crowd as if he were pushing a football blocking sled.

Jake moved with blinding speed toward the guy at the front of the crowd who'd just drawn a small pocket knife. He grabbed the guy by the wrist, almost breaking his hand. "Not on my watch, bud. Drop it, or you won't have the use of your hand for a while." The boy cried out in pain and the knife fell to the ground.

Gabe had enough. He moved into the one who'd pushed him, grabbing the back of his neck and bringing his face down and slammed his knee up at his nose. He immediately fell. Gabe stood over him, considered kicking him, but drew a breath, let the anger subside and walked away.

The crowd was cheering, his friends were jumping up and down, patting him on the back, rubbing his head. Gabe allowed a smile and accepted their congratulations. He made his way to Jake, shook his hand.

"Man, you saved me. I guess he intended to stab me. That is crazy."

Jake nodded. "When the dude nodded at his friend, it caught my attention and I watched the guy pull the knife out." Jake put his arm around Gabe's shoulder. "Still, you were thinking too much about the guy coming from behind and shouldn't have let that dude close enough to grab your shirt."

Gabe nodded. "Got it."

Jake nodded at the Pine Forest police officers who were cuffing the guy. "And now, since he was stupid enough to try to knife someone in public, he gets to visit a lovely Pine Forest facility."

Gabe only shook his head.

Laynah ran up and kissed him on the cheek. "That's from Taylor."

"She watched?"

"Yeah. A bunch of people saw it. I mean a whole bunch of people. Not just like the millions of Teenspotter people. I livestreamed and so did Liam."

Peyton and Elias came running and picked Gabe up into the air.

Keegan and John watched from afar. Jake slowly walked back to them.

Keegan shook his hand. "Thanks, Jake. That was a close one."

"Copy that, sir. Just doing my job," he said with a grin.

As the crowd thinned and Ameritech agents and police officers ushered everyone out, Gabe gave his interview to Isla.

"Wow, Gabriel Tanner. That was one amazing display. You never disappoint. Even your little speech beforehand was perfect. That was some pretty tough talk, and you delivered."

Gabe tried hard not to roll his eyes. "I just realized those guys were not trained at all and I could really hurt them. I didn't want to, well, not too much anyway. So, I gave them

an opportunity to walk away."

"Well, you may not have wanted to hurt them, but apparently, one of them really wanted to hurt you. I mean, that one guy had a knife."

Gabe nodded. "Apparently. Though I'm not sure why. I mean, I don't even know these guys. Not sure what their problem is with me."

"And who was your friend who took the knife away?"

"That's Jake Appel. He's like a brother to me, and he's a Marine. Not much gets past him."

"Now, Gabe, would you mind telling us why you didn't fight back when they jumped you the first time, because I think we can all see today that you certainly could have fought."

"It was for my mom," Gabe began. He told the whole story and put in his two cents worth about the no-tolerance rules, about how they sound like they're a good thing but instead are really harmful.

"Isn't it wonderful that Mayor Andrew Bradbury gave permission for this little martial arts demo right here in the lovely town of Pine Forest?" Isla continued.

She turned and pointed her microphone toward the man on the other side of Gabe. "Mayor Bradbury, some people are probably wondering why you would allow this public demonstration?"

"Well, first, as you can see, we had it well under control. We had men from our city police department stationed throughout the crowd, keeping order. And I allowed it because I think it was a shame that this excellent young man born and raised in our town, had to take the beat down he took. I wanted to show that we will not accept that kind of violence and I want to encourage all of our young people to learn how to defend themselves. I believe it to be a worthwhile pursuit."

"Thank you, Mayor. I agree with you one hundred percent. It's not often that a politician is willing to come out and take a stance, and I'm sure that Gabe here is probably pretty grateful for you having his back."

Isla turned back to Gabe. "Tell us, Gabe. Where did you learn martial arts?"

"Master Appel, who, by-the-way, is co-owner of the *Pine Forest Country Inn*, and three more Country Inns in small town Georgia, has a string of martial arts studios in Georgia. He and his partner Brian Cantrell run *Appel Martial Arts*. Master Appel's flagship studio is right here in Pine Forest."

"What style does he teach? I mean, is it karate?"

"Master Appel teaches Zendo Ryu."

"I actually know what that is, but for our audience, can you tell us what that means?"

"It means the whole school of thought. It's a mixture of every style of martial arts brought together to use the best style for your current situation."

"Amazing. Did Master Appel come up with this on his own?"

"No. He is a student of Grandmaster Kino, from *Kino Martial Arts*. So is Brian. And so am I. Grandmaster Kino is the founder and teacher of Zendo Ryu, which is one of the first mixed martial arts."

"Of course, through Grandmaster Kino, that's how we all first came to know you, Gabe, at the Mini-MART the Kinos put on a few months ago."

Gabe nodded.

Keegan, John, Chaz, Charlie, Jake, Laynah, and Gabe's older sisters stood by waiting for the interview to finish. Gabe was doing a good job drumming up business for the Country Inns and for *Appel Martial Arts*, but it was unbearably hot and all of them were sweating profusely. Peyton and a few more of Gabe's friends milled around talking about how quick Gabe moved, how strong he was, how proud they were of him. They were waiting also because they'd been invited to the party. When Isla finally finished, she hugged Gabe and thanked him profusely. She then shook the Mayor's hand and thanked him too and made her way toward her car with her cameraman beside her.

Gabe watched her go and felt a wave of compassion. He ran after her. "Uh, Isla!" he called.

She turned, a smile on her face, and moved back toward him while the camera guy was loading their equipment into their van.

"Uh, well, I just wanted to say thanks, for all you've done for me. You're a good lady."

"It's my pleasure for sure, Gabriel Tanner."

He grinned. "Why do you always call me by both names?"

She laughed. "It's just fun to say. Gabriel Tanner. Has a good feel to it."

He chuckled. "Anyway, um, if you'd like, I mean, my mom is having a surprise graduation party for me and you are invited to come."

"A surprise? It doesn't sound like a surprise."

"Well, yeah, but she knows that I know. I mean, I'm not dumb."

"No, you're certainly not that."

"So, you'll come?"

"Yes. I just have to go back to the motel and take care of some business first."

"So, how is it traveling around without your brother?"

"He's relieved to go do other things. And my new camera guy, well, he's pretty nice."

Gabe smiled. "Is he single?"

"Why yes, yes he is," she said with a smile.

"He's invited too," Gabe said. "See you later."

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The Tanner home was large. Three stories if you count the basement. Seven bedrooms/seven baths built for what they knew back then would be a large family. Keegan, with the knowledge and help of Chaz and his father Charles and John had built it with their own hands. The large backyard was great for a pickup game of football or baseball. Just outside the back den through two sets of french doors was a deck and patio and pool. That seemed to be where the main party had moved after they'd chowed down. The elder folk, Maddie Lewis, Charles and Patricia Stewart, and Keegan's parents, Deb and Roger Tanner, chose to relax in the cool air in the front living room where a giant sign hanging on the wall read, "Congratulations Graduate," with his name at the bottom and jersey numbers in the corners and glitter and confetti glued to it, and a tiny hand print, Gabe guessed was Iris'.

Gabe came in to greet the grandparents, and see if they needed anything. He ended up serving them some of the giant cake and some sweet tea, shook the men's hands, kissed the ladies' cheeks and went back to the main party.

Keegan and John carried a giant gift-wrapped box about the size of a washing machine and set it down next to Gabe out by the pool.

"I, uh, thought we weren't gonna open gifts while everyone's here," Gabe said.

"This is an exception. It's from the guys at Ameritech, and they insisted you open it at the party."

"What is it?" Gabe asked.

"I don't know. Open it and find out."

Gabe opened the gift and everyone's eyes lit up.

"Alright!" Peyton exclaimed.

"Wow!" Rose said. "I get this one!" She reached into the box grabbed up a NERF N-Strike Elite Disruptor.

Keegan peered into the box. It was full of guns. Nerf guns. N-Strike Elite Rhino-Fire Blasters, Fortnite AR-L Elite Dart Blasters, Zombie Strike FlipFury Blasters, N-Strike Elite Retaliators, and even several Elite 2.0 Commander RD-6s. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of foam bullets and darts. Keegan grinned. "Oh yeah. Let's do this."

"Oh my goodness, an epic battle! Please, you HAVE to allow me to get this on video!" Isla exclaimed. "What a great memory this will be!"

Gabe looked at his dad. They both smiled at each other and then at Isla and gave her a nod of approval.

While everyone divided up into teams, chose their weapons and ran off to make battle plans, Isla had AJ, who was her new camera guy, go get his equipment and then she gathered a few forces of her own, so that she could get phone video from some volunteers to give different perspectives from different teams to edit together later.

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The firefight was coming to an end. There were only a few left standing. Gabe motioned at Peyton, the only one left alive on his seven-man team, which had included all his teammates from school. He pointed down the back hallway from where he currently hid behind the sofa in the den. He and Peyton needed to make their way down that hallway and out the game room door to the backyard. It was their only chance. Laynah and Rose, who no one wanted on their team and were scooped up by the older guys, turned the corner of the stairway and jumped out firing, Gabe and Peyton easily evaded them, made it to the office and burst out the back doors where they were immediately mowed down by Keegan, John and Jake. Gabe and Peyton fell onto their backs, breathing hard.

Keegan, John and Jake stood victoriously over them, nodded at each other. "Oorah," John said. Keegan and Jake echoed it.

"I think I saw this guy move," Jake said, aiming his gun at Gabe.

"No prisoners," Keegan barked. "Get 'em."

The three Marines opened fire once again on Peyton and Gabe as they raised their arms to cover their faces.

All the others standing around and sitting by the pool cheered and laughed. It had been a great and long battle. Some thought for sure the young, spry kids would win. But the other team was led by two special forces veterans and there was just no beating them.

Laynah and Rose stood over the fallen soldiers and smiled. "Well then, it looks like we were on the best team."

"I wouldn't gloat if I were you," Gabe warned.

"I'm not scared of you," Rose said.

Gabe stood. "Another guy said that to me today and didn't fare so well." He nodded at Peyton, "You get Laynah, I'll get Rose."

The girls shrieked, the boys gave chase, grabbed them, lifted them, walked to the pool and tossed them in.

Jake nodded at Keegan and John. "I got this." Within a few seconds both Gabe and Peyton were also thrown into the pool.

Isla was in heaven. Her mind was going crazy at how to edit together the epic battle, the horrific final massacre and the delightful act of revenge twice over.

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May 27th Early Monday Morning

Atlanta Hartsfield Airport

They were flying an Ameritech private jet. They almost always did as long as there was a flight available and space available on the flight. Ameritech now had a fleet of jets and helos, but Keegan remembered when there had only been one of each. The empire Jason had created was an amazing accomplishment. He'd started out merely as a martial arts consultant for some security companies, but his expertise under Grandmaster Kino's umbrella was quickly recognized. He moved up to consulting for the U.S. government, ended up training SEALs and FBI and others and eventually putting together entire training programs. Then he started arranging security for large events across the country and eventually across the world. It was impressive. Ameritech now employs over thirty thousand people and is still growing.

Now, Keegan thought, kids like his Gabe could aspire to be an Ameritech agent as an alternative to the military or the FBI. Jason took a lot better care of his employees than the gov did. It was almost a no-brainer. Keegan looked down at his son who was currently texting his girlfriend before they took off. He'd been through a lot the past few months and he had some big decisions to make on top of that. Keegan wouldn't push him. He needed to heal emotionally from the trauma now, or he'd be in trouble later.

Gabe looked up at his father. "What's up, Dad?"

"Just thinking about your future."

"Seems to be the topic of the week."

"We'll figure it out. And if you're not ready to make a decision, there's no hurry."

Gabe nodded. "Thanks."

"So, is Taylor all excited?"

Gabe smiled. "Yeah. She couldn't sleep knowing I was on my way. We're hoping we can find some alone time tonight, to, um, talk, ya know?"

Keegan smiled. "Yeah, I know. So, tell me, son, what are your plans for Taylor?"

"My– plans for her?"

"Yeah, how does she fit into what you have planned for your life?"

"I don't have a plan for my life yet, Dad, as you well know. But whatever it turns out to be, I'd like Taylor to be a part of it."

"And what if she meets a new guy at school, or you meet someone else?"

Gabe sighed. "Well, in my head, I know that's possible, and if that's what happens,

then I guess we weren't meant to be. But I swear, I can't imagine myself with anyone else."

Keegan nodded. It was the same thing his eldest daughter had just said to him before she went back to Tennessee. But she was twenty-four. Gabe was only seventeen. "Ya know, you're about to be eighteen in a few weeks and Taylor will still be a minor. You need to be careful with her."

"Yes, sir, I know. I don't intend to do anything with her that I shouldn't."

Keegan gave a short laugh. "Things don't always go as you intend. Just be smart. Be responsible."

"Yes, sir."

"I was a Christian when I was your age, I mean, my parents raised me to be, took me to church when I was young. But when I was your age I didn't live my religion, mostly because I wasn't sure God was even real. It was Ricky Kino bearing his testimony to me out of the blue that changed me. But before that, Gabe, I went after everything I could get. I thought it was the manly thing to do, when it was really just the opposite. Taylor is young and in love with you. She is malleable. Get what I'm saying?"

"Uh, I think so. You're saying she would do whatever I want her to do."

Keegan nodded.

"I want us to do things right, Dad. I'm a virgin. She's a virgin. We will remain so. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Yep. That'll do it."

"Excuse me," one of the young men on the flight said. Keegan recognized him. He was one of four new recruits on the flight that Keegan had recently interviewed. "But you're Gabe Tanner, right?"

Gabe smiled at him. "Yes."

"Just wanted to shake your hand." He held out his hand, which Gabe shook.

"What you went through, and how strong and level-headed you were. You are what inspired me to go Ameritech."

"That's a nice compliment," Gabe said. "Thanks. Who knows, I might be headed the same way."

"Cool. Well, my name is Brooks Booth, in case we cross paths again."

"Nice to meet you, Brooks."

Brooks held out his hand to Keegan. "Agent Tanner, nice to see you again, sir."

"You too, Booth. Better buckle up," Keegan said. "We're about to take off."

"Yes, sir."

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May 27th Monday Morning

Savannah, Tennessee

"So, what did you think about my big, crazy family?" Heather asked Nolan. She'd invited him over to breakfast at her little apartment.

He smiled at her. "There are a lot of them, and they are great. I couldn't stop laughing at all the antics. Especially during the giant Nerf battle."

"Yeah, your laughing is what got the both of us killed."

"Sorry, hon, it was funny. Your whole family is hilarious. I can't tell you how many

times I blew my drink out of my nose. The things your sisters say, oh Lord, they are funny. And your brother may be young but he is my new hero, I swear. Watching him fight those boys. He was truly remarkable."

"Thank goodness," Heather said softly.

"Thank goodness?"

"Yeah, well, my family can be a little overwhelming and I was worried that you might, well, might think we were just too much."

"Your family, Heather, is what helped to make you who you are. I'm in love with you, how can I not love them too?"

Heather smiled. It still thrilled her when he said those words.

"What about my father?"

"Well, he can be a little scary, but having to take care of and protect six women and one little girl, you have to be a little scary. And with all that, he was just as silly as everyone else during the Nerf battle. He's pretty cool. After everything I've read about him, and after meeting him, I have a lot of respect for him."

"Even after he grilled you about what you do, what you've been doing, how many girls you've dated, why you aren't married yet, and what are your intentions?"

Nolan chuckled. "Even after all that. I wouldn't expect anything less from him."

"No, I wouldn't either," Heather confessed.

"And it's not ego," Nolan went on. "He truly cares for you. I mean, he isn't even your biological father, he gives all credit to your real dad by wanting you to keep your father's name. Keegan Tanner is a remarkable man." He smiled. "And your mom must be the sweetest lady I've ever met. She might even beat my sixth grade English teacher."

Heather giggled. "Tell me about this. Do I need to be jealous?"

"Well, not if you consider she's about forty-something years old by now. But I was totally in love with her. She was sweet, like your mom. Spoke in that same soft lilting voice. She didn't win any Grammys but when she read Shakespeare to us, I was in lala-land."

"Shakespeare, huh? I'll have to remember that," Heather said as she rose to clear the dishes.

He rose, grabbed her around the waist, pulled her close. "You don't have to read me Shakespeare, Heather. All you have to do is look in my direction and I melt, utterly and completely. It's been like that from the moment I set eyes on you." He raised her chin and kissed her thoroughly.

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May 27th Monday Afternoon

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

The Ameritech SUV slowed and came to a halt at the security gate which woke Gabe up from a deep sleep. He sat up, scrubbed his hands over his eyes and looked out the window at the familiar green lawn, fountain surrounded by flowers and the red front double doors with gold script on them. Gabe had been told that this time the words were in Mandarin and stated that: "Every step makes a footprint." He knew they changed it up every few years.

The car pulled up around the circle and came to a stop. Gabe and Keegan got out and

stretched and went to the back where the driver was unloading their luggage. He offered to carry it in for them but Gabe and Keegan both declined. Keegan handed him a large bill and thanked him.

Eric came out the front door and waved at the driver as he left, then came down and shook Keegan's hand. "Good to see you, Keegan."

"You too, sir," Keegan replied.

Eric turned toward Gabe who bowed deeply to him. Eric returned the honor and then shook his hand. "Gabe, so glad you came to see us."

"Me too, sir."

"Please come in."

Keegan and Gabe grabbed their luggage which included Gabe's heavy bag filled with guns, and headed up the steps.

Gabe kept looking up, hoping to see Taylor come running, but she didn't show.

"She's not here yet," Eric said as they entered the house.

Gabe smiled sheepishly.

Shelley appeared at the top of the front stairway. "Hey guys! It's so good to see you! Come on up and I'll show you your rooms."

They came up and were hugged fiercely. They turned right at the top of the stairs. Shelley pointed down toward the opposite end of the hall. "Jeffy and Cam are staying in Jeffy's old room so I thought I'd give you guys some privacy down here at this end." She ushered them into Bree's old room and Ricky's old room, each looked out toward the back of the house toward the ocean and each had their own balcony.

"Y'all get settled and come on down. I'm sure you'd like a little snack. Dinner won't be for a few hours. Oh, and I've invited the Davises to dinner. I thought you might like to see them."

Keegan smiled. "Always. Thank you for being so thoughtful, Shelley."

She grinned. "I'm not always, but I have my moments. See you downstairs."

It didn't take long for Gabe to get downstairs. He went straight to the kitchen where Shelley had laid the "snack" out on the island. It looked more to Gabe like a full meal. There were sandwiches, fruits, cookies, pasta salad. "Wow," Gabe said.

Shelley laughed. "I wasn't sure what you'd like so I put out a little of everything."

Gabe started helping himself, filled a plate, bowed his head, blessed his food and dug in.

Shelley sat with him. "Taylor will be here soon. They've been stuck in traffic. Apparently there was some big accident on I-5."

"Sorry to hear that," Gabe said.

"So, congratulations on graduating Summa Cum Laude. Very impressive. Have any idea what you want to do now?"

"No, ma'am, that's why I'm here. I can't figure out what to do, or when to do it."

"It's a hard decision. Leaning any particular way?"

"Leaning toward Ameritech."

Shelley nodded. "It's a dangerous job."

Gabe looked up into her eyes. Her youngest son, Joey, was the lead Ameritech agent just under Jason. His own father was just under Joey. "Yes, ma'am, I know."

She nodded. “I guess you do.” She reached out, touched his face. The black eye was finally starting to fade. “When I saw the video of the guy punching you, it made me cry. If it did that to me, I wondered what it did to your mom.”

Gabe’s brow furrowed. He had no idea if him being punched made his mother cry. He hadn’t thought about that. What he did know was that he himself had smarted off and made her cry. He’d been in his own little world feeling mad. He needed to work on that. Do better. Serve others. But in order to do that, he needed to be strong. “I, uh, I’m not sure if she cried. I guess that makes me a bad son,” he answered.

“No, honey, that makes you normal.”

“Well, I don’t want to be normal.”

“Hmm,” Keegan said as he entered the kitchen. “Just a few weeks ago I remember you telling Joey that you just wanted to be normal. Funny how perspectives change.”

Gabe smiled. Nodded. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

Keegan smiled. “Several times.” He proceeded to load a plate and sat down, bowed his head, and silently blessed his food. Gabe rose and refilled his plate, then looked worriedly over at Shelley. “Um, is anyone else eating?”

She laughed. “No. Feel free to have as much as you want. I remember having teenage boys. It’s like you can’t get enough. But let me just tell you, we’re having lasagna tonight and I know it’s one of your favorites, so save some room.”

Keegan laughed. “Don’t worry. He’ll have room.”

Eric came into the kitchen. Smiled at his wife. “Does it feel good to have a teen boy eating at your table?”

She dabbed at her eyes. “They grow up so fast and move away. Even young Eric and Logan and JoJo hardly ever come by anymore.”

He put his arm around her. “If you’re desperate to feed some boys, we can take in some foster kids, or even adopt some kids.”

“Ha ha,” Shelley said. “Don’t tease me.”

“Who says I’m teasing?”

Shelley looked up into her husband’s eyes. “Seriously?”

Eric shrugged. “Why not? We have the resources.”

Gabe smiled. This was very cool. He looked at his dad who was also smiling.

Shelley clapped her hands together. “Let me think about it. And pray about it.”

Eric nodded. “You do that. And we’ll pray together and see what God would like our next move to be. Until then, we have this young man to work on.”

“Yes we do,” Shelley said happily.

Gabe smiled and rose to take his plate to the sink. Being in this house with these people was always the most inspiring, uplifting thing. He hadn’t even been here thirty minutes and he already felt like saving the world. He gazed out the kitchen window to the ocean, which was bright blue today.

Eric placed a hand on his shoulder. “I want to speak with you in a little while, but I want to talk to your dad first. Why don’t you go take a walk on the beach. We’ll send Taylor down when she gets here.”

Gabe nodded. “Yes, sir. That sounds great.” He turned, nodded at his father. “Dad?”

“Yes, go son. Not too far though.”

"Thank you, Mrs. Kino, for the 'snack,'" he said using air quotes.

"You're very welcome, Gabe."

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Keegan smiled as he sat in the chair in front of Eric's desk. "You know, Gabe calls this the 'hot seat'."

Eric chuckled. "Ricky used to call it that too." He drew a deep breath. "Keegan, we rarely get to talk one-on-one. Usually, when you're around, so are twenty other people. So, while I had the chance I wanted to speak with you privately. I hope that's okay."

"Of course. I'm honored that you would take time for me."

Eric smiled. "Actually, you just stole my first line. I'm honored that you would ask me to help you and Gabe sort things out. I've prayed on Gabe extensively. He is a remarkable young man. A special young man. I know you know that. He's a reflection of you and Lizzy. Which means that the two of you are also special."

"Lizzy is for sure."

Eric frowned. "If you don't mind, I want to address what you just said, before we end this meeting. But right now, I'd like to go in a different direction. I was thinking, I know when we first met, you weren't real into God and Jesus, but I sense now that you most definitely are. Is that correct?"

"Pretty much. Thankfully, I came around before Gabriel was born. Before that I was a hard man. Drank a lot. Cursed a lot. Had a lot of, uh, relationships. Typical ex-military, dealing with the atrocities of war the best I could."

Eric nodded his head. "Thank you, Keegan, I appreciate your candor. So, you changed once Lizzy came into your life?"

"Well, Lizzy and her girls had something to do with it, but also, that was the same time that your son came into my life."

"What does Ricky have to do with it?"

"He came to Savannah, him and Bree together. He came to see Jeff in the hospital and we were introduced. Out of the blue, he said he felt moved to say some things to me. Everything he said to me answered every question I'd ever had about God. It was like he was reading my mind. Of course, he wasn't. But God knew my heart and proved Himself to me that day using Ricky. It took me a while to get on board completely, to understand what it meant to be a Christian man. But I've never looked back, and that's thanks to Rick."

"I never knew this," Eric said softly, moisture gathering in his eyes. "I'm glad to hear an example of my son listening to and acting on the Spirit."

Keegan nodded. "He's a reflection of you."

Eric gave a soft laugh. Sighed. "So then, Keegan, what is it you want for your son?"

"The acceptable answer to that is the always dependable, 'I just want him to be happy'. But actually, there's more to it than that."

Eric nodded. "Go on."

"Gabe, like you said, is special. There's a reason he's here. He feels like he might have a ministry, but not your normal preacher-type ministry. One where he can use the talents God has given him. He's an unnaturally superb marksman. He's a gifted martial artist and now that he doesn't have football practice and baseball practice to take up his time, he

wants to rededicate himself to his training and go much further with it. You know, at least move up in the belt rankings, and maybe even do some tournaments. He's smart. He graduated with the fourth highest GPA, and that was only because he didn't pay much attention to his grades because he was focused on sports, shooting and girls. He knows and I know that he should've had the highest, especially in such a small graduating class. I'm not complaining, only illustrating that he is extremely bright. He's compassionate. And he has a close relationship with the Lord. He feels the Holy Spirit often and allows it to permeate his soul, making him emotional."

"Gabe is all that you say and more," Eric agreed. "Has he talked about going into the military?"

"He considered it, but he's not sure he wants to go that route, which means I will discourage it, because a guy has to be all in to make it in the military."

"Does that disappoint you?"

"Not at all. I'm not sure that I want my son to experience the atrocities of war."

"And as an Ameritech agent yourself, as an Elite, would you want him to experience *that*?"

"Yes, I think it would be good for him. He's actually leaning in that direction. He wants to serve in some way. He wants to achieve the strong, hardened, lethal status of his heroes."

"Who are?"

"Jake and John Appel, you, Ricky, Jeff."

"And you."

Keegan sighed. "Yes, of course. He told me not long ago that I was his hero."

"And that brings us around to what you said earlier. I said Gabe was a reflection of you and Lizzy and you said, 'Lizzy for sure.' I'm actually surprised by you downgrading yourself. You have to have confidence and high self-esteem in your job. You command many men."

"My confidence is high enough."

Eric shook his head. "Why would you not want Gabe to be a reflection of you?"

Keegan blew out a breath. He was beginning to understand the 'hot seat' thing. "There are some things about me that I hope he reflects. My work ethic. The protection I offer my family."

"How about your strength, or your calmness under pressure. How about your power of discernment, or your humility. How about your love of God."

Keegan's lips closed tightly. "Not so calm under pressure. When Gabe was gone, taken, I thought I would lose my mind."

"I believe that's understandable, and I don't think that's what you're ashamed of."

"Ashamed?"

"In consideration of time, I'll cut to the chase. You have a certain stigma or reputation. You are dark, angry, stern, and a killer."

"Wow, you really did cut to the chase."

"Let me ask you, would you kill again?"

He shrugged. "If I had to."

"Do you hope that time will come?"

"No, of course not."

"Why have you had to kill in the past?"

"Well, sometimes it was kill or be killed. Sometimes it was kill or the perp would kill someone else."

"Like those children you rescued?"

"Yes, like them."

"So then, Jeff recently took out a sniper who would have killed you or your son. Are you grateful to him?"

"Yes, of course."

"Should he think less of himself because he killed that sniper?"

Keegan shook his head.

"People call you a killer because you've been put in the place where you've had to kill. Who do you think put you there, in that place?"

Keegan sighed.

"I'll answer for you. God put you, one of His chosen warriors, in place to help fight His earthly battles. To save innocent lives. To dispel evil and darkness. Even before you truly believed in Him and started living a righteous life, you were His. And you are still His. I can feel Him smiling upon you. He's proud of you. He's saying, 'Well done,' and He is also not finished with you. He has entrusted to your care another one of His chosen warriors—Gabriel, aptly named after the archangel who was a messenger of God. God sent Gabe to you and Lizzy, because He knew you would steward him well. You have done, and are doing, a great work. You have never abused nor neglected your children, but instead have nurtured them, protected them, taught them values, shown them the difference between right and wrong, dark and light. Keegan, you are *not* a killer. You *are* a warrior. Yes, you have a lot of kills under your belt, but that is what comes when you are the leader, the strongest, the 'Samson' of your time. Take heart. You are a light. Your family is a bright light. And I too, Keegan, am proud of you, proud to know you, proud of you as a man. You are strong enough to do the hard things, to do the things no one else wants to do, or even could do."

Eric stopped, smiled, grabbed a box of tissues off the desk and handed them to Keegan.

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Psalm 144:1-2

"Praise be to the Lord my Rock,
who trains my hands for war,
my fingers for battle.
He is my loving God and my fortress,
my stronghold and my deliverer,
my shield, in whom I take refuge,
who subdues peoples under me."

Chapter Twenty-Six

May 27th Monday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor came bursting in the front door of her grandparents' home.

"There you are," Shelley said from the kitchen.

Taylor came in and quickly brushed her grandmother's cheek with her lips.

Right behind her were Bree, Ricky and young Eric. They all also came over and bussed Shelley's cheek.

"Where is everyone?" Bree asked.

"Eric's in his study speaking with Keegan," Shelley answered with a smile, but didn't say anything else.

"Grandma!" Taylor said, exasperated. "Where's Gabe?"

Shelley laughed and pointed out the kitchen window. "Oh, you wanna know about Gabe? He's walking on the beach, waiting for you."

Taylor kissed Shelley's cheek again, then hugged her. "Thanks!" She ran out the glass dining room doors.

Ricky shook his head as he sat down at the kitchen table. "I'm gonna give them about ten minutes alone, and that's it."

"Got anything to snack on?" young Eric asked as he went to the refrigerator.

"I just put away some leftover sandwiches. They're in that square green plastic container on the second shelf."

"Got it."

While Bree, Ricky and young Eric sat and talked quietly, Shelley glanced out the window. Gabe was walking north, his hands in his pockets. Shelley heard Taylor call Gabe's name. He turned, a smile on his face. He held his hands out and Taylor ran full speed into his arms. She bowled him over and he fell backward onto the sand. He lay on his back while she straddled his body and bent her head to kiss him. It was beautiful, Shelley thought, this young, exuberant love. Gabe's hands came up to tangle in Taylor's long hair. He held her head as he kissed her, then, in a split second, he reversed positions and suddenly Taylor was on her back. Gabe lay next to her, kissing her a long time. Shelley sighed. She watched as Gabe's hand rested on Taylor's abdomen, and his lips moved to her neck. She closed the blinds and turned. There was really no reason to intrude on their privacy, because she trusted both youngsters to know when it was time to stop.

She leaned against the counter and listened to Bree and Ricky talk about their travel plans to go to Georgia for Jake and Laynah's wedding in a few weeks. She looked down as her cell phone went off.

It was Jeffy. "Hi sweetheart," Shelley said as she answered.

"Taylor and Gabe," she cried. "Taylor and Gabe! Hurry! Get dad!"

Eric and Keegan came out of the study before Shelley could call them. "Are Taylor and Gabe still down at the beach?" Eric asked.

Shelley held up her phone. "Yes. Jeffy says, they're in trouble. She says to hurry."

The men rushed out the back door, Bree right behind. Shelley looked out the window and gasped. "Call you back," Shelley said quickly.

Shelley ran outside and watched in horror. Gabe was fighting with several men. Five, six, it was hard to tell. Taylor lay face down on the sand. Young Eric arrived first, grabbing a guy from behind and pulling him off Gabe's back. He pummeled him to the ground with his fists until he wasn't moving. Ricky spun, kicked, and knocked another guy unconscious. Keegan bashed someone's head into his knee and the guy fell. Eric chopped a guy across the throat and sent him down as Ricky ran to Taylor arriving at the same time as Bree. They turned her over.

Keegan started toward Gabe, the only one still fighting. He wanted to step in and help, but thought Gabe needed a win. Gabe bashed the man in the face several times, but the guy wasn't fazed. Gabe kneed him in the groin and the guy finally went down but he kicked out and Gabe stumbled and fell onto his hands and knees. Quickly the guy grabbed Gabe from behind, put him in a headlock, jerked him up to his feet and held a knife to his neck. Gabe immediately stilled, his breath coming in gasps. Keegan started forward but the man yelled, "One more step and I'll kill him."

Suddenly everyone got quiet. Keegan pulled his gun, his arms out straight, the gun pointed at the man who'd pulled a gravity knife and held it to Gabe's throat. He calculated the distance. About thirty feet away.

Gabe tried to pull away, but the man pressed the knife harder against his throat and a thin line of blood appeared.

Keegan spoke firmly. "You have only a few seconds to drop the knife and let him go before a hole appears in your forehead."

"Back off and let us leave or I will slit his throat without a second thought."

"Let US leave? How ya gonna leave with these guys?" Keegan asked calmly. "You gonna carry four guys out with you?"

The man glanced around. "I guess not. I guess I'll just kill the kid for the heck of it."

"Fair warning, you might want to stop and think. This isn't my first rodeo. You're in danger of losing your life. Is it worth it? All you have to do is remove that knife from his throat, drop it on the ground. You do that and I'll put away my gun and this will be over."

The man slid the knife along Gabe's throat as a warning. "I WILL kill him." Gabe winced as blood began to flow down his neck. "Now back off!"

Keegan pointed his gun up, hands in the air. "There, see? I'll back off. You'll live. Now, just drop the knife."

The man laughed. "Oh, I'll drop the knife as soon as I complete my mission."

"And what is your mission?"

"To kill the kid."

"Dear God, I swear, I don't want to kill this man," Keegan said, shaking his head.

The man actually laughed. "Put the gun down and back away, because I swear, I DO want to kill this kid."

"Head to the left," Keegan said softly.

"What are you talking about? I'm not heading anywhere. I'm just gonna drop this kid."

"He wasn't talkin' to you," Gabe murmured, as he leaned his head slightly left.

Keegan's eyes narrowed, watching the man's forearm. It tensed. The knife began to cut and the shot rang out as Keegan made good his promise. The knife fell away. The man holding Gabe fell to the ground, bringing Gabe with him. Keegan holstered his weapon and ran to his son, who lay dazed, holding the wound on his neck with his own hand. Eric knelt down next to him. He carefully pried Gabe's hand away so he could see if it was a fatal wound. Both Eric and Keegan peered closely. "I can't tell. Too much blood. Keep the pressure on it," Eric said as he pulled off his shirt and pressed it to the wound.

"Taylor?" Gabe muttered. "Is she okay? He hit her hard. Is she okay?"

Eric smiled. If he was talking and asking about Taylor, he was pretty sure the knife didn't go deep enough to hit his artery. "Ricky?" Eric asked. "How is she?"

"Not sure yet. She's alive. She's still out. Her nose and mouth are bleeding so much, I can't tell if there's a head wound."

Shelley made her way down. "Paramedics are on the way. And police. And Jason—and Justin, for you, Keegan."

Keegan nodded. He was probably gonna need a lawyer– again. He couldn't think about that right now.

"ETA is twelve minutes," Shelley continued. She knelt down next to her granddaughter. Placed her hands on her head and began praying.

"Gabe," Keegan said. "Are you with me, son?"

Gabe drew a ragged breath. "I'm here." He whimpered. "Is Taylor okay?"

"Yes, she's fine," Eric said swiftly.

"Can I see her?"

"I don't want you to move."

"Please, Dad."

"Shhh, now. Soon, okay? Just be quiet and calm and say a prayer for her. That's the best thing you can do."

Young Eric was pacing furiously in the sand. He was sick and tired of this world. Here were two of the best people the world has ever known, lying here on the sand, their lives hanging by a thread. Well, hopefully not by a thread, but it was bad and it could have been much worse. Stupid. It was stupid. And he was stupid. He knew Gabe had been given a warning. But young Eric hadn't thought about it at all when Taylor ran out to see Gabe. He was only thinking about how happy those two were to see each other.

"Gabe?"

Everyone turned at the softly uttered word.

"Taylor, is that you?"

"Yeah. Are you okay?"

"Are you?"

"I asked you first."

"No you didn't. You just didn't hear when I asked about you," Gabe said and then coughed.

"Lie still. No more talking," Keegan ordered.

"Dad?" Taylor questioned. "Is Gabe really okay? Tell me the truth."

Ricky stroked her face. "He's gonna be fine," he assured her.

She tried to rise up but Bree held her down. "Be still, sweetie. Please."

"I want to see Gabe," she said, her voice choking on sobs. "Please, Dad, I have to see him. I have to know he's okay. Please, I have to see him, Dad, PLEASE!"

She was so distraught that Ricky pulled her into his arms, stood, carried her over and laid her next to Gabe.

She reached out her hand and took his.

"Rick," Eric said. "We don't have a lot of time before the official interrogators get here."

Ricky nodded. Kissed his daughter's forehead. "I'll be right back."

Bree watched her husband and son head over to the four guys lying on the beach, a few of them struggling to stand and get away. Young Eric grabbed one by the front of his shirt and dragged him over to where another one sat holding his face. When they had them all together, they searched them, finding two more knives, cell phones, wallets. Young Eric quickly went through their wallets and identification and looked for any scraps of paper with notes written on them.

Ricky spoke. "If you don't want to end up like your dead friend over there then start talking."

When no one offered up anything, Ricky sighed. "Eric hand me one of those knives."

Eric did as asked. None of them were small enough to use inside the nose but he'd work with what he had. He pressed a blade against a cheek right under the eye.

"Dad, don't do it," young Eric pleaded.

Ricky glanced up at him. His acting skills were improving. Impressive actually. He'd almost thought he was serious.

"My son knows what's coming. Ya see, it's really easy to pop out someone's eye." He pressed the point inward, just under the guy's eye. "Who sent you?"

"Please don't," the guy blubbered.

Ricky pressed harder. "Tell me now, who sent you?"

"I, swear, I'd tell you, but I, I can't remember his name. It's weird, like foreign."

"Foreign like, Spanish sounding?" He pressed the tip of the knife into the skin.

"No. No, p-please. Like, uh, like Russian or maybe Polish."

"What's it start with?"

"L. It starts with an L. Land something. I swear."

"Land?"

Listening to the interrogation, Eric closed his eyes and shook his head. "Lanske," he said to Ricky.

"Is that right? Lanske?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"It can't be him. He's in prison. You're lying," Ricky said as he moved the knife firmer against his cheek.

"No, it's the truth. You have to believe me. The other guy, the one paying the money, he's in prison but not Lanske. The one in prison, he's like a billionaire."

"Did Lanske actually speak to you? I mean face to face?"

When he didn't answer Ricky pressed the knife a little deeper. "I'm getting tired of this. Tell me all you know or the eye pops out. Did Lanske speak to you personally and did he send you after the girl or the boy?"

The guy whimpered as blood trickled down his cheek. "The man, Lanske, he's a bad dude. Please, man, he's gonna kill me. I've already said too much."

"Then working with us is your best bet right now, so answer the question."

"He, he sent me after the girl. He said he was positive she'd be alone with the boy. Told him, Manuel," he said pointing at his dead friend, "to kill the kid to make sure he didn't ever get a chance to ruin the virgin, or something freakin' crazy like that. I swear that's all I know."

"How did he contact you?"

"He was at a club. *Los Dragon*, put out word he'd pay twenty thousand apiece for us to take the girl, kill the kid. He didn't say anything about the kid being like, a fighter or something."

"Why does he want the girl?"

"Somethin' weird man, like about her blood, royal blood, or her bein' a queen, or somethin'. I didn't really listen that much."

"What's the name of the guy in prison? The one paying the bills?"

"I don't know his first name, but he's a doctor. Dr. Black."

Ricky sighed. Pulled the knife away. He stood and looked at his father, then up to see the world descending down the steps to the beach.

"Where's Jeffy?" Eric asked.

"She was at the hospital when she called. I told her I'd call her back. She's probably frantic," Shelley replied.

"I'll call her," Eric said as he rose and walked away from the others.

"Hey, Daddy," Jeffy said softly. "I know they're alive, but how bad is it?"

Eric filled Jeffy in and asked her to call her brothers.

"We're getting close, aren't we Dad?" Jeffy asked softly.

"I'm not sure, baby girl. Not sure. But, Jeffy, listen, this was a kidnapping attempt by Black and Lanske. They were told to kill Gabe and take Taylor because of her royal blood."

"No, this can't be. Aren't they in prison?"

"Black is. Apparently, his right hand man was released. Which means you cannot be alone. Is Cam with you?"

"Yes."

"He is not to leave your side, Jeffy, not for any reason."

"Yes, sir." She sniffed. "Will this evil ever stop?"

"Probably not, sweetie. Not until Jesus comes. Until then, we will be His warriors and fight the battle the best we can. Right?"

"Right."

Jeffy ended the call and glanced at her husband who was just getting off his own call.

"Who was that?" Jeffy asked.

"It was Jason. Protecting you is my new assignment for the foreseeable future. Who were you talking to?"

"My dad. You are not to leave my side."

Cam gave a small smile. "Feels like old times."

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Taylor and Gabe had both been transported to the hospital. Shelley and Bree followed the ambulances. Jason had his men scour the beach for evidence. A police detective walked along with them. Another detective was looking over the body of the dead man, and then at Keegan. "I'm gonna need to take the gun." He held out his hand.

Keegan sighed and drew his gun from the holster, ejected the mag, unchambered the bullet, and handed it all to the man.

The detective checked the magazine and placed it and the bullet in a bag. "Looks like you only used one bullet."

"That's all it takes," Keegan answered.

"Where were you standing when you fired?"

"Over there."

The detective scanned the area, found the casing, bagged it. Looked over at the dead guy from where he stood. Nodded his head. "That was some shot."

"He was gonna kill my son. I had to take it."

"I understand, but Agent Tanner, you know it's illegal to carry a loaded weapon in California, even as a security officer, if you're not on duty."

"Well sir, I'm always on duty. Always. That's who I am. That's what I am. That's who Ameritech is. I carry my weapon wherever I go and I don't take it off until I go to bed, or enter a courthouse. And it's a good thing, or my son would be dead right now."

Detective Lopez nodded. He knew better than to mess with Ameritech, even though their arrogance bothered him. They did everything by the book. Their permits were always up to date. They were known for their honesty and integrity. But this Keegan Tanner, the detective always thought of as a loose cannon. He sighed. "Well, sir, if we have any more questions, how can we reach you?"

Keegan gave him all the information, though he was pretty sure the detective already had it. "Listen, I really need to call my wife and get to the hospital to be with my son."

Lopez nodded. "We'll be there to speak with him soon."

Eric, Ricky and young Eric joined Keegan. Jason came back, nodded at the men. "Found the vehicle they rode in parked up at the overlook near the rocks."

Keegan nodded. "I need to get to the hospital. I don't want Gabe or Taylor without protection."

"We'll get you there. I already have men at the hospital watching over both Gabe and Taylor, and Jeff will be arriving there any minute."

Keegan nodded, satisfied that his son and Taylor were safe at the moment. "Thanks, Jason. And now I have to make the dreaded call, but let's get going and I'll make the call in the car."

The men finished up. Eric gave the detectives the video from his home security cameras, and then they loaded up and rode to the hospital, the Kinos in one car and the Lee brothers and Keegan in another.

Jason and Justin were silent as Keegan filled his wife in on what had transpired. From what they could tell she'd taken the news fairly well. Keegan also spoke with Rose and

asked her to take care of her mother and then followed up with a call to John and asked him to do the same. He then called his assistant at Ameritech and dispatched two agents to watch over his family while he was gone. Not that he thought they were in danger. It was Gabe and Taylor the bad guys were after. Which was freaking maddening.

The moment Keegan got to the hospital he was taken back to see Gabe. He was sitting up on the edge of a gurney. He still wore his jeans but the blood-soaked shirt had been removed. He had an IV and his neck was sutured and bandaged.

Gabe looked up when he came in. "Dad," Gabe said.

Keegan came to him, hugged him, then pulled away to look at him. "You okay?"

"Yes, sir. I'm fine. Have a few stitches in my neck, but no big deal."

"What's the IV for?"

Gabe held up his arm. "Some fluids and some antibiotics so the cut won't get infected. They said I can go home soon."

Keegan nodded.

"Dad, I'm sorry," Gabe said softly.

"For what?"

"For making you have to do what you did."

Keegan nodded. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect my family."

"I know that. But Dad, I knew I shouldn't have been alone on that beach with Taylor. I've had dreams, dreams of Taylor on a beach all bloody. God was trying to warn me but I didn't listen. I mean, I listened, but I didn't let the warning alter my actions. I'm sorry. I know how hard it is for you, what you did. How are you feeling?"

Keegan smiled. "Don't you worry about how I'm feeling. The question is, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, Dad. I really am. But I want to know that you're okay too. I mean, honestly."

Keegan sighed. "Honestly? I've been better."

"Dad, talk to me. I need to understand. Please."

He nodded. "Okay. It's like, it's like I have this pack on my back, and it's full of rocks. Each rock represents a person I've killed. And yeah, it's a heavy burden, but I eventually get used to the weight. Today, I added another rock to the pack. So, it'll feel heavy again, until I get used to the extra weight. But I *will* get used to it."

Gabe's eyes teared up as he tried to understand the weight his father bore and the strength of the amazing man who was his father. He sighed. "I need to get stronger, Dad. I need to get more skilled."

"You will."

"I want to be one of Jason's Elite. If I'd known how to get out of that situation, you wouldn't have had to kill him."

"Don't make snap decisions based on an emotional trauma."

"I feel like I'm being shown my path."

"You may be. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Okay," Gabe said softly. "Um, does Mom know what happened?"

"Yes, I spoke to her a little while ago."

"Is she okay?"

"She seemed to be very calm."

"Hmm. Wonder what that means."

Keegan smiled. "I'm not sure."

"Have you heard about how Taylor's doing?"

"She's okay. She has a concussion. She was unconscious for a few minutes. They want to keep her overnight for observation."

"I need to see her. As soon as they take out this IV, I'd like to go see her, Dad. I know you're probably tired. It's been a long day. But could I see her for just a few minutes?"

Keegan nodded. "I think we can make that happen."

Gabe looked up as two men in suits walked into the room. Keegan turned. Frowned.

The men stepped forward with smiles on their faces, held out their hands which Gabe shook.

"Gabe, I'm Detective Hunter, and this is Detective Lopez." He turned to Keegan. "Agent Tanner, I'm Detective Hunter. You've already spoken with Detective Lopez earlier."

Keegan nodded, shook hands.

"Gabe, I know you're probably tired, but can you fill us in on what took place on the beach today? We'd like to hear your version."

"Yes, sir. Taylor and I were, uh, we were lying down in the sand."

"Having a little makeout session from what I understand," Lopez said.

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. She's my girlfriend. We haven't seen each other in a while and we were, uh, happy to be together again."

"How old are you?" Lopez asked.

"I'm seventeen."

"Go on. You were lying down and then what?"

"We heard some footsteps, like someone running. We looked up and these guys came running right at us. We jumped up. I told Taylor to run to the house, but one guy grabbed her. I tried to get to her, but a couple guys jumped on me. I looked over at Taylor and she was fighting hard against the guy who had her, but he drew back and hit her – twice – really hard and she fell to the ground, face down. I couldn't get to her because they were all over me. I fought them, though."

"All four of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're a student of the Kinos?"

"Yes, sir. And Master Appel when I'm in Georgia."

Detective Hunter interrupted. "Lopez, this is Gabe Tanner. Ya know, the one who won the Mini-MART a few months ago and the same kid who was kidnapped on the way home from his high school baseball game in Georgia. And the same kid who just put on a martial arts demo two days ago against multiple attackers."

Lopez' brows rose. "Actually, no, I didn't know. I knew who Keegan Tanner was, I didn't make the connection to his kid, but I don't do social media."

"That's because you don't have teenage girls," Hunter replied.

"So," Lopez went on. "You fought the guys and then what happened?"

"Then my dad and Grandmaster Kino, and Ricky and Eric Kino came down to the beach to help us. They took out four guys, but the last guy I was fighting pulled a knife and

held it to my throat. He kept saying he was gonna kill me. He actually said he *wanted* to kill me. My dad begged him to not do it, but the guy started to do it anyway, and my dad shot him. He cut me pretty good," Gabe said as he touched the bandage on his neck. "I got twelve stitches."

"I was told your father asked you to move your head to the left."

"Yes, sir, so he could have a clear shot."

"You trusted your father to shoot that close to your head?"

Gabe frowned. "Of course. He's almost as good a shot as me."

Keegan rolled his eyes. The detectives eyed each other.

"This is hardly a time to be joking around," Lopez admonished.

"I'm not joking. I'm serious. I'm letting you know how much I trust my father. We don't joke about shooting."

"So, you also shoot guns?"

"Yes, sir. I love to shoot."

"The kid has skills," Keegan put in. "He's been shooting since he was in first grade."

The detective shook his head in obvious disapproval. "Do you carry?"

Gabe shook his head. "No, sir. I'm a minor. But as soon as I turn twenty-one I'll get my permit and then I will carry."

"In Georgia, not here."

"Correct. I know the laws. I'll follow them always. Just like my father."

"You people in Georgia and your obsession with guns. It's a shame," Lopez mumbled.

Keegan's brow shot up, he looked at the other detective who only shook his head.

Gabe smiled, only to hide the viciousness with which he was about to speak. "Tell me Detective Lopez, why it's a shame. Is it a shame that we as Americans believe in the Constitution– the one thing that sets us apart from any other country? Or is it a shame that we have, like, fifty percent less crime in our state than here in California? Or is it a shame that we make it a point to know and understand our rights, or maybe that good people who own guns have saved millions of lives?"

"Gabe," Keegan said sternly.

"Sorry, Dad. I guess I'm a little on edge. I apologize. I meant no disrespect, at least no more than he meant toward us."

"Are there any other questions?" Keegan asked.

"Not at this time," Detective Hunter said quickly.

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She was lying on her side, sound asleep. Gabe quietly lowered the bed rail and eased himself into the bed to lie beside her. He gently touched her face. "Taylor?"

"Gabe, is that you?" she asked softly.

"Open your eyes and see for yourself."

"I'm afraid to. I was dreaming and I heard you speak to me and I opened my eyes and you weren't really here, so what if I'm just dreaming again?"

He chuckled. "Well, that is a dilemma." He softly brushed his lips against her cheek. "In the dream, did I do that?"

She smiled. "No." Her eyes opened.

He smiled at her. "There she is," he said softly. "My beautiful, Taylor."

"Ha, not so beautiful right now."

"Super beautiful, because you're alive."

"You are too. You fought those guys so bravely."

"I'm just sorry I was too late to get to that guy before he hit you." He touched her mouth. "Your upper lip is pretty swollen and it has a cut, right here."

"What in the world is going on?" a nurse said as she came in the room.

Gabe turned. "Oh, sorry, ma'am. I was just saying good night before I have to leave."

The nurse smiled. "Oh, you're Gabe Tanner."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, let me just fix one thing." She came to the bed and raised the rail behind Gabe. She touched his shoulder. "Don't want you falling out of bed onto this hard floor and getting hurt."

Taylor giggled. The nurse winked and left the room.

"Oh—YOU'RE Gabe Tanner. Oh my. We don't want *you* to get hurt," Taylor mocked.

Gabe laughed.

"Are you in a hospital gown?" Taylor suddenly asked.

"Oh, uh, yeah. My shirt was so bloody we had to toss it, so they gave me this hospital gown to wear until I get home."

"Your shirt was bloody?"

"Hmm, I guess you don't know what actually went down."

"What went down? I mean, I know you fought with those guys. I know you were hurt cuz I heard your dad tell you to lie still. So, how badly were you hurt, Gabe?"

"After the guy knocked you out, I tried to fight them off. Your dad and brother and Grandmaster Kino and my dad all came down to help. The guy I was fighting with held a knife to my throat and said he was gonna kill me. He ended up cutting me." Gabe lifted his head so she could see his throat.

She gasped and reached up to touch the bandage. "Oh, Gabe, how did you get away?"

He breathed a heavy sigh. "My dad, he, well, he had to shoot him to save my life."

Taylor was quiet.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Are you?"

He smiled. "I asked you first."

"I didn't know that happened. I'm sure it was horrible and I'm sorry for you and your dad. I just don't understand any of this."

"Me neither, but we'll get it all figured out. For now, though, I really have to be going."

"No, don't go, Gabe. Please just stay with me."

"I want to. I would, I swear. But my dad is waiting for me, and if I stayed that means he would sit in a chair right outside your door the entire night. He's so tired. I need to get him back to the house."

"Okay, I understand. For your dad, I get it."

"Your Dad is gonna stay with you. And they said they're only gonna keep you overnight, so I'll see you tomorrow morning. There's gonna be some big family meeting."

"I'm sure there is. So, I guess I'll see you in the morning then."

She scooted forward and hugged him. He put his arm around her and pulled her in

close to his body.

"Someday, Tay, maybe we won't have to say goodbye."

She was quiet a moment. "I, uh, I don't know how to take that."

"Take it any way you want. I love you."

She sniffed. "I love you too."

He kissed her forehead.

She giggled. "I bet you're stuck because your sweetie pie put the bed rail up."

"Uh, excuse me? You're talking to a prime athlete here," he said with a laugh as he sat up and then hopped over the rail to the floor.

"Sorry, I underestimated you."

"It's okay. I'm used to it," he said with a smirk.

He waved again and left the room. Outside the door his father and Jeff Davis and the agent on duty spoke quietly with Ricky and Bree. Eric, Shelley, Jeffy and Cam had already left for home in Cam's car.

"Thanks for waiting for me, Dad," Gabe said.

He chuckled. "What's the alternative?"

Gabe smiled. His father had just killed a man. Now, he made jokes as if nothing had happened. His father was not just physically strong, but mentally and emotionally tough, and able to file things away in their proper perspective. The more Gabe got to know his father, the more he respected him and admired him. Gabe wondered how many times his father had done something similarly difficult at work, and then come home to help Gabe with his algebra, or toss Iris in the air, and kiss his mother. People always described him as dark and dangerous. To Gabe, he was a beacon of safety and light.

"So, how are we getting back to the house?"

"Bree and young Eric are gonna drop us off."

Gabe looked up. He didn't see young Eric.

"He's around the corner sitting alone," Keegan supplied. "He's struggling a bit, I think."

Gabe thought about it. Today was probably the first time Eric had seen someone die right in front of his eyes. Gabe himself hadn't really seen it. He was too busy struggling to keep from bleeding out. He sighed. "Should I go talk to him?"

"No. Let him work through it. When he's ready, he'll probably talk to his father or grandfather."

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May 28th Tuesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric stood at the entrance to their living room and peered around at the people he loved with every fiber of his being. There was a low murmur of conversation. He'd lost track of how many family meetings they'd had when they'd had to discuss the safety of a family member. They always called a meeting because what affected one, impacted the whole family. Taylor was usually the one who volunteered to take the little ones to play during the meetings, but today, that wouldn't work, so today, Lori, Justin's wife, volunteered. She gathered Sophia, Kelstyn, Ledger and Emily and headed to play downstairs.

The living room contained three large sofas placed in a U-shape. Those sofas used to

hold them all, but not anymore. Even with the new additions of a loveseat and a wingback chair, they still had to bring chairs in from the dining room table. Eric smiled at his wife who sat with her daughter Bree, best friend Angel, who was Jason's wife, her daughter Kimmie, who was Jeffy's best friend, and Jeffy, all of them on one sofa. On the next sofa sat Mark, Shelley's oldest son, and his wife Bella, her sister Breez who was Joey's wife, and Mickey Davis, who was Jeff's wife. The third sofa was occupied by Justin—Jason's older brother and the family attorney— along with Joey, Shelley's youngest son, Jason and Keegan. Gabe and Taylor occupied the loveseat. Six dining room chairs had been brought in and placed around the room. They were occupied by Logan, young Eric, JoJo, Jensen Deal, who was Kimmie's husband, Cam, who was Jeffy's husband, and Jeff Davis, those last three all being Ameritech agents along with Jason, Joey, and Keegan. Ricky stood silently against the front window, his arms folded across his chest. Young Daniel and Jeremy Davis sat cross-legged on the floor. The wingback chair was currently unoccupied, but everyone assumed that Eric would eventually sit there.

"How are you feeling?" Taylor whispered in Gabe's ear.

"Feeling happy to be sitting next to you," he answered. "How are you feeling?"

"Feeling weird to be sitting here. I'm usually the one who takes the little ones to the playroom and keeps them occupied while the adults talk."

"Gee, Tay, I guess that means you're growing up."

She giggled, squeezed his hand.

Gabe looked up to see Grandmaster Kino looking at him. Gabe smiled, stood, bowed. Grandmaster Kino returned the gesture.

"Now that we're all here," Eric started as the room immediately became quiet. "Let me say 'good morning' to you all. I would say 'welcome to our home,' except that would be silly because as far as I'm concerned everyone here is part of my family so this is your home too. Since we're discussing the subject of security, I'm gonna turn the time over to Jason, but before I do, I'd like to open with a prayer. However, instead of hearing me drone on and on, I thought I'd call on one of you to say it. Gabe? Would you mind?"

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "Oh, me?"

Eric smiled. "Is there another Gabe in the room?"

"Um, no, sir. Yes, sir, I'd be honored to say it." He stood, bowed his head. Took a deep breath to clear his mind and focus his attention. "Father– hey– it's me again."

There was a murmur of laughter.

Gabe cleared his throat. "Father, so, this time I'm praying for all of these people here as we're gettin' ready to have a meeting. Father, I know You love all of these people, I can feel Your love for them so strong right now." His voice filled with emotion. "Thank You for that. Um, so, we're gonna try to figure out the best way to protect Taylor from some bad guys and we ask You to fill us with wisdom and understanding so that we can protect these people that we love. Let us all be in tune with You so that we can keep everyone safe. We understand Father, that sometimes we have to go through hard times, but we also know that You are right here beside us as we do, just like You were with the guys in the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel. So, anyway, I pray Your Holy Spirit to be with us as we meet today." He paused. "And, Father, I'm just gonna say—same as I said last night and earlier this morning, I'm just gonna say right here in front of everyone, how sorry I am

that I didn't listen. I hope You'll forgive me and I'm grateful that it didn't result in Taylor's death. I know You sent me warnings about Taylor being hurt on a beach, but I wasn't even thinking about that. I had my mind on, uh, well, on other things. Please don't stop giving me messages. I promise to do better, to be more aware. Father, help us all to be aware. I guess that's all for now. As always, I pray in Jesus' mighty name. Amen."

"Amen," everyone affirmed loudly.

Shelley picked up the tissue box and passed it around as several women grabbed a tissue and dabbed at their eyes.

Young Eric glanced at Logan and JoJo and nodded with a smile.

Taylor smiled up at Gabe, brought his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"Well done, Gabriel," Eric said softly. "Alright then I will now turn the time over to Jason."

Jason stood and waited for Eric to take a seat.

"It'll be good for everyone to know and understand what went down three years ago, so that you can know what we're dealing with now. You may remember, the crazy, whacked-out genius, Dr. Julian Black, a renowned geneticist, had it in his mind to take Jeffy, procreate with her, and make some kind of super genius hybrid kid. He had it in his mind that somehow she would consent to this, I suppose in the interest of science. He had Grandmaster Kino and Shelley taken hostage to lure Jeffy into his lair, so to speak. Payne Lanske, ex-military Army Ranger, was in charge of the hostages. He was Black's right hand man, who pretty much carried out all of his sicko designs. He got off on torturing Eric, and beating up Shelley.

"One of the strange things Dr. Black did was take eggs and sperm from Eric and Shelley." Jason glanced at the two youngest people in the room and then at Jeff. "Uh, sorry, I wasn't thinking about your boys being here."

Jeff nodded. "Yeah, they pretty much know about eggs and sperm. I allowed them to be here because we've been talking about the evil in the world and what we can do about it. Whatever you need to say, you can say. Mick and I will clarify things with them later."

Jason nodded and went on. "So, the reason he did that was he was talking about running DNA tests and then about using their eggs and sperm to create babies if for some reason he couldn't get Jeffy to cooperate or get samples from Jeffy. He thought it would be entertaining to study Eric's and Shelley's genes. Of course, none of that came to fruition because we were able to rescue them all. Still, I'm telling you this so you know where the guy's mind is at. After hearing what the man said yesterday, about the virgin and royal blood, it sounds like Dr. Black is still on his kick to study the Kino gene pool. Since he was so interested in Jeffy, a product of Eric and Shelley, he seems now to have focused his attention on the next generation and since Ricky is Eric's son, and Bree is Shelley's daughter, their children would be interesting to Dr. Black. And since the guy seems to be a pervert who imagined himself being with Jeffy, he is more than likely imagining the same scenario with Taylor."

Taylor shuddered, and Gabe put his arm securely around her.

Ricky still stood by the window, and the blinking of his eyes was the only indication that he was listening at all. His calmness was a Kino characteristic.

"So, we have a few things to consider. They want Gabe dead. We surmise that's

because Dr. Black believes Gabe will make it so that Taylor is no longer a virgin. And in his eyes, that sullies the gene pool."

"Why now?"

Everyone looked at Jeffy, who'd asked the question.

"It's hard to know how this guy is thinking," Jason answered.

"He's thinking he had you but now you're lost to him because you're now pregnant," Keegan spoke suddenly.

"That doesn't make any sense. He never had her," Taylor said.

"With a delusional psychosis, people don't make much sense," Keegan answered. "Jeffy is now lost to him. But here you are, a Jeffy look-alike, in his mind you must have similar 'royal' genes. He also seems to suffer from severe delusions along with some dangerous sexual pathologies. That combination makes him highly unpredictable and potentially predatory. You are young, beautiful, an innocent, that's how he sees you and has decided he wants you. He is fantasizing about being with you. Even about you giving birth to his children. But I defer to Grandmaster Kino, or at this point I guess I should call him Dr. Kino, because he is the expert."

"You don't have to defer to me. You too have a psychology degree and specialize in the criminal mind and you, Keegan, are absolutely correct," Eric said.

It was young Eric who spoke next. "Still, it's not like this guy, this Lanske guy, is gonna be able to grab Taylor and deliver her into Black's hands, right? I mean, Black is in jail. If he had succeeded in taking her yesterday, what would he intend to do with her? It's not like they could deliver her to him at the jailhouse."

"Black may be thinking of some kind of act by proxy, or maybe something as simple as running tests on her," Keegan said.

"By proxy? What does that mean?" Taylor asked.

"I– may have said too much." Keegan looked to Eric for help.

Eric nodded. "Well, honey, there are a lot of things in this world that are perverse, especially when it comes to sex. Instead of it being a loving, wholesome expression of love between a man and a woman, people have perverted it into some pretty ugly things. These people lead deviant lifestyles. One of these perversions has to do with having, I guess you could say, imaginary sex with someone, by asking someone else to stand in for you."

Taylor's mouth opened, but no sound came out. Her eyes filled with tears. Gabe held her tight. "We won't let him get to you."

"I said that before I thought too much about it," Keegan went on. "On second thought, I don't think that's what he's after. If so, then Cam being with Jeffy would satisfy him or Gabe with Taylor would satisfy him. He doesn't want her bloodline sullied in any way. The only one who is worthy to be with her is him. And we know that's not gonna happen."

"I agree," Eric said.

"The point is," Jason went on, "we have to swing into high alert. Not just for Taylor and the women, but for every single person in this family, because we already know they will use other loved ones to draw out the one they want. As you all know, three years ago, they went after JoJo and Logan who were only high school kids at the time. They've already stated they want to kill Gabe. Therefore, every member of this family, including the Tanner family, needs to be on high alert. Agents with everyone. Ricky, your security

gate and camera room need to be manned. Here too, Eric. Every single one of you need to have an emergency text ready at the push of one button on your phones. And use it. I don't care if there are false alarms. Better safe than sorry. In the meantime, I'll be working with the FBI to find Lanske. Dr. Black will be questioned, searched and his access to the outside cut off. Like Eric said, everyone here is considered family, therefore, everyone here is considered at risk.

"Now, I know because of personal experience that this family has a way of breaking protocol. I'm ordering you all right now, you will follow the rules the agents in charge give to you unless, I, Joey or Keegan are consulted and overrule the agent." He looked around at several smiles. "I'm not kidding, guys. No sneaking out," he said as he looked at Taylor. "No drugging of my agents," he said glaring at Bree. "No horseplay or bets," he said looking at young Eric, JoJo and Logan. "Your assigned agents will be arriving here before this meeting ends. I would prefer you don't hire anyone to do any work at your house whom you don't know. If someone new shows up, they will not be allowed on premises. Check out your vehicles, make sure they are in good working condition. No bald tires. Full tanks of gas. Good batteries. Everyone's homes and phones will be checked for bugs because the bad guys knew Gabe would be here and he and Taylor would be out on the beach. Still, in this day and age, it's nothing to hack into a cell phone. I'm sure Gabe and Taylor have texted back and forth about this visit. Probably right to the minute they were arriving." He looked at Gabe and Taylor. "Am I right?"

They nodded. Taylor held up her phone. Read the text. "Hey Gabe, we finally made it through the traffic jam. Be there in five minutes."

Jason went on. "Texts like that, along with them monitoring your social media—easy way to pinpoint your location. The 'out on the beach' thing could be an assumption, knowing two randy teenagers would want some alone time, but the point is, the bad guys knew the kids would be here."

Gabe's face turned red. He'd played right into their hands. He hated being labeled a randy teenager, but that was exactly what he'd acted like. He would do better.

"You all should be using a VPN on phones, laptops and computers. From here on, don't share what you're doing or where you're going on social media. And you will use the encrypted texting platform we have provided. Justin, do you have anything to add?" Jason asked his brother.

"Only that the FBI will be stepping in and therefore, we will no longer be dealing with local police. Still, Keegan's action yesterday has been ruled a righteous shooting and there will be no charges brought. Unfortunately, Keegan you will have to go in to obtain possession of your firearm."

Keegan nodded.

"That's all I have for now," Justin said.

"Joey?" Jason asked. "Tell them about the agents."

Joey nodded. Stood. "Each family member will be assigned an agent with a few exceptions. I won't need anyone with me, Jeff is also on his own, as is Keegan, Mark and Ricky. But we're not taking chances with Eric, Grandmaster or not, he will have an agent with him. Logan, JoJo, young Eric though you are capable fighters, you will have an agent assigned. Gabe, you too, while you're here. At home, your father will assign you your

bodyguard."

"Are those the only exceptions?" Breez asked.

"No. Since the little ones will be with you or I at all times, we don't need agents for them. Same for Mark's little Em."

"So, even though Bella and I and Mickey have all been doing self-defense training, you still think we need a bodyguard?" Breez asked.

"Well, I don't mean to hurt your feelings, sweetheart, but no matter how much training you've had, you're no match for a man. I'm not being sexist. It's just science. Look at Taylor. She's young, strong, agile, and she's been training all her life. She could destroy most any female, yet look how easily they took her down," he paused, smiled at his niece. "No offense, sweetie."

Taylor shrugged. "It is what it is, but hey, I got in a few good kicks."

"Yes you did. I watched the video. You rocked it there for a minute. By the way, Gabe, you too did well against those four guys. Impressive."

Gabe only shook his head.

"Stop beating yourself up," Joey admonished.

"Yeah, Gabe, you don't have to do that, cuz like, they already did it for ya," JoJo joked as the group laughed, including Gabe.

"Back to business," Joey said. "Some agent assignments will be logical. Cam is with Jeffy. Jensen is with Kimmie. I can't always be with Breez, so she'll have someone else and same for Mickey, because Jeff can't always be with her."

"Anything else?" Jason asked.

"Not at the moment," Joey replied.

Eric nodded. "Mark, I'm not gonna call on you right now since your report has to do with Gabe. We'll meet with him next in my study."

Mark gave a slight salute.

"Ricky?" Eric said. "We haven't heard from you."

Ricky stood straight. Sighing he slowly walked to the front of the room. "Well guys, I guess the gravity of this situation is really getting to me. I dunno, maybe because someone wants to harm my baby girl. I've been over there trying to put things into perspective. Ya know, a lot of people in this room have come very close to death, literally just a few inches, even just a few seconds from death. My dad and Shelley– numerous times, Joey, shot in the chest, Mark, fell off a cliff, Logan almost fell off a cliff, Logan and JoJo, beat to a pulp, Bella, everyone knows that story and we don't need to go into detail. Jeff, taken by terrorists, Mickey kidnapped and marked for death, Angel was shot, Kimmie was pushed off a bridge into the ocean, Cam and Jeffy, too many to mention, Keegan, also too many to mention, and Gabe, trying to catch up to his father, my wife, almost raped and was beaten and later, shot, my son, attacked by some skate punk, myself, you all know, and now my baby girl is in danger."

He shook his head. "So, I asked God as I stood over there, asked Him to help me understand. I asked Him, 'Please, just help me to understand.' And He did. A calm knowing came over me. First, the words my own earthly father had spoken so many times came flooding into my brain, and then some new words that came straight from the Lord. I'm trying to remember everything." He stopped and drew a deep breath.

"The words my father spoke which the Lord just reminded me of were ones you've heard from him many times; we are here for a purpose, we are bright lights, and whenever there is a bright light in the world the dark forces of the world gather together to put it out. I've heard my father say that many times," he said as he gestured around the room and most everyone present nodded in agreement.

"The Lord then told me we have choices. He said we could choose to hide our light, not do anything, not help anyone. If we choose that, then we would go unnoticed by the evil ones. But when we shine, we draw attention to ourselves. So, why do we do it? I'll tell you why; because all of us in this room are warriors. We fight for right. We protect the innocent. We serve the best way we know how. Dr. Black has seen both Taylor's and Gabe's light, so he has gathered his dark forces. Some of those forces are ones we can actually see, like the guys we fought on the beach yesterday. Some are more on the spiritual realm. We can't see them, but the demons and entities are at work constantly.

"The Lord just said to me, that we are not fighting our battles alone. He is with us. God— is with us." He choked with the emotion he felt, cleared his throat and drew a breath. "Just like what Gabe just said in his prayer, we're not facing these hard times alone. We are not in the fiery furnace all alone, however, we ARE still IN the furnace. It's what it takes for us to become stronger, more powerful, honed and ready to fight the bigger battles. He told me as I stood right over there, that, yes, He could wave his mighty hand, or speak a mighty word and make the furnace disappear. He could make– the furnace– disappear. But what good would that do? He asked me that. What good would that do to get rid of the hardships we face when we need to train, to get strong, to learn to handle adversity and yes, even handle death. He said, 'so, stop trying to get out from under this burden, Ricky. Face it.' He said I should be grateful for the opportunity to pick up my cross and bear it. So, that is what I'm gonna try to do. With a cheerful countenance, I'll try to face whatever adversity God has planned for me to face, and hopefully, my family will learn from that example.

"And then, right at the end, He gave me this message. He said, those who have ears to hear will know it's especially for them. He said, 'You are not here to be comfortable, to lie on soft mattresses, eat fancy meals and be entertained by fools. Your joy will come in the doing of hard things, and from the relationships of a close family full of love and respect, so, shine that light.' So, everyone, that's what I have to say. We will go after this guy. We will protect our families. We realize we are in the furnace and we will not cry woe is me. He is with us and we'll withstand the heat. That's it. That's all I got."

"That was perfect," Eric said softly. He motioned toward Gabe. "Gabe, we haven't forgotten why you came out here to California in the first place. We'll take a break, eat something, and then you, your father, Jason, Justin and Mark and I will meet in my study."

"Yes, sir," Gabe replied.

Eric's phone buzzed and he glanced down. The security army had arrived.

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While Shelley and Eric worked in the kitchen to prepare food, Jason and Joey introduced each agent to the person they would give their lives to protect. The agents were feeling pretty good about the fact that they'd been picked to protect the boss' family. It wasn't a cush job. It was a serious job. Back twenty years ago one of their own had been

killed and another critically injured while protecting Mrs. Kino and a then, seven-year-old, Jeffy Kino.

"You are to give your agent twenty-four-hour notice of the next day's schedule. After that, all changes are to be approved," Jason said.

There was a smattering of "yes, sirs" in the crowd as they milled around, introducing themselves to everyone else. Once Breez, Bella and Mickey had been introduced to their respective bodyguards, they made their way into the kitchen to help. Most everyone gravitated into the kitchen and dining area.

Joey came into the kitchen with the final agent. "Mickey, this is another one for you. This is Agent Wyatt."

Mickey turned, confused. "Another one? You guys think I need extra protection?"

"Well, Jeff and I spoke, and we decided you needed another agent to help look out for the boys since you're not feeling too hot."

Mickey gasped.

Joey stopped. "Oh, wow, I just messed up, didn't I?"

"What's wrong with Mickey? Mickey, are you ill? You better not keep us from helping you. Tell me, what's going on?" Shelley said.

"Did you do that on purpose?" Jeff asked Joey.

Joey laughed. "I wouldn't do that, I swear. Though, it's not because I'm afraid of you but because I really like Mickey. Mick, I'm so sorry. I've never in my life divulged a secret I was supposed to keep. I don't know what happened. Jason, I might need a vacation."

"A vacation? Yeah, that's not gonna happen anytime soon. You wanna maybe fill us all in on the big secret?"

The women all smiled, because they'd already figured it out.

"You are kidding me," Bree said. "Good grief, next thing you know, *I'll* be pregnant."

"That would be very cool," Ricky said.

"Uh, I'm almost forty-nine. It would NOT be cool. You want another child, there are lots of children out there waiting for someone to adopt them and give them a loving home."

"Hmm," Ricky said. "That's a good thought. Let's discuss it."

"I'm guessing Mrs. Davis is pregnant?" Gabe whispered to Taylor.

"That's what it sounds like to me," she whispered back.

Joey put his arm around Mickey. "I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

She sighed. "Of course." She looked up at Shelley. "We weren't gonna say anything yet until I get past the first trimester since I'm forty-two, but, yes, I'm pregnant. Due in December."

"Wow," eleven-year-old Jeremy Davis said. "I'm gonna have another brother or sister."

"Pretty cool," older brother Daniel agreed.

"So cool," Jeffy said. "Mickey, your sister, me, Kimmie, Lizzy Tanner and Lisa Stewart—all pregnant at the same time. God must have some big plans coming up and needs a special task force."

Gabe moaned as he felt like he'd been slammed in the chest. He crumpled to the floor. Taylor yelped as she tried to keep him from falling. A few agents standing nearby caught him, laid him down.

"Back up," Jeffy commanded.

She and Keegan knelt down beside him. Keegan placed his hand on Gabe's head.

"Gabe?" Jeffy said softly. Jeffy laid a hand on Gabe's shoulder, and he bucked immediately. Keegan jerked his hand back.

"What's happening?" Shelley asked.

"It felt like an electric shock just shot through my hand," Keegan said.

"Don't touch him," Jeffy said. She leaned close, rested her forehead against Gabe's. She moaned. Tears ran down her cheeks. "Can you see me, Gabe? I can see you. I see you talking to someone. Oh, wow. Oh Gabe, how amazing is that, huh? I'm under the tree. Walk to me. That's right. Reach out. You can take my hand. Don't let go of my hand. We're headed back now. That's all your body can take right now. That's it. Come on."

Gabe's eyes fluttered open. Jeffy smiled at him. "That was a trip, huh?"

"Uh, yeah. I," he stopped, blinked, "I think I just spoke to an angel or something." He sat up, looked around at all the eyes peering at him. "I'm sorry. It felt like I was electrocuted. I didn't mean to cause a commotion." He gazed into his father's eyes. "Dad, do you think I'm losing my mind?"

Keegan sighed. "Nope, but I think it's just been confirmed that God has some special plans for you."

He grabbed his son's hand, pulled him to his feet. "Feel steady?"

Gabe nodded then smiled at Taylor as she moved close to him.

"I'm thinkin' this assignment is not gonna be boring," one of the agents said aloud, causing a round of laughter.

"Never is when the Kinos are involved," another said.

"Now that's truth," another said.

Jeffy's eyes met her father's. Because of their shared vision three years earlier, she felt like he should know what she saw inside Gabe's vision.

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Gabe bowed to Grandmaster Kino, shook Jason's and Justin's and Mark's hands. Keegan did the same and they both settled onto the small sofa in Eric's study instead of into the hot seat which currently had been moved back next to the sofa. Eric sat at his desk. Jason, Justin and Mark each occupied a chair that had been moved to form a semi-circle.

"So," Eric began. "You and your dad have traveled all the way across the country so that we can help you figure out what path—or paths in life you have available to you, and we here, are all honored to be part of your decision-making. Before we begin, let's start with a prayer. Justin? May I call on you?"

"Of course," his longtime friend said. Justin prayed a beautiful prayer.

Gabe looked up as he prayed. He hardly ever heard this man speak. He was usually pretty quiet. But from his prayer, Gabe could easily see, or more like feel, that this man was powerful, loyal, and close to God.

"Thank you, Justin," Eric said. "Justin is here because he is not only my dearest friend, but he is our family attorney, and also handles our family finances. He, with the help of other trusted accounting firms, takes care of the vast amounts of revenue that come in from *Kino Martial Arts*, and even vaster amounts that come in from our investments. He is part

of the checks and balances that oversee Jeffy's *Heal the World Foundation*, to make sure there is never any misuse of the funds. For one small misuse would cost the foundation millions, because people must be able to completely trust the foundation to be totally, one hundred percent honest and trustworthy. That's why we audit every single year."

Gabe listened intently.

"Keegan, I know you too have a large portfolio, put together by yourself and your father. So, I'm assuming you too, could be considered an expert."

"It's been more my father than me. I'm a novice at best."

Eric nodded. "As am I. But that's why we surround ourselves with the experts, isn't it?"

"Absolutely."

"Mark is here because he's working on eventually taking over Justin's law firm. What was once *Lee, Baker, and Todd*, and then *Lee, Baker, and Adams* is now *Lee and Adams*. In order for Mark to take over, he has to learn not just the criminal defense aspects, which, by the way, he is a genius at, but all aspects including finance and business law. He will soon be taking over my personal portfolio so that Justin can retire. Mark has been put to the task of looking into the *Gabe Tanner Ultimate Warrior Fund,* to see what can be done with it, and how to best run it. He's looking into how to get the most out of it and how to help the most people. He'll give his report in a few minutes."

Eric gestured toward Jason. "Jason is here because of your interest in becoming an agent, or even more, an Elite, and your interest in going to school while you accomplish this goal, and that is where we will begin. Jason?"

"Gabe," Jason began, "I reached out to your father to join Ameritech back before you were born because I recognize him as a brilliant, honest, strong warrior. A quality man. A hero. Someone I wanted to be associated with my agency. You're much younger than him, but I feel the same way about you. Of course, it would make sense that Keegan's son would become the warrior he is. Still, I'm blown away by your character, your level head, your skills, your strength, and your obvious spirituality. I would love to have you as part of our agency, as an Elite. As you know, becoming a JETT is a difficult thing to do. Many have tried and failed, but I have no doubt that you would make it. It would please me to have you choose Ameritech as part of your path, but there are some reservations."

"What reservations?" Gabe asked.

"Before I answer that, let me ask you a few questions. Why do you want to be an Elite?"

"I want to get strong. I want to be skilled. I've had so much respect for my dad and for Agent Davis, and for you and for Jake, who I know isn't Ameritech, but he is special forces. I want to be like these men who are skilled and strong and who I respect. I'm willing to work as hard as it takes to accomplish it."

"I believe you. Why Ameritech? Why not the military? I mean your father is a Marine. The Appels are Marines."

Gabe tried to put his feelings into words. "Believe me, I have so much respect for the Marines, or for the US military, but, I, uh, I don't think I can do what the military does."

"You think going the Ameritech path is easier?"

"Oh, no, sir! What I mean is, I don't think I can go to war, to fight in a foreign country

for a cause that I'm not sure is really legit. There's so much dishonesty in the government. We never really know the truth about why they fight and who they fight. There are so many accounts of ex-military who were disheartened by things they learned, by things they were made to do. I've done the research."

"It sounds like you've thought a lot about this."

"It's all I've thought about. I don't want to disappoint my dad, but I discovered that he too knows how messed up the government can be."

"Keegan?"

"He's right. I've not hidden my disdain for the things I sometimes had to do because some suit or cake-eater had his own political agenda. And you yourself know how I feel about the corruption in the FBI. My brothers in arms are my brothers. They are not bad people. Not everyone in the FBI is bad. But there is definitely corruption, especially in the upper echelon."

Gabe nodded in agreement. "At Ameritech I would have the opportunity to get strong, get skilled, do some good in the world, and I would be able to feel assured that what is being done is honestly for a good cause. To help someone. To protect someone. No political agendas. That's how I see it. But I have some reservations myself, about Ameritech. Several."

Keegan smiled at his son's brazenness.

Jason smiled too. Who was interviewing who? "By all means, Gabe Tanner, fill me in."

Gabe grimaced. "I hope you know I mean no disrespect."

"I'm not easily offended. Please speak freely."

"I want to get educated. I want to be able to move up in the company. But I don't want to go to school full time and put off training. I need to get strong *now*. So, I'll need to go to school part time and train full time."

"That's easily handled. I have a program in place where you can get your online degree. But here's the deal. If we spend time and money to school and train you, which is extensive, we expect you to give us at least five years of service after the fact."

Gabe nodded. "That's fair."

"What else?" Jason asked.

"Well, how do I explain this? Um, before my football games and baseball games, our high school always invited the military out onto the field during the National Anthem. It always brought tears to my eyes and filled me with strong patriotism and a love for my country. I realize as Ameritech, I wouldn't be able to stand on that field and let people know that I'm willing to give my life for my country, for my family, and for my neighbors and even people I don't know. But I thought, why not? I mean, Ameritech works side-by-side with military on numerous occasions. And America is right there in the name of your company. We should have some kind of American agenda, to promote and show the love Ameritech Agents have for their country, to show the world that we have American values, that we too are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. I mean, here you have all of these amazing warriors working for you, and no one knows or understands how skilled they are, how brave they are, how loyal they are. I know your company is worldwide, so the thought of promoting American values, may not be the best way to promote Ameritech. And that, I guess, is the reservation. I'm not even sure I've made any sense in what I'm talking

about, because it's difficult to put into words what I'm asking since I'm not really clear on that myself."

Keegan looked proudly at his young son who felt his loyalty to his country so deeply, and then back at Jason who seemed to be deep in thought.

"I think you've made it quite clear," Jason said. "It should be made known, at least here in our own country, how often we work with the military and the FBI and local law enforcement. We should maybe make a public relations campaign to honor the warriors here at Ameritech that sacrifice their lives to protect the innocent."

"Yeah, like that *'Battle to Belong: U.S. Marine Corps Commercial',"* Gabe said excitedly. "Only it would be showing clips of agents training, agents helping in natural disasters, right there beside the National Guard, and stuff like that. Maybe arrange little public appearances in major cities, heck, in small towns too," Gabe said, a smile spreading across his face.

Eric cleared his throat. "So, your reservation was that as an Ameritech Agent you wouldn't get the accolades and recognition that you want?"

Gabe lowered his head, blinked. "Wow, that's how it seems, doesn't it?" Gabe said sadly. He shook his head. "I don't need the accolades. I'm willing to serve God with no one knowing but me and God. I guess I was thinking about Jeff, I mean Agent Davis, and Agent Adams, Agent Wallace and Agent Deal and all the others who put their lives on the line every day but don't get to stand and salute the flag. They don't get to show how patriotic they are. They deserve some kind of recognition for what they do, that's all. I'm just proud of them, and I wish the country knew just how skilled and strong these guys are and how much they love their country and how they serve our country. And I have to say, Grandmaster Kino, that it makes me sad to think that you would think that of me."

Eric smiled. "Take heart, Gabriel, I don't think that of you. You said you weren't really clear about what you were saying. I just wanted you to get that clear in your mind."

Gabe smiled.

"He's pretty tricky sometimes," Mark explained to Gabe.

"So," Jason went on, "if I meet your demands then you'll consider coming to Ameritech?"

"Well, we haven't discussed money yet," Gabe joked.

The others laughed.

"Don't push it, son," Keegan said quietly.

"Well, before you make any decisions, let's hear what Mark has to say about your foundation," Eric said. "Mark? Whaddya got?"

"So much. It may take a while. Before I present your options, Gabe, I need to ask you a few questions. Do you have any thoughts about who you want the foundation to serve?"

"Well, sir, I have a few things I've been thinking about, but they're not very clear."

"It's okay if they're vague. We'll polish them up, but we need to know what angles you're contemplating."

Gabe nodded. "Well, like, there's this kid, Will Cole, back in Pine Forest. He's actually the guy who jumped me at school. He got a bad break. He got in a fight when he was younger against some older bully. He cracked him over the head with a bottle that was lying around. The bully's parents pressed charges and Will ended up spending a year in

juvy, I mean in a juvenile correctional facility."

Mark smiled. "I knew what you meant."

Gabe nodded. "Obviously, the place didn't 'correct him' and I was thinking, if we could help kids like him somehow. I don't know what could be done. I don't know how we can help."

"Well, you're actually talking right up my alley. First, in this particular case, we'd have to look into it and see what went wrong. For example, did he have a lawyer? I'm guessing court appointed. But let's pretend for a minute he did have a good attorney and that wasn't the problem. Maybe he had no father at home. Maybe, he has no direction. Maybe they're struggling financially. There is a reason he, like you said, got a bad break."

Gabe shook his head. "See? It feels overwhelming."

"That's not overwhelming at all. I can look into his case for you, see what his challenges were and are. That will help us to know where we want to take this, how we could have helped. Let's go back in time magically, and say, this kid just got arrested. His mom says, 'We don't have money for an attorney, what will we do?' And then, they remember, there's this organization especially for under-privileged kids who get into legal trouble. You'll need some catchy name so that people will remember it. She calls our organization, we look into not only the legal battles, but the deeper 'why' of everything. We can offer counseling, or Big Brother-type mentoring, or even a place to go rather than the streets, like a community center."

Gabe smiled. "That would be cool."

"What else have you been thinking?"

"Well, like, about the lady who kidnapped me, she also had a rough break. My dad said it perfectly when he said that she was pretty much doomed from the beginning. I guess you guys know the story?"

"Yes, we do," Eric said. "We've discussed Mia Casellas at length, and your dad is right."

"So, I was thinking we could do something about the children or families of criminals. Should they have to pay for the bad choices of their parents?"

"Again, Gabe," Mark began, "that is right up my alley. If that family had somewhere to turn when they lost their home, when they lost everything, maybe Mia Casellas would be a bright, well-adjusted young woman with a future."

Gabe nodded. "And again, it feels overwhelming. How can we help these people?"

"Well first, your foundation name has to be out there. It needs to be professionally organized. Someone calls the 1-800 number and is immediately set up for a consultation to see if we can help them and how we can best serve them."

"I don't know how to do that. I don't know how to set this all up."

"You don't need to know how, unless you want to know how. But you just clarified a few minutes ago that training to be an Elite is top on your priority list. You can go to school and learn about running a non-profit if that's the degree you really want. But you don't have to do that. We surround ourselves with experts. I would handle all the legalities of setting up your foundation. We'll brainstorm a catchy name, not that Gabe Tanner Ultimate Warrior isn't catchy," he said with a smile, "but maybe something shorter. Once we have the name, we'll have to set up employees, HR, everything beyond reproach."

"Employees?"

"Yes. For example, people who answer phones, people who will contact attorneys that are willing to donate time, and in special cases, attorneys who must be paid. We'll need counselors, investigators, computer experts similar to Jensen, and more. Then there's the fundraising part, which is more in your area."

"Fundraising?"

"Of course. You currently have almost fifty million dollars. That sounds like a lot. But that could dwindle down pretty fast. We'll invest some and we'll spend a little on publicity to make a lot. And you'll have to make some public appearances, explain your foundation. YOU are the biggest asset. Your appeal to the young people of this country is what makes all of this possible. You appeal on so many levels. The fighting, martial arts, boxing, UFC communities are all into watching to see what you do next. So, that might mean you'll need to do some challenges. More Mini-MARTs, or a few Kino Challenges, so they know you're legit and not a fluke. And you becoming an Elite will not only add to your credibility, but will also give you an opportunity to do for Ameritech what you spoke about earlier. Then there's the kids' sports community."

"Kids' sports?"

"All of those baseball games being livestreamed, it's like the whole country became a fan of the *Pine Forest High School Rebels*, and mostly of you. There was a big upsurge in kids wanting to play rec ball this summer. Sign-ups for rec ball increased by forty-five percent. That is huge. And then, your popularity because of your videoed abduction and then coming back to play ball against the odds, do you know how inspirational that is and how many video channels have done a special on you to promote kids' sports?"

"I didn't realize all this," Gabe said softly.

"And there's a lot more. Remember the challenge you gave during your interview with Teenspotter?"

"To be in service in your community?"

"Yes. Across the country, teens serving their communities have trended every weekend since then. Some towns have set up teen help centers, manned by teens who want to be in service. It's incredible. So, that community of charity also is watching you, waiting for your next move and for you to set the example of what to do next. And then, there's the dance community. Do you know what a craze dancing is in this country? The video of you and Taylor dancing at the prom went mega viral and there was a challenge to do your dance to *Uptown Funk* and there are hundreds of people who took up the challenge. Some of the most popular were some of the big guys from SYTYCD, and one from two adorable little kids who were amazing. So, the dance community is also waiting and watching for your next move. And the way you and Taylor went out of your way to include everyone at your prom, that started a movement of, I don't even know what to call it, of kindness, spreading across the country. And then, there is the huge Christian community, and your influence there. I could go on and on, but I'll stop there. Bottom line, you have the young people of the country in the palm of your hands. You have the means to continue to raise money for your foundation with no problem.

"So, once we come up with a name, I set it up legally. I'll organize the moving parts and then I'll get the same group who runs Jeffy's *Heal the World Foundation* to take over

the running of your foundation to free you up to do what you want to do. How does that sound?"

Gabe smiled. "Overwhelming. But since someone else will be running things, it's actually awesome. Feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

"That was my goal. But I need to ask if there were any other ideas you were thinking about."

Gabe sighed. "I don't know if this is part of the foundation or not, but I want to do, or have, a ministry. I want to bring people to Christ, teach people to have hope, to live in love, to know that God is real. I want to serve them, I want to be, like Grandmaster Kino always says, to be a light. Ya know, your brother Joey came to me when I was in the hospital and told me I was no longer just a normal kid and I could hide my light under a bushel or I could let it shine."

Mark smiled. "My little brother has always had a way with words."

"He really shook me up. And for a while, I was fighting it. I was thinking, I just wanna be a normal kid. But that would be hiding under a bushel. And I have enough warrior in me to know that's not how I want to be. I want to serve God, serve His children, have a ministry. But I don't know where to start."

"You've already started," Eric put in. "Did you just hear all the things you've done, all the people you've touched without even meaning to? So, how do you continue?"

"That's just it, I don't know. I guess I'm dumb, but I don't know where to go from here."

"It's not being dumb, Gabe," Mark said. "So far, you are where you are because of the internet, because of social media. Isla was brought into your world for a purpose. You changed her life, which she has testified on air many times now. And she is changing your life. So, the internet is your tool. All those different communities whom I named earlier are out there waiting for your next move, literally waiting for the next word that comes out of your mouth. That means you need an internet presence. You can't stand by and wait for the next time Isla decides to interview you. You need your own platform, and you will need to interact with your viewers and subscribers on a daily basis."

"How can I find time to do that?"

"It will be part of your foundation, so we'll be able to pay someone to maintain your internet presence. All you'll have to do is speak into a camera every day."

"Speak what?"

"It's YOUR ministry. Let God tell you what to say. Greet your online community, offer words of encouragement, tell them what you're gonna do that day, issue a challenge like you did about community service or offer a prayer on their behalf. The person we hire to maintain your online presence will let you know what's trending, if there's someone who needs help, if someone needs prayers. Your presence will grow quickly, and I'm sure Isla will be more than willing to work with you, even partner with you on things, and with her giant influence, you will be able to be up and running very fast."

Gabe listened intently as Mark went on with numbers and statistics and the outline of everything that needed to be done. He emailed the entire outline to everyone in the room. Once Mark finished, Gabe felt amazingly at ease and excited.

"So, it's already afternoon. I'm sure you're tired, Gabe. I know I am," Eric said.

Gabe smiled. "Well, mostly hungry."

"Of course you are," Keegan chuckled.

"So, Gabe, how did we do?" Grandmaster Kino asked. "Do you feel clear on your path?"

"Yes, sir. I'll take the summer to rest and to plan and to establish my internet presence. Beginning of September I'll report to Ameritech and start school. I'll pray and ask for guidance on my degree and area of study. Since I'm training with Ameritech here, I'll probably go to UCLA or USC and will take care of that enrollment process right away. I'll also use the summer to spend quality time with my family and friends because I'm gonna be away from them for a long time. When I turn eighteen, I'll have some legal paperwork I'll need to take care of, so that will happen over the summer too."

"When exactly is your birthday?" Eric asked.

"It's June 14th, the day before Jake and Laynah's wedding," Gabe replied.

Everyone was quiet, seemingly dumbfounded.

"What's wrong?" Keegan asked.

Eric shook his head. "Nothing is wrong, it's just so fitting. I never thought to ask before. Gabe's birthday is the same day as mine."

"Wow," Gabe said. "No way!"

Eric nodded. Rubbed his hand over his heart. "Yes, that's pretty amazing. Our family will be in Georgia for the wedding. We're filling up almost all of the Inn rooms and cottages, so we'll be right next door. We'll have to do a little joint birthday breakfast. Early, so we don't interfere with Jake's and Laynah's plans."

"Oh Grandmaster Kino, I'd be honored to share a birthday breakfast with you," Gabe said reverently.

"I look forward to it. Everyone, thank you so much for all of your input. I hope it was worth the trip, considering yesterday's adventure."

Gabe touched his fingers to his throat. Nodded. "I can't thank you all enough for helping us figure this out. And thanks, Dad, I mean, for making this trip happen."

Keegan nodded. Everyone rose and shook hands and made their way out to join the rest of the family.

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Proverbs 19:21

"Many are the plans in the mind of a man,
but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."

Once out of the big meeting, Gabe immediately sought Taylor and asked her mom for her location.

"She wasn't feeling too well, but she's okay. She's been cleared by Jeffy and told to go upstairs to find a place to lie down," Bree said.

"May I go see her?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do you know what room she's in?"

Bree turned to Agent Ward. "Do you happen to know which room Taylor went to?"

"Yes, ma'am, the second-to-last room on the west side."

"Uh, that's my room," Gabe said with a smile. "I mean, currently. Thanks." He trotted upstairs and opened the door softly. Taylor was sleeping. He came in quietly and sat on the bed next to her.

She stirred and opened her eyes. "Hey."

"Hey, Tay. Your mom says you're not feeling well."

"Really tired and a little nauseated, but I'm okay."

"I'm gonna go get Jeffy."

"Been there done that. She says I'm good."

"Oh, okay then. So, you want me to let you sleep?"

"No, I want you to sleep with me."

He smiled at the words. "I'm not really sleepy. But I'll stay with you." He sat down on the side of the bed. "I guess you know you're in my bed. Was that on purpose?"

"Yes. I wanted to smell you while I sleep."

"Hmm, I didn't shower last night before I went to bed cuz we got home so late. I bet it doesn't smell very pleasant."

"It smells wonderful."

He chuckled.

"Ya know, this room used to be my father's bedroom a long time ago," Taylor said.

"Really?"

"Yes. And the room your dad is in was my mother's room."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Because they were like, brother and sister, I mean, kinda sorta."

"Right." She patted the bed. "Lie down next to me."

"Yeah, uh, I don't think that's a good idea."

"You did it last night in the hospital."

"I knew we weren't alone and you were not in danger of me doing anything to you."

"Am I in danger now?"

"Not as long as I keep my distance."

She giggled. "What do you think you would do?"

"Stop."

She sighed. "Sorry. So, you guys were in there a long time. Did you make any life plans or will it take a few more sessions?"

"I think we got it down."

When he didn't say anything else, she turned toward him. "Gaaabe! Don't be so mean.

Tell me what you decided!"

He laughed. "Okay. Well, I'm gonna try to become one of Jason's Elite and I start training the beginning of September."

She smiled. "Awesome! And they train here, in California, so that means you'll be here, close to me, right?"

"Yes, that's what that means."

She sat up, squealed, and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh my goodness, I'm so happy!"

"Hold on, don't get too excited. Training means long hours, sleeping at the barracks, or uh, dorms, and when I'm not training I'll be doing online school. My only time off will be a few weekday nights and Sundays. And I will be desperate to see you on Sundays, but I will also need to be back in the dorms by 2100 hours Sunday evenings."

Taylor frowned. "And when is leave? I remember agents having leave."

"Vacation. This isn't the military. But in order to get a vacation, I have to be an agent first and put in some time. And when that happens, I'll need to see my family."

She sighed. "So, when will we see each other?"

"Sundays for sure. I don't know about other times. I'll have to wait and see if and when I have down time. But Tay, you'll be a senior. You'll have so much to do, so much to keep you occupied. You won't have time for me either."

"Time for you? You don't understand. I just want to be with you, Gabe. Whenever you're not around I feel like I'm gonna go crazy."

"I get it, Tay, cuz I feel the same way. But we have to learn to focus on the present moment."

"I hate when men say that."

He grinned. "Did you just call me a man?"

She smiled. "I guess I did. You certainly fought like a man yesterday."

He stroked the bandage on his neck. It didn't feel like he had. He thought of his approaching birthday. He realized that the number eighteen didn't magically suddenly make him a man. He sighed and tried to focus on this present moment, which was all about the girl he was in love with. "So guess what?" he asked, effectively changing the subject. "Today we discovered that your grandfather and I have the same birthday."

"Oh my goodness, I knew your birthday is two weeks from Friday, but I didn't put it together. Your birthday is June 14th?"

"Yes. And you guys are coming on Wednesday before the wedding so, I'll get to see you on my birthday."

"Are you having a party?"

"Naw, don't want to mess up Jake's and Laynah's special day. So, Grandmaster Kino said we'd have a little birthday breakfast."

"But *their* wedding is messing up *your* special day."

"A wedding only happens once. Birthdays happen every year."

"But your *eighteenth* birthday only happens once."

"It's no big deal, Tay. Really. Listen, I appreciate you caring so much, but I would rather put the attention on Jake and Laynah. It's their special time. Besides, Jake and Laynah are giving me the best present I could have on my birthday."

"Really? What?"

"You. They are why you'll be there." He paused. "So, tell me again, when is *your* birthday?"

"August 30th."

"So, I'm one year and two and a half months older than you. Funny, if we were like, my mom and dad, it wouldn't seem like much difference at all, but right now, I guess because you're still in high school, it seems like a huge difference."

"My dad is three years older than my mom. She was only eighteen when they met. So, your dad is only a year older than your mom?"

"Oh no, I was just using them as an example. My mom was only twenty-four when she met my dad, and he was thirty-one. They're seven years apart."

"Wow, and she already had your sisters when they met, so she had five babies by the time she was twenty-four."

"She had five babies by twenty-one. I only know because I've heard her tell the story so many times."

"Wow, five children and so young."

"Yeah, and her husband was deployed most of that time. She's a strong lady, my mom. She took care of the kids and put herself through nursing school and became a nurse at a hospital in Atlanta, and that's how she met my dad. He was in a car accident. There's a lot more to the story, and one day, when we have lots of time, I'll tell you the rest. But for now, I'm gonna let you rest here in my bed."

"I like the sound of that."

"What?"

"Me in your bed."

"I like the sound of it too. I'm thinking maybe one day, it'll be more than that, unless you find some other boyfriend while I'm away trying to figure out how to be a man."

"Thinking about your mom with five babies, makes me want so much to be the one to have your babies."

He blew out a breath, gave a soft groan.

She giggled. "What? Did I say the wrong thing? Going too fast?"

"It's not that. Thinking of you having my babies, it's a total turn on. You don't realize what you do to me when you say things like that. Everything you say gives me a visual."

"No, I didn't realize that, but I'll be sure to remember it," she teased.

He smiled.

"But really Gabe, I've been thinking about something, seriously."

"About what?"

"This Dr. Black guy. He wants you dead because he's worried you're gonna take my virginity."

"I know. He doesn't know us, doesn't understand our faith and our strength."

She frowned. "Let me finish. He doesn't want you to have me because, I guess, HE wants to be the one to, like, be the first, which totally freaks me out. Ya know, he held me captive with Kimmie and Jeffy. I was only thirteen and I was so scared, but I remember he wanted Jeffy and I thought I would throw up."

"We won't let him near you."

"Yeah, but the same guy figured out how to take my grandparents. And he's a high genius. What if he knows something we don't realize? So, I was thinking, they said he didn't want me to be 'sullied,' which means to be made dirty, to defile, to make impure."

"Right." He smiled. "You looked that up didn't you?"

She nodded. "I wanted to be sure it meant what I thought it meant. So, Dr. Black doesn't want me if I'm not a virgin. What if you do exactly what he thinks you'll do? What if you and I, ya know, have sex. Then Dr. Black wouldn't want me anymore, and there'd be no reason to kill you because the deed would already be done."

Gabe smiled. "That's a fine argument. And very tempting. Why don't you present that argument to our parents?"

"No, they'd just say something like, 'we won't allow ourselves to be held hostage and terrorized and made to do something against our will,' or, 'our souls are not for sale,' and 'we won't break God's laws to save our earthly lives, when our spiritual lives are so much more important'."

Gabe smiled. Nodded. Remained silent.

Taylor sighed. Looked down. "Wow. You just did a Granddad."

Gabe chuckled, thinking that was an immense compliment.

"Good grief, I feel like I'm Eve, tempting you with an apple."

"Hmm, great analogy." He pushed her back down on the bed, lay next to her like she'd originally asked, and pulled her close. "I'm in love with you, Taylor Kino. And there's nothing more I'd like to do than to marry you and make love to you and have children with you and live happily ever after with you." He gently kissed her still swollen mouth. "But Tay, you're young, I'm young. You may not still want me in a few years. You know, they say young love can change pretty fast. I know that's what they say, because I looked THAT up. So, until you graduate from high school, and figure out where to go to college, or even if you want to go to college, or what you want to do, I'll wait for you. If you wait for me, that would be cool. If you don't, well, that hurts too much to think about right now, but I would eventually accept it."

She stroked his face, touched the bandage on his neck, then put her fingers on his lips. "What if I don't want to have a career? What if my goal is to be a wife and mother and raise a giant house full of warrior children? Would you think I'm being lazy or stupid?"

"You're kidding, right? My father says, and I agree with him, there is NO nobler career choice than to run a home and take care of and teach and feed and raise your children. And no one better equipped than a woman, because they are so strong, they never give up, they work harder than anybody he knows. So Taylor, being a wife and mother is not shameful in any way so don't let anyone tell you that, I mean, if that's what you want to do. My mom won a Grammy and has been criticized for giving up her singing career to raise her family. My Dad has also been criticized for being some kind of caveman who keeps her, uh, barefoot and pregnant, I think is the expression they use. But I'm not a bit ashamed of my mom. She's smart. She's talented. She puts up with a lot of crap from us kids, mainly me, she's beautiful, she never complains, and she keeps us all close to God. She's amazing. And she says if she'd spent the time making albums then at the end of her life, she'd have a few albums. But if she spends her life raising a family, then at the end of it, there's another entire generation of people. Much more important."

Taylor frowned.

"But hey, if you want and need more than that, that's cool too. Whatever you want to do, Tay, you figure it out. I'll support you, no matter what. Even if what you want to do doesn't include me."

"I realize you don't believe me because I'm young, Gabe, but wait and see. I *will* want you. I think it's you who could change."

He sighed. "Of course, that's possible. But let's not talk like that. If we sit around and worry that our feelings might change, then it's like, we could make that happen. Let's think positive. I love you. You love me, and we both have an awesome future in front of us."

"Yep. As long as you don't get murdered and I don't get kidnapped and raped and made to have some loony guy's babies."

"Yeah, as long as that doesn't happen," he said with a slight laugh. He kissed her cheeks. "Okay, so, sleep for a while. I'm gonna go have a snack and I'll come get you for dinner. They're having a giant family dinner and I love those."

"Me too."

He watched as she turned over onto her side and closed her eyes— then he quietly left the room.

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Outside in the hall Gabe could hear the rumble of his father's deep voice in the next bedroom as he spoke on the phone. His father– always taking care of business, after all, it *was* a work day. Gabe started toward the front stairs and came upon Agent Ward, Taylor's assigned bodyguard and Agent Trout, his own bodyguard, as they sat on the steps speaking softly. They stood as Gabe started down the stairs.

"Hey," Gabe greeted.

"Mr. Tanner," they both said.

Gabe stopped. "Seriously? You can't call me that."

"What should we call you then?"

He grinned. "You can call me Gabe, or Tanner, or kid, or hey you, but not Mr. Tanner. I mean, I'm a kid. I haven't earned that respect yet. The only person who ever calls me Mr. Tanner is my high school principal, and that's when I'm in trouble. But you guys are Ameritech Agents that I aspire to be like one day. Hopefully one day you can call me Agent Tanner."

They smiled. "You're joining the ranks?" Agent Trout asked.

"Yes, sir. I start training in September. But, uh, if you ever want to work with me before then, give me a head start, that would be cool."

"I can arrange that," Agent Trout said. "But we only have two days to do it, because you leave Friday morning."

"I do?"

"You didn't know?"

"When we got here yesterday my Dad didn't know how long we could stay."

"Well, we have until Friday and I understand we're hittin' the shooting range early tomorrow morning. Meet on the beach after that?"

"Yes, sir, that sounds great." He headed down. "See ya then."

"Oh, I imagine you'll see me a lot before then."

Gabe got to the bottom of the steps, and waved at the ladies in the living room all sitting on the floor playing with the little ones. Building blocks, coloring books and crayons, action figures and dinosaurs lay all around. He stopped when Bree called his name, and he turned back into the living room.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"How's she doing?"

"She's asleep right now. She seems fine. Said she was slightly nauseated, but like, she wasn't throwing up or anything."

Bree smiled. "Great report."

"Gabe!" little seven-year-old Sophia yelled.

Gabe moved forward, knelt down in front of Joey Adams' oldest daughter. "I'm right here, ya don't have to yell at me," he growled.

She giggled and yelled his name even louder.

"Oh, I'm gonna get you for that," he said as he wrestled her down and tickled her. She screeched in delight. Three-year-old Kelstyn threw down her crayon, jumped up and jumped onto Gabe's back.

"Who's that on my back?" he said menacingly as he pulled her down and pinned the giggling girl to the floor. "Oh! I know you. It's Kel-Bell! Well you're in for it now." He tickled her mercilessly.

The plump little two-year-old Ledger got to his feet and lifted his arms up to Gabe. He stood and put his hands on his hips. "What? You too? Oh, little man, you're gonna fly!" He picked him up and spun him around in the air several times, then set him down carefully. "Little man, you're heavy," Gabe complained. He had his hands on Ledger's sides. "Can you walk straight?" He let him go, and followed for a few seconds, making sure he wasn't too dizzy to walk. He switched attention down to little three-year-old Emily who was demanding her turn to be tickled, which he took care of immediately.

Gabe glanced up at Daniel and Jeremy Davis, smiled. "Hey guys."

"Hey, Gabe," the boys answered together from their place on one of the sofas where they had been playing the latest football video game.

"Whaddya playing?"

"Madden football."

Gabe frowned. "Hmmm, how about we go down to the beach and play some real football?"

"Uh, yeah," Daniel answered.

"Cool. Let me grab something to eat and I'll see if I can round up a few people."

The boys smiled.

Gabe looked around at all the ladies in the room. Taylor's mom, Bella and Breez Adams who were Mark and Joey's wives, and Mrs. Davis, Jeff's wife and Mrs. Kino and the two Mrs. Lees—Jason's and Justin's wives. They were all grinning at him.

"Uh, what? Did I do something wrong?" Gabe asked.

Shelley rose from her place on the floor, came and put her hands on his cheeks. "No, sweetie, you did everything right. Oh, Gabe, I do love you," she sighed.

His face turned a bright red. "Um, I love you too, Mrs. Kino."

She smiled. “Go on now, there’s lots of food laid out on the island.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He hurried out.

In the kitchen he grabbed a plate and filled it with several finger sandwiches, some chicken wings, and two cupcakes. Thinking of his mom, he stopped, grabbed up a couple of baby carrots, dunked them in some ranch dressing and stuffed them in his mouth, crunching loudly, and then grabbed a cold bottle of water. He glanced over at the two couples sitting at the kitchen table, Jeffy and Cam, and Kimmie and Jensen. He nodded in greeting, because his hands were full. They smiled. “Are you sure you can’t fit something else on that plate?” Cam asked.

He shook his head, because his mouth was full. Shrugging, he turned and headed into the larger dining room where young Eric, JoJo and Logan currently sat, apparently having finished their food and just chillin’.

“Whassup, guys,” Gabe greeted as he took a seat next to JoJo.

“Not much,” young Eric said.

Gabe quickly gave thanks for his food and stuffed two finger sandwiches into his mouth. He eyed young Eric who sat at the end of the table. JoJo sat to Eric’s left and Logan to Eric’s right. “So, Eric,” Gabe began. “I, uh, just wanted to thank you for coming out there yesterday and rescuing me.”

Eric blew out a breath. “Yep. No worries. That was some crazy stuff.”

Gabe touched his neck. “Yeah it was. I thanked God last night a hundred times.”

Eric nodded. “How’s the throat?”

“It’s sore, but it beats the alternative.”

Eric nodded again. “So, like, does it bother you? I mean, your dad shooting that guy.”

Gabe shrugged. “Again, it beats the alternative. But ya know, I didn’t see it. My eyes closed when my dad told me to move my head. And I didn’t see anything afterward. So, like, I don’t have those images in my brain like you do. I know it’s hard. How are you feelin’ about it?”

“I, well, I do have those images in my brain. My dad told me to break it down into segments and that would help.”

“Segments?”

“Yeah, like certain things were good. Certain things were bad. Like first, that was an amazing shot. Your dad was so calm, he knew he could save you. He was confident and YOU had total faith in him.”

Gabe nodded. “Total. In him and in God.”

“And then, there’s the image of that hole appearing right in the middle of the guy’s forehead, just like your father warned. He had a look of surprise on his face. I was thinking, that at that moment, he regretted his decision, but it was too late.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that, but I’m grateful to be alive.”

“And then,” Eric went on, almost as if he were in a trance. “He fell back. He didn’t like, just crumple down. It was like he was stiff as a board and fell backward like a tree falling. And because he had his arm around your throat, you fell with him.”

Gabe swallowed.

“And your dad and my granddad pulled you away and started trying to stop the bleeding. You were alive, and that was good. But all I could see was that guy lying on his

back in the sand, his eyes open, a tiny trickle of blood running from that black hole. I remember pacing on the beach. I thought I was gonna throw up."

Gabe's eyes filled. "I'm sorry, Eric."

Eric looked at Gabe with surprise. "Oh, I'm not blaming you. It was a hard lesson to learn though, that there is real evil in this world. That evil could've killed you. That evil could've taken my little sister. But God went out of His way to warn us. And when we weren't vigilant enough, He sent messages to Jeffy and to Granddad. If we hadn't moved as quickly as we did, I mean, think about it. Another minute later and when we got out there you would've been the one lying in the sand and no sign of Taylor." He shuddered. "But it's like, I know you've been through so much lately, this is probably old hat to you."

"Old hat? No. I don't think you ever get used to it. Even my father has a hard time, every time he has to step forward and do what he has to do."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He's not like a hardened monster who thinks nothing of killing someone. He hurts. He suffers. But like Grandmaster Kino says, he's a warrior. God put him on earth to be a warrior."

"He has my complete respect," JoJo said.

"Mine too," young Eric said. "Your dad is a good man, and my father honors and respects him. I'm just struggling I guess, because I've never seen anyone killed right in front of me."

"I'll pray for you to be able to get over this," Gabe said. "I had a hard time with my kidnapping afterward. Couldn't sleep, had terrible nightmares. It sucks. But God is toughening me up. For what, I don't know. That's just what my dad and Grandmaster Kino say. So, I'll just trust God and keep walking the path He has set for me."

JoJo reached up and patted Gabe on the back. "You're a good guy, Gabe. I'm glad we decided to sit here and wait for you to come eat."

"You were waiting for me?"

"Yep. We haven't really had a chance to talk to you much since you've been here. Not this time and not last time, so we decided it was time for a heart to heart."

"Oh," Gabe said. "Sounds like I'm in trouble. So, is this a 'you'd better not hurt Taylor' kinda talk?"

They chuckled. "Nope."

"Is it a 'you better not have sex with my sister' kinda talk?"

"Of course not," young Eric said with a grin. "Because *that* is understood, and we know you have a lot to live for."

Gabe's brows rose at the thinly veiled threat.

"This is a 'come to Jesus,' kinda talk," JoJo said.

Gabe nodded. "Okay. Lay it on me," he said as he chewed on a wing.

"Gabe," Logan began. "The three of us have always known you were a special guy. I haven't known you as long as Jo and Eric, but I remember asking them one time when you were only about nine years old, 'who is that kid?' They told me all about you and all about your family. From that time forward, every time I saw you, it was like, something strange. It reminded me of something."

"*I* reminded you of something?"

"Yes," JoJo said, jumping in. "You reminded him of an experience we had back when Logan was only eleven, and I was twelve and Eric was about to be twelve."

Gabe finished his food and started on his cupcakes. "Okay," he said. "Go on."

"The three of us were on a bike trip, up in a canyon. Me and Eric, we've always been close, and when Logan came into our lives, we felt an instant bond with him, kinda like we knew he would end up being my brother. We decided to do this prayer thing at the top of the cliff that overlooked the river."

"The place where you fell off the cliff?" Gabe asked Logan.

"Yeah, but that was a different story, different day. This was before that," young Eric said.

"So, up on this cliff side, we sat in a circle and we prayed," JoJo went on. "We prayed and then we meditated, trying to quiet our minds to hear God's voice. It felt like we were floating. And we felt the Holy Spirit move through us so strong. And then it was like we could see our family. The ones who'd passed. I could see my mother, even though I'd never seen her before. She died when I was a baby. But I knew it was her."

"And I saw my grandmother whom I've never seen, because she died when my father was only eleven. And I saw my great grandfather," young Eric said.

"And I saw my grandparents, though I really didn't remember them, they died in a car accident when I was little." Logan said.

"They came to us to let us know that our family units are eternal, as long as we choose the light over the darkness," JoJo said.

"The thing is, Gabe," young Eric went on. "The feeling we had that day, I don't even know how to describe it. It was like the strongest love we've ever felt in our lives. Like, we all cried. The feeling was amazing, and we craved that feeling. We've tried to live every day so that we can feel that feeling of being so close to God again."

Gabe smiled. "I understand that feeling. It's like an extreme rush of joy that comes from being in God's presence. It's like, addictive. Once you feel it, that's all you want– to be in the presence of God, to stand next to Jesus. His light is so strong, it fills your whole heart, your whole soul, and it makes you want everyone around you to feel that feeling, because, as God's warriors, it's in us to try to save everyone."

At Gabe's words Logan and JoJo bowed their heads and made no attempt to try to hide their emotional response.

Young Eric smiled. "We knew you'd get it, Gabe. That's what Logan was talking about when he said, you reminded him of something. Whenever you're around, we're reminded of that feeling we had in the canyon that day. You may not realize it, but you have a light about you, constantly. That light is why you streaked to the top of the internet. Once people see it, they either can't get enough of it, or they're angered or jealous and want to put it out. Just like Granddad is always saying. But Gabe, *you,* are special, and we want to learn from you and we want to help you any way we can."

"Learn from *me*? But I'm a nobody. I'm just a kid. Yeah, I love God, I love Jesus, because, like you guys, I've felt His love and I want to feel it again. But I'm so much younger than you. I need to learn from you."

Eric shook his head. "You're not that much younger. Only three years. Only two years younger than my brother, Logan."

"You mean your cousin," Gabe corrected.

"No, I mean my brother. Ya see, that day in the canyon, we took a blood oath. We cut our palms and swore to be brothers. Inseparable. Loyal. Honest. No secrets. We would be there for each other as brothers no matter what goes down in our lives."

Gabe smiled. "That's cool. I like it."

"And we want you to be included in our brotherhood, Gabe," Eric said.

"Uh, you want me to cut my hand?"

They laughed.

"Naw, that was kid stuff," Logan said. "Besides, you shed enough blood yesterday trying to protect Taylor."

"You don't have to consent to anything," JoJo added. "We just want you to know, that from here on out, we're your brothers. You can call on us for anything at any time. You can share your innermost thoughts with us, and you will never be judged, or criticized."

"Well, this is cool. Unless you count Jake, who's kinda like a brother to me, I've never had a brother. Just lots of sisters."

Young Eric nodded. "Yeah, I've wondered how it is to have six sisters."

Gabe smiled. "I've never known anything else. My sisters are totally cool, though. I, like, really love them, and being around them actually makes me happy."

"Ya see!" Logan said loudly. "That's what I'm talking about. He could have said what people usually say, about how sisters are a pain, make fun of them, make light of them, say what a bother they are. Instead this guy talks about his love for them. I mean, who does that?"

Gabe's face reddened. He shrugged. "Well, you guys know my sisters. They're awesome."

"They're hot," Eric said, his brows raised.

"So is *your* sister," Gabe countered quickly.

Young Eric laughed. "Touché."

"So," JoJo went on. "My dad says you're gonna be an Elite."

"Yeah, well, I'm gonna try."

"Uh, you know what Yoda says," Logan said with a grin.

Gabe laughed. "Yes I do." He nodded firmly. "So, I will DO."

"We know you'll make it, Gabe. We have every confidence in you."

"Thanks."

"My dad also says we're gonna be hearing from you a lot more because you're gonna start a social media ministry," JoJo added.

Gabe nodded. "He's gonna get it all set up for me and I'm gonna just say or do whatever God puts on my heart."

"Well, remember, we can help, whatever you need," JoJo said.

"Aren't you all really busy with your own stuff? I mean, JoJo, I follow you. You're the big time Heisman candidate QB for USC. That and school takes up all of your time, doesn't it? And you, Eric, aren't you making movies? And you, Logan, aren't you also in school?"

JoJo nodded. "Gabe, a lot of my time is taken up with football and school. Most of my time. But it won't always be like that. This is my last year. But for you, Gabe, I'll make

time. I'll do whatever God asks me to do, whatever His will is for me, that's where I'm going. Today, we all felt God wanted us to talk to you. And that's what we did."

"And, yeah," young Eric said. "I just finished a movie and we'll see how it plays out. I too, will do God's will, no matter what it is."

"And, yeah," Logan added. "I am in school, studying music. We'll just see where that takes me. Still, I have time for you, brother. Always. We might even collaborate on some music for your videos."

Gabe smiled. "That would be cool." He nodded his head, blinked away some tears and drew a deep breath. "Thanks, guys, I mean, thanks, bros. Y'all have me all choked up. God is doing something, right now." He patted his chest over his heart, cleared his throat, drew another deep breath. "So, uh, I don't know how you guys are feeling, but I'm kinda antsy and I need to release some of this energy and I promised Dan and Jeremy we'd go out on the beach and play some football. Are you guys up for it?"

"Absolutely," they all said at the same time.

Gabe grinned. "Cool. So, where are the men?"

"Having another meeting in Granddad's study."

"Well, I'm gonna go interrupt and see if they need a break too."

"Yeah, good luck with that. You're braver than we are."

Gabe shrugged and headed toward Grandmaster Kino's study but stopped first in the kitchen. "Hey Cam and Jensen. You guys up for some beach football?"

"You got it. When?" Cam asked.

"Hopefully in about five minutes. I'm gonna go interrupt the men in the study."

"Uh, I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Gabe shrugged. "I guess I like to live dangerously."

"Well that is apparent," Jensen ribbed.

Laughing, Gabe headed down the hall to the study, knocked, didn't wait for permission, opened the door, stuck his head in.

"Is there a problem?" Grandmaster Kino asked him immediately.

Gabe smiled sheepishly. "Um, no, sir, sorry to interrupt, but I promised the Davis boys we'd play some football on the beach and I was wondering if you old men could use a bit of a break and come down and show us young guys what's what."

"Absolutely," Mark and Joey said in unison.

Eric's brows rose, then he smiled. "I guess we could all use a break. Let's do this."

Gabe grinned. "See ya on the beach in five?"

"Make it ten."

"Ten it is." He strode back out to the kitchen. "Okay, we're set in ten minutes." He went to tell the others.

Cam smiled. "The kid's got swag."

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"Lord have mercy, y'all, would ya get a load of all that." She waved her hand toward the sixteen males on the beach. "I mean, that is some serious beefcake."

It wasn't what she said that made all the women turn and stare at her, it was who said it.

"Oh," Shelley giggled. "Did I say that out loud?"

Angel laughed. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

They all turned back toward the men. There were sixteen of them, in different sizes, ages and colors, all dressed in swim trunks, t-shirts and athletic shoes, and they had just divided into teams of eight. They were playing shirts and skins, and the skins had all just drawn their T-shirts over their heads and tossed them into a pile near the far end goal line. Lori, Bree, Mickey, Kimmie and Bella were a little disappointed that their men ended up being shirts, while Shelley, Angel, Jeffy, and Breez were delighted with their men.

The skin team consisted of Eric senior, Keegan, Jason, Cam, Joey, JoJo, young Eric and even younger, Daniel Davis. The shirts team included Justin, Ricky, Jeff, Jensen, Mark, Logan, Gabe and the youngest player on the 'field,' eleven-year-old Jeremy Davis.

It was amazing. Eric was about to be seventy in a few weeks, but he looked like some thirty-something guy off a calendar. The same for Justin, who was closest to Eric's age at sixty-six. How was this possible? It was like this group had found the fountain of youth. Jason, at fifty-nine, Ricky at fifty-two, and Keegan at forty-nine, all looked like college age kids, and the rest could literally go undercover at a high school.

Beach chairs had been brought down and set up on one sideline and the women sat in a long row, with the agent/bodyguards right behind them. Some of the agents sat, they were getting to enjoy the game, while other agents stood, constantly on watch. They decided they would switch positions every fifteen minutes. They stood as sentries, looking very official in their white polo shirts and their Oakley sunglasses.

The game hadn't even started yet when JoJo and Logan, on opposite teams for once, started arguing with each other. Shelley glanced at Eric, interested to see his reaction, but he was smiling and just shaking his head. Sometimes ya just have to stand back and let people work things out on their own.

The playing field was a good, wide, flat stretch of wet sand, which wouldn't be there in a few hours.

"Agent Brown," Jason yelled. "Toss a coin for us please."

"Call it," Brown yelled back.

"Tails," Cam said.

"Tails it is."

Cam grinned. "We'll take it."

The other team got ready to kickoff. Logan was just gonna punt it, but stopped. "Gabe, I'll hold, you kick."

Gabe nodded. When the other team realized Gabe was gonna kick it, they backed up.

Logan held the ball and nodded at Gabe. "Do NOT kick my fingers."

Gabe laughed, moved forward and kicked the ball way past the other end zone since it was a much smaller playing field than a normal football field. The other team pointed at Gabe and threatened him. He laughed. Shrugged. "Sorry, guess I don't know my own strength."

The agents watching got a good laugh.

"Who's got the edge?" Agent Trout asked.

"Well," Agent Wyatt began. "On Grandmaster Kino's team there are—one, two—two college football players, JoJo and Cam, and I think young Eric and Agent Tanner also played some football in high school. But on Mr. Lee's team there are also two college

players, Mark, and Jensen. And Gabe, Logan and Ricky all played in high school. So, they're pretty evenly matched."

"Wanna wager?" Agent Trout asked.

"Probably not a good thing to do, right here first day on the job," Agent Brown put in, glancing at his charge, *the* Breanna Adams. She looked up and smiled at him.

"Well," Agent Trout said. "I'm just gonna say, if I was gonna bet, I'd put my money on my guy's team."

"Who's your guy again?" Agent Brown asked.

"Gabe Tanner."

The group at large nodded in agreement.

"Hold on now," Shelley interrupted. "Don't count my husband's team out too quickly."

The agents all laughed.

They turned and watched as JoJo, a Heisman candidate, fired a frozen rope into the hands of his uncle, Agent Joey Adams, who, known for his speed on the mats, showed he could run just as fast. Still he was caught and taken down by Ricky, also known for his speed.

The next play Eric senior QB'd and tossed the ball to young Daniel. All the men blocked for him and he almost scored but was brought down by his own little brother, Jeremy. Next play JoJo connected with young Eric on the fade. Touchdown.

Gabe talked up his team. "Come on, we got this. We got a Heisman candidate too, just a little older. Let's go."

At that moment he glanced over to see Agent Ward carrying a chair down to the beach and Taylor right behind. Gabe smiled and ran over and helped her into the chair, then leaned over her. "Feeling better?"

"I think so."

"Good. I'm dirty and sweaty but I'm gonna do this anyway." He kissed her softly.

"Come on, lover boy. Delay of game," Cam called.

Gabe grinned at Taylor. "Gotta go kick some butt." He kissed her again, turned and headed back to the game.

Taylor pulled out her phone and started taking pics and video of the hot bodies on the beach.

Out on the field, they huddled up. "Okay," Ricky said. "Jeremy, you ready for this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Everyone, ya know what you gotta do."

They all nodded. "Break," they said loudly, stood back and waited for the kickoff.

The skins team kicked it straight to Justin. Gabe knew they would, because Justin was the oldest on the team. But that's okay, because they had a plan. Justin ran two steps, turned and tossed it to Ricky. He ran a few feet and reversed and tossed it to Jeff. From Jeff it went to Jensen, and then Mark, who ran one direction and turned and passed it all the way across the field to Logan.

"Stay with me now," Gabe said to Jeremy. Jeremy nodded as he ran alongside of Gabe.

Logan turned and tossed the ball back across the field to Gabe, who then handed it off to Jeremy and blocked the rest of the way. Jeremy dodged his brother, and crossed the goal line. Touchdown.

The other team stood with hands on hips, breathing hard.

Gabe laughed and high-fived his team.

The spectators were cheering and clapping and whistling.

"Okay, we see how it's gonna be," young Eric warned. "You're in for it now."

"Bring it," Gabe yelled back.

Eric smiled. He could not love this family more. Their competitive edge, mixed with love and honor, it stirred the heart, even at a silly backyard pickup game on the beach.

The women also were enjoying the trash talk along with the beefcake show. Mark, on the shirt team, lifted his T-shirt to wipe the sweat dripping from his face, exposing rippling abs for a brief few seconds. "Umm, did you see that?" Breez said to Bella.

"Yes. Yes I did. My man, he's still got it."

"He's definitely a hunk," Bree agreed, looking up from where she played with her nieces and nephew in the sand.

Taylor watched with a smile. They were all hunks, she thought. But Gabe was definitely the hottest one out there. She wished he'd take his shirt off. He would eventually, she knew. When the game was over, they'd all either jump into the pool or swim in the ocean. She was looking forward to it.

The game went on for some time. The men were hot and sweaty, it being almost June and the late afternoon sun was blistering. The ladies, too, were perspiring. Lori, Angel and Shelley finally gathered up the little ones and headed in to get things ready for dinner. It was already after five and the tide would be coming in soon anyway. There were too many people to cook for and the meal would be arriving from their trusted caterers within the hour.

The rest of the women toughed it out to the end of the game. Justin's team had a one touchdown lead according to Agent Brown's scorekeeping, but Eric's team had the ball. All the guys were done in, sweating profusely, breathing hard, ready to end the torture. Eric, Keegan and Jason all protected the QB. Daniel, Cam, Joey and young Eric ran parallel routes. JoJo dropped back and threw the ball high, hoping one of the four would come down with it. On the other team, Gabe, Mark, and Logan all jumped high, trying for the interception. There was a great tangle of bodies as everyone came down, all grappling for the ball. When the dust cleared, the ball rolled away and seven guys lay on their backs, gasping for breath.

Eric came to stand over them. "I call that the last play. We're done. Everyone hydrate please."

Gabe didn't move, but spoke from where he lay on the ground. "That would make our team the winners."

"Of course we are," Ricky bragged. "Let's go celebrate."

All the guys grabbed bottles of cold water from the cooler and downed them quickly. Sweaty shirts were being pulled over heads. It was the moment the women had been waiting for. Gabe still hadn't moved though and Keegan stood over him.

"You okay, son?"

Gabe drew a deep breath. "Yes, sir. Maybe a little dehydrated."

"You lost a lot of blood yesterday."

"Hmm, was that just yesterday? Seems like a long time ago." He sat up.

Taylor went to him and handed him a bottle of water, which he gratefully accepted. She sat down next to him.

Keegan gave them their privacy and left to wade into the ocean to wash the sweat and dirt off his body.

"I'd kiss you, but I'm all dirty and sweaty," Gabe said as he gulped down some water.

"That didn't stop you earlier."

He grinned, pushed her down onto the soft sand and kissed her, making sure he made contact with his sweaty body.

She pushed him off her. "Ugh, you really are sweaty and smelly."

He laughed. "I warned you." He forced himself to stand, reached his hand down to her. "Come on, let's go up to the house and get cleaned up for dinner." He walked over to grab her chair to carry it back up to the house, but Agent Ward waved him off. "I got it. You two go ahead of me."

Smiling, Taylor took Gabe's hand, and they walked up together.

Thirty minutes later, showered and dressed, Gabe looked around his room. Apparently Taylor had made up his bed and straightened up his room before she left it. Sweet girl. He stepped out into the hall and again could hear his father's deep voice talking on the phone in the next bedroom. Gabe knocked softly and opened the door. His father waved him in, and held one finger up to let him know he was finishing up his conversation. He obviously had just showered. He was only half dressed, wearing only slacks that weren't fastened yet, and a shirt that wasn't buttoned and no shoes. Gabe stepped all the way in and closed the door.

"Yes. That'll be fine. Not until Friday. Thanks. No. Not until I get back."

Gabe watched his father as he spoke. He looked tired. It seemed he was always working.

"We'll go over that too. Roger that." He ended the call and looked up. "Hey son, you okay?"

"Yes, sir. I just got cleaned up and I'm gettin' ready to go find Jeffy or Miss Lori to put a fresh bandage on my neck."

"Come here, let me see it."

Gabe stepped forward and lifted his chin. Keegan studied it a minute. "It actually looks really good. It's only been about twenty-four hours and it's already healing. It's amazing."

Gabe smiled. "That's cool. When that vision thing happened in the kitchen, I felt this tingling going up my neck. Maybe I was being healed."

Keegan nodded thoughtfully. "Do you wanna talk about what you saw in your vision?"

"Um, not yet. I need to write it all down. Get it straight in my head."

"Well, you know I'm always here for you, when you want to talk about it."

"I know, Dad. So, how's Mom? Have you spoken to her lately?"

"Actually yes, just before that last phone call, which was Agent Dalton, working on a tricky case. Your mom is okay. Not great, but okay. This pregnancy is hard on her."

"Does the doctor say she's okay?"

"Yes. Just having a lot of morning sickness."

"Dad, if we need to get home, let's go."

"We're heading home on Friday morning."

"Yeah, Agent Trout told me and I'm surprised. Why are we staying so long?"

"That's only two more days. I thought you'd be happy to get more time with your girlfriend."

"I am, but if Mom needs us, Taylor would understand."

"Mom is okay, and I have some loose ends to take care of while I'm here."

"Okay. But Dad, you seem tired. You're always working."

He gave a soft laugh. "I'm a little tired, but there are a lot of people depending on me. Not just your mom and sisters, but all those people who work for me and their families, and our friends and neighbors, and you, and the people here. Things have to get done. I have people to take care of. People to protect."

Gabe suddenly threw his arms around his father and hugged him tight. Keegan was surprised by the gesture. He hugged his son. "What's this all about?" he asked softly.

"I dunno, Dad. It's like you take care of everybody, ya know? You're so strong and dependable. But, like, who takes care of you? It seems like, I mean, I see you like, standing on a football field, facing some big, hulking team, ya know? Like when we played the *Townsend Titans*—only *you're* facing them all alone."

Keegan smiled. "Well now, that's a pretty good analogy, son. So, are you saying you're worried about me?"

"I don't know if I'm worried. I'm just like— feelin' ya."

Keegan nodded. "Well, thanks for that, but let's go a little further with your analogy. First, as I'm standing on this field, I'm wearing my pads, right? Which, since this is a life analogy, I'll say consists of the full armor of God. And, I have *the* best coach, which IS God. And He's constantly calling in plays and giving me directions. Second, I'm not alone in this world, Gabe. I have my family and friends, who in this analogy would represent my teammates. Your mom, she's my center, she takes very good care of me. She's strong and dependable too, like you say I am. And your sisters are also strong and dependable. And then, there's you, son. You're truly becoming a man, and you help me more than you know. I feel sure that I can hand the ball off to you and you'd find a way to score. And Gabe, I'm grateful for you and for this little show of love and support."

Gabe shrugged. "Well, I do love you, Dad, and I respect you."

"I love you too, son. Let me ask you, when you're all suited up and huddled on that football field with your teammates and coach surrounding you, do you feel alone, or afraid?"

"No, not at all."

"You're kind of psyched up, right?"

"Stoked, yeah."

"And if you're a little out of breath from the last play and you know you've got to cover the receiver again, what do you do?"

"Suck it up and dig deep."

"Right. So, that's how I face each day. I dig deep, even when I'm tired. But I'm good, because I have my coach and my teammates, all around me, and I want them to know they can depend on me to do my job. And I know I can depend on them to do theirs."

Gabe stepped back. Sighed. Nodded. Took a moment. "Ya know, you sound a lot like

Grandmaster Kino."

"He and Ricky and Jason have been a huge influence on me."

"Do they know that?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure, but maybe I should take the time to let them know."

Gabe smiled. "Cool. So, uh, good talk. Are you coming down to dinner?"

Keegan chuckled. "Yes, I'll be right there."

Gabe started toward the door, but stopped. "Oh, uh, Dad, I wanted to tell you something Taylor said to me that I thought I should pass on."

"Shoot," Keegan said as he buttoned his shirt and tucked it in.

"Well, she's pretty scared. She says this Dr. Black dude is a high genius billionaire and was able to figure out how to kidnap her grandparents, so she's not feeling very safe. She thinks Black might know something that we haven't thought of and she's scared he's gonna get her. I hate that she's feeling that way."

Keegan nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I'll need to pass that on to her father. I don't want her living in fear. When you interrupted our meeting earlier we were trying to go over every scenario, trying to think of every situation to make sure that doesn't happen again. I believe that if we follow protocol, no exceptions, we should be okay."

Gabe nodded. "I trust you guys. And I trust God. But there is this other side that is also pretty scared that something could happen to Taylor. I don't know what I'd do. I keep seeing that guy punch her in the face inside my head and it's like, I mean, it makes me feel sick."

"Which is it, son? Choose which thoughts you'll dwell on. You can't serve two masters. Are you gonna trust God or not trust God?"

Gabe nodded, thinking of what his father just said. "Yes, sir. Got it."

"Let me finish dressing and I'll be down. You go get your neck patched up."

"Yes, sir."

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May 29th Wednesday Morning

Alley Creek Shooting Range, Camp Pendleton, California

Agents Trout, Ward, Winston, Penning, Landry, and Wyatt, the agents assigned to watch over, Gabe, Taylor, JoJo, Logan, young Eric and the Davis boys respectively, were blown away by what they were seeing. They'd heard all about this young man, Gabriel Tanner. Some of them followed him on social media. They all knew about his abduction, in detail. They'd all seen him perform at the Mini-MART in person. They knew he was like a magnet. People were drawn to him. But when they'd met him yesterday, he seemed like a normal kid, if one were to leave out the episode in the kitchen where he'd had some sort of spiritual trip. But today, here at the shooting range, he was giving them a glimpse of a superb marksman, and a superb instructor, with a high intellect and a level of confidence as if he were a seasoned sniper.

Logan had been having some problems hitting the target heart. Finally, Gabe moved forward, took the gun, aimed, fired three shots through essentially the same hole in the target, gave it back to Logan, spoke to him about the position of his trigger finger and watched as Logan adjusted and hit the bullseye. Gabe then simply stepped back as if he hadn't just done a remarkable thing.

The on-duty agents weren't the only ones impressed. Joey and Jeff, both considered expert marksmen by Ameritech were both awed by the young man. So far, Gabe had helped everyone who'd come to shoot this day, Ricky, young Eric, Logan, JoJo and the two Davis boys. When Joey and Jeff were shooting, Gabe didn't say anything, so Joey asked him if there was anything they could change up.

Gabe shrugged. "Not really, sir. But when I think I have it all down and perfect, I add speed to the mix. Like, can I reload faster, can I aim quicker, can I pull the trigger faster, can I switch targets faster. Like, you're already pretty fast. How can you go faster?"

"You tell me how. How can I go faster?"

Gabe smiled. "Well, competition always improves speed. We can have a little competition. Lay bullets, empty mags, guns on the table. How fast can you load the gun, and kill three targets with two rounds each and then one last shot to the fourth target. Then drop the mag, empty the chamber and lay the gun down."

"Okay, you're on. But since you haven't had your turn yet. You warm up by demonstrating the drill."

"Okay, but wait. Taylor? You haven't gone yet. Do you want to take your turn now, or wait until after this little competition?"

She smiled sweetly. "I'll wait."

He nodded. Set the table. "I only need seven bullets to complete the drill, but part of the drill is to fill that mag, so fill it all the way." He stood back. "Let's have two timers."

JoJo and Logan got out their phones and stood ready.

"You start as soon as I move toward the table and stop the moment the gun touches the table at the end." He took a breath, shook his arms loosely by his side, and stepped forward. His fingers worked nimbly, hand-loading the bullets into the mag. In no time he'd popped the mag into the gun, chambered, aimed, two shots, two shots, two shots, one shot, dropped the magazine, racked the slide to empty the chamber and laid the gun on the table. He turned. "How'd I do?"

"I got fifty-three seconds," JoJo said.

"I got fifty-four," Logan said.

Gabe frowned. The other men were awed.

"That was pretty darn impressive," Jeff said. "Danny-boy, Jeremy, how'd you like to be able to do that?"

"That was very cool," Daniel said with a grin.

"Well, it's not my best time, but maybe I'll do better now that I'm warmed up," Gabe said. He looked around. "Who's going next?"

Ricky went next. He fumbled a bit loading the magazine. His time ended up being a minute and thirty-eight seconds. Young Eric took his turn, he beat his dad at a minute and thirty-one seconds. Logan got a minute and forty-eight seconds. JoJo got a minute and fifty-eight seconds because he dropped two bullets on the ground. Joey got a minute and eleven seconds and Jeff got fifty-nine seconds.

Gabe smiled. "Good job guys."

"Your turn was a warm-up," JoJo said. "You go again."

Gabe nodded and set the table. Stepped back, drew a deep breath, shook out his arms and stepped forward. He zoned out, focused, and when he set the gun down the guys were

again awe-struck.

"Thirty-eight seconds," JoJo yelled.

Gabe smiled. "That's my best time ever."

"That was a freak show," Jeff said.

"Well, to be honest, it's not very realistic. If you were like, out on a mission and had to reload fast, you would have several magazines already loaded. You wouldn't have a box of loose ammo lying around. So next time, let's do it with changing out mags for each target, or something like that."

"Sounds good," Joey said. "We'll all work on it, so next time you're out here, be ready for some real competition."

Gabe grinned. "I'll look forward to it. I came up with this loading the mag scenario after watching some movie where the person was in big trouble and was so nervous he couldn't load his gun, so I decided to do an experiment and see how hard it would be. My first time was like over two minutes, so you guys all beat me."

"Cool," young Eric said. "That means there's hope for us."

The men laughed.

"And, the other thing we didn't really look at was how accurate we were. So next time, we'll take that into consideration. Points for speed. Points for accuracy." Gabe looked at the six agents sitting there, then back at Joey. "Would it be okay for these guys to take a turn if they feel like it?"

Joey nodded. "Go for it guys. I'm interested to see how you do."

"Oh," Gabe said, "I, uh, didn't mean to put them on the spot with their boss man."

Joey grinned. "Well, I did. Agent Wyatt, step up."

While all six agents took a turn, Gabe sat next to Taylor, took her hand and kissed it. "Sorry. They all looked kind of left out so it felt right to invite them to try."

"Why are you sorry? I love that you did that. I love how thoughtful you are and that you show compassion for other people."

"Even when it means I wasn't thinking of you having to wait even longer?"

"Well, the fact you just said that means you thought about it. But you thought I wouldn't mind, and you were right. See how well we understand each other? Everyone thinks we're too young to know if we're really in love. Even you think that. But I know."

Gabe smiled, touched her cheek, turned her face toward him and kissed her softly. "Right at this minute, I'm crazy in love with you."

She giggled.

The six agents averaged around a minute and forty seconds. Then it was Taylor's turn. She went through her usual practice routine. Gabe only had to correct her a few times. Like Logan she was having a little trouble with her aim. He stood behind her, placed his hands over hers, his cheek beside hers. Not because she really needed him to, but because he liked the position. It was how they'd first become aware of each other. He spoke softly as he corrected her position, using his foot to nudge her legs farther apart, pushing her right shoulder forward, and placing his hand on her right hip and gently shifting it left to center her stance. He jumped back though when he heard Taylor's father clearing his throat, and he realized his hand was more on her backside than her hip.

"Uh, sorry," he mumbled. His face reddened as he heard soft laughter from the

spectators.

Taylor did a great job for only having been shooting a handful of times now. Gabe asked her if she'd like to try the competition and smiled when she said 'yes'.

"How about me and Daniel and Jeremy," she said, winking at Gabe.

"Cool," Jeremy said with a big smile.

The men watched and helped and explained exactly what to do and not do, since the kids' safety was foremost in their minds. Using their .22s the three accomplished the exercise. The boys both had times around four minutes, and Taylor's time was closer to five. Still, it gave them something to work on.

As the group started packing up, Agent Trout asked Gabe, "Are we still meeting down on the beach?"

"Yes, sir, if you still feel like it, I'm always game to learn."

"With that attitude, kid, you're gonna go a long way very fast."

"I hope so," Gabe said. He thought of everything that had happened over the past few days. Only a few days had passed, but seemed like a lot longer. Monday they'd arrived and someone tried to kill him and take Taylor, and they'd taken a trip in an ambulance and spent time in a hospital. Tuesday they'd had a big family meeting, then a meeting about his life goals. Then a football game on the same beach where his and Taylor's blood had spilled the day before and where a man had died at his father's hand. Then a giant family dinner with the Kinos which was always entertaining and educational.

At that dinner, Agent Jason Lee had discussed what they'd found thus far. Dr. Black's cell had been raided. They'd found a stash of cell phones, money, and contraband. He'd been placed in solitary confinement while authorities searched for Payne. Of course, he denied ordering a hit on Gabe or ordering Taylor's kidnapping. He denied being in touch with Payne, but the cell phone told a different story. Using the phone records they were able to find where Payne had been staying, a rental property near Little Corona Beach, which was only six miles north of the Kino estate. The place was raided, but Payne had already left. Payne Lanske, like many other violent criminals, had been released from prison during the plandemic. Ameritech and FBI spoke to people at the *Los Dragon* night club and got nothing, but were able to pull video and have current images of the man, which Jason said would be sent to each person's cell. They were to study it and commit it to memory. Jason would keep them posted as they learned more.

Gabe thought about the fact there was a hit on him. He needed to talk to his dad, who hadn't come today. He was with Jason, working on the case. But Gabe wondered if maybe he shouldn't go home. Would he be putting his family in danger? Would being near Taylor put her in danger? Or would being near Taylor put him in danger? It was weird, thinking that somebody actually wanted him dead. It seemed to be a theme lately. Then the words came into his head. "When there is a light, the dark forces gather to put it out. Trust Me."

Gabe's eyes misted and he nodded heavenward, letting God know that he'd heard the message. He turned when Taylor gently placed her hand on his shoulder.

"You okay?" she asked.

He dropped the gun bags he'd gathered and pulled her close into a giant hug. Held her tight for several seconds. "I'm good," he whispered. "I'm grateful you're okay, you're here, alive and well." He put his hands on either side of her face and tilted it up to look

deeply into her eyes. “I love you, Tay. Just in case anything happens to me, I want you to know that.” He leaned down and kissed her fiercely.

Young Eric, who’d been watching and listening, glanced over at his father, who’d also been watching. His father frowned and young Eric wondered what he was thinking. He glanced around him and realized everyone was watching. It was Agent Trout who spoke. “Well, rest assured, I’m not gonna let anything happen to you, young man, or should I say, Agent Tanner.”

Gabe smiled at the title. “I’m not even close to being an agent.”

“You will be. I guarantee it.”

It happened fast, as if to prove what the agent just said. Before Gabe even knew what was going on, all six agents plus Joey and Jeff moved quickly, forming a circle around the others, guns drawn, as two armed men approached their booth. Everyone knew you don’t enter into the space where other people are shooting. There was a walkway that ran just behind the long line of staging areas, and shooters were expected to remain on it until they reached their assigned area. And the agents had seen one of these men walk by a few times now.

The two men stopped, dropped their rifles on the ground and threw their hands in the air.

“Whoa,” one man said. “We didn’t mean any harm. We just saw Ricky Kino, and, uh—”

At the words, several agents holstered their weapons.

The other man continued. “We saw Ricky and then we noticed his kids were here, and then we saw Gabe Tanner. That is Gabe Tanner, right?”

“Yes,” Joey answered.

“And, uh, you too, you’re Joey Adams. I just wanted to say that you guys are a big deal in our household. I’ve even taught some of my Sunday School classes using the Kino family as an example of how to live.”

The rest of the agents holstered their weapons.

Ricky stepped forward. Extended his hand, smiled kindly. “Sorry about the show of force. We’ve had some threats lately.”

The men shook hands and nodded. “We heard. We should’ve thought to speak before we approached. We just got excited. My wife and daughters are gonna go bonkers when I tell them who we saw today. We were hoping to get a few autographs for them, uh, and us.”

Ricky grinned. “Whose autograph do you want?”

“All of ya,” one man said.

The other man explained. “My daughter just loves Taylor and Gabe. They’re all she can talk about. And my son follows young Eric’s career, and JoJo’s football, and Logan’s music videos. And my wife loves your wife so much though she would leave me for you in a second.”

Everyone laughed, but Ricky sighed, nodded.

The two men held out their hats and a black permanent marker.

Ricky took one of the hats to sign. “And you guys just happen to have a marker with you?”

"No, but I went back to my truck to get one."

The others stood quietly while Ricky, young Eric, Taylor, Gabe, JoJo, Logan, and Joey all took a minute to sign the two hats.

One man nodded and thanked them profusely. "Hey," he said to Gabe. "Tell your father he's my hero, and my brother."

"You're a Marine?" Gabe asked.

"Yes. And your dad is a great man."

"Thank you, sir," Gabe said, shaking his hand. "I'll tell him."

The other man shook Ricky's hand again. "My name is Kevin Douglas. I'm the youth pastor at *Big Canyon Church of Christ*." He handed him a card. "If you'd ever like to visit us, it would mean a great deal to the kids. Our ministry reaches out to a lot of underprivileged kids. We bus them in from all over. For you to address the class, it would go a long way."

Ricky nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

"I know it's a big ask. I mean, some strange guy comes up to you randomly at a gun range."

"Nothing is random," Ricky said firmly. "When would you like us to come?"

He laughed. "Is this Sunday too soon?"

Ricky glanced at Joey. "Well, here's the deal. I'll shoot for this Sunday, but due to security reasons, we won't be able to let you know for sure until about thirty minutes before we arrive."

Kevin nodded. "We'll hope and pray you can make it. Oh, and if you do, will your family be joining you?"

Ricky grinned. "If we come, we'll come in force. That includes, Breanna. But that also includes security. Like I said, we've had some threats."

"Understood. Hope to see you."

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May 31st 12:30 AM Friday

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor sighed contentedly as she turned over in her bed. When she heard breathing, she smiled. "Gabe, how did you get into my room?"

She heard a slight laugh. Felt him move, felt his hand on her face, felt it cover her mouth, and when she couldn't breathe she tried to move his hand, but she couldn't. The panic took over and she began to struggle.

"You're mine," a voice said, definitely not Gabe's. "You belong to me. You tried to give yourself to me once, in place of your auntie, so now, we'll make that happen."

Taylor tried to scream but couldn't get it out. She rolled, struggled, fought and finally fell out of her bed, making a loud thump on the floor. She sat up and screamed, tried to make it to her door, which burst open.

Young Eric slammed the door open and looked down to see his sister on her knees. He knelt down, took her in his arms. "I gotcha, Taytay," he said loudly. "Wake up, hon, I'm here."

Ricky then made it to the door, breathing heavily. Bree also arrived. Ricky frowned at her and then turned his attention back to his daughter. "Taylor," Ricky said calmly.

She looked up. “Daddy.” She left her brother’s embrace and went into his arms. “Daddy, it was so real. He was here. He said I belong to him. Daddy, I’m scared. I’m so scared. Please, don’t let him get to me.”

He held her close. “I won’t, baby girl. You’re safe. I’ve got you. I know you’re safe, honey.”

“But how do you know? How can you be sure?”

“Do you realize the level of security we have on this house right now? If you or anyone even touches the window at night, what happens?”

“A very loud alarm sounds.”

“Right. But no one can even get near the windows because of the motion sensors. No one can even approach the house if they were to get past the gates. But no one can get past the gates. And we have two agents on the property outside and one inside, 24/7.”

“So, where is the inside guy right now? Did he not hear all the commotion I just made?”

“He did hear. He just went back downstairs to check in and let them know we’re okay.” He set her away from him so he could look into her eyes. “But all that is not why I know. It’s because your mom and I have prayed over you, over this whole situation, and we both had a feeling of peace come over us. God is real, baby girl. Do you believe that?”

She nodded.

“Then we have to trust Him. We do everything we can to help ourselves, but then, we have to trust Him. He’s let your mom and I know that you’re safe. Remember, He warned us before. He would warn us again.”

Taylor sniffed. “I wish Gabe could be here with me. I wish he could sleep with me.”

Ricky blew out a breath. “Well, that’s not gonna happen.”

“I’m not talking about sex, Daddy. I just don’t want to sleep alone.”

“Gabe is not gonna sleep with you, Taylor. He has his own path to walk and that doesn’t include him staying here in this house. If you’re afraid to sleep alone, we’ll blow up an air mattress and put it in our room. Would you like to do that?”

“Yes. I’m too afraid to stay in my room at night.”

“Okay, sweetheart. Tonight, just come and sleep with your mom and I. Tomorrow I’ll dig out the air mattress. And I promise— I’ll keep you safe.”

She wiped away her tears. “Thank you, Daddy.” She smiled up at her brother. “Thank you, Eric, for getting here so fast.”

“You’re welcome.” He grinned. “You scared the crap out of me.”

Taylor grabbed her pillow and headed down to her parents’ bedroom.

Ricky turned to Eric. “Thanks, son. It’s good to know I can depend on you.”

Eric nodded. “Thanks for knowing that.”

“I’ve known it a long time. Good night.”

“Night, Dad, Mom.”

“Night, honey,” Bree said sweetly.

Ricky then turned to his wife, put his arms around her. “Do you remember all those years ago, when that red-headed Roy guy broke into Dad’s house and I told you to go to your mom’s room and stay and you disobeyed me?”

Bree raised her chin defiantly, which made Ricky smile. “Yes, I remember.”

"Did you hear me tonight when I distinctly told you to stay in our room just before I ran out the door?"

"I do believe I heard you say something silly like that."

"Do you think I said it simply because I wanted to order you around?"

She frowned. "I guess not."

"Why do you think I said it?"

She sighed. "Because you were worried about me."

"Because it's my job to keep you safe."

"I was perfectly safe."

"But we didn't know that, did we? If I'd come up here to have to fight with an intruder and had to worry about you too, it could mean the difference between a good outcome and a very bad outcome."

"But that's not what happened."

"That's not the point."

"Okay. I know and understand what you're saying because we've had this discussion more than once."

"Yes, we have."

"But if you think I'm gonna cower in my room while someone is in our home trying to hurt my baby girl, or my son, or my husband, then you are sadly mistaken."

He sighed. Then smiled. "Sweetheart, I love what you just said. But think. How could you best help the situation? We have a plan in case something happens. Follow the plan. Please. Did you grab the gun from your nightstand? Did you get your phone? Or did you simply follow me up here?"

She frowned.

"Baby, I love you. I couldn't bear to lose one of you. You've never been interested in learning self-defense, and that's okay. I'll protect you. But you have to cooperate. Please. And you know what? I insist that next time we go shooting, you come with us and brush up."

Bree sighed. "Okay. And I promise I'll try to do better. It's just that, I'm not one to sit back and take orders."

"Oh, how I know. Your feistiness is one of the reasons I fell in love with you." He smiled. "Tell me this. Do you take orders from your director when you're making a film?"

"Well of course. But he knows what he's doing and I don't. He knows the bigger picture, so I trust him."

Ricky stood silently, his brows raised. Finally, he spoke. "Go over those words again and tell me why I don't get that same consideration. I'm a grandmaster in five different disciplines. I've been trained in survival techniques and in staying calm and thinking rationally under any circumstance. And not just trained, but tested, many times. Do I have to go over my complete resume to get the same respect from you that you give to your directors?"

Bree sighed. "Okay. I get it. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I have enormous respect for you, Ricky. I'll try to do better."

He nodded, smiled, kissed her. "That's my girl."

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May 31st Early Friday Morning

Ameritech Private Airport, Long Beach, California

"Yesterday was the best day, Gabe. The dance we choreographed, I mean, it was fire."

"You were fire," Gabe returned. "I could barely keep up. I'm glad we were able to get it done. I'm supposed to keep doing more videos, some about dance, some about sports, some about shooting, some about martial arts, and some about our beliefs. So, I'm glad I have at least that one video ready."

"When are you gonna post it?"

"Your Uncle Mark says to wait until he has my website and social media stuff ready. He's gonna hire someone to do it for me and then get Isla to help launch me."

"Hire someone? Shoot, I could do it for free."

"He says it's a full-time job." He shrugged. "It's not my forte for sure. But he says we don't have to know everything. That's why we hire specialists."

"Well, let me know when you post it."

"Of course." He sighed. "Well, here we are saying goodbye again."

Taylor bit her trembling lip. "I hate saying goodbye to you. It's so hard and it makes me feel so lonely." Her eyes welled with tears.

"Please don't cry, Tay. We're only talking, like, eleven days. If you don't count today, cuz I'm seeing you right now, and you don't count the day you arrive, cuz I'll see you then, then there are only eleven days we won't see each other. And I'll call you every day, if you want, and you can call me anytime you want since we're not in school. It's gonna go by really fast." He used his thumbs to wipe at her tears. "Where's that strong, confident girl? Huh?"

She nodded. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm really not the type to be all dramatic and all weepy and creepy."

He nodded. "I think I get it. What happened on the beach, this Dr. Black dude, it's kind of freaking you out. It is me too. But I'm not afraid, and I don't want you to be. I know your father is doing everything he can do to keep you safe. I mean, he's even hired a second bodyguard for you now, which I think is great. I really feel like you're safe. Black had his best chance to take you. It didn't happen. You're good, Tay. Please don't worry anymore."

"I'll try not to," she said, offering a brave smile. "Eleven days, huh?"

"Eleven days. Now kiss me before I have to board."

She lifted her arms, interlocked her fingers behind his neck and lifted her face to him. He kissed her gently, pulled back, smiled at her, then kissed her again, stronger this time.

She sighed. "Have any of your other girlfriends ever told you that you're a good kisser?"

He frowned. "How do you know I'm a good kisser? Who are you judging me against?"

She giggled. "Don't worry, they were just little boys compared to you."

"Does your father know about them and how many are we talking about?"

"He doesn't know about all of them," she said slyly.

He frowned.

"But I'm thinkin' that guy in first grade who stole a kiss on the playground doesn't really count," she added.

"Gabe. Gotta go, son," Keegan called.

"Yes, sir."

He kissed her one more time. Lifted his bags, smiled, winked, turned and boarded the jet.

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Ephesians 5:21-23

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands
as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head
of the wife as Christ is the head of the church,
his body, of which he is the Savior."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

May 31st Friday Late Afternoon
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

As Keegan and Gabe drove into the driveway, they both felt that delicious feeling of being home. Gabe jumped out of the car and immediately offered to get the luggage. Keegan nodded and headed straight into the house.

"Daddy!" little Iris squealed as he stepped through the door.

Laughing at her sweet enthusiasm, he scooped her up and swung her around, kissed her several times. Lizzy stood in the kitchen doorway watching with pleasure. Before she could move forward, Rose, Daisy and Lily came running down the stairs, each of them throwing themselves into the arms of their father.

Gabe struggled through the door with his arms full of two large pieces of luggage and a giant gun bag, but he dumped it immediately when his baby sister screamed his name, running at him and reaching her little arms up to him. He scooped her up, much like his father had, and swung her around and nuzzled her cheeks. He looked up to see his sisters had backed away from his dad and his mom moved forward.

He watched, taking in the moment. He'd seen his father come home thousands of times, but he'd never really paid attention to how his parents interacted. Gabe himself was so happy whenever he saw Taylor after being away, it made him take note of this reunion. His mom smiled and his father moved toward her, pulled her into his arms and held her against him. They stayed that way for several moments. Then finally, he tilted her head up and kissed her so gently, as if she were delicate, and breakable and precious. And she was, Gabe realized. His mom had always just been his mom, strong, capable, loving but stern. But he'd just gotten a glimpse of the sweet young girl that had made his father fall in love.

His father released her and she came straight to him. He wrapped his arms around her. "Hey, Mom. Miss me?"

She laughed. "Not a bit."

She took his face in her hands, kissed each cheek, and then moved her eyes to the bandage on his neck. She stroked it, then peeled it away and studied the wound. Almost immediately her eyes filled with tears.

"Ah, come on now, Mom. It's not so bad. You shoulda seen it a few days ago. It's almost healed now."

"Is that supposed to make me feel okay that someone tried to murder you? Someone wants you dead?"

"Uh, well, yeah. I mean, here I am, alive and well, and like— you should see the other guy."

Rose snorted. Her sisters gasped. Keegan frowned.

Gabe was immediately contrite. "Uh, sorry, really. I know better than to make fun of someone's death. I was just trying to lighten the mood. I didn't mean anything by it. I'm sorry. But really, Mom, I'm okay, thanks to Dad."

His mother sniffed but couldn't stop the tears from spilling over. "I just don't understand," she mumbled as she left the room and headed upstairs.

Gabe blew out a breath and looked up at his father.

"Young man, you and I are gonna have a little talk later," Keegan said sharply as he turned and also went upstairs.

"Well, guess I messed up," Gabe muttered. "Again."

Unperturbed, his sisters came and greeted him, hugging him and kissing his cheek and checking out his wound.

"The guy got what was coming to him as far as I'm concerned," Rose stated firmly.

"I'm just glad Dad was able to take the shot," Lily agreed as she hugged him. "Ya know, the day you were born he almost had to do the exact same thing to a man who'd kidnapped me. I mean, I don't remember, but Ty reminded me yesterday when we were talking about what happened to you. He said Dad was so calm, and he talked the guy into giving up."

Gabe nodded. "He was calm on the beach the other day too. He warned the guy. He tried to get him to drop the knife. Dad even pointed his gun up and put his hands in the air. But the guy started to cut me anyway and, that was it."

Daisy kissed her brother. "I'm so happy to see you little bro."

Gabe smiled. "Thanks. I'm really happy to see you all too. Where's Violet?"

"She's working. Got a job as a lifeguard at the community pool. She'll be home in about an hour or so."

Gabe frowned. "She's alone?"

"No. She has one of Dad's guys with her."

"Which one?"

"Agent Blackmon. CJ Blackmon."

Gabe nodded. "He's a good guy."

Rose shrugged. "I guess. He is if he's as good as he looks."

Lily and Daisy laughed and agreed. "He's hot," they said at the same time.

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Keegan stood in the bedroom doorway, gazing at his wife, the sweetest, most angelic person he'd ever known. She lay on their bed, on her side, her back to him. He came in, closed the door and locked it, went to the bed and lay down beside her.

"Elizabeth," he said softly. "Talk to me sweetheart."

She rolled to her back and looked up at him. "What is there to say? Someone wants my baby boy dead. I can't stand it."

He smoothed some hair from her face. "You and I both know that there's evil in this world. Gabe is a shining star. He's gonna be a target. Always. His entire life. We might as well get used to it."

"I can't stand the thought that something might happen to him."

"You ought to be afraid of what I'm gonna do to him."

"You mean because of the remark he made?"

"Yes."

"Well, he said he was sorry, and I can't be too mad at him because, ya know what? I'm glad that guy is dead. So there. I said it. I'm glad you killed him. If that makes me a horrible person then I'm sorry."

Keegan sighed. "You're not a horrible person. You're a protective mother, and that's understandable. Still, baby, we can't allow ourselves to slip into the darkness of hatred and vengeance. Forgive."

"I'm trying to. Really I am. But thinking about someone wanting to harm my baby. It just makes me crazy."

"Then don't think about it. I mean, don't dwell on those thoughts, or try not to dwell on them. I know it's hard. But you can't live like this, all sad and fearful."

She sniffed. "I know that, but lately I can't seem to help it."

"Well, babe, I'm thinkin' maybe your hormones are running a little wild, ya know, with the pregnancy and all."

She smiled. "Maybe."

"Are you still happy about the baby?"

"Ecstatic. Aren't you?"

"Yes. But I see it's taking a toll on you and I feel a little guilty about that."

"Please don't feel guilty. I mean, we always used protection, and somehow I still got pregnant. Like you said before. It was meant to be."

He leaned down and kissed her. "Aww, Elizabeth, I missed you so much."

"Show me how much."

Thirty minutes later, Lizzy stood at the bedroom door, gazing at her sleeping husband. She sighed. When he was home, everything seemed easier, calmer, safer. She closed her eyes. "Thank you, Father," she whispered. "Thank you for such a wonderful husband and father. Thank you, thank you, thank you. In Jesus' name."

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May 31st Friday Late Afternoon

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Chaz Stewart gazed at his gorgeous red-headed wife as she worked at the counter in the kitchen. She got her hair from her father, Joe Carter, who also had bright red hair. He'd gotten Lisa's mother, Louise Lewis, pregnant back when they were just juniors in high school. Joe had wanted to do right by Lou, but instead the girl had taken off, running away, desperate to get out of the "hick town." Lou's mother, Miss Maddie, had received the news that Lou had a baby girl. Joe spent years searching for them, mostly for his daughter, Lisa. And then, back when Lisa was twenty-five years old, she'd ditched her mother and her old life to find home. She came home to Pine Forest, looking for her grandmother, not even knowing that her father lived here too. She'd walked into the middle of Chaz' cattle crossing and he'd pulled her to safety. He'd been smitten from the moment he laid eyes on her. Then again, so were most men.

Currently, she was humming as she arranged silk flowers in what looked like an old-fashioned miniature milk can. There were already three of them finished and she stood back, looking from the one she was working on to the others. She moved her hips back and forth as she eyed the arrangements and Chaz couldn't resist. He moved forward and put

his hands on her waist.

"Oh!" she said, startled by his touch.

He leaned forward and nuzzled her neck. "Hey, Red."

She sighed. "Mmm, that feels nice."

"We can go upstairs and I'll make you feel even better."

"Eww, Dad," twelve-year-old Matthew complained as he entered the kitchen.

Chaz chuckled.

"Hey guys, do you think these look the same?"

"Yep," Matt said quickly. "Can I have a snack?"

"I swear you are always hungry," Lisa said. "Dinner is in about an hour, so do me a favor and just have a piece of fruit."

"Awww, come on, Mom," Matt complained.

"Matt, I said to have a piece of fruit," Lisa said firmly.

"Dad, can I have... "

"Boy, you'd better think about what you're about to say," Chaz said quickly.

Matt stopped. Nodded. "Yes, sir." He grabbed an apple and started out.

"Hold it," Chaz commanded. He didn't have to say anything else.

"Sorry, Mom. Didn't mean to be, uh, disrespectful."

Lisa smiled. "You're forgiven. Go tell your brother to finish up in the barn and that dinner will be ready in an hour."

"Yes, ma'am," he called as he left.

"So?" Lisa asked Chaz.

"So? You want me to punish him?"

"No, silly. So, do you think they look alike?"

"Hmm, let's see. I think the one you're working on looks better."

"Why?"

"It's brighter. I think it has more yellow flowers, and those have more white."

She nodded. "Hmm, I agree."

"How many more of those do you have to make?"

"Twenty-five."

"Seriously?"

She sighed. "Yep, but really it's not so bad. I figure if I make five a day for the next five days I'll be okay. Wanna help me?"

"Desperately."

She laughed. "That's okay. I can do it. Besides, you and Jake and John need to finish the barn. If you guys get that done, then when everyone else arrives a week from next Friday, the florist, the chairs, the tables, there'll be a place to put them."

"The florist? Then what's all this for?"

"The florist will do the real flowers. These are to go on all the tables to be taken home as gifts for the attendees. But the barn has to be done. And all the tulle and ribbons up. And not one spider anywhere. And that cracked window fixed. The torches put in along the path to the barn, and the garland greenery over the barn door, and... "

"Honey, I have the list. It's all under control. Don't you worry, Red. We got this."

She sighed. "Thanks, my big handsome, efficient cowboy."

He spun her around, moved close. “I love when you call me that.”

“I love when you act like that.”

“Like what?”

“Big and handsome and– efficient.”

He laughed. “Emphasis on efficient. But let me ask you this: are you planning on coming to see the boys play ball tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, it’s part of my efficient schedule. We have two boys playing baseball, Aralyn has dance classes, and a daughter getting married. I don’t know how it’s gonna all work but we’ll get it all in somehow.”

Chaz bent his head and kissed her. “Can you believe it’s been almost exactly twenty-two years since you and I got engaged? And now, here we are getting ready to marry off our daughter. Feels weird.”

“I know. It’s gone by so fast. Too fast if you ask me. I need more time for us to be a family.”

“Baby, we’re still a family. And since there’s gonna be a new baby, we’ll be a young family for a very long time.”

Lisa put her hands on her abdomen, checking to see if there was a swell yet. It might be her imagination, but it did feel larger.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay. Not too bad. Not as bad as poor Lizzy, bless her heart.”

“Yeah, I’m glad Keegan’s back. For both their sakes,” Chaz agreed.

“Both?”

“Yeah, well, I know she’s having a hard time, but being away from the people you love most in the world, especially when you’re worried about some nut job tryin’ to hurt them, it can do a man in.”

Lisa nodded. “Did I tell you how proud I am of you and John going the extra mile to take care of the Tanners?”

He smiled. “Ya just did. So, what’s for dinner? I smell something delicious.”

“You smell summer squash cheeseburger casserole.” She started gathering up the floral supplies. “I’d better finish this later. Matt might starve to death if dinner is late.”

“Then that trip upstairs is definitely off?”

“Postponed, cowboy. Patience.”

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May 31st Friday Evening

Stewart Stables, Pine Forest, Georgia

“Hey, Bugs.”

Startled, Laynah whirled around. “Oh! Jake, you scared me.”

He frowned. “I see that. Feelin’ a little skittish?”

She shrugged as she finished brushing Sugar’s mane. “Maybe. Really just deep in thought.”

He came to her. Touched her hand. “Something wrong?”

She shrugged.

He smiled. “Second thoughts?”

She turned, smiled. “No, of course not,” she said quickly. She eyed him. “You?”

"Absolutely not. When I make a decision, it's made."

"No going back?"

"Nope. We are getting married in two weeks and one day."

"You don't think you're too young?" she asked.

His brow furrowed. "I'm older than you. Do you think I'm too young?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

He swallowed hard, his brows raised. "Um, what are you saying, Bugs?"

"It's just that, I've been thinking. I mean, what if you get a little older and a little more mature and realize you've made a mistake?"

So, she WAS having second thoughts. He'd been kidding about that. This kinda hurt. He drew a deep breath. "I thought and prayed about us getting married. I thought hard. I prayed hard. We've prayed together. We've felt like this is what we're supposed to do. How can you think I'll regret it later?"

"It's just that it all happened so fast." Laynah led Sugar to her stall.

Jake closed the stall door and took her hand. "Yeah, it all happened fast. That's exactly what your father said, that I was moving too fast, but I convinced him otherwise."

She was silent as she thought.

"Laynahbug," Jake said, his voice somber. "If you don't want to marry me, you tell me now. Right now."

"I DO. I'm just worried about you. What if five years down the road you realize you don't really love me anymore?"

"Don't you think I know my own mind?"

She didn't answer.

"Okay. You're killin' me here. But I'll play the game a minute. Let's say that's exactly what happens. Five years from now I think I don't love you anymore. What will I do? I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd tell Satan to get gone. I'd pray for forgiveness. I'd pray to remember the love I had for you. I'd do everything I could to save the marriage, because I won't divorce you. When I make a vow to you and to God, I'll keep it. Period. You must know that about me. Bugs, you and I, we have the best examples in the world of how to have a good marriage, a good relationship. If we have troubles, which we probably will, we'll go to our parents, to a counselor, to our pastor, but I swear to you, our marriage will last forever. Or until I– " He stopped. Shook his head.

Her eyes filled and he took her in his arms.

"I have to admit, Jake, I am so scared. I love you so much and I'm so scared that you won't come back to me."

"Okay now, we don't even know where I'm gonna go yet, so let's not get ahead of ourselves. You told me you knew and understood this is who and what I am. Were you just saying that and didn't really mean it?"

"No, I meant it."

"Do you want me to change my path in life? Cuz, as I said before, I'd do that for you."

"Yes. I do." She closed her eyes, shook her head. "But I don't. I want you to reach for all you ever wanted to be, and I don't want to be responsible for holding you back."

"Then, logically, it seems we're at an impasse. What do we do?"

"We're not at an impasse. I truly want you to be what and who you are," she said softly.

"I respect that person, I admire that person, I love that person, the person you are."

"Well, I'm a Marine. I'm gonna be in dangerous situations. I love you, Bugs, and I don't want you to have to worry about me, but I have to go when they call. We either stick this out together or separately. Either way, it'll be difficult. If you don't marry me, you'll still worry and wonder about what's happening while I'm gone. Wouldn't it be better to do this difficult thing together? I mean, I know it would mean everything to me to know you, my beautiful wife, my feisty, strong Melaynah is holding things together here, doing her thing, and will be here for me when I get back."

She nodded. "I will be."

"Then that means we ARE getting married, right?"

"Yes. That was really never in question. I was just thinking about all these things. Going round and round inside my own head."

He pushed her back against the wall, put his hands against the wall on either side of her. "Well, get out of your head babe, because we're about to have the happiest day of our lives and there's a whole lotta stuff to do."

"Like what?"

"Like right now, you have to kiss me."

She smiled. "That's easy enough." She lifted her face, his head dipped and their lips met.

When he finally pulled away, he put his hands on either side of her face, breathing hard, he shook his head in awe. "Two weeks from tomorrow night, I'm gonna take you to our hotel suite and make love to you all night long."

She sighed softly as she imagined what Jake spoke. "I've been thinking about that a lot lately."

He smiled. "You have?"

"Umhm, lying next to you, knowing you don't have to go home, knowing we can stay together, sleep together."

"There's not gonna be a lot of that goin' on."

She giggled. Then frowned. "What if I get, like, weird?"

"Weird?"

"Like, what if I have a flashback to, you know."

He nodded in understanding. "Okay, well first, I'm supposed to tell you to say the words."

She sighed. "Okay then, so, what if I have a flashback to when Brett raped me?"

He looked deeply into her eyes. "I won't hurt you, Bugs. If you have trouble with it, I'll stop. We'll talk, I'll hold you. I won't force you. The term is making love. Making love is not forcing someone so that *I* can feel physical pleasure. How short-lived would that kind of pleasure be? You don't do that to someone you love."

She quietly thought about what he just said and realized those were some of the most manly and beautiful words a guy had ever spoken, and her heart swelled.

"Do you trust me to protect you and take care of you?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, I really do."

"Good," he said as he kissed her again. Softly. Gently. With every bit of love he felt. He lifted his head and smiled at her labored breathing.

He stroked a finger down her adorable pixie face, but frowned when she frowned.

"What now?"

She shrugged. "I was just wondering about Brett."

"What about him?"

"What made him do what he did. Like, he did it without even thinking he'd get caught. He didn't change clothes. He didn't even wash the blood from his hands. He didn't think about the fact that anyone could drive up any second. It was broad daylight. I mean, how cocky is that?"

"More like stupid. And by the way, he *did* try to get away with it. He tried to leave the state. He did it because he was blinded by his rage. He wasn't thinking straight. His anger took over and he just wanted to hurt you."

"But why?"

"He told you why. He believed that you hurt him, that you led him on, teased him and then didn't put out."

"I'm so dumb. I didn't realize all those times I went out with him that all he wanted was for me to 'put out,' as you say. I thought, you know, that he enjoyed my company."

"Sometimes there are guys who get focused on the conquest and sex is the reward. Their thinking is skewed. Not all men are like that. It can come from not having a father in their lives to teach them how to be a man, or from some trauma in their lives. Brett had all that. His mother died. His siblings moved away. His father worked all the time."

Laynah sighed. "I almost feel sorry for him."

"You're kidding."

She shrugged. "What will happen to him?"

"Well, funny you should ask because your dad and I were gonna tell you the news tonight after dinner."

"What news?"

"Well, let's wait for your dad to be present."

"You're my husband. Or are about to be. You tell me."

He frowned. "Okay. But I won't have all the answers."

She nodded. "Understood. Now tell me."

"So, the prosecutor has offered Brett a plea deal. If he pleads guilty to a reduced charge, they'll recommend a lighter sentence."

"Guilty. So he'd be admitting he did it, right?"

"Yes. And he will get prison time. If he's convicted of rape, he could face twenty-five years to life. But a trial is expensive for this little county, so they offered to reduce the charge in exchange for a guilty plea and recommend a lighter sentence. Brett's attorney grabbed that up, because he knows there's too much evidence against him and if it were to go to trial, he'll do a lot of time."

"So what is the deal being offered? And do I, or we, have a say in it?"

"The deal being offered is ten years in prison and ten years probation. And the deal will be offered no matter what we say, however, the judge can deny the deal if we make a big enough stink and show it's not in the best interest of us or of the community."

"Can the judge change the deal? Like, can he decide to go five years instead of ten?"

"Good question. We'll need to ask about that."

"What are your thoughts?" Laynah asked.

"My thoughts are a little messed up. There's this side of me that wants him to pay with his life. Then there's this part of me that wants it to go to trial. Then there's the side of me, the best side of me, who follows the teachings of Jesus, and that scripture in Matthew chapter five keeps coming to me." He stopped, pulled out the Bible app on his phone and read, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Jake looked up. "Ya know, as he hung on the cross Jesus asked God to forgive the people who were killing him. I mean, that's some lesson. As a man, my first priority is to love God, and my second is to keep my family safe, because I know my calling is to be a warrior for righteousness. So, you see, my thoughts are all jumbled and require some prayer."

"Thank you for sharing that with me, Jake."

"Yep, so, do you have any strong opinion?"

She sighed. "I know it sounds crazy, but I kinda feel sorry for him. He messed up, got angry and ruined his whole life. He didn't kill me, though he certainly could have. So, he shouldn't have to pay for the rest of his life. Maybe, with the right kind of counseling along with prayers, he could still make something of himself. Jesus said to pray for your enemies, so I will."

He smiled at her. "You make me want to be a better man."

She gave a soft laugh. "You make me want to be a better woman. But I'm probably about to change your opinion. Because as far as the plea deal, I think ten years is fair, and I think five years is scary."

"Scary? What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "I mean scary for me. Will he have learned his lesson in five years? Or will he still be angry? Will he still be young and strong enough to come after me again, like in revenge? Is that even where his mind is at?"

"Well, I don't want you to be afraid, Bugs, but if you're worried about him being strong enough when he gets out, that doesn't matter if it's five years or twenty-five years. He'll be strong enough."

She nodded. "So, how can we find out what his state of mind is? I mean, if he's all sorry and stuff, I'd go with the plea. But if he still wants to hurt me, it needs to go to trial."

Jake nodded. "Okay. We'll talk to your dad, and to Justin and see what's what. Maybe we can ask for a meeting with Brett so that we can see where his head is at."

Her face paled.

"Not with you, but Justin and me and your dad. I mean, they may not even allow something like that. But we can ask." He took her hand, kissed it. "We'll figure it out. Come on, your mom invited me to dinner and I'm starving."

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June 1st Saturday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe woke early. Thinking he was the only one up, he dressed, grabbed his gun bag and quietly headed downstairs. But when he entered the kitchen, he saw his father pouring

hot water from the tea kettle into a mug.

"Hey, Dad, I thought I'd beat everyone up today."

Keegan smiled. "Grandmaster Kino gave me some special tea that's supposed to help your mom with her morning sickness, so, we're gonna test it out."

"I hope it works."

"Me too. Shelley swears by it. Are you off to shoot?"

"Yes, sir. Wanna come?"

"Can't today. I've been gone all week and have a lot to do for your mom and for work and for Jake and Laynah."

Gabe reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a gallon of milk and a plastic container filled with breakfast muffins. "I can stay home and help you this morning. But Jake has already claimed me to help him finish cleaning the barn today."

"Looks like the barn is the main attraction today for us all cuz that's where I'll be too. But you go ahead and shoot first. Did you give your itinerary to Agent Dalton?"

"Yes, sir," Gabe said as he took a huge bite of the muffin and chased it with milk. "He said he'd be out front. What other agents are watching over our family? I know Agent Blackmon was with Violet yesterday. Who else?"

"Agent Rodgers and Agent Austin. I figure one for you personally, and three for the rest of the family." He smiled. "And then there's me– and you."

Gabe grinned. "Me, yeah, I hope I can help if I'm ever needed."

"I have every confidence in you."

Gabe put the muffins away, downed a second glass of raw milk, set the glass in the sink and turned to leave. "So, guess I'll see you in a little while."

Keegan nodded as he spooned honey into the tea. "Be safe."

"Yes, sir."

Gabe opened the front door and smiled at Agent Dalton.

"Good morning, Gabe," the agent greeted. "Let's go see what you got."

Gabe smiled. Agent Dalton had never seen him shoot.

At the Stewart ranch shooting range, Gabe was warmly greeted by Jake, Laynah, Chaz, John, Charlie and Matthew. Everyone wanted to see the wound on his neck, and everyone expressed how grateful they were that he was still alive.

"Y'all remember Agent Dalton, right?"

They all shook his hand and everyone started removing guns and rifles from their cases and bags, setting out ammo, and calling dibs on who gets to go first.

Once everyone had a turn, including Agent Dalton, Chaz and John took their leave, saying they just had way too much to do for the wedding.

"Laynah and Gabe and I are gonna shoot one more round," Jake said.

"I am?" Laynah asked.

"Yes. We're gonna practice you drawing your weapon."

"Drawing, you mean like from my hip?"

"Yes."

"I don't usually carry on my hip."

"I know. You usually carry your firearm in the glove box of your car, but that doesn't really help you," he said dryly. "I want you to get used to carrying either on your hip or a

shoulder holster as soon as you turn twenty-one."

She made a face. "Well, that's not very attractive."

Gabe snorted.

"Well, Bugs, it would have been ultra-attractive had you had it on your hip the day Brett drove up to the lake."

She frowned and then nodded.

"And Rose carries on her hip. Are you saying she's not attractive?"

"No! Rose is ultra gorgeous and sexy, but Rose is, well, Rose is Rose."

"And you are my tough girl. Now, I want you to watch Gabe draw and fire. Real time first, and then we'll ask him to go step by step. Gabe?"

Gabe pushed a holster down into the waistband of his jeans, chambered the weapon and pushed it into the holster.

"Why did you chamber it?" Laynah asked. "Isn't that dangerous? I mean, carrying around a chambered weapon. Seems dangerous."

"Well, when things go bad, those few seconds it takes to chamber the weapon can make the difference between life and death," Gabe explained.

Jake nodded. "He's right, but if you're not comfortable with that, we'll keep working on it until you are. We also don't want you to shoot yourself."

"I've taken two gun courses. I know how to shoot," Laynah said.

"Baby, I know you do. And by the way, it actually IS attractive. But you told me you don't carry because you're not comfortable. Let's work on getting you comfortable."

They watched Gabe draw and fire and were mesmerized by his speed and accuracy. Then they went over the procedure step by step. By the time they were finished, Laynah was already feeling better about carrying a loaded weapon on her hip. They called an end to the drill. It was time to get to work.

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June 2nd Early Sunday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Dressed and ready for church, Gabe galloped down the stairs and poked his head into the kitchen. "Mornin' Mom, mornin' Dad, Hey Lily, Daisy." He smiled and came into the room when Iris reached for him. "Hey sweet girl," he said, kissing both her fat cheeks. He looked up. "I'm off to see Miss Maddie, but I'll be at church on time."

Keegan nodded. Lizzy smiled. "Good, honey," Lizzy said. "The girls and I will do the same after church. We're gonna have lunch over at the Inn, so don't make any plans."

Gabe frowned. "Um, Mom, I really need to go see Peyton after church. Avery called me and there's a problem. Can I be late to lunch?"

"Yes," Keegan said. "But try not to be too late."

"Oh, and Gabe, why don't you invite Peyton and his mom and brother to come to lunch with you," Lizzy added. "I haven't seen Rebecca in quite a while."

Gabe smiled. "That would be great. Thanks, Mom, Dad."

"This problem Avery told you about," Keegan began. "Can you share it with us?"

"I was going to, when I get all the facts. I might need your help."

"You'll have it."

"Uh, so Mom, Dad, do you think Aunt Jodi is right about Miss Maddie?"

Lizzy sighed. "It doesn't matter if she's right or wrong, though hopefully wrong. But when Miss Maddie told Jodi she dreamed that her husband came to her, Jodi says the feeling was so strong, that Maddie will be called to heaven soon. She didn't want to say anything at first, but then she thought, what if it happens, and God gave us this opportunity to say all the things we need to say to her and we didn't take advantage of it, then what? Hopefully she's wrong. Hopefully Maddie will live to be a hundred or more. But, still, shouldn't we live like each day is the last? Shouldn't we show all the people we love, kindness and care and love and compassion every day?"

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, but sometimes there's not enough time in the day to get to everyone."

"Exactly," Keegan said. "So, we listen to God's promptings, and make time for the ones He nudges us toward."

Gabe nodded. "Got it."

"Does Agent Dalton have your itinerary?"

"Yes, sir. He's outside waiting on me."

"He doesn't have to wait outside. Tell him when he gets here from now on to come inside."

"I think you make him nervous or something."

Keegan frowned. "Well, we need to remedy that."

"Yes, sir. See y'all at church." He kissed Iris once more and left.

"Hey Agent Dalton," Gabe greeted as he jumped into the passenger side of his own truck.

Dalton nodded.

"Dad says to come in the house from now on."

"Will do. Just didn't want to have to disturb the family when it's so early."

"We get up really early, so, no prob."

They drove the half mile to the Inn and parked. Agent Dalton got out of the truck, scanned the area, nodded, Gabe emerged and they headed into the Inn.

"Mornin' Aunt Jodi," Gabe said. He went straight to the kitchen. "Hey Miss Maddie!"

"Good morning, my handsome boy," she said as she hugged him. "I'm so happy you came to help me this morning. I hope you like blueberry muffins, because that's what you're gonna be in charge of. First, put on this apron and then get those bowls down from up there."

Gabe put on the apron and reached up high for the bowls. He smiled at the other kitchen workers whom he'd known all his life. They hadn't always worked here at the Inn, but they had always lived in Pine Forest. Two of them were about to be seniors at the high school and were working their summer job. The others were adults.

"Now," Miss Maddie said. "We're gonna need six cups of flour and three cups of sugar. You work on that and let me know when you're ready for the next step."

Gabe nodded. She smiled up at him. He smiled at her. She was a tiny lady. Maybe only about five feet tall, if that. She was in her late eighties. She seemed strong and capable. Her back was straight, her eyes sharp, her smile always in place. She was pure sweetness.

"Miss Maddie, tell me how you met your husband."

She giggled like a little girl. "We met each other in school. First grade. He says he had

his eye on me the whole time. We finally went on a date when we were high school freshmen. He was so cute. He looked a lot like you, only his hair was lighter." She sighed. "We went on a picnic at Wilson's Lake. He kissed me that very first night." She was silent a moment like she was seeing it all happen again. "Lord have mercy, I miss him so much." She pulled up the edge of her apron and dabbed at her eyes. "Look at me goin' on. Now, you stop distracting me or we'll never get finished before church."

Gabe laughed. "Yes, ma'am. Just one more thing."

"What's that, handsome boy?"

"I just want you to know that you're like my real grandma, and I love you so much."

"Aww, there you go again." She dabbed at her eyes. "Thank you, Gabriel. I love you too, sweetie."

Gabe's eyes also misted as he felt overwhelmed with compassion for the amazing woman.

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June 2nd Sunday Afternoon

Murphy Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Agent Dalton pulled up in front of the small brick three-bedroom home where Peyton Murphy lived with his mother and fourteen-year-old brother, Lucas. The grass was neatly trimmed, but the house itself looked run down. Mrs. Murphy's old blue Corolla sat in the driveway. It had a dent in the right fender from when Peyton ran into a brick mailbox. Gabe remembered Peyton saying that they had insurance but didn't get it fixed because they didn't have the money for the deductible. Gabe had offered to pay the deductible, but Peyton wouldn't hear of it. Gabe understood. He hoped somehow he could get past that pride today and fix the much bigger problem that was hanging over Peyton's head.

Gabe knocked on the front door and it was Peyton who answered. "Hey, man, so good to see ya. I mean, like, alive."

Gabe grinned. "Thanks, Peyton. It feels like you really mean that."

Peyton chuckled. "So, what's up? Why the surprise visit?"

"You gonna invite me in, or what?"

"Oh, uh, sure. Let's go back to my room."

Gabe stepped in.

"Hey Gabe," Lucas said. "How's your neck?"

He touched it. "It's good."

Mrs. Murphy smiled at him from where she stood in the kitchen. "Hello, Gabe. I heard what happened and I'm so glad you're okay."

"Thanks, Mrs. Murphy. So, uh, one of the reasons I stopped by is to ask you and Peyton and Lucas to come to lunch over at the Inn."

"Awesome," Lucas said.

Mrs. Murphy frowned. "Is it a special occasion?"

Gabe smiled charismatically. "It will be if you guys come."

Peyton snorted.

Mrs. Murphy smiled. "Well then, aren't you the charmer."

"No, really, when I told my mom I was coming over to talk to Peyton, it reminded her that she hasn't seen you in a long time and she told me to ask if you would come. She

hasn't been feeling too well lately, but she's feeling a little better now."

"Peyton told me your mother is expecting." She glanced at her watch. "It's already noon. What time?"

"Lunch is at 1:00, but come earlier if you can."

"Sounds fun. Lucas, change your shirt. I'll get dressed. Peyton?"

"I'll get ready. Gabe, come on back."

"Uh, Mrs. Murphy, why don't you and Lucas go on ahead in your car and Peyton can ride with me and Agent Dalton, who's waiting outside, cuz, we have some guy plans to make."

"Okay, but you guys don't be too long."

"No, ma, we won't."

Peyton and Gabe went back to Peyton's room. It was small. Half the size of Gabe's room. It held a twin bed, dresser, and a storage tote that served as a nightstand with a small lamp on it. The bed was unmade. Peyton's black steakhouse pants and shirt were on the floor. A pair of baseball cleats lay in front of the closet, along with some dirty socks. Gabe sat down on the lumpy bed.

"So, what's up really?" Peyton asked as he pulled the dirty T-shirt over his head and searched through his closet.

"Just wanted to talk to you about when you go to school and stuff, because I'm leaving at the end of August to do Ameritech and I know you're leaving before that right?"

"Maybe," Peyton said as he picked up a shirt from the floor of his closet and smelled it.

"Whaddya mean, maybe? You have a baseball scholarship. You ARE going to college. Don't even try to tell me that you're not."

"Keep your voice down, please."

"Sorry."

Finding the shirt he wanted, he pulled it over his head. "Look, I'm not sure if I can afford to go."

"Peyton, it's a full ride, right?"

"Yes." He sat down and pulled on some socks and athletic shoes.

"For UGA that means everything. Even living expenses," Gabe said. "I know that because I researched it."

"I know that sounds good. But there's stuff you don't know about."

"Then tell me about it."

Peyton heaved a sigh, glanced toward his door then back at Gabe. He sat down next to him, his hands on his knees, his head down. "Look, I know that you know we don't have a lot of money. My dad left my mom when I was eleven. I haven't seen him since. I don't even know if he's still alive."

Gabe shook his head. "I know. I'm sorry."

"The thing is, he's never paid my mom any child support. And she doesn't make enough at her teaching job to support us. So, you know she works at the motel up on the highway cleaning rooms on the weekend."

Gabe nodded. "Right. I know."

"But ya see, even that's not enough, so I work all I can and what I make pays the power

bill, the water bill, and buys gas for the car. But Gabe, there's never any extra. So, like, if something breaks, it stays broken. So, you tell me Gabe, how am I supposed to run off to school and just leave her to fend for herself?"

Gabe sighed. "You going off to school could be your big break and could be the best thing you could do for her."

"I swear, Gabe, I get that. But until that happens, who's gonna take care of things? It's like I'm between this rock and a hard place and I don't know how to solve the problem."

"Good grief, why didn't you come to me? Geez, Peyton, I'm your best friend. You have to know that I'd help."

"What? You mean ask you for money? You're my best friend, and so you have to know I couldn't do that. I've turned you down enough times for you to know that."

"I know, but this is different. This is your whole life we're talking about. Swallow your pride. Let me help. Dammit, bro, you can pay me back if that makes you feel better. A full baseball scholarship is a big deal. Especially when you have the fourth most home runs in the country and the second highest batting average, and second highest sprint speed. You are gonna go all the way, Peyton. And when you do you can buy your mom a new house, a new car, anything she needs. She won't even have to work anymore. You have to do this. You have to let me give you some money."

"I can't do it. I want to, I really do, if only to shut you up, but I can't borrow the money. It's like—it puts a darkness around the whole scholarship thing. Like pressure. It'll psychologically mess me up. I know you get that. It's like a jinx on something."

Gabe blew out a breath. Nodded his head. "Yep. I get it." He sat quietly a moment. Closed his eyes. "Father, help me, help us, figure this out." Immediately a thought came into his head. He took out his phone and texted Mark Adams.

Gabe ~Can I add another category to my foundation and if so, how fast can I access the funds?

Mark ~~Yes, we can add anything you like, but it's gonna take a few more weeks before the foundation is completely set up and legal. Then we can make the changes. What's the hurry? Something I can personally help with?

Gabe ~I'll let ya know. Thanks.

Mark ~~ (Thumbs up)

"Ya wanna tell me what that's all about?"

"Yep. You're not gonna borrow the money, but a large grant is about to be awarded to you and I guarantee that it will be enough to take care of your family."

"A grant. What exactly does that mean?"

"Well, it's not a scholarship, and it's not a loan. It's money free and clear, granted to you on your merit, due to your hard work, excellence in athletics, and community service. How much do you actually contribute to the household income each month?"

Peyton shrugged. "About five hundred a month."

"Oh, well, we're good because this grant will be awarded at one thousand a month, that is, as long as you're in school." Gabe grinned.

Peyton sat still, going over what Gabe was saying, letting it sink in. He chuckled. "As long as I'm in school. You think you're so smart, don't ya?"

"Not me. I prayed and the idea popped into my head."

"So, you're talking about your foundation money?"

"Yep."

"Is this legal?"

"Of course. That text was to my lawyer."

"But won't people be mad, because I'm like, your best friend?"

"Well, we're gonna set it up with qualifications I'm sure, like, um, academic standings, athletic merit of course, maybe like individual household financial need, community service, and like I said... continued enrollment in school. And like, right now, you're the first person to receive the grant. And as far as I'm concerned there's no one more worthy. And, there's gonna be a lot more grants available for athletes of merit who need a helping hand, just like you. This is gonna be so cool."

"Will the money be available by the time I have to leave?"

"Mr. Adams and the foundation board will have to approve everything officially, but if there's any delay, I'll find a legal way to bridge the gap until it's ready, but it should be available as soon as you report to school. Come on, Peyton, there is just no way you can turn this down."

Peyton nodded, a smile spreading across his lips. "I guess you're right."

"And when you make it big, Peyton, you can like, pay it forward if it makes you feel better."

Peyton smiled, stood and extended his hand. "You are the best friend anyone could ever have."

Gabe stood and held out his hand. Peyton grabbed it, shook it, and pulled him in for a giant hug. "If there is anything I can ever do for you, you'll call me?"

"Of course. Now, let's go eat."

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June 2nd, Sunday Afternoon

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe stood off to one side of the large dining room, watching his mother, with Iris on her lap, converse with Mrs. Murphy, his sisters taking turns hugging and loving on Miss Maddie, Jake doting on Laynahbug, and his father talking to the Appels and Stewarts. Charlie Stewart and Lucas Murphy were teasing little Aralyn and young Matthew was heaping his plate with more food. Agents Dalton and Austin were talking to Peyton at the far end of the giant table, as they ate their dessert. There were a few Inn guests too, who were conversing and eating and apparently loving being part of the big extended family. It was one of the greatest attractions of the Inn. Gabe smiled. He loved these people.

How was he gonna leave them come the end of August? He was understanding how Peyton had been feeling, thinking of not being there for his family. Of course, Gabe's family wasn't depending on him. But God was. He'd been given so much, and God expected him to do something with what he'd been given. He hoped he was equal to the task. He looked up when his father placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, sir, it is, but I do want to talk to you about the Murphys when we get home."

"Okay. Is it a private conversation or can the ladies listen in?"

"They can listen in. They might have some ideas to help."

"Okay, then we'll talk tonight at dinner."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"When I go away in August, are you gonna miss me?"

Keegan blinked several times as he looked at his son.

Gabe smiled. "Is that a hard question?"

Keegan sighed. "If I could, I would turn back the clock about eighteen years and raise you all over again. And I know someone who wants that even more than me. The thought that you won't be in my home when I return from work each day, that there are no more high school games to attend, no one to ask me how to be a man anymore, it's really sad. Am I gonna miss you? You can't even fathom how much." His voice choked with emotion. "But, it doesn't serve me or anyone to grieve over it. It's the circle of life.

"It seems like just a few years ago, I was leaving my parents to be a Marine. I didn't think about it that much, not from their perspective. But now I know how hard it must have been for them. You, on the other hand, *are* thinking about it. You're being mindful, aware of the present moment. That is a level of maturity guys your age usually haven't reached."

Gabe shrugged. "Maybe it's because I've had my life threatened a few times. It makes me appreciate every minute."

"Maybe. But son, I hope you know how much we love you, how much we'll miss you. From you stomping down the stairs, to eating us out of house and home, to arguing with your sisters or leaving messes everywhere you go."

"How can you miss that?"

"It's part of your charm."

Gabe grinned. His phone vibrated and he pulled it from his pocket. He smiled. "Hey Tay. Hold on a minute." He looked back at his dad.

Keegan smiled, nodded. "Go ahead. We'll talk at home."

Gabe walked outside the large French doors to the back veranda. "Hey, I'm back."

"Hey. So, are you guys at your lunch at the Inn?"

"Yeah, but it's pretty much over. What are y'all doin'?"

"We just got back from going to church at *Big Canyon Church of Christ*. It was cool. It's a big congregation. My dad was asked to speak and he did a pretty good job. I met about thirty kids my age, but I'll never remember all their names. They were nice."

"Any guys?"

"Yeah, mostly guys."

"Hmm."

Taylor giggled. "Are you jealous?"

"Only that they got to see your beautiful self and I'm here without you."

"Aww, poor baby. Well, if it makes you feel any better, a bunch of girls asked me why you didn't come."

"Nope, I don't feel any better. The only thing that would make me feel better is if you could magically appear in front of me right now."

"Well, I can make that happen in about ten days."

"Can't wait. Whoa, uh, hmmm, well, look at that."

"What? What do you see?"

"I'm walking out by the fence where you can see my house, and I looked over toward the pecan grove, and I see Violet and Agent Blackmon standing on the backside of a tree and they are holding hands."

"Really? That's like, against the rules, right?"

"Yes it is."

"What else are they doing?"

"They're just talking. Oh, wait, shoot, he put his hand on her face. Oh, man he— "

"He what?"

"Freak. He just kissed her."

"Are you gonna tell?"

"No, of course not. Ya know, there's like a sibling code."

"Yep, but remember that code ends if the sibling in question is in danger."

"Well, the only thing in danger for Violet– is her heart. But for Blackmon, he's in danger of losing his job— and maybe his life," Gabe joked, thinking of his father's reaction if he knew.

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June 2nd Sunday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan looked around the dinner table at seven of the most beautiful females that ever existed and at the young man who was currently taking the world by storm. His eyes met his wife's and he winked at her which made her blush.

"Keegan," Lizzy said. "Is there something on your mind?"

"Always. Ladies, this looks delicious. We are so blessed. Whose turn is it to say the blessing?"

"Iris'," several people answered.

"Iris, who do you want to help you say the blessing?" Lizzy asked, though everyone knew who she would pick.

"Gabe," she answered in her tiny munchkin voice.

Gabe chuckled. "Okay, little flower, put your hands like this."

She folded her little hands together.

"Say, dear Father."

"Deah Fawd-der."

"Thank you for our food."

"Tank yew fo food," she looked up at her brother with a frown. "Yew forget to say so so so so much."

Everyone giggled.

"Oh," Gabe said. "Sorry. Okay, thank you so so so so so much for our food."

She repeated the phrase adding in even more "so's."

"Please bless it."

"Pweese bwess it."

"In Jesus' name, Amen."

"In Jesus' name. And, and, I love you Jesus, so so so so much. Amen."

There was a murmur of 'awuhs' and a few sniffles.

"Let's eat before it gets cold," Lizzy said as she lifted a bowl of mashed potatoes and

passed it around.

"I wike it cold," Iris announced, making everyone laugh again.

Gabe heaped his plate and dug in as usual. He glanced over at Violet. She acted normal, like she wasn't just making out with the man being paid to protect her. Giving her the benefit of the doubt, he was pretty sure this wasn't a casual thing for her. She wouldn't kiss just anyone, and knowing the severity of the consequences, what was going on between her and Blackmon must be serious.

Violet looked up and caught his eye. She smiled at him. He smiled back. Maybe he would talk to her later and let her know that he knew. He wondered if Rose knew and glanced at her. She was looking right at him, and her raised eyebrows and haughty expression told him she did know, and that he'd better not tell. He smiled.

"So, Gabe, what is it you want to talk about?" Keegan asked.

"The Murphys. I want to help them, but I don't know how to go about it without, like, embarrassing them."

Keegan nodded. "That's a hard one. But before we figure out how to get them to accept your help, tell me what exactly do you think they need help with?"

"Well, first, I had to convince Peyton today to actually make use of his scholarship." Gabe went on to describe the whole conversation, the problem, and the solution he'd come up with.

Keegan nodded. "That was a good job. And now, knowing how difficult things are for them, you want to do more."

"Yes, sir. Like, their car is all beat up and I heard Peyton telling someone that the AC in the car is out, so they have to roll the windows down and go really fast. I mean, he was making a joke of it, but the AC really isn't working. Then, just today, Mom says Mrs. Murphy told her the oven isn't working. Right, Mom?"

"Yes. I offered to have you come look at it, Keegan, and she said she'd let me know."

Keegan nodded. "Go on, Gabe."

"Well, earlier today Peyton told me that when things break there is no extra money to fix it. And I saw firsthand that Peyton has hardly any clothes and I'm guessing it's the same for Lucas. They don't have a dad to take care of them. Their mom has to work two jobs. How can I fix this stuff, Dad?"

"Well, first you'll have to raise money. That money can be used to fix the AC in the car, and fix the oven, and even buy clothes. If you raise enough, you might be able to go above and beyond and just buy them a new car and find out where else they might need some help."

"How do I raise the money?"

Keegan frowned as he thought. "If I were to give you a thousand dollars seed money, how would you use it to organize an event that might raise money?"

"An event? Like, a bake sale? But that wouldn't make a big enough profit."

"Do you bake?"

"No, sir, but I CAN charm a bunch of ladies into baking a bunch of stuff for me," he said with a grin.

Keegan chuckled along with everyone else. "Oh, I bet you can. But let's put that on a back burner. I want you to think bigger, and think of things that would use *your* actual

knowledge and skills and contacts to make it happen."

Gabe shook his head. "My mind is a blank."

"Well, what do you think you're good at?" Rose questioned.

Gabe shrugged. "The usual, sports, martial arts, shooting."

"Oh, you're good at a lot more than that, little brother," Lily said.

"Like what?"

"You can dance, you're super strong in the weight room," Daisy said.

"You look good, you can talk anyone into anything, you're super smart," Rose added.

"Well, thanks y'all, for the compliments, but, I mean, I still don't see how to use that stuff to raise money."

"Okay, well, I take back the part about you being smart," Rose said.

Violet sat up. "Think back to when you did the Mini-MART. Do you realize how much money was made on that thing? Just a little martial arts tournament put on in one week's time made hundreds of thousands of dollars all put into the *Heal the World Foundation*."

"That's all cool, but my last name is not Kino."

"Oh my goodness, Gabe, wake up," Rose said. "Your name IS Gabe Tanner, and at the moment that name is a hot commodity. Use it."

Gabe sat silently, chewing his food, thinking hard.

"Contests are the way to go," Lizzy put in. "When Maddie held that cooking contest at the Inn all those years ago, she took in over ten thousand dollars from the contest itself, and the magazine that held exclusive rights paid another large sum, though I'm not sure how much."

"Contests! Yes!" Violet said.

"The possibilities are limitless," Daisy said.

"A martial arts contest sponsored by Appel Martial Arts who is already growing by leaps and bounds because of your little demonstration," Lily said.

"Or, a shooting contest," Rose added. "There are a whole lotta gun enthusiasts around here who love to do that. And you could use your talk smarts to get the big shooting range over at the *Eagle Eye Gun Club* to sponsor you."

"Or," Daisy began. "A kids' invitational baseball tournament. I bet you could get the mayor to host it at the rec fields as long as he gets some credit and some of the money."

"Or a dance contest," Violet added. "If you got Taylor to come dance with you, people would come out of the woodwork just to see you two dance in person. And trained dancers would come to do their thing."

"Even a community service contest," Rose said. "The local hardware stores could donate the stove or whatever else the Murphys need, or if there's someone else in our town, and I'm sure there is, who needs help. I mean, this could be huge."

Gabe nodded. "Wow, guys, you are all amazing."

Keegan smiled. "They are indeed. So, son, do any of these things stick out in your mind?"

"Well, two of them stick out the most, though I think I'd eventually like to try them all out. But I think I'm most comfortable with a martial arts summer tournament and the shooting contest. You said earlier to use my contacts. Well, I think the Kinos would join Master Appel in sponsoring a tournament, and they are some big influential contacts. And

then, Teenspotter might also help if it's a teen tournament. And as far as a shooting contest, I think you're right. I could probably get *Eagle Eye* to sponsor, and they can put the word out. It would bring them a lot of new business."

"Looks like you have a lot of phone calls to make," Keegan said.

"Yes, sir. I'll start right on it tomorrow."

"And don't forget you still have some things to finish for the surprise for Jake and Laynah."

"No, I won't forget."

"And don't forget that Taylor is coming in one week and three days," Lizzy said.

Gabe grinned. "I don't think I'd forget that."

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Proverbs 3:27

"Don't withhold good from someone who deserves it,
when it is in your power to do so."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

June 10th Early Monday Morning
Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

"So, are we still meeting at our special place for lunch?" Jake asked.

Laynah smiled. "Of course," she said as she turned off the water at the trough and eight horses came quickly to quench their thirst. She stroked Santana's shoulder. "Santana says he wants a good hard ride today."

Jake grunted as he ran up the ladder in the barn, holding another string of lights in one hand and the phone in another. "You tell Santana I'll be there by noon."

"Did you hear that, boy? Your daddy says he's coming to get you at noon," Laynah cooed at the horse.

"And that means I'm coming to you by 12:30, Bugs."

"I'll be there, waiting impatiently. Want anything special for lunch?"

"Just you," he quipped.

"You got it."

"See you soon, baby," Jake said. He ended the call, tucked his phone in his pocket, picked up the lights and looped them over the nails.

He looked over at Gabe on a ladder on the other side of the barn. "How's it going?"

Gabe smiled. "Only about ten thousand more lights to hang. No problem."

Jake chuckled. "Me too. Think we'll have it done in the next two hours?"

Gabe's brows rose. "You got somewhere you gotta be?"

"As a matter of fact I do."

"Okay then, well, if we're not done, you go do what you have to do. I'll get it done with or without you."

"You're a good man, Gabe Tanner."

Gabe smiled. "Right?"

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Laynah loosely wrapped Honey's reins around the split rail fence at the very back of the west pasture. Her hands on the top rail she leaned slightly over the fence and peered into the woods. It was a beautiful place. She and Jake had now enjoyed many a picnic here. They'd climbed over the fence and walked through the woods, so peaceful, so quiet, except for an occasional lowing of cattle or the chirping of birds or the scurrying of squirrels and other wild creatures.

There was a small dirt path that ran along the outside of the pasture fence on her right side that ended just a few feet from where she stood. That path would eventually become a wider gravel drive if she and Jake were able to convince her father to let them build a

home here. Really, she felt confident that he would agree. After all, the house she lived in her whole life was on a piece of her grandparents' property that her father had claimed. He'd built their home in the woods too, and left much of the surrounding trees intact.

Now, she and Jake had their eyes on this area. Surely allowing them to purchase a few acres for their home would be no big deal. She smiled. It was Jake's idea. He knew the parents on both sides would love the thought that their children were living so close.

She turned and leaned her back against the fence and propped one booted foot on the lowest rail. She peered off toward the east to see if she could see Jake on his way, but it was difficult to see past the low ridge. She pulled out her phone to check the time. It was only 12:20. She knew he would be on time. Jake was never late. Smiling, she texted, "Where are you?"

She stared at her phone to see how long it would take him to slow Santana, pull out his phone, read her text and reply.

She gasped, squealed, dropped her phone and clawed at the hand that had covered her mouth and at the arm across her throat. She tried to scream, but the choke hold he had on her was too tight.

"Hold on, hold on, I'm not gonna hurt you, I swear."

Laynah panicked even harder at the sound of Brett's voice so close to her ear.

She couldn't get any air and felt like she was gonna pass out.

"Don't scream and I'll take my hand away. Don't scream. Do you hear me?"

She needed air. She nodded frantically.

He moved his hand and she drew in a deep breath and immediately started to scream. He slapped his hand over her mouth again and tightened the choke hold. She struggled, but he held her tight, the fence rail biting into her back.

"Laynah, I don't want to hurt you. I just want to talk to you, that's all. Please. I just want to talk to you. Don't scream. Do you understand?"

She nodded again. He moved his hand and again, she gasped for breath.

"I'm not gonna hurt you. I just want to talk to you. Calm down."

She couldn't help the tears that came. "Please let me go, Brett."

"Naw, I don't trust you, so I'm gonna keep you just like this," he said as he moved the arm he had across her throat up and down.

She drew a ragged breath. "You, you're not supposed to be here," she said, trying very hard to sound brave through her tears.

"I know. But I needed to talk to you."

"I, I was gonna talk to you too, but it was gonna be at the lawyer's office. Now, let me go."

"Will you stop telling me what to do," he said fiercely in her ear. "Just you listen for a change." He shook her. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," she grunted out, barely able to speak with his arm cutting off her air supply.

"I need to know that you're not gonna try to fight the plea deal."

"I wasn't going to," she ground out. "But now I'm reconsidering," she blurted out before she could stop herself.

He immediately tightened his arm across her throat. "I could snap your neck right here."

She whimpered. Suddenly, Laynah remembered the gun on her hip. She stopped trying to pull his arm away from her neck and dropped her hands by her side. She quietly pulled the gun from the holster tucked inside the waistband of her jeans. But dammit. It wasn't chambered. She hadn't wanted to bounce around on her horse with a chambered weapon. She slowly reached her left hand over, grabbed the slide, racked it and pulled the gun up. But he saw it and grabbed her wrist with his free hand while squeezing his arm tighter, completely cutting off her air. The gun, pointed high in the air, discharged as they struggled and in a fit of temper that she would actually try to shoot him, he slammed her hand against the fence and the gun went flying.

She was barely conscious from lack of air when he pulled her body over the top rail of the fence, the rough wood ripping the back of her shirt and scraping her skin. She tried to scream but the sound barely escaped her throat. He slapped his hand over her face again as he pulled her into the woods. That was the last thing she remembered.

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Jake felt the vibration of his phone and slowed Santana to a slow walk as he pulled it out and read Laynah's text. He halted Santana so he could text her back. "Almost there. Be patient." He hit send, raised up in the stirrups and pushed the phone back in his hip pocket.

Looking around him he realized he'd seen something shiny reflecting the sun on the other side of the fence. He trotted over, dismounted and looped the reins over the rail of the fence. He jumped the fence and went to investigate. There was a small thicket next to the dirt path that was used to drive four wheelers to check fences. On the other side of that thicket Jake was surprised to find Brett's Camaro. Cursing under his breath he circled the car, peered inside and found the keys in the ignition. He took them. Moving fast now, his heart racing he jumped the fence again and threw himself onto Santana's back. Santana reared at the sound of a gunshot. "Dear God," Jake pleaded as he kicked the horse into full speed.

He came over the ridge and thought his heart would jump out of his chest when he saw Honey running toward him without a rider. He sped up to the back fence and jumped off his horse. Laynah's phone and gun lay on the ground. He scanned the area. Noted parts of Laynah's flannel overshirt hooked on the splintered wood of the fence. He jumped the fence, pulled his phone and called Chaz.

"Hey Jake."

"Brett was here. He took Laynah. Far end of the west pasture. I'm on his trail. Call Ty."

Chaz looked up at the men around him at the barn. Keegan, John, Agent Dalton and Gabe. He relayed the information and called his brother. They immediately jumped into action and in only a few seconds had contacted police and were headed out to the west pasture.

Jake realized if Brett had Laynah, he would head back to his car. He took off east toward the car and it took him only a minute to catch up. Brett was struggling, trying to drag Laynah through the woods. Jake ran at him full speed and knocked him away from Laynah who grunted as she fell to the ground. Brett rolled over and came up, pulling a gun from his waistband.

Laynah came to and gasped. "Brett, no!" she screamed.

"Come on, soldier boy," Brett taunted, the gun just a few inches from Jake's forehead.

Jake looked him right in the eye. "I'm not a soldier," he said as he moved with blinding speed and snapped the gun from Brett's hand. He tossed it aside and with one punch knocked Brett unconscious.

He moved to Laynah, knelt on the ground, pulled her into his arms and held her tight.

He heard the sound of vehicles coming fast up the dirt path. Heard car doors slam.

"We're over here," he called. "I have her."

He brushed his hand over her cheek, smoothed back her hair that had been pulled out of her braid. "Hey, Bugs. You're okay now. I got you. I got you baby."

She pressed her head against his chest. "Oh Jake, I'm so freaking glad you got here in time."

He smiled at her brazen words. "Me too."

The men made it to them. Chaz knelt in front of his daughter. Keegan searched Brett, and turned him over onto his stomach to await the sheriff who would cuff him.

"Are you hurt?" Chaz asked.

Laynah sniffed. "I think he broke my hand," she said softly.

Chaz took her right hand, checked it carefully as she winced in pain. "I think you might be right." He checked her over. "And you have some pretty good scrapes there on your back."

Laynah nodded. "He pulled me over the fence."

Brett moaned and started to get up, but Keegan planted a boot against him and forced him back down. "Stay put," he ordered.

It was another ten minutes before Ty and another deputy arrived. While the deputy took Brett into custody, Ty walked around, quickly got the full evidence story in his mind, went back to the fence, took pics for evidence, located the spent casing. He went back to where Laynah sat on the ground. "Can you tell me what happened?"

She nodded. Everyone was quiet after Laynah finished telling what had taken place.

"Thank God you were close," John said to Jake.

Jake nodded. "I do. I will."

Gabe stood quietly watching the whole thing, remembering what it had been like to see that man hit Taylor on the beach. Now, to see Laynah hurt, Gabe knew exactly how Jake was feeling. And Gabe too would thank God that things turned out like they did. Because when Chaz had said Laynah had been taken, all he could envision was her tied up on the floor of some remote farm building.

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June 12th Wednesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lizzy's brow furrowed as she tried to figure out the sound she was hearing. It sounded like when someone uses a straw to suck up the dregs from the bottom of a cup. Only this was louder, and was lasting much longer. She made her way into the kitchen.

"Gabriel Tanner, have you lost your mind?"

Gabe rose up from where he was bent over the kitchen counter and took the straw out of his mouth. "Oh, shoot, I was hoping to have this all up before you came down." He bent down again, put the straw into the middle of a large mess on the counter and sucked it up.

"What in the world are you doing?"

He grinned. Shrugged. "I made this awesome smoothie, with milk and ice cream, banana, protein powder, vitamins, minerals, probiotics and honey. I mean, it was perfect. And then I freakin' knocked the glass over."

"And now you're sucking it up off the dirty counter?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm sucking it up. I have complete faith that your counter is spotlessly clean." He turned and sucked more smoothie up from the countertop.

"For heaven's sake, stop that. I'll make you another smoothie."

Gabe laughed. "No need, Mom. This is good enough." He let out a large burp. "Uh, sorry. I'm gettin' a lot of air." He sucked some more, trying to go fast because his mom was pulling a bunch of paper towels from the roll.

"Move it," she commanded.

Sighing, he moved away as he burped again.

"Just when I think you're all grown up," she muttered. "Lord have mercy," she complained.

Gabe couldn't keep from smiling at her. "Sorry, Mom. Let me clean it up."

She held her hand up. "No. You've done enough. Scat."

"But... "

"Now."

Laughing, he kissed his mother's cheek and headed downstairs to join Agent Dalton in the weight room, because he'd invited the man to come work out with him.

Gabe worked hard for an hour, pushing his body to the max. Agent Dalton also worked hard, trying to keep up with the young man.

"So," Gabe started, "what's your first name?"

"Andrew. Some people call me Andy."

"Can I call you that?"

"Sure."

"I mean, not being disrespectful. Just being, like, friends. Ya know, cuz we're like, always together."

"No problem. But if you wanna be my friend, well, my friends call me Dalton."

"So, can I call you Dalton? I mean, I have complete respect for Ameritech agents. I'm gonna try to be one."

He nodded. "Yes, you can call me Dalton, and, I heard."

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Gabe started.

"Sure."

"How old are you?"

"I'm thirty-eight."

"Oh!"

"Oh?"

"Sorry, I mean, you don't look so old. I thought you were like, mid-twenties."

Dalton gave a short laugh. "Nope, I'm pretty old."

"How long have you been an Ameritech agent?"

"Five years."

"So, like, what did you do before that?"

"I was, well, I was a drunk."

"Oh."

Dalton nodded.

"Sorry," Gabe said. "I guess I shouldn't pry into people's personal lives. I was just curious."

"Don't worry 'bout it kid. If I was trying to hide my past, I wouldn't have told you. I guess you wanna know the story but are afraid to ask."

Gabe smiled, nodded.

"I started drinking as a teenager. Ya know, at parties and stuff. But I couldn't stop. It got worse and worse. I'd lose my job, get sober for a minute, get another job, start drinking again and lose that job. I had no one. My parents and two siblings didn't want anything to do with me and I can't blame them. I wasn't very pleasant to be around. I ended up homeless and on the street by my late twenties. It was your father who saved me."

"Really? My dad?"

Dalton nodded. "I asked him for some food one day as he came out of a courthouse in Atlanta. He said, yes, come with him and he would buy me a meal. He sat and talked to me as we ate together at a Waffle House. He ate with a dirty, smelly, homeless guy and asked me questions and spoke to me about God. I was mad at God at the time and didn't want to hear it, but I was hungry enough to sit and listen. He bought me dinner every night for a week. Something inside me started to change. I wanted to please your father. I wanted to get cleaned up. Get sober. He got me help. Put me in touch with AA people. Found me a place to stay. Bought me some clean clothes. Then he told me if I would get clean and show him that I'm ready to change my life, he would give me a job.

"I never looked back. I started from the bottom up. Literally cleaning bathrooms and offices at Ameritech. I worked hard. Never too full of pride to do the lowest of jobs. I moved up eventually to work in the cafeteria. Then maintenance. Then security. And then, one day, your dad asked me if I'd ever thought of being an agent. I jumped at the opportunity. I gave it my all. I trained harder and longer than anyone. The day I graduated from the triple A, the Ameritech Agents Academy, at the top of the class, it was the happiest day of my life. Agent Tanner changed my entire world. For some reason he thought I was important enough to save and I'll be forever in his debt."

Gabe blinked back tears. "I, uh, didn't know my dad did all that. So cool. And listen, he must think really highly of you to assign you to protect me."

Dalton laughed. "He told me that exact same thing. I don't take my assignment lightly. I'd give my life to save yours."

"I appreciate that and hope it never has to happen. So, are you like, married?"

"No."

"Do you wanna be?"

"Sure, if it ever happens."

"Where do you live?"

"I'm renting a house right here in Pine Forest. It's actually in the neighborhood where we went to visit your friend a few days ago."

"Oh, cool. Did you already know the Murphys?"

"I knew Peyton because he was on your baseball team. I met Rebecca and Lucas when

they came out to get in their car to go to lunch at the Inn on Sunday."

"Rebecca?"

"Oh, I mean, Mrs. Murphy." At Gabe's raised eyebrows he went on. "She introduced herself to me that way."

Gabe grinned at him. "She's a nice lady, huh?"

"Yep. She's nice."

Gabe looked him over. "And she's pretty too."

"Yep. Well, you better finish up here. You have an appointment with *Eagle Eye Gun Club* in an hour, and you-know-who should be here by the time we get back."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said with a smile. The west coast people would be arriving for Jake and Laynah's wedding, and he was stoked.

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Wednesday Afternoon...

Gabe came flying in the door. "Hey Mom, that took longer than I expected. I'm gonna go take a quick shower."

"Wait, at least tell me how it went."

He turned toward the stairs. "It went good. We're gonna have a shooting contest." He started up. "It's gonna be called the *Gabe Tanner 3 Gun Quick-Shot Contest*, and it'll be on the July Fourth weekend. I'll tell ya all about it later!" He disappeared up the steps.

About that same time, four large, shiny, black, Ameritech SUVs and one black van pulled into the open gate, went around the circle drive and stopped in front of the *Pine Forest Country Inn*. John, Jodi, and Jake came out to greet the large group, shaking hands, hugging and kissing everyone.

Miss Maddie came out onto the giant porch, covered with rocking chairs and swings and clapped her hands together. "Hello everyone!" she said. "Oh, this is just gonna be so much fun! Come in, come in. Y'all must be hungry after your long trip. Dinner won't be until seven, but I have just a slew of goodies laid out for you all. I've been cooking all morning! Come in!"

"The ones assigned to the cottages come this way," Jake said. "We'll get you settled and then you can head into the main house." Everyone started grabbing their luggage. Some followed Jake. Some followed John and Jodi into the Inn.

Taylor glanced around inside the Inn but didn't see the person she was looking for. She was, however, approached by a man who smiled and held out his hand to her father who was standing just behind Taylor. "Hello. Mr. Kino. I'm Agent Diaz. I'll be looking after Miss Taylor during your stay."

Ricky shook his hand, which was then offered to Bree, and finally to Taylor.

"Miss Taylor, I've received your itinerary. I understand you'll wanna see Gabe ASAP. I'll be right here when you're ready and I'll escort you over to his home."

"I'm ready now."

"No you're not," Bree said. "Come up to the room, freshen up."

Taylor sighed. "I'll be down in five minutes," she informed the agent.

She was true to her word. Agent Diaz stood as the beautiful girl came running down the stairs. Her long dark hair was now down and blowing back from her face as she ran. Her jeans looked like the same ones she had on earlier, but she'd changed tops from a

white one to a lavender-colored one that was much softer and more feminine looking. He looked down at her shoes to find her wearing white athletic shoes. He smiled. The guys had told him not to worry, Taylor Kino was an unspoiled, very cool girl. Seeing her come bounding down the stairs in jeans and white athletic shoes, made him think they were probably right. She smiled at him as she approached.

"Did I make it in five?"

He laughed. "Not quite, but pretty close." He motioned toward the front doors. "We're gonna walk the side path."

She nodded and followed him out.

What he called a path was a paved sidewalk, lined with solar lights, winding through trees and beautiful landscaping, including pink and yellow flowers whose names Taylor didn't know, but was curious to find out. She made a mental note to do some research.

They finally came upon a large, black, iron fence, made in the same way and same style as the front gate of the Inn. The gate leading to the property next door had a security box which Agent Diaz opened and punched in some numbers. The gate unlocked and he held it open for her as they walked through.

Taylor watched Agent Diaz as he walked. There was nothing casual about his movements. He scanned the area constantly. He was alert and ready. He obviously took his job seriously. She was grateful for that. They came to a clearing and there was the Tanner home. She'd never been here, she thought. They'd always met at the Inn. For that matter, Gabe had never been to her home either. They'd always met at her grandparents' home. She headed up the front steps to the door, and knocked.

It was a few seconds before Lizzy Tanner swung the door open. "Well, hello there, Taylor!" she exclaimed. "It's so nice to see you again."

Taylor smiled and held out her hand. "Hi, Mrs. Tanner. It's nice to see you too."

Lizzy took Taylor's hand and pulled her in for a hug, then pushed her back and looked her over. "My, don't you look pretty today. I love that top. It's so cute. Come in, come in. Gabe was running late, but he should be ready by now." She nodded at the agent. "Agent Diaz, nice to see you again. I see you got the luck of the draw."

He grinned at her. "No luck to it. They wanted only the best for Miss Taylor."

Taylor laughed at the cockiness of her assigned agent. She liked it. It reminded her of the other men in her life.

"Mrs. Tanner you have a beautiful home," Taylor said.

"Thank you, sweetie. My husband, with the help of our neighbors, built it himself with his own two hands."

"Wow, that's pretty impressive."

"I'm very proud of him. I'm sure Gabe will give you the grand tour. Give me a minute and I'll run up and get him," Lizzy said.

"I can go up and get him," Taylor offered. "It'll be fun to surprise him."

Lizzy smiled. "Okay then, it's upstairs. Turn right, then another right, and it's the next to the last door on the left." Lizzy smiled at Agent Diaz. "So, why don't you come on into the kitchen. Agent Austin is in there with a few of the girls."

Taylor ran quickly up the stairs, headed to the next to the last door on the left and knocked softly. She smoothed her hair while she waited. The door flew open and she

looked up into the surprised face of the guy she loved.

His hair was wet, he was holding a towel, his feet were bare, he had on jeans that weren't buttoned yet showing a small part of his underwear, his chest was bare, his blue eyes blinked in surprise, a smile spread across his face.

Taylor smiled up at him. "Wow. Now that's hot." She reached out and touched a fingertip to the elastic waistband of the exposed front of his underwear.

He drew in a sharp breath, grabbed her arm, yanked her into his room, closed the door, pulled her into his arms and kissed her. He broke the kiss for just a second and then dove back in. She was pure intoxication to him. When she was near he could barely think straight. When she'd touched him, all he could think about was dragging her over to his bed. He got control of himself, broke the kiss and held her away from him. "Hey, Taylor."

"Hey, Gabe. I missed you so much."

"Me too. I mean, I missed you."

She giggled. "You smell really good."

"You do too." He lowered his head and sniffed her neck, her hair, and couldn't stop himself from kissing her again. Finally, he set her away and immediately fastened his jeans.

She looked around at his room. "Have you always had this room?"

"Yes, but it used to look different."

"Different how?"

He laughed. "Well, there used to be a crib right over there. And this bed used to be a little bed with a railing. And this dresser is a lot bigger. And the room used to be a lot messier."

She looked around, taking note of the neatness of his desk, the book on the nightstand, the made bed with his phone and an aqua colored T-shirt lying on it. The comforter was blue and white. The curtains on the two windows were all white. She moved to peek outside. She could see a backyard with a wooden swing set for kids that included an attached climbing wall and a slide. "Did you play on that?"

He came to stand behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist. "No, that's new. Dad and I put it together for Iris."

"How about that trampoline?"

"That's old and I've spent many hours on that. Wanna go jump?"

"Sure." She turned to smile up at him and ran her hands over his muscular chest, then pulled away, walked to his bed, and sat down. "But I'd rather play around here."

He swallowed. "Me too, but I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"You know why."

She smiled coyly. "I do but I want to hear you say it."

He went to the bed and sat next to her. "Because, I'm afraid that once I get you next to me in this bed I won't have the strength to stop myself from making love to you and we can't let that happen."

Taylor smiled. "It's a lovely thought though, isn't it?"

He stood. "Yeah. It's a lot more than lovely."

Gabe walked around to the other side of his bed, picked up the shirt and pulled it over

his head. He then quickly donned his socks and shoes. He grabbed up the towel he'd been holding earlier, ran it over his head a few more times and went into his bathroom. He came out with his hair combed back out of his face.

Taylor eyed him. For the first time she noticed a very slight stubble. She rose and touched his face. "You have a little bit of a beard growing."

He rubbed his hand over his cheek. "Oh, sorry, I haven't shaved in a few days."

"How often do you shave?"

He shrugged. "I guess about every three or four days."

"Interesting. Can you like, grow a beard?"

"Probably. I've never tried."

"Funny, I've never thought about guys my age having to shave."

"Well, probably most of the guys your age shave, you just don't realize it." He raised his eyebrows. "Or at least they're beginning to shave."

"I'm only a year younger than you."

"A lot happens in that year. Just wait. You'll see. This time last year the most important thing on my mind was, well, actually I can't remember, which means it must not have been anything important."

She reached up and touched the scar on his neck. "And this year?"

"It feels like I've aged ten years. So much has happened, especially these past few months. I've grown up a lot. And I still can see that guy punching you in the face almost every time I close my eyes." He touched her cheek. "Does it still hurt?"

"Not really. I don't like to think about it."

"Me neither."

"Gabe! You two have been up there long enough," his mother called.

He smiled. "Let's go downstairs." He grabbed up his phone and glanced at it. He had a text from Taylor's dad sent several minutes ago.

~~You two come over and have some snacks.

Gabe quickly texted back.

~sorry sir didn't see the text -coming right now

He looked up. "We've been summoned by your father."

Taylor sighed. "But your mom said you'd show me around your home."

"I will, but not right now. I just told your dad we were on our way."

"So, we could be late."

"Yeah, I don't think so."

"Are you afraid of my father?"

"Nope. It's just respect. There's a difference."

"You're not a bit afraid of him?"

"I mean, if he were angry at me, maybe. But right now he's not. So, let's keep it that way."

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June 13th Thursday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Oh!" Lizzy shook her head as she turned on the kitchen light. "You scared me. What are you doing up so early and sitting here in the dark?"

Gabe shrugged. "Couldn't sleep. Just thinking."

Lizzy quickly put on some water to heat for her tea, started the coffee, and went to join Gabe at the kitchen table. She smiled sweetly. "Whatcha thinkin' about my sweet boy?"

Gabe smiled at her words. "Lots of stuff. There's so much I need to do before the end of summer. But right now, I'm thinkin' mostly about Taylor."

"Everything okay between you two?"

"Yeah, things are good, but maybe too good."

"Hmm, I'm not sure what that means."

He blew out a breath. "I'm not sure if I can talk to my mother about these things."

"Ya know, I'm not unaware of what you're going through."

"Oh, I know that, Mom, I'm just, maybe, embarrassed."

Lizzy sighed. "What if you talk to me AND your dad. Maybe with both a male and female point of view it will help you to sort things out."

"What things do we need to sort out?" Keegan asked as he entered the kitchen. "Was he sucking more stuff off the counter?"

Gabe laughed. "Mom told you about that?"

"She told everyone at dinner last night at the Inn when you and Taylor went for your walk."

Gabe stared at his mom.

She shrugged. "It was too ridiculously funny not to share."

Keegan poured hot water over a tea bag and brought it and some honey to Lizzy, then turned and poured himself a cup of coffee. He sat at the table. "So," he glanced at his phone and laid it on the table. "We have about thirty minutes before the house wakes up and before I have a call with Jason and our newly appointed AIC up in New York. What do we need to sort out?"

When Gabe didn't speak, Lizzy did. "It's about Gabe's relationship with Taylor. And since he says it's too embarrassing to talk about with his mom, I'm guessing it's about their physical relationship."

"Well, at his age, it usually is," Keegan said. "Do you have a particular question? Or maybe a confession?"

Gabe gave a soft laugh. "No confession, or at least not yet. The thing is, I don't want it to ever have to come to that. I'm trying so hard to be strong, to do what's right in God's eyes, or at least to not do what's wrong."

"But?"

"But it's like, the, uh, pull is so strong. There's been a few times I've thought, ya know, just do it. I've pushed that thought away. I realize it's like, Satan is telling me his lies. But I think I'm gonna fall. And Taylor doesn't make it any easier."

"What do you mean?" Lizzy asked. "What does Taylor do?"

"She always wants to, ya know, kiss and stuff. Which I got no problem with, but she says things, like yesterday, up in my room, she like— " he sighed. "She invited me to play with her in the bed. It kinda puts me on the defensive, ya know? I don't know if she knows what she does to me, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. She's an awesome girl, the best and I don't want to break up with her, but she's too tempting. And it doesn't help that I'm freakin' in love with her and hope that she doesn't lose interest in me while I'm training

for Ameritech, because one day I hope we can get married."

Lizzy's mouth dropped open at that news and Keegan heaved a sigh.

"Okay, I think I get it," Keegan said. "First, let me just say it's commendable that you're trying to be strong. We, as men, have to learn to control our own bodies and minds. We're not animals. We don't have to give in to the urge no matter how much pleasure we think we'll have, because, son, there are always consequences."

"You mean like pregnancy?"

"Well yes, but no. I was actually referring to things like guilt, self-condemnation, and more mind games than you realize."

"So, what do I do?"

Keegan looked at Lizzy.

She drew a breath. "You have to speak with Taylor. You said a minute ago that you don't know if she knows what she's doing to you. I'm sure that she doesn't. She's innocent, totally innocent. When you touch her hand and she feels a warmth, she craves more. That's why she tries to get you to do more, why she tries to get closer to you. That's her perspective. It's totally instinctual. When you kiss her or hold her, she feels safe and secure and loved. That's what women crave. She just wants to feel emotionally close to you and right now, she feels that when she's physically close. But she doesn't know that when she presses close to you, it brings your body to life. She gets close because she craves your strength.

"Women these days may not know or understand that from the beginning of time what attracts them to men is their masculinity, which is their ability to protect and provide for us. And men need women too, for their caring and love, and also for their strength, because they have to know that the woman they love backs them up and supports them. And the women have to know the same thing. But Taylor has been under the protection of her father all her life and suddenly there is this new man who makes her feel just as loved and protected as her father did. It's new and different and innocently, she does things she doesn't realize are getting to you."

"So, what am I supposed to talk to her about?"

"You literally need to let her know what she does to you, how your body responds."

Gabe's face reddened.

Lizzy brushed it away. "Don't be embarrassed. I'm a nurse. And do you think I don't know what certain things I do and say do to your father?"

Keegan smiled.

"But when I was young I didn't realize at all that the little things I did, that to me were just an innocent touch, like putting my hands on your dad's chest, or pressing close to him. I didn't know it was getting to him as much as it did. You have to tell her."

"I don't know how to say those things to her."

"Well," Keegan began. "Ya better figure it out because there's only a few alternatives. Don't tell her, and things will continue on and you'll eventually have sex with her and the aftermath will probably break you up anyway and that will be that. Or, I can speak with her father and have him and Bree fill her in, but she'll know that you went to me and I went to her parents and that would probably bring you down in her eyes and also probably piss her off."

"You can let her know that you need her to help you, and not hinder you," Lizzy said. "Let her know that you're trying to be strong but you can't do it without her help. And when she asks how she can help, you can tell her what she's been doing. Go into detail so that there's no mistaking what you're asking."

"Detail?"

"I'm sure there are exact things she's done and said that you don't want to share with us but that are clear in your mind. Share them with her."

Gabe smiled and nodded his head as the picture of her touching his underwear yesterday came to mind. "I don't know if this will work because she acts as if she wants to have sex."

"Taylor doesn't seem to me to be one who wants to willfully sin. I'm telling you, honey, she doesn't know what she's doing."

"She asked me to take her virginity to keep Dr. Black from wanting her."

"That was fear talking," Keegan said. "Her father did tell me that Taylor is having nightmares and even sleeping in her parents' room."

"Oh, well she didn't tell me that."

"Probably because she doesn't want you to think less of her, or she doesn't want you to worry," Lizzy said.

"It will help her if you can get her to talk about the incident itself. Again, go into detail. Describe things in detail. Get her to talk to you. It's almost like when Laynah was assaulted," Keegan continued. "It may not seem as bad, but she is still traumatized."

Gabe nodded as things became clearer to him. "So, I need her help and she actually needs my help. Sounds like a match made in heaven."

Keegan and Lizzy looked at each other.

"Time will tell," Keegan said just as his phone rang. "Gotta take this." He stood and walked toward his office. "Hey Jason, good morning."

Lizzy smiled and rose from the table, placed her hand on her son's head. "So, my sweet boy, did we help at all?"

"Yes, ma'am." He rose and hugged his mother. "I love you, Mom."

She sniffed. "One day, when you have your own children you'll begin to understand just how much I love you. But Gabe, I'm also proud of you. Keep up the good work, my baby boy."

He laughed. "Yes, Mommy."

"B T W, don't forget to stop by the cleaners."

"B T W, Mom? That is so cute, you trying to be all hip."

Lizzy smiled and then frowned. "Hey, I'm hip. Now listen, remember, it's your suit, your dad's uniform, John and Jake's uniforms and Rose's dress from the cleaners. That's nine pieces all together but it will look like eight because your suit pants will be attached to the hanger holding your jacket under one piece of plastic, and the uniform pants are white, they will be separate. Make sure there are eight pieces, nine hangers."

"Got it. It's on my list."

"What else is on your list?"

"Taylor and I are gonna meet Peyton and Avery for breakfast and then the four of us are gonna finish up working on the big surprise for Jake and Laynah."

"How's that coming? Cuz we need to bring everything in tomorrow."

"It's almost ready. Just some punch-out work. Then Taylor and I are gonna work on the dance for the wedding. After that, she's got stuff to do with the ladies, I think they're gonna make gift bags or something."

"Yes, we are."

"So, while y'all are doing that, I need to get in a workout and then I have to go help Jake mop the barn again and then I gotta get ready to go out with the guys."

"And, when were you intending to stop by the cleaners?"

"Right after breakfast."

"Let me see the list. I'm gonna circle it in red."

He grinned. "Sorry, ya can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Cuz the list is up here." He pointed to his head.

"You think you're so smart. Get outta here."

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❤ **Thursday Itinerary (Laynah)**❤	**Thursday Itinerary (Jake)**
❤ Check in with Caterers	→ have Inn bus p/u buddies from airport
❤ Check in with Bakery	
❤ Check in with Florist	
❤ Check in with DJ	→ mop barn floor again
❤ Check in with photographer (Aunt Cindy)	→ finish up Chaz' list whatever he needs
❤ Start packing bags	
❤Bridesmaid Luncheon at the Ritz	
❤ Pick up Dress... (no later than 3:00)	→ take care of horses for Laynah
❤ Dinner with all the ladies	→ cut grass along path to barn
	→ make sure all torches are full

Laynah looked over her list of things to do. Not so bad since her mom and Miss Jodi had already made all the phone calls. Lifting her right hand up, she frowned. The cast was white and nobody was allowed to write on it until after the wedding. Getting started, she went to her closet and reached up over her head to pull down her luggage. There were two large pieces stacked one on top of the other, and when she tried to grab one with her left hand, they both came crashing down with a few large thumps and bumps. It was her brother Charlie who came running.

"You okay, Bugs?"

She smiled at her brother. "Yep, I'm just a klutz with this stupid cast."

He moved forward, picked up the fallen bags and laid them on the bed. "Which one do you want open?"

"Let's start with the big one."

He opened the suitcase and stood back. "What can I get for ya?"

As she pointed and gave orders, Charlie moved around the room, gathering what she wanted and doing his best to place it neatly in the suitcase. When she'd finished all that

she'd intended to pack early, she sighed and sat on the bed. "Thanks, honey. Since when did you become so helpful?" she teased.

He shrugged. Glanced up at his sister's face. "I'm, uh, I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks, Charlie." She watched him. Apparently he was more upset than he was letting on. "Are *you* okay?"

"Sure. I'm fine. It's just that, when I heard that guy had taken you, I mean, I was scared. I remembered when Gabe was taken. I was really sick over it. And then when you got taken, I thought I'd never see you again."

Laynah stood and motioned for him to come to her. He stood and she hugged him hard.

"I was taken for all of about two minutes. But ya know what, Charlie? You're getting to be very grown up."

"Ha, you're the one getting married, but really, Bugs, I'm, uh, gonna miss you."

"Oh, sweetie. I'm gonna miss you too. But I'm not really going anywhere for a while. And when Jake deploys, I'm gonna stay right here with my family. So, don't go gettin' your hopes up on my room."

Charlie smiled. "I don't want your room, Bugs. I just really want you to be okay."

Melaynah smiled at her brother's sincerity. "I'm good, Charlie. I promise. And now Brett is going to prison for a very long time. So, there are no more worries."

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June 13th Thursday Night

Joe's Family Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan and Gabe and Heather's boyfriend, Nolan, walked into Joe's and were surprised to see so many people there. Joe had closed the place to the public for the private party in honor of the groom who was about to marry his granddaughter. Gabe pulled out his phone and immediately started taking pictures as he was ordered to do by Laynah.

Gabe looked around at all the people. On Laynah's father's side were her father, Chaz; her brothers, Charlie and Matt; Chaz' dad, Charles; and Chaz' brother, Ty. Also, there were Laynah's uncles who were married to Chaz' two sisters: Bo Clark and Parker Ross. And also there was Laynah's young cousin, Parker Ross Jr., who went by Park. On Laynah's mother's side of the family was her mother's half-sister's husband, Josh Turner, and his son, Laynah's other young cousin, David Turner. And of course, Lisa's father Joe, who was Laynah's grandfather.

On Jake's side, there was his father John. Jake's high school friends he'd grown up with, Kurt and Landon were also in attendance. Jeff Davis and his sons Daniel and Jeremy. Grandmaster Kino, Ricky Kino, Joey Adams, Mark Adams. Young Eric, Logan and JoJo, Jason and Justin Lee and Cameron Wallace and Jensen Deal. Last but very obviously not least, there were four big, beefy guys Gabe had never seen before, but he knew who they were, they were Jake's Marine special ops brothers. All together there were thirty, maybe forty guys. Joe's was a big place but these men seemed to fill it up.

The jukebox was playing. The booze was flowing. A lot of the younger guys were playing pool. Some of them were playing arcade games. The food was Joe's regular cuisine being cooked up and served by Joe's staff. Gabe sat at a table, drinking Joe's famous lemonade and looked around, snapping off pics. He enjoyed watching people to see how they acted under certain circumstances. Ricky and Eric Kino were drinking

Perrier with lime. The Lee brothers each had a glass of wine. The underage guys all had sodas. Most everyone else had beer. But Gabe knew the whiskey shots would be coming out eventually. That was always fun to watch.

One of the servers walked up to Gabe's table with a big smile and placed a whole pizza in front of him.

"Um, I think you have the wrong table, cuz I didn't order anything," Gabe informed her.

She smiled and pointed at the group of Marines at the bar. "They ordered it for you. They said any brother of Jake's is their brother too."

One of them smiled and pointed his beer bottle at Gabe. Gabe nodded at him and then stuffed a piece of pizza in his mouth. As he ate he watched Jake being patted on the back, congratulated, teased. You could tell Jake had been raised in the hotel business because he was working the room, making sure everyone was welcome and appreciated. Gabe's eyes shifted to Ricky when he stood and began to do the same thing. He walked around shaking hands and introducing himself to people he didn't know. For some reason, that made Gabe happy. He wiped his fingers, picked his phone back up and started recording. He watched as everyone Ricky visited would laugh at something he said. Ricky had a way about him.

Joey and Mark rose then, grabbing Gabe's attention, as they made their way to a pool table, apparently Joey having challenged Mark. Young Eric, JoJo and Logan gathered to watch and place bets. The four Marines were interested and turned to watch.

Gabe shifted to see his father talking to Jason, probably about something work related as they both kept looking at their phones and texting. He took a pic. They were always on call. People's lives depended on them. Gabe wondered what was goin' down. He looked up as Jake approached and took his picture as he sat down at Gabe's table.

"Why ya sittin' here all alone, bro? Don't feel like partyin'?"

Gabe smiled. "I'm good, Jake. I'm just watchin' people. Ya know, people are cool. You can learn a lot by just watching."

Jake smiled at Gabe. "You're cool, because you say things like that. So, we haven't talked much about it, but, how's it feel to know someone's out to get ya?"

Gabe laughed. "You tell me, you're the Marine."

Laughing, Jake nodded. "See, you're so cool, Gabe."

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June 13th Thursday Night

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Taylor walked around the room introducing herself to everyone she didn't know, and chatting with those she did know. There were a lot more people here than she'd imagined.

Laynah looked beautiful in the white dress that came to mid-thigh. It hugged her body, showing off her gorgeous figure which Taylor had never really noticed before because she was always wearing jeans. She was cool like that, simple, not all into herself. But tonight, she looked like a model. Her whole body was well-muscled and Taylor wondered if she worked out or if it was just the horses that kept her in shape.

Laynah's mom, Miss Lisa, was also beautiful, Taylor thought. Laynah obviously got her gorgeous red hair from her. Lisa's was a little shorter than Laynah's and tonight was

straightened.

Trying hard to remember all the names she went around the room. She saw Laynah's aunts, Cindy, who was currently walking around taking pictures with a very fancy camera, and Stephanie, who was a doctor. They were Laynah's father's sisters. Then there was Laynah's Aunt Jenny who was married to Sheriff Ty, Laynah's father's brother. There was Laynah's Aunt Megan, who was Miss Lisa's half sister and also had red hair. Miss Shirley, Lisa's stepmother, and therefore Laynah's grandmother, was married to Joe who owns the bar. Also there was Mrs. Appel, Jake's mom, and Mrs. Tanner, Gabe's mom. And of course all of Gabe's sisters, Heather, the eldest, then Rose and Violet, and then Lily and Daisy and finally, little Iris, who currently was being led around by Laynah's little sister, Aralyn. Other little ones included Taylor's cousins, Emily, Sophia, Kelstyn, and Ledger, the only boy at their gathering.

There were two teenage girls a year younger than Taylor who were Laynah's cousins from her Aunt Cindy and Aunt Megan. Their names were easy to remember because they rhymed, Kylie and Riley. There were two friends Laynah went to high school with who Taylor hadn't met yet. And finally there were the Cali people. Mickey Davis, Angel and Kimmie Lee, Aunt Breez, Aunt Bella, grandma Shelley, Aunt Jeffy, and mom Bree, who was doing her best to chat with, take pictures with, and sign autographs for, anyone who asked. Some people had asked Taylor herself for autographs. Kylie and Riley had taken selfies with her and immediately posted them. Last but not least, Miss Maddie was sitting quietly, smiling and dabbing at her eyes. Taylor went to her.

"Miss Maddie? Are you okay?"

"Oh, yes child. I'm just fine as ever. Just looking around at all these people I love so much. Isn't it wonderful to have them all together!"

Taylor smiled and nodded. "Just think, Miss Maddie, you created this. If you didn't have your daughter, she wouldn't have had Miss Lisa, and she wouldn't have been around to marry Mr. Stewart, and they wouldn't have had Laynah. So this is all because of you."

"It's all such a blessing," Miss Maddie said softly. "Oh how I wish my Lawrence could be sitting here next to me seeing all this."

"Lawrence, that's your late husband?"

"Yes, dear, he's been gone a long time now."

"Well, maybe he IS sitting here next to you."

Maddie teared up again. "Strange you should say that, because lately it's felt like he really is. I almost started talking to him the other day. I miss him so."

Taylor bent down, squeezed Miss Maddie's hands and kissed her cheek.

"Dinner is served," Jodi announced and they all moved into the giant dining room. Jodi sat Miss Maddie at the head of the table and Laynah at the opposite end. Laynah smiled and blew a kiss to her great grandmother.

Taylor smiled at the amazing spread on the table. The centerpieces and place settings were lovely. The part Taylor was really looking forward to though, was after the meal when Laynah would be given a surprise shower. There hadn't been time to do it since the wedding was a rush job, so, tonight was the night. Right now though, Iris was crying and Mrs. Tanner was trying to hold her on her lap. Mrs. Tanner's face was pale and Gabe had told Taylor that she was struggling with some severe morning sickness, so Taylor rushed

to her side. “Mrs. Tanner, may I take Iris for you?”

“Thanks, Taylor, but I don’t know if she’ll go with someone she doesn’t know.”

“Of course she will, won’t you, Iris?” Taylor said in a soft voice. “All children love me.” She smiled and held her hands out. Iris stopped crying and looked at Taylor suspiciously, then she smiled and raised her hands to Taylor who scooped her up. “You come sit with me and I’ll sneak you some goodies,” she whispered. “There now, sweetie, everything is gonna be okay.”

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At Joe’s things were starting to get interesting, Gabe thought as he moved around, taking pictures. He took one of Jake with his Marine buddies. Then Chaz, John and Keegan were asked to join the group to get a pic of all the Marines in the room. Other pics included all the kids holding up their glasses of soda as a toast to Jake. Jake with his future father-in-law and then with Charlie and Matt and Chaz’s father Charles, three generations. Jake and his father hugging it out. Jake and his high school friends. Someone offered to take a pic of Jake and Gabe.

The interesting part was the whiskey shots and toasts. Grandmaster Kino and Ricky still only drank water, but everyone else had a shot glass in their hand, including Gabe’s father, as he made the first toast to Jake. Everyone downed their glass. Glasses were refilled for the next toast, and Jake had slipped one to Gabe. “Just one,” Jake had whispered.

But one had turned into three and Gabe was feeling pretty good. It was Ricky who came and gave him some words of wisdom. “I’d stop there if I were you. You’re gonna be sorry in the morning.”

Gabe nodded and took the advice. Still, watching everyone else was fun. Especially seeing his father loosen up. But it was the conversation taking place that really got everyone’s attention. Gabe immediately started recording again.

“So, Ricky Kino, I hear you’re the real deal,” one of Jake’s Marine buddies said, slurring his words and obviously intoxicated. Everyone got silent.

Ricky laughed and then shrugged. “Guess— you’ll never know.”

“Ah, come on now, how about a friendly little match.”

Jake, a little alarmed, looked to his father for help. But John and Keegan seemed only mildly interested in the exchange.

Ricky sighed heavily. Young Eric didn’t look too happy. Someone was always starting stuff with his father. However, no one would’ve thought a fight would break out here. It was obviously the whiskey talkin’.

“Hey guys,” Jake started, “we’re all friends here. Let’s keep it that way.”

“Aww come on, Jake, we’ll still be friends when it’s all over. Let’s just see how I do against the great Ricky Kino.”

“Dude,” another Marine said. “Have you never seen the Kino Challenges?”

“Not the ones where Ricky fought.”

“Well, it was a lot like the ones I fought,” Joey suddenly said, walking forward.

Jeff groaned. “And, here we go again.”

Mark sighed. “Just like old times.”

The drunk Marine looked hard at Joey. “Oh, you’re THAT Joey Adams.”

His buddies laughed at him. "Let me give you a little history lesson, Derrick," one of them said to his friend.

"You see that dude over there? That's Jason Lee. He owns Ameritech Security. He is the guy responsible for developing *our* training, along with the SEALs and the Berets, and the Rangers, man. And that man was trained by that man, who I know you know is Grandmaster Kino. And Grandmaster Kino also trained Ricky Kino, and Ricky Kino trained Joey Adams. These guys are good."

Derrick grinned. "Cool, then a little friendly match should be no trouble," he said, rising and swaying on his feet. "Whaddya say, Ricky Kino?"

Ricky sighed. "It wouldn't be a fair fight."

"Why? Because you're so much older?"

"No, because I'm sober."

"Cool. That'll make us even."

"Dad," Jake appealed.

John Appel only smiled though, and Jake couldn't believe what he heard next. "Sounds like a good time to me," John said.

Grandmaster Kino laughed, which made Gabe smile.

"Don't y'all go bustin' up my place," Joe said. "At least move the tables and chairs."

"I'll pay for any damages," Jason assured Joe.

"Ricky, you want me to take care of this for ya?" Joey asked.

Ricky sighed, stood. "No, that's okay. Always good to stay on my toes." He looked at the large Marine. "Since I'm so *old*, you won't mind if I stretch out a bit?"

"You do you," Derrick said, making everyone laugh.

The men quickly moved all the tables and chairs to the outermost perimeter of the room, leaving a large space in the middle. Gabe was busy snapping off as many pics as he could get.

John Appel moved forward. He was the highest ranked Marine in the room and decided he'd better take charge. "Alright this is gonna be a fair fight with rules," he said firmly. "And what I say goes. Understood?"

"Roger that, Master Sergeant," Derrick mumbled.

"I didn't hear you," John barked. "Am I understood?"

"Sir, Yes, sir," Derrick said louder.

John looked at Ricky.

Ricky smiled. "Sir, yes, sir," he mocked. He looked at his father. "Any tips for me Dad?"

"Don't get hit," he quoted, making everyone chuckle.

"If you fight dirty it's over," John said. "No knee, groin or throat hits. Three rounds of three minutes each."

"Copy that," Derrick mumbled.

"Charlie," Gabe said. "Help me record this. You get it from that side."

"Got it," Charlie said, pulling out his phone.

Ricky took off his belt and shoes and socks. Folded himself in half and hugged his ankles.

Derrick walked slowly out to the middle of the floor and patiently waited for Ricky.

Ricky finally moved out, shook hands with Derrick then stepped back.

"Bow to me," John ordered.

They did.

"And to each other," John said.

They did.

John put his hand out. "And fight."

Derrick immediately charged forward, throwing all kinds of punches but Ricky moved quickly, blocking or outright avoiding everything Derrick threw. After doing this all the way across the floor and back again, Ricky finally spun and kicked, connecting sharply with Derrick's cheek.

Everyone 'ooed' over the connection.

Derrick staggered a bit, but got frustrated and charged in again. This time he was able to grab Ricky, and he lifted him and threw him over his shoulder.

The crowd cheered at that, and then also cheered when Ricky landed on his feet and kicked out to land a side-kick in Derrick's gut. Ricky bounced away. For the rest of the round, Ricky blocked punches and dodged a few misplaced kicks.

"Time," Joe called.

They each found a chair and sat.

The Marines surrounded their guy. "You gotta do better than that, Derrick. This guy is like fifty years old."

"Yeah, well, he's fast," Derrick answered, breathing heavily.

"Yeah, that's what he's known for," one of his buddies answered.

"Let's go," John said at the end of a minute.

They faced off. "And fight."

It was pretty much a replay of the first round, except instead of Ricky connecting twice, he connected three times. The third one knocking Derrick down.

Third round, Derrick actually got in a few punches, but they didn't seem to faze Ricky. Ricky got in a few of his own, and finally tripped Derrick. Rather than go after him while he was down, Ricky bounced away. He motioned for Derrick to get up and bring it.

But Derrick got up and waved him off. "You win, I'm done." He offered his hand.

Ricky smiled. Shook his hand. "I told you it wouldn't be fair. But hey, if you were sober, it would have been a lot closer. Good job."

"You're the real deal, just like they say," Derrick said.

Everyone cheered the fighters, pushed the tables back together and ordered another round.

Jake was enormously relieved. Relieved the fight was over, relieved no one was hurt, relieved with the show of good sportsmanship, relieved Joe's place didn't get messed up and relieved he wouldn't have to explain a big brawl to the women.

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June 14th Early Friday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe rolled over and buried his head under the pillow. It was 6:00 AM. He didn't feel too bad, maybe a little queasy. It was a good thing he stopped at three shots. He was tired though and wished he didn't have to get up, but today was his birthday and he was

supposed to meet Grandmaster Kino over at the Inn for breakfast. He stumbled into the shower. When he came out he kept hearing a buzzing and realized his phone was blowing up. He picked it up and glanced down. He had over a thousand messages and notices on social media, plus over a hundred texts. He sat down a minute and scrolled through, reading some of them. He smiled. Peyton called him a man. Taylor professed her love. A lot of girls from school. Some girls he didn't know and he wasn't sure how they got his number.

He finally put the phone down, dressed, made his bed, knelt in prayer, grabbed the birthday card he got for Grandmaster Kino and headed downstairs.

His father was in the kitchen. Gabe came in and glanced over at the kitchen table where there was a huge Happy Birthday sign and balloons and streamers. He smiled.

"How ya feelin', son?" Keegan asked.

"Okay."

"No hangover?"

"Oh, so, you saw that?"

"Of course."

"Sorry, does Mom know?"

"Nope, that's just between you and me."

"Thanks."

"Well, it's more for my sake than yours."

Gabe grinned.

"Drink some water."

Gabe nodded and did it immediately.

"So, happy birthday, son."

"Thanks, Dad."

"What time are you supposed to be at the Inn to see Grandmaster Kino?" Keegan asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"In about ten minutes. Um, do you want to come?"

"Yeah, thanks for the invite. I think I may mosey over there with you."

"Cool. Is Mom not feeling well? She's usually up by now."

"She and Iris are out running some last minute errands."

"Oh, okay. Well, let's go, but I gotta go out front and tell Agent Dalton that I'm walking over with you."

"No need. He actually came to the door like I asked and I already sent him on ahead."

Keegan and his grown son walked slowly along the sidewalk that led to the Inn. They both were taking in the beauty of the early summer morning. The sun was shining, birds were singing, flowers blooming, bees buzzing.

Keegan finally broke the silence. "Gabe, these past eighteen years have been the happiest years of my life and I just want you to know that you, son, are a big part of that."

Gabe smiled, felt his eyes tear up. "Dad, I hope you know how grateful I am for having such awesome parents, an awesome family, awesome sisters. Really, I know how good I've had it. And you, Dad, are the best dad in the world."

Keegan smiled. "I've tried to do right by you. And you've shown me that I've not done too badly. Your sisters, however, I'm not so sure about."

"Why do you say that? You mean because they're not yours?"

"No, of course not. You have to know that I love them like they're my own. But they're so headstrong and I think they don't appreciate that I'm only trying to protect them."

Gabe stayed silent because he had a feeling he knew what his father was talking about.

"For example," Keegan went on. "Heather dated Nolan for a long time before she finally brought him home to meet us. I'm pretty sure that she's probably gonna have wedding bells in her near future, though they haven't said anything yet. So I feel like she didn't trust us to share how she was feeling."

"Um, it wasn't that, Dad. She just didn't want to bother you about it if it didn't work out."

"Hmm, so she's confided in *you*."

"Uh, yeah I guess. I was complaining that she's always gone, and she told me that she missed Nolan a lot like I miss Taylor. She said she would tell you guys about him if it looked like it was gonna work out."

Keegan nodded. "Okay, that makes sense. And since she's told us about him now, I'm guessing she feels it's gonna work out."

Gabe nodded.

Keegan sighed. "But both Violet and Rose are also seeing someone without letting your mom and me know."

"Rose too?"

Keegan glanced down at Gabe. "So, you know about Violet?"

Gabe looked down. "She doesn't know I know. I saw her and, well, I saw her."

Keegan nodded. "I see."

"Dad, she wouldn't do this if her feelings weren't serious."

"I get that they're serious. Serious enough to put his job on the line."

"Give her a chance to come clean. Give him a chance too. Remember Jensen and Kimmie got together on Jason's watch. Violet loves you. She's just afraid."

"Afraid of the consequences, as well she should be."

Gabe sighed, decided to change the subject. "Who is Rose seeing?"

"So, you don't know about her at all?"

Gabe shook his head.

"I guess she's a little better at subterfuge. She's been seeing Mike Moreland."

"The *Twin Wave Beauty* guy? That's weird."

"Why is that weird?"

"He doesn't strike me as being her type. Besides, I thought he lives up in Oregon."

"He's been here working out the plans for the shoot for the product line. They're gonna make the ad next week."

"Well maybe she hasn't said anything because it's not that serious."

"Maybe. We'll just have to wait and see."

They walked up the steps to the Inn and opened the door.

"Surprise!"

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Matthew 10:26-28

"So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden

that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Chapter Thirty

June 14th Friday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe's mouth fell open. This was supposed to be a little private birthday breakfast between Grandmaster Kino and himself. Everyone was here, including Peyton and his girlfriend Avery, and his mom and brother. A giant sign hung across the far wall, "Happy Birthday Eric and Gabe!"

Gabe looked around for Grandmaster Kino and approached him.

Eric smiled at the young man. "Your eighteenth birthday is an important one, so we invited a few more to help celebrate."

"Okay everyone," Lizzy called. "Breakfast is set up buffet style. Fill your plates and have a seat. But first," Lizzy gestured toward her husband.

Keegan cleared his throat. "But first, Grandmaster Kino, since it's also your birthday and seventy is also an important one, will you do us the honor of blessing the food?" Keegan asked.

Eric smiled. He was honored to do so. He bowed his head. "Dear Father." He stopped.

Everyone looked up to see if there was a problem.

Eric sniffed, started again. "Wow, Father, I don't know if anyone else felt that, but as I began this prayer I felt your Spirit move through me so strongly that it took my breath away and has filled me to overflowing. Because of that I'm going to do more than bless the food, but pray for this beautiful group of people, Father, people You've seen fit to bring together." Overcome with emotion Eric knelt on the floor. Shelley immediately knelt beside him.

"First, Father, because it's mine and Gabriel's birthday, he and I would like to thank You for our lives and for placing us with the wonderful families You've blessed us with."

Gabe gave a soft moan and sank to his knees. Taylor knelt beside him and took his hand.

"Father, everyone here, everyone in this room, is absolutely willing to do Your will, and they want to know what Your will is, they want to know what You would like them to do."

Several more people sank to their knees as the room grew warm and the Holy Spirit filled each person.

Eric's voice was now thick with emotion. "I pray a blessing of protection over this group. They are some of Your fiercest warriors, Father, and we know You love them. We can feel Your love so strongly right now. Father, lead us, guide us, help us to rise up and do the work You have for us. Bless the young ones with health and strength and the power of discernment. Bless us all to find the correct path."

All around the room, the remaining people slowly sank to their knees as they felt the power of God move over them. Even Jake's Marine buddies knelt and had their arms around each other's shoulders.

"We are so grateful for You touching our hearts today, Father. We're so grateful for Your love and guidance. I feel Father, that you're telling me that something is coming, and that everyone here will be involved in some way. We pray that we'll be ready when the time comes. Give us strength and courage and patience."

He stopped for several seconds. Drew a deep breath.

"We're grateful for the good food we're about to eat, and for the many hands that prepared it. We ask Your blessing upon it. We pray in the name of Your faithful and powerful Son, for whom we are so very grateful, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen" was whispered around the room. Eric opened his eyes to see everyone on their knees. He watched as John helped Miss Maddie to her feet and everyone else around the room slowly began to stand.

"Well, I declare," Miss Maddie said loudly. "I have never in all my years felt the spirit so powerful, and I've lived a lot of years."

Several people chuckled.

"I wanna sing 'Happy Birfday to you,'" Iris chirped, making everyone laugh.

"We will in a few minutes," Daisy told her little sister. "First let's get some food in that tiny little belly of yours."

The group stirred and went to fill their plates.

Gabe stood aside and watched everyone. What had just happened? He agreed with Miss Maddie. He'd never felt God's presence so strong. Taylor smiled up at him and left his side to go help everyone get served. He felt a strong hand grip his shoulder.

"You okay?" Grandmaster Kino asked.

Gabe's eyes filled again as he looked up into Eric Kino's face. There seemed to be a light around him. Gabe couldn't speak. He just blinked and then shrugged his shoulders.

Eric faced him completely and looked deeply into Gabe's eyes. "I know exactly how you're feeling, Gabe. Commit it to memory, and then for the times in your life when you begin to doubt that God is real, remember this day, this moment."

Gabe nodded, found his voice. "I don't think I'll ever forget this. It's weird, Grandmaster Kino, I've always felt this, well, I'm not quite sure how to put it."

"Are you talking about our connection?"

Gabe opened his mouth in surprise. "You feel it too? Like some kind of link between us?"

Eric smiled at the young man. "I've always felt it, but it's grown much stronger this year. We have a connection, a bond. You are a special young man."

"I don't know about that, but I do feel this, like, pull I guess, that God wants me to do something."

"Then be ready at all times. Stay in His word. Pray often. Listen often. No more drinking."

Gabe smiled. "I thought, ya know, just this once, to celebrate Jake."

"I did the same thing once. I thought almost those same words. Except it was to celebrate my own marriage. And I wasn't ready when danger came calling."

"What happened?"

"A man who wanted to hurt me came after me and defeated me and tied me up and made me watch while he raped and tortured and tried to kill my wife."

Gabe's mouth fell open. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I think I've heard bits and pieces of that story. But I didn't know you'd been drinking."

"Now you know. Learn from my mistakes. Be ready."

"Yes, sir."

"And Gabe?" He smiled warmly. "Happy birthday, young man."

Gabe smiled. "Thank you, sir. And happy birthday to you." Gabe bowed slowly.

Eric returned the gesture.

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June 14th Friday Afternoon

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe's job was to keep Jake and Laynah occupied while the Stewarts, Appels and Tanners prepared their wedding gift for the couple. That gift was a place for them to live. The most secluded Cottage at the Inn, number eight, had now been completely renovated. Today they were moving in the furniture, hanging curtains, and staging. Whatever gifts were given to the bride and groom would be brought and placed in the second bedroom of the cottage.

Gabe resorted to challenging Jake and his four Marine friends and his two old high school friends, Kurt and Landon, to a little target practice. Laynah, currently unable to shoot, was asked to come and watch and keep score. She brought along her two cousins, Kylie and Riley, and two friends, Holly and Kayla, and last but not least, Taylor. Gabe demonstrated the challenge using three guns: a pistol, a hunting rifle and an AR, and four targets. He hit all the targets dead center, laid down the AR and backed away.

"Sign him up," Derrick said.

"Boy's a natural," Kurt agreed.

Gabe grinned and set the table for the first challenger. He turned to Taylor who was keeping time. "Just like you did for me, start the timer the second he steps forward past that line and stop the moment any part of the AR touches the table."

"Got it. Ready when you are."

"Who's going first?" Gabe asked.

Derrick stepped up to the line.

"Naturally," Jake said with a smile. "Come on, brother, make us proud."

Derrick flew through the challenge and hit every target dead center. "Semper fi," he mumbled as he backed away.

"Oohrah," the guys responded.

Gabe grinned. He loved it. The other Marines, Shane, Drew, Corey and Jake did just as well. Jake's friend Kurt hit all the targets, but not dead center and Landon hit all the targets, barely.

Gabe shook his head. "Well, for accuracy, I can't declare a winner, but I can declare the best loser, the award goes to Landon."

Everyone laughed and patted Landon on the back.

"That's the kid's way of nicely declaring you the biggest loser," Kurt said.

"Speed wise," Gabe went on. "The winner is Derrick, but only by a fraction. Then Jake, then Corey, then Drew, and then Shane, all just fractions of a second apart. Then Kurt is only a few seconds back and Landon only a second behind Kurt. You guys rocked it. Good job."

"And don't forget, the timer is merely human."

"Hey," Taylor complained.

Gabe smiled at her.

"What about you?" Jake asked.

"I don't count since it was my drill and I do it a lot."

"What was your time?"

"Doesn't matter," Gabe insisted.

"His time was a full second faster than everyone," Taylor said. "But I'm only speaking as a mere human."

"Next challenge," Gabe went on. "Girls' turn."

"Oh, no," Holly, one of Laynah's friends, said. "I don't know how to shoot a gun."

"Me neither," Kayla said.

"I've shot a few times, but it's been a long time," Laynah's cousin Riley said.

"Ditto," Kylie, Laynah's other young cousin, said.

"Cool," Gabe replied. "So, each guy volunteers to teach one of the girls. It'll be a challenge of the teachers. How well can you teach? You each have twenty minutes to teach your girl how to shoot a pistol and, hmm, let's do the rifle. Who's in?"

"I'll teach that one," Derrick said, pointing at Holly.

She smiled and blushed. "Okay."

There were only four girls, so a few guys opted to just watch.

Derrick taught Holly, Shane claimed Kayla, Jake took on Kylie, and Kurt took on Riley.

"Taylor," Gabe said, "tell them the most important thing to teach their student."

Taylor grinned. "Finger off the trigger and never point a gun at anyone, unless you wanna kill them."

The guys all chuckled. Once the guys began to teach they all realized it was gonna take a lot longer than twenty minutes to teach. The guys without students ended up helping the instructors demonstrate. Gabe didn't mind. He was doing his duty, keeping them occupied.

Gabe yawned. He was feeling pretty tired, he guessed from last night. While he waited for the guys to instruct the girls he nuzzled up close to Taylor.

"How ya doin', Tay?"

"I'm good. This is fun."

"Glad you think so. Do you wanna take a turn?"

"I'd love to. I'd like to shoot all three like you did."

"Okay, I'll set the table for you, but I'll have to instruct you on the rifle and AR."

"I'm game."

"Cool. Make me proud."

She grinned. "I will."

The timing worked out perfectly. Taylor got to shoot and she was excellent. The other guys and girls all praised her. The other girls each got a turn. Riley was the best out of that

group and her instructor, Kurt, claimed the win. Right at that moment Jake got a text. He looked at his phone and then over at Laynah. “We’re being summoned to come to Cottage eight.”

“Why?”

“Dunno, it’s the one that’s been out of commission the last two weeks. Something was wrong with the foundation or something. It says come quickly.” He looked at everyone else. “It also says the rest of you guys are invited to lunch at the Inn.”

“Sounds good to me. That Miss Maddie can cook!” Derrick said.

Gabe pulled out his phone when it too buzzed. He looked at Taylor. “You and I have also been summoned, but to my house.”

“Oh good! You can finally give me that tour.”

“Alright, everyone. Let’s bag it up,” Jake ordered. “Hey, Shane, would you guys mind escorting Gabe and Taylor over to Gabe’s place? I promised we’d keep them safe and that they didn’t need their bodyguards while they were with us.”

“We don’t mind. We’ll take care of little bro for ya.”

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Jake and Laynah walked up to Cottage eight. It was the one farthest back on the property and closest to the Tanner home. Their parents stood in front of the cottage. Each cottage featured two bedrooms, one bath, an open floor plan, and a tiny kitchen. Each cottage had a small front porch with two rocking chairs. Each cottage was meticulously landscaped.

Jake frowned as they approached. Something was different. “Looks freshly painted,” Jake said to Laynah as he eyed the sage green cottage with fresh white trim.

“Yeah, I’m sure it used to be yellow,” Laynah agreed.

Their parents all wore big smiles.

“Hey, y’all,” Laynah greeted as they walked up. “What’s up?”

John handed Jake an envelope which he opened and then held up so both he and Laynah could read it.

For Jacob and Melaynah Appel,

So that the newly married couple can have some privacy until you buy or build your own home, this cottage is yours. It has been completely renovated. One bedroom has been enlarged. If you decide you don’t want to use it, and would rather go with your original plan to stay at the Inn, that is no problem. Just know that it’s here for you whenever you want some alone time. We love you both so much and pray God will bless your marriage and your home with peace and safety and love abounding.

Always,

John, Jodi, Chaz, Lisa

P.S. A lot of people helped with this gift including, Keegan, Lizzy, Gabe, Taylor, Charlie, Matt, Rose, Violet, Lily, Daisy, Ty and Joe

Laynah looked up, tears in her eyes. “Oh you guys, what an amazing gift. It’s beautiful.”

Lisa laughed. “Wait ‘til you see the inside.”

"This is amazing," Jake said solemnly. "I don't know what to say." He shook his head, brow furrowed. "But, this will mean a loss of income for the Inn, right?"

"You don't worry about the Inn," John assured. "Thanks to Gabe and the Kinos, business is booming. We're doing so well your mom and I and Lisa are getting ready to expand again and are opening another Inn."

"Really? Where this time?"

"Right here in Pine Forest. In town. It'll be more like a motel than the Inn, but it will still be very charming, have a place for breakfast, and loaded with small-town charm."

"That actually sounds awesome," Jake said. He smiled and looked around. "So, thank you all so much." He looked at Chaz. "Uncle Chaz, you know, Laynah and I still want to purchase those few acres from the ranch."

Chaz nodded. "That is understood, son, but that's down the road, right? A newly married couple needs some privacy."

Laynah threw her arms around her parents. "Thank you guys so much." She hugged them hard and then did the same for Jake's parents.

Jake hugged his mom and Aunt Lisa and shook hands with his father and Uncle Chaz. "You guys are the best."

Jodi clapped her hands with glee. "Well, go on in and look around!"

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"So, some dudes are trying to get ya, huh?" Derrick asked as they walked Gabe and Taylor up the long drive.

"They're tryin' to *get* Taylor. They just wanna *off* me," Gabe answered.

"Let me take a look at your neck," Shane said.

Gabe stopped, turned and lifted his chin to show the fresh scar.

"Geez, dude, I bet that hurt."

Gabe chuckled. "I was in shock and really didn't think about it hurting. I was thinkin' more about I was about to meet Jesus."

"I guess if ya gotta go, that's a comforting thought," Shane said.

Gabe turned and continued walking as he thought about that statement. He put his arm around Taylor who had gone silent. "It's okay. You're safe."

She only nodded.

They arrived at the front door and Gabe invited the Marines inside but they wanted to hurry back to the Inn for lunch. Gabe shook their hands, thanked them and he and Taylor headed through the door. He looked up, surprised as everyone yelled "Happy Birthday!"

His whole family was there, along with Peyton and Avery, and Elias, Liam, Luke and Carlos, the other seniors on his baseball team.

Gabe was being hugged and congratulated. Elias said he had doubts that Gabe would make it to his eighteenth birthday. A few guys agreed.

"I'm sure everyone is hungry," Lizzy said. "Gabe, will you bless the food?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And don't give one of your long-winded prayers," Carlos urged.

Gabe laughed, bowed his head and blessed it quickly.

"Go ahead everyone and serve yourselves. You can sit wherever you want. The kitchen table, the dining room table, outside at the pool, wherever."

No one was shy and they all lined up to serve themselves.

Gabe looked down as Iris reached her little arms up to him. He scooped her up and asked her what she wanted to eat.

"You get her situated and I'll get you a plate," Taylor offered.

"Thanks, Tay," he said. He stopped her, tilted her face up. Kissed her lightly.

"What's that for?"

He smiled. "Just because I haven't done that in at least an hour."

She giggled.

Gabe served Iris and set her in her booster chair. He then backed up and observed the crowd, a thing he did habitually. People laughing, chatting merrily, loading plates up, all these people he cared so much for and he looked heavenward and silently thanked God for them. He turned to his mom who was also watching and he smiled at her. "Mom, this is awesome. Thank you so much. Because of Jake and Laynah's wedding, I didn't really expect this big of a deal."

She smiled and hugged him hard. "Silly boy. Surely you know that your day is important too."

"It's no big deal."

"I love that you think that."

"Anyway, thanks, Mom." He kissed her cheek.

He glanced around to find his father and caught his eye across the room. He smiled at him and his dad simply nodded.

Gabe sighed. He was tired. He'd love to go upstairs and sleep, which was very unlike him. All these people were here for him, so he took a deep breath, shook off the fatigue and smiled. Taylor handed him a plate and they found two places right there at the kitchen table. Right in front of him was a giant chocolate sheet cake with eighteen candles, a few envelopes with his name on them and a few gift bags. He really didn't need anything, but whatever was in them, he was grateful for the thoughtfulness.

As he ate, one by one his sisters came and hugged him and kissed his cheek. Once everyone had eaten they were all called together to see what gifts he'd received.

The first bag he delved into was from Peyton and Avery. It was a black T-shirt with "I'm an Adult Now (technically)," printed on it. Gabe laughed.

A gift from Rose was a selfie light and stick combined. "You said you're gonna have to make videos and post them, this should make it easier," Rose explained.

The gift from Violet was a thick, black Ameritech hoodie.

Daisy and Lily jointly gave him a new, larger ammo can and matching duffle.

Several cards held heartfelt messages and money.

Lastly, his mom gave him an impressive Tactical Smart watch, and his father presented him with a Colt Double Eagle handgun, which everyone oohed and awww'd over.

Gabe looked up at everyone standing around. "Wow, guys, these are awesome gifts. I can't thank you enough."

"Yeah, don't go gettin' all mushy on us," Peyton said.

Lizzy leaned over and started lighting the candles on the cake. Iris started clapping her hands. "Let's sing happy birthday and have cake and ice cream before this child loses her mind," Lizzy said.

Over the next few hours the party wound down and finally the house was quiet. Iris went down for a nap. Rose and Violet said they had errands to run and left the house, but Gabe had a feeling that they were off to see their guys. Gabe glanced up at his father to see the disappointed look on his face and he wondered if he should let his sisters know that Dad knew they were seeing someone, and that they were actually hurting him by not telling him. Daisy and Lily both went to share some time with Miss Maddie. Keegan had work in his office and Lizzy went upstairs to rest. Gabe and Taylor made their way into the den and sat cuddled on the large sectional sofa his arm around her, her head on his chest. This was nice and comfortable and Gabe felt content.

He rubbed his hand over her shoulder. "You've been awfully quiet, Tay. You okay?"

"Yes, I'm good. Just thinking."

"What about?"

"About you and me and the thing Granddad said in his prayer this morning."

"Which thing?"

"About God's will, about finding out what His will is for our lives. Do you think it's His will that we be together?"

"Hmm, yeah, I feel pretty good about being with you. It feels right to me. Doesn't it feel right to you?"

"It feels more than right to me. It feels like we were meant to be together. But I hate to say that cuz I don't want to scare you away."

"I don't scare too easily, Tay. Being with you doesn't scare me, but..." He realized it was the perfect opportunity to talk to her like his mother advised him to do.

"But?"

"Well, there is one thing that scares me."

"Okay. What scares you about us? Go ahead, you can tell me anything."

Gabe swallowed. "My feelings for you are so strong, I'm afraid I'm gonna lose control and make love to you, and you and I both know that's not God's will. Not yet anyway."

"Well, I think I have a say in whether you make love to me or not."

Gabe smiled. "Yes, you do. But I'm just gonna tell you how it works. If I lost control, and decided I was gonna go for it, you would cave pretty easily."

"What makes you think that?"

"You've already offered yourself to me a few times. I just feel like if I really wanted to do it, I could get you to consent. Think about it and be honest."

She drew a deep breath. "Okay, maybe you're right about that."

"But it would be a big mistake, Taylor and we would feel guilty. We would feel ashamed. And more than likely, we would want to do it again. And again. And we would feel really bad about disappointing God, as well as our parents. And think of our friends and the people on social media who look up to us. We have to be stronger than everybody else."

"Then we have to make sure we stay strong."

"Exactly. But, well, a guy is different from a girl."

"No kidding," she laughed.

"I'm serious. When I touch your hand, or your shoulder, when I kiss you, how does it make you feel?"

"Loved. Close to you."

"Right. But with a guy, when you say certain things or touch me certain ways, it gets me all, well, all goin' and stuff."

"Like, really turned on?"

"Right, like, almost too strong to stop myself. Like, remember Wednesday when you came up to my room and touched me here," he said as he raised his shirt and touched his lower abdomen. "It made me want to drag you over to my bed and take you right then and there. I am so weak sometimes, Taylor. It's so hard. It actually does scare me. So, I need your help. I need you to work with me and not against me."

Taylor's big eyes blinked up at him. "So, does that mean we can't hug and kiss anymore?"

"No, it doesn't mean that. I don't think I can live without that. But like, don't suggest we play around in bed cuz I really want to take you up on it. I don't want to fall and I sure don't want to have to explain to my father, and even less to your father, that I couldn't restrain myself."

Taylor was silent for a few moments as she thought about Gabe's words. "I don't want you to fall either. And I sure don't want to be the reason for it. I'm sorry if I've made things hard on you."

Gabe gave a soft laugh.

"What's so funny?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

Taylor sighed. "It's just that, I'm so in love with you, it's like I can't get close enough. Wow, I guess that makes me seem like some crazed, overbearing girlfriend."

"Well, it might seem like that if I didn't feel the same way. But I do. I'm in love with you Tay. I can't think of anyone who I trust more, can talk to more, attracts me more, who I have more respect for. You are it. You're the 'it' girl. We just need to be careful so that we don't ruin 'it' before we have a chance to make 'it' happen. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. I want to be the reason we make it, not the reason we fail. I'll do whatever you need me to do to help."

Gabe sighed. "Thanks for that. Thanks for listening. If I haven't said it lately, I gotta say it now, you totally rock, Taylor Kino."

"You do too, Gabriel Tanner."

His arm still around her, he hugged her close, tilted her face up, kissed her slowly. They sat there silently for some time. When Taylor looked back up at him, his eyes were closed. She tucked her feet up under her, snuggled her head against his chest and closed her eyes with a contented smile.

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"Taylor."

Taylor yawned, and stirred at the sound of the feminine voice.

Bree stood at the entrance to the Tanners' den. Gabe was sound asleep, his head on the arm of the sofa. Her daughter was tucked up under his arm, her head on his chest, also sound asleep. "Taylor," she said again.

Her eyes blinked open. "Mom?"

Bree raised her eyebrows. "Yes, ma'am."

Taylor sat up. "Oh!" She pushed against Gabe's chest, lifting herself away from him. He stirred and his eyes fluttered open. When he realized Taylor's mom was in the room, he sat straight up.

"Oh, sorry, Mrs. Kino," he mumbled. "I must've fallen asleep."

"Um hmm," she said. "Well, you two need to wake up. Ricky is here in the office talking to your father right now, and I don't think he'll be happy about you two sleeping together on the sofa."

Gabe stood quickly. "Yes, ma'am."

Taylor giggled. "So you are afraid of my father."

Gabe smiled. He pulled out his phone and glanced at the time. His face paled. "Tay, we've been asleep for almost two hours."

"Wow."

"Where is everyone? Is my mom in the kitchen?" Gabe asked.

"Your mom has been upstairs resting with Iris. Lily went up to get her. The rest of your sisters are in the kitchen working on dinner."

Gabe's mind was racing as what he just dreamed came rushing back into his brain. He swayed, put his hand to his head.

"Are you okay?" Bree asked.

He looked up at Mrs. Kino. "Is Grandmaster Kino here?"

"Yes," she said with a smile, "but you're talking about the elder Grandmaster Kino, right?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, I didn't mean any disrespect." He felt like he couldn't breathe.

"I know, I'm just teasing you. No, Eric is not here, he's at the Inn. What's wrong?"

"I, uh..." he looked at Taylor and then back at her mom. "I have to go talk to Grandmaster Kino. Tell my dad I'll be right back." He turned and ran out the front door.

Gabe flew down the path, through the security gate, hurdled flowers and shrubbery, dashed up the front steps and burst through the door of the Inn. He headed straight into the kitchen. Shelley and Jodi looked up.

"Hey Gabe!" Jodi greeted.

"Where's Grandmaster Kino?"

"He's resting up in the room," Shelley answered.

"Which room?"

"Number two, why?"

He didn't answer but turned and charged up the steps, went straight to the door, knocked briefly and entered the room.

Eric closed the Bible he'd been reading, placed it on the table next to the bed and smiled. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Gabe stood there, breathing hard. He moved forward without a word and placed his hand on Eric's chest, just over his heart. "How are you feeling? Are you okay?"

Eric's lips pressed tightly together. He sighed. "Yes, son, I'm good. What did you see?"

Gabe released a breath, and moved to sit on the chair near the window. "It wasn't a vision. It was a dream. But it was more than a dream. It was so real, but it was also unreal. I know I sound like I'm crazy."

"No you don't. Go on."

"I fell asleep in the den, which I never do. I've been sleepy all day. I slept for two hours. It was such a deep sleep that it seemed like only five minutes. When I first woke up I was like, disoriented, but then I remembered the dream. It felt like God was trying to talk to me, but I couldn't understand what He was saying. But I saw you, it seemed you were having like a heart attack or something. It seemed you were in distress. But there were other things too. Terrible things." His eyes filled with tears. "Things like children being killed. Women being slaughtered. It was terrible. There were so many different scenes, like flashes, and they were happening so fast. If God was trying to tell me something, how can I stop what he was showing me? I can't even comprehend it. There was too much, and some of it had to do with you, maybe with our connection."

"Okay, take a deep breath. Blow it out. One more time. Good." Eric sat up to face Gabe.

"God is not trying to confuse you or overwhelm you. These messages you got today may be a buildup."

"A buildup? What does that mean?"

"Like, He tried to show you one message, earlier, but your mind wasn't calm enough to receive it. And then He tried to show you something else. And something else. And today, when you finally slept deep enough and your mind relaxed enough, they all came through."

"Okay. But then, why would God show me such terrible, horrible things?"

"It's hard for me to say, because God is speaking to you, not me."

"What if it's not God? What if it's the enemy?"

"That's possible too which is why we must pray often and stay in tune so we can have the power of discernment. But you said, it felt like God was talking to you. Do you feel like you have a relationship with Him?"

"Yes, I really do."

"Then you know His voice. So, let's assume it was God giving you this dream. It could be for many reasons, but let's just consider one. What if God is showing you the people you will eventually help on your current path? What if He is showing you how you'll be needed in the future? Did you feel fear during the dream?"

He shook his head. "No fear. Some sadness."

"If the dream came from dark forces you would have felt fear. Nothing you can do right now except stay in tune, ask for clarity, He WILL answer you. Be patient. His timing is perfect."

"Sir, have you been to a doctor lately?"

Eric smiled. "I'm in perfect health."

"But your heart, is it... "

"My heart is in perfect health."

Gabe blew out a breath. Shook his head. "Will you pray with me?"

"I'd be honored."

They knelt together and prayed and Gabe felt a delicious peace and calm fill his body and mind. They were just rising from their prayer when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," Eric said.

Jake poked his head in. "Hey, so Gabe, I'm supposed to escort you back to your house. The Kinos are still there waiting for you to come back. They have a birthday present to

give you."

"Oh, man, they came over there to give me a birthday present? And I ran over here like a bat out of h—uh, like really fast."

"Yep. So, your dad says to not keep them waiting any longer."

Gabe turned to Eric. "Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure. Go get your gift. It's a joint gift from Shelley and me and Bree and Ricky."

"Oh! Well then, thank you in advance."

"You're very welcome."

"Come on, Gabester, I can't wait to see what this is."

"Jake, on your way out, will you please tell Jeffy I need to speak with her?"

"Roger that," Jake said.

He did as asked and then they headed back to the Tanner home. As soon as they came in Taylor approached Gabe. "What was that all about? Why did you run out of here like that? You scared me."

Gabe turned to everyone, all waiting for his answer. "Sorry, Taylor, sorry everyone, I had a dream, and I thought Grandmaster Kino was in trouble. I thought he was having a heart attack. I had to see him for myself. It seemed it was urgent, but he was just fine, so, I guess I'm just losing my mind."

"I've known that for years," Rose chirped.

"Sorry to make you wait on me Grandmaster Kino, Mrs. Kino. Would you like some birthday cake?"

Ricky smiled. "Been there done that. Sit down, we have a birthday present for you."

Gabe sat obediently in the closest chair in the front living room.

Ricky held up an envelope. "So, Bree and I were driving around Pine Forest looking things over, because we're thinking about buying a vacation home here."

Taylor gasped. "You are?"

"Yes," Bree answered her daughter with a smile.

Taylor squealed and jumped into the air while everyone laughed.

Gabe smiled at her. "That is an awesome surprise," he said warmly.

"Yeah, but that's not the gift," Ricky continued. "So, as we drove around we saw the old elementary school on Main Street and decided to drive in and around back, ya know, see where the big fight, I mean, the 'demonstration', took place. I was surprised at the large schoolyard out back. It seemed such a shame that a prime piece of property like that was sitting idle, going to waste. We walked the property and Bree got on her phone and got hold of the city clerk to ask some questions, and next thing we know, the Mayor pulls up. After a long talk, well, it's almost a done deal." He handed the envelope to Gabe.

Confused, Gabe opened the envelope. There was a nice birthday card admonishing him to do great things, and what looked like the deed to a piece of property. He read it and looked up, his brow furrowed.

"Gabe, you are now the owner of the Gabe Tanner Community Center, or whatever you want to call it."

"Seriously. This is incredible. I, I can't even, I mean... "

"I know you have a lot of questions, or maybe are not quite sure what to do with this yet. I've spoken extensively with your father. We have no intentions of saddling you with

a huge responsibility right here before you're getting ready to go away and train at Ameritech. That little deed paper is just a token. Right now there's a contract on the property in my name. We're gonna give the money to your foundation to buy the property and place it under the foundation. But before all that happens, we'll renovate it ourselves, however you'd like to do it."

At Gabe's lost look, Ricky smiled. "Do a little research on other community centers and see what kind of services they offer to their communities, and then pray about it and see what comes to mind. No big deal. Do you want a basketball court, do you want classrooms, do you want an auditorium? Whatever you want, we'll take care of. And we'll take care of the taxes until you're ready to take over. Even if that's five years from now."

"I'm blown away. I don't know what to say. I don't know that I'm worthy of this gift. I mean that property, it must be worth millions. Oh, sorry, I guess I'm not supposed to say that."

"It's okay, brother," Heather said. "Cuz I said the same thing."

"So you all knew about this?"

"No," Keegan answered. "Not until about thirty minutes ago. Ricky and I have spoken privately and then while we were waiting for you to come home, the family was told. And it's okay for you to ask about the price of this one cuz, you're eventually gonna be responsible for it. Ricky was able to take the property off the town's hands by paying all the back taxes. He ended up getting the property for under two million dollars."

"It was a steal," Ricky added. "The same property out in Cali would be around twenty million, maybe more. To be honest, I couldn't resist. Bree and I started talking about all the things that could be done with the property, all the activities you could offer to your community, especially to the underprivileged. And you're gonna need a manager and teachers, and a fundraising campaign manager, kitchen workers, recreation helpers, maintenance man and lawn keeper and more, so it's gonna provide employment for a lot of people in this town. And when it's not in use for regular activities, it could be rented out to be used for special events, like a town dance, or private parties, or Master Appel could hold a large tournament there, or a number of other things."

"This is too amazing," Gabe said softly. "I'm so grateful, I don't even know what to say. I think I'm in way over my head."

"That's understandable," Ricky went on. "But I spoke with Mark, and the foundation will take care of most of the business end of things. They will have someone oversee all operations, including hiring a manager, which of course would come from your recommendations. I mean, who knows, maybe one of your sisters would be interested in this kind of thing, running a non-profit. The opportunities are endless."

Gabe shook his head. "I'm blown away. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. My father and Shelley, and Bree and I all went in on it. And I have to warn you, Bree and Shelley and your mom and sisters have already shown a great desire to be in on the planning and the renovations."

Gabe smiled. "That's cool with me. I'd be grateful for their input."

"Okay," Bree said. She held up a small box. "Now, there's one more thing. This was the gift we had for you before we stumbled across that property. It's a joint gift from everyone in our family, including Mark and Bella, Joey and Breez, Jeffy and Cam, Eric and Mom and Ricky and me, Justin and Lori, Jason and Angel, Kimmie and Jensen and

also young Eric, JoJo and Logan. We did this with your parents' permission and we hope it'll make things just a little bit easier for you when you get out west to train." She handed him the box.

He opened it and pulled out a set of car keys. His eyes opened wide.

"Those go to this," Ricky said as he handed Gabe his phone. He was looking at the picture of a beautiful, matte black Toyota 4-Runner.

"You're kidding me," Gabe mumbled.

"You're gonna need transportation when you're out there and it was much less expensive in the long run than leasing a car for you. And don't worry about the expense. With so many people opting in, it was nothing," Ricky added. "Besides, I figure you're gonna be driving my daughter around, and I want you in something dependable. Also, this vehicle is a little special. It's armored. Bulletproof body and glass."

"Wow," Jake said. "That is amazing. You guys are the best."

"We've been so blessed. We try to bless others as much as possible," Bree said.

Gabe rose and hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Thank you guys, it seems like, so feeble to just say thanks."

He turned and shook Ricky's hand. "Thank you, sir."

Ricky pulled him in for a hug. "It's our pleasure. You can thank us by going out there and making amazing things happen in this world."

"I'm gonna try."

Ricky grinned. "Do, or do not. There is no try."

Everyone laughed.

"I need to go back over to the Inn and thank everyone."

"No, you'll have to thank them tomorrow," Lizzy said. "Jeff and Mickey are coming over to dinner and will be here any minute." She looked at Jake. "Are you seeing Laynah tonight?"

"No, ma. Laynah and I have said goodbye for the day and she's having dinner with her family for the last time as a single girl. Next time I see her, she'll be walking down the aisle."

"And what about you?"

"I'm having a cozy little dinner with my parents in our apartment. My mom says it's the last time as her little boy," he chuckled.

"Aw, that's so sweet," Violet said.

"What's everyone else doing?" Gabe asked.

"We're having dinner at the Inn," Bree said. "Miss Maddie has had her staff prepare a gourmet meal for us. But the younger guys are going to Joe's."

"And my Marine guys are also going to Joe's," Jake added.

"What am I doing?" Taylor asked.

"You're welcome to eat with us," Lizzy offered.

Taylor looked up at her mother. "May I?"

"Yes, but that means your Dad will have to come get you."

"Dad?"

"Of course I'll come get you."

"What time?"

"Not too late," Bree said. "We have a lot to do in the morning. Call us when dinner is

over and we'll decide."

Taylor nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

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"Come on, Dad," Heather pleaded. "Please tell the story again. We love hearing about when you and Mom first met and Jeff saved your life and then you saved his. Besides, Nolan hasn't heard it."

Keegan glanced around at his audience. All of his family plus Nolan and Taylor, and then Jeff, Mickey and their two boys. Fifteen people. They'd had to put both inserts into their already large dining room table. "Well," Keegan began, directing his words toward Nolan. "Lizzy was a nurse and I'd been in a car accident. And... "

"Tell them what you told me about the accident," Lizzy urged.

Keegan smiled. "I was driving along the road at a fairly high rate of speed and this giant devil buck with a huge rack and red demon eyes stepped out in front of me. I smacked right into him and went careening off the road and down into a steep ravine. I swear the deer was laughing as I hit him."

The group laughed.

"I'm not kidding. It's like I could hear this loud demonic laughter as my car went flying down the hill."

Lily made a witch laugh and Iris copied her, making everyone laugh again.

"So," Keegan went on. "At the time I was with the FBI and I was driving so fast because I'd been working undercover to infiltrate a child trafficking organization, and I had lots of evidence and they knew it because someone blew my cover. It took a while for someone to find me after the accident. I was... "

"How long?" Gabe asked.

Keegan nodded in understanding. "Several hours. I'm actually not sure exactly. It was morning when I had the accident. It was dark when they found me. Anyway, so I was taken..."

"Were you in pain?" Gabe asked.

Keegan had told this story dozens of times but had never gone into great detail. He looked at his son and realized that after Gabe's own ordeal he was needing to understand. "I was in a great deal of pain. I was pinned under the car and every movement caused a ripple of pain to run through my leg and back. I thought I was gonna die a long slow death and I cried, but I didn't want to give up because there were children whose lives were in grave danger. I've never felt that much pain in my life except for the day your Mom said she wouldn't marry me. But that's another story."

The girls smiled at the sentiment.

"Your dad is my hero," Jeff said. "Not just because he saved my life, but because no matter how much it hurts, he still does what has to be done."

Keegan glanced at Jeff and smiled. He realized he was making that point here in front of his boys for a reason.

"So," Keegan went on. "I was taken to a hospital in Atlanta and Lizzy was a nurse there. My AIC decided they had to move me because the organization would send someone to find me and kill me. They put me in Nurse Lizzy's home way up in Tyler Springs to hide me and gave me a new identity, Mike Moreland."

Gabe glanced at Rose, and noticed her cheeks turned pink.

"I was only five at the time," Heather said. "But I can still remember it clearly. He was so nice to us girls, so kind and so funny."

"Hah, that's not how I remember it," Lizzy put in. "He was a mean, grumpy bear."

Keegan smiled at her, his heart swelling with the love he felt for her. "I was grumpy because I was mad at my boss for putting me in a home where a beautiful nurse and her beautiful girls would be in danger if the bad guys were able to hunt me down."

"But he told really awesome bedtime stories to us. So sweet," Violet said. "And Dad just gave Mom a book of those stories as her birthday present."

"Yes, it's so adorable," Daisy said.

"I would love to see that book," Mickey said, herself a best-selling author.

"Remind me to show it to you after dinner," Lizzy said.

"Okay, can we go on with the story of how Jeff saved your life?" Heather asked.

Gabe agreed. He glanced at Taylor who seemed too quiet. "You okay?" he whispered.

"I'm awesome. I just love listening to everyone and I've never heard your father speak so much. He has a whole different side to him," she whispered back.

Gabe squeezed her hand.

"Okay, so, the day I found out the bad guys had located me and were on their way, we'd been making scarecrows in the backyard. I went inside to find your mom and tell her we needed to get in the car and get away, but she'd decided to go into town. She left me a note but didn't– take– her phone," he said pointedly at Lizzy.

She laughed, shrugged. "I wasn't used to having a phone."

"So, I called John, Master Appel, and had him come and get the girls and take them to safety and I waited for Lizzy to get back. But when she did, she overheard me talking on the phone and thought that I had sold you girls off. I had no idea what she was talking about. I was focused on getting her out of there, but she was fighting me like a crazed tiger."

"And so, like, you couldn't just subdue her and get her out to the car?" Gabe asked.

Keegan and Jeff smiled at each other. So did Lizzy and Mickey.

"It's really hard to subdue someone that you don't want to hurt. Still, I almost did it, but I ran out of time. The bad guys showed up and they tied me up."

"How could they do that?" Gabe asked.

"Well," Keegan said dryly, "I hate to step down off that pedestal, son, but there were four of them and one had a gun pressed against my forehead. I'm no good to anyone if I'm dead, so I had to bide my time, go with the flow until I had the right opportunity. Which I finally did."

"Wait, back up," Lizzy said. "I don't think he's ever told y'all that while he was tied up they beat him to a pulp."

"That's a bit of an exaggeration," Keegan said softly.

Gabe blinked up at his father. There was so much he didn't know about him.

"Anyway, I was able to overcome the four bad guys and... "

"You killed them right?" Gabe asked.

Keegan sighed. "Who's telling this story? Yes, I shot them. And then I got your mom out the back door. We were headed toward the woods. I had a car hidden on the other side of a shortcut through the woods. But before we got halfway across the backyard, we were ambushed by three more bad guys. I was shot in the right arm before I was able to fire my

gun. We were dead meat, but then from behind me someone squeezed off three quick shots, pow, pow, pow. Three shots, all three bad guys down, dead, shot through the heart. It was Jeff and that was some fine shootin' there. He got us to the car and on our way and then he went back, because he knew there were FBI agents who were in danger and he went to help them."

Daniel and Jeremy smiled up at their father with pride.

Nolan nodded his head. "That is quite a feat, Agent Davis."

Jeff smiled. "Call me Jeff. And it was nothing compared to what Keegan did to save my life." Jeff put his fork down and looked at Keegan. "I'll take it from here. So, it was only like a week or so later. Keep in mind that Keegan had been shot in the right arm and was not healed yet. We were in Savannah trying to get information, dirt on the street, about something going down at the harbor because that's where the shipment of children was supposed to be leaving from. We got word about some suspicious activity at a warehouse right next to the harbor, so Keeg and I went to investigate. It was only supposed to be recon. We got inside the warehouse, pretty deep inside. Keegan on one side and me way on the other. I found the children. I could hear them crying. It got to me and I lost focus. I never heard the guy coming up behind me. He bashed me in the head and knocked me unconscious."

"It was hell," Keegan put in. "I kept saying on the comms, Jeff come in, Jeff where are you. Jason ordered me to pull back, but I just couldn't. There was no way I could leave, not without Jeff. So, I disobeyed orders."

"Good thing for me," Jeff said. "When I woke up I was on a ship, I was..." He stopped, swallowed hard.

"Sometimes it's hard for him to talk about," Keegan explained. "They had his wrists tied with ropes and had him hanging where his feet couldn't reach the floor. If you've ever been in that position, it ain't fun. It really strains the shoulders. And then the bad guys used a car battery to, um, hmm, maybe I shouldn't go any further."

"It's okay. The boys know. They were torturing me, shocking me. I can't even describe the pain. I would pass out and they would lower the ropes and dip my whole body into this barrel of ice water until I woke up, and then do it all over again. I really just wanted to die. But then Keegan showed up. But he didn't just show up. He had to get past a lot of guys to get to me. It wasn't just him having to fight off three or four guys. He got past twenty-three terrorists to get to me. Remember, his arm was gimpy and he fought all those guys."

Gabe looked down a moment, because he knew his father didn't just fight them. He actually killed all of them.

"And then he carried me off the ship," Jeff continued. "He had to climb down a rope ladder with me on his shoulder. Do you even realize what a feat that is?" Jeff shook his head in wonder. "And then, he was shot halfway down that ladder, in the thigh and he fell and somehow kept the both of us from drowning and got me to the far side of the Savannah River. He was almost dead himself, but stayed next to me to offer his body heat until we were found by John, Brayden, Tristan and Kaleb. What he did was almost superhuman."

"It wasn't that big of a deal," Keegan said.

"Yes it was," Mickey said softly. "God sent you to save Jeff's life and I am eternally grateful to you and to God. If you hadn't saved Jeff, he wouldn't have saved me, and these

two awesome boys wouldn't exist."

Keegan smiled at the twelve-year-old and eleven-year-old boys. He was sure they brought as much joy to Jeff and Mickey as Gabe had brought to their family.

"Dad," Heather said softly. "Have I ever told you just how proud I am to have you as my father? And I don't mean to be disloyal to my biological father, because I know he was a hero too, and a good man, and I look forward to meeting him one day, but I am so proud to be called your daughter. And grateful."

"I agree with Heather," Rose said. "I'm sure we all do."

The other girls all nodded their heads. Lizzy wiped tears from her eyes.

"Well, thanks, ladies," Keegan said. "I'm grateful to have you in my life too. I know I'm not your biological father, but I love you as if I was, and sometimes forget that I'm not. I hope you know that you can come to me about anything, tell me anything at all, and I'll always have your best interest at heart."

Gabe looked at Rose and Violet to see if the words hit home and from the look of distress on their faces, he thought they did.

"Well, Lizzy," Mickey began. "This dinner was absolutely delicious."

"Thanks, but the girls did most of the cooking. I wasn't feeling well."

"The baby?"

"Yes. How is *your* pregnancy going?"

"So far so good. Haven't been too sick, which is great because I was sick as a dog with the first two."

Lizzy smiled. "That must mean you're gonna have a girl!"

"That would be very cool," Jeff said. "Huh, boys?"

"I guess," Daniel said.

"You guess? A little sister to love and protect and beat up her boyfriends? Sounds cool to me," Jeff said.

Jeremy smiled at the thought.

Nolan laughed. "If that's how you guys see it, I guess I've been lucky so far."

Jeff smiled at the young man. "You're not out of the woods yet, I'm sure."

Lizzy stood. "Anyone want dessert?"

"What is it?" Gabe asked.

"Well, there's lots of cake left, and also some ice cream and apple pie."

"That sounds great!"

"Which one, the pie?"

"All of it." He stood. "Sit down, Mom, I'll get it."

"I'll just clear things up a bit," Lizzy said.

Keegan stood. "Sit down, Elizabeth. We'll take care of it."

Chewing on her lip, she sat back down. Keegan smiled. He loved it when she did that.

✝✝✝

Proverbs 18:24

"One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

Chapter Thirty-One

Taylor called her mom to let her know dinner was over and she was given thirty more minutes to stay. After dessert and cleanup were finished Taylor asked Gabe if she could speak to him privately somewhere and they ended up walking out to the backyard. Holding hands they walked past the pool and to a retaining wall. Taylor hopped up on the wall and Gabe stood in front of her, standing between her legs. She put her hands around his neck and he rested his hands on her waist. "You've been awfully quiet," he said.

"Sorry. Just thinking a lot today I guess. Besides, with your big giant family, it's hard to get a word in."

"Oh, sorry. Is there something you wanted to say?"

She smiled. "No. I was completely mesmerized by the conversation and by the story of your dad and Jeff."

"It's amazing, isn't it? I hope one day I'll be able to do things like that, I mean, save people."

"I have a feeling you're meant for very great things just like that."

"Ya think?"

"I really do."

"I'm gonna try," Gabe said solemnly.

"So, has it been a good birthday?"

"Yeah, it's been great. Unbelievably great."

"I haven't given you my present yet," Taylor said with a smile.

"Sure you have. You being here is the best gift of all."

"Aww, that's sweet," Taylor said with a giggle. "But it makes you sound like a player."

Gabe laughed. "I guess it does, but I meant it. I wasn't playin'." He took her face in his hands and kissed her. When the kiss ended he wrapped his arms around her and held her softly against his chest. They remained like that for a long time.

Finally, she looked up. "I have something for you." She raised up and pulled what looked like a coin out of her pocket. "It's not a car, or a two million dollar piece of property, or a gun or even a shirt, but when I saw it at a small shop on the boardwalk at Laguna Beach, I knew it was what I wanted to give you. And I didn't put it in a box or wrap it because you seem like the type that doesn't really care about that stuff."

He smiled and stroked his hand down her cheek.

She held the gold coin out and placed it in his hand. He looked closely at the coin, which wasn't a coin at all, but a medallion. It was engraved with the words, '*Always Remember You Were My First True Love'*. On the reverse side were two intersecting circles, symbolizing an eternal connection.

"Taylor, this is amazing."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's perfect."

"It's real gold. Well, I actually mean gold-plated, not solid gold, so it's not like, worthless."

"It wouldn't be worthless if it was tin. The words on it are priceless."

"I thought, you could keep it in your pocket, and you'll always have a reminder of how much I love you. Even if you stop loving me."

"I don't think that's gonna happen."

She smiled. "I'm glad you think that."

He kissed her again. Then several more times and when he pulled away he was breathing heavily and looking deep into her eyes. His hands slid from her waist to rest on her thighs. Smiling, she took a deep breath, took his hands in hers and hopped down off the wall. "I guess my Dad will be here any minute."

He smiled. "I guess you're right."

They walked toward the back door.

"Taylor?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

She knew he wasn't just thanking her for the gift. She smiled sweetly. "You're welcome."

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June 14th 9 PM Friday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Dad?" Gabe said as he poked his head in his office.

Keegan held a finger up. "Yes, and call me first thing in the morning with a report on his condition and a report on the status of the case. Get me early 'cause I have a wedding to attend." He hit a button on the Ameritech landline and looked up at Gabe. "Whatcha got?"

"Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt. Uh, I heard you say 'his condition.' Is someone hurt?"

Keegan sighed, nodded. "An agent up in North Carolina helping out a small town sheriff with a drug bust. He was shot twice, but thank God, looks like he's gonna make it. What did you need, son?"

"I was wondering if I could go up to Joe's for a little while. The guys are there and I haven't been able to spend much time with them."

Keegan frowned. "It's already nine o'clock."

"I won't stay long."

"Agent Dalton is off duty."

Gabe frowned. "I'd be safe with the guys and Jake's Marine friends."

"Any of them carryin'?"

"I don't know, but I can find out." He pulled out his phone and called young Eric. "Hey Eric. So, I was thinkin' 'bout comin' up there to Joe's, and my dad wants to know if any of you guys are armed."

"Yea, I have arms," he laughed.

Gabe smiled, realizing young Eric was drinking. He put his phone on speaker.

"Hey, lil bro, you still there?" young Eric said loudly. "Yeah, come on up to Joe's we'll be happy to see you, right guys?"

"Well, my Dad won't let me unless there's someone there who can protect me."

"Oh, okay, hold on. Hey Derrick, any of you guys carryin' your sidearm?" he yelled across the room.

There was a rustling, and then Derrick's voice up close. "Eric, my man, ya don't go yelling that out in a crowded bar. It's called concealed carry for a reason. Who you talkin' to?"

Eric laughed. "Oops, my bad. It's the young Gabester."

Gabe glanced at his father, who rolled his eyes.

"Give me the phone. Hey Gabe, is that you?"

"Yes."

"This is Derrick. Your little movie star friend here is a little bit wasted."

"I can tell. I wanted to come up there, but I don't have my bodyguard right now, and Dad wants to know if any of you guys are carryin'."

"Yep, me and Shane are. We always are. Tell your dad we gotcha, buddy."

"Great. Thanks. See ya in a few." He ended the call and looked at his father. "So?"

Keegan nodded. "Okay, but I'll have to take you up there, and it sounds like *you* might have to keep an eye on young Eric. He's not legal and I don't want Joe to get in trouble."

"I will, but I'm sure JoJo and Logan are also watching out for him."

"You don't need to drink, got that?"

"Yes, sir. Don't really want to anyway."

"Alright, let's do this." He stood, stretched.

A few minutes later they pulled up in front of Joe's. Keegan frowned and shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Gabe asked.

He nodded to his right. "That's Rose's car."

Gabe sighed. "I'll keep an eye on her too."

"You do that."

"I'm surprised you didn't know she was here. Don't you have a tracker on her car?"

"Yes, but I don't keep track of her every minute."

Gabe smiled. "Good to know."

"However, I track you every second of every day."

"Very funny. Thanks for the ride, Dad."

"No problem."

"Oh, by the way, that reminds me of something I wanted to ask. So, after July, do you think you and Mom can get me around to where I need to go until I leave in August?"

"What's wrong with your truck?"

"Nothing. It's great. And, well, I was wondering how you would feel about me giving it to Peyton to take with him up to UGA. He's gonna need some transportation. All they have is his mom's little broken down car."

"I have no problem with that. But let's see how your two fundraisers go. You might not have to do that."

Gabe nodded. "Okay, let's see."

"You have money in your wallet?" Keegan asked.

"A little."

Keegan pulled out forty bucks and held it out. "Here take this and don't say I didn't

ever give you anything."

"Uh, I would never say that." He took the money. "Thanks, Dad. See ya later."

"Not too late."

"Yes, sir."

Inside Joe's, Gabe was greeted heartily by young Eric, JoJo and Logan. He was offered drinks by the Marines, which he declined, and challenged to a game of eight ball by JoJo, which he accepted. Walking across the room on the way to play, he came to Rose's table where she sat drinking with Mike Moreland.

She stood quickly when she saw him, nervously rubbing her hands on her jeans. "Gabe! What are you doing out so late?"

"Just spending some time with the guys." He turned to Mike and offered his hand. "Looks like you're doing the same."

"Look, little bro, Dad doesn't know that we've been dating, so I appreciate you keeping this on the down low."

Gabe shook his head. "Is that what you think?"

"What are you saying? Does he know?"

"I'm just saying that you know Dad, and if you think he doesn't know stuff, then you're not thinking very clearly, and that sort of bothers me."

Rose frowned. "Well, by all means, I don't want to *bother* my little brother."

Gabe looked into her eyes. "Good. Then fix it," he said fiercely. He turned and walked away. He knew he just ticked her off, and he truly hated it when Rose was mad. But he also hated to see the hurt look in his father's eyes, so he didn't regret a bit what he said.

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June 15th Wee Hours Saturday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake woke at the sound of a text coming in. He picked up his phone. It was after midnight. His wedding day. Scrubbing a hand over his face he sat up and read the text.

~~ Come outside in the backyard ♡

He jumped out of bed, went to his window and peered down. Laynah stood there looking up at him. He held a finger up.

~ on my way

Quickly pulling on some jeans and shoes he quietly made his way downstairs and out the back door. Laynah ran to him and he hugged her and held her close for a few minutes. Finally, he pulled her away so he could see her face. She wasn't smiling.

"What's goin' on, Bugs?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't sleep. I'm too nervous."

He nodded. "Nervous? Or excited?"

"Hmm, I guess both."

"Whatcha nervous about?"

"Everything."

He thought a minute. "We've got everything all set up and ready. Are you talking about stuff like the florist forgetting your bouquet, or the bakery dropping the cake, or something else?"

"Something else."

"What? Saying your vows?"

"No. I know exactly what I'm gonna say."

He sighed. "Okay, so, are you thinking of leaving me at the altar, like, doing the runaway bride thing?"

"I don't think I'd do that to you."

"You don't think?"

"I wouldn't."

He blew out a breath. "You had me worried there for a minute."

"Jake, are you sure you love me?"

He took her face in his strong hands. "I do love you, Melaynah Stewart. I am absolutely, positively, madly in love with you, and it kinda hurts that you question that."

"Oh, Jake, I don't mean to question you. It's just that I've loved you for so long. Almost all my life. And now, it seems like all my dreams are actually happening, and it's like, it's too good to be true. And ya know what they say, 'when something seems too good to be true that's because it probably is.'"

He moved his thumbs over her beautiful face. Bent down and kissed her softly. "Bugs, are you willing to give me the benefit of the doubt and put me to the test? I promise you that I'll prove to you that us getting married is exactly what God has planned for us."

She sighed and leaned her head against his bare chest, ran her hand over the muscle and sinew, then lower, her fingertips traced the outlines of his rippling abs. He drew in a sharp breath. Tucking her fingers into the waistband of his jeans, she stopped when she touched the hardness of the gun tucked inside.

She pulled away, looked him over and smiled up at him. "You are totally hot."

He chuckled. "You are too babe, and that Bugs Bunny T-shirt is making me crazy."

She giggled. "Let's just go to number eight right now. We can snuggle together all night. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Sighing, he nodded his head. "Yes, that would be nice, but it's too tempting. Tomorrow night, well, actually tonight since it's after midnight, we *will* be together, and it will be right and good and perfect. Okay?"

"Yes. It will be perfect."

"Come on, now Bugs, I'll walk you home, no, I'll walk you back to your father's house, because after tomorrow, *your* home is with me."

She smiled. "That's very macho sounding."

He laughed. "Well, I *am* a Marine."

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June 15th Saturday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Laynah couldn't help but smile as all of her bridesmaids chattered away. Everyone was in her parents' bedroom because it was large and had a huge bathroom. They were doing their hair and putting on makeup. There hadn't been time to order bridesmaid dresses, so each one had chosen their own dress. As long as it was any shade of yellow, it was good. And the result was absolutely fabulous. The energy in the room was light and happy and exciting, and Laynah was grateful for that.

The conversations centered around how beautiful Laynah looked, how amazing the barn looked, how gorgeous the flowers were, how awesome the cake turned out, how cute JoJo and Logan Adams were, how hot was young Eric Kino, how handsome the Marines

looked in their dress blues and whites, and how Gabe looked every bit as handsome in his plain blue suit. Then they bragged over which hot guy was gonna walk them each out at the end of the ceremony.

They discussed why Laynah and Jake had decided to not have a wedding rehearsal and laughed over the answer. Laynah said, "Because I've always thought that was silly. All of my friends and family are smart enough to understand simple directions. When the music starts you walk slowly up the aisle in the order I told you, once you get to the front, men go to the right, ladies to the left, stand in a neat little row, listen to the pastor, watch us say 'I do,' leave in pairs up the aisle, head out to the front of the barn, and get ready to party. Anyone who doesn't understand, let me know right now and I'll go over it with you."

They looked around to see if anyone would dare say she didn't understand. Rose grinned. "And that is why Bugs and I are such good friends."

The next discussion had to do with where to place the flowers in Laynah's hair, which was swept up on the sides, away from her adorable pixie face. The eight bridesmaids included the two sets of Tanner twins, Laynah's two high school best friends and Laynah's two fifteen-year-old cousins. Each of them was taking a turn to place a few of the white flowers in her hair and hugging her and telling her how beautiful she was or how lucky she is to have a fine man like Jake. They told her not to worry, he would always come home to her and they'd be there for her when he was deployed.

They'd had to repair her makeup after that part. Now, each girl was just finishing any touchups needed on Laynah and on themselves when there was a knock on the door. Rose peeked out and then opened the door to allow Laynah's mom and sister into the room.

Everyone cooed at Aralyn, in her frothy yellow flower-girl dress. She had a white basket filled with yellow rose petals. Lisa was wearing a simple cream-colored sleeveless dress that was high-waisted and then spread out in a feminine bell to her knees. A thin yellow belt accentuated her still narrow upper waist, and the fullness of the skirt hid the small baby bump already showing.

"Mom," Laynah said softly. "You are stunning."

Lisa waved her hand. "You are the stunning one today, my Laynahbug."

"And Aralyn, oh my goodness," Laynah continued. "Sweetie, you look like a princess." She hugged her and Aralyn pushed her away. "Don't squish my roses," she complained, making everyone laugh.

"Well Laynah," Rose said. "I'm gonna go find my escort and give you some private time with your mom. Next time I see you, you'll be walking down the aisle!" She kissed her cheek.

The rest of the bridesmaids did the same, and Kylie asked Aralyn if she wanted to go look at the cake. Finally, Laynah and Lisa were alone. Lisa smiled at her daughter. "How ya feeling, sweetie?"

"Good. Excited. A little nervous."

"That's to be expected. I wanted to say something to you, but I'm not quite sure how to say it. I didn't have my mother around on my wedding day. She wasn't interested in my happiness."

"That is so sad, Mom. I've been so blessed to have you as my mother. I can't imagine not having my mother in my life."

"It's me who's been blessed. You have been an extreme source of joy for your father

and me from the moment we discovered I was pregnant. You are such a strong young lady and you've always seemed to know what you want. And I know you've wanted Jake for a very long time. Baby girl, I couldn't be happier for you. Jake is a fine young man. He loves God, he is not ashamed to confess that love. He's honorable in every way, and I can see how much he loves you. I feel so blessed to know that the man who is your husband will never hurt you and will always protect you. I'm blessed because I won't have to worry about that.

"And baby girl, if I were to give you any words of wisdom, it would be this; I know you're a strong girl. You can ride and shoot and you're athletic and a martial artist, and you have a quick brilliant mind, still, it's not shameful to have a man protect you, to *allow* him to protect you, and it's also not shameful to take good care of that man. Jake is a man that you can respect and admire and if that ever starts to change, you need to confide in him because communication is the key to all relationships. And *you* live in a way that he will always be able to respect and admire *you*. Work at these things. They're not easy. God never said life should be easy. But it will be wonderful and joyful, as long as you stay close to the Lord and keep his commandments." She sighed, smiled. "I think that's all I wanted to say. Like I said, I never had this talk with my mom. How'd I do?"

"Oh Mama, you did awesome. I love you so much. I'm gonna miss you."

"I'll always be here for you. Just a short walk or phone call away. Always."

She took a tissue and dabbed at Laynah's makeup and picked up some mascara and fixed it. "There." She checked the time. Almost noon. "You ready to head out?"

"Let's do this," Laynah said.

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Jake eyed his father as he came in the room. He hadn't seen him in his uniform since the funeral of a friend they'd attended back when Jake was just ten years old. His father was well-muscled and trim. He was fifty years old but looked thirty-something, probably because he stayed in top shape as the Master of his own line of martial arts schools. He had blond hair, so the little bit of gray at the temples was unnoticeable. He glanced at his father's many ribbons and medals, including a Purple Heart and Medal of Honor.

"Lookin' sharp there, Dad," Jake said.

"Thanks, son. You will too if you ever finish getting dressed."

Jake laughed. "I'm working on it. It seems my hands are shaking," he said as he picked up the white belt and dropped it.

John retrieved the belt and put it around his son's waist. "Nervous?"

"I didn't think I would be, but suddenly I am. Don't know why."

"Well, you're officially, in front of friends, family and God, taking on the responsibility of the well-being, protection and happiness of another living human being. That'll make a man's hands shake a bit."

Jake chuckled. "Then I guess I'm normal."

"There's nothing normal about Jacob Appel. You've been an extraordinary person from the moment you were born. I know I've said it before, but Son, I am so proud of you. You've achieved so much, including becoming the youngest Raider on record. What an accomplishment." John reached up and lightly touched the golden eagle on his son's chest. He had to clear his throat from the emotion that welled up.

"I love you, Dad. You taught me everything I know. You taught me how to be a man,

and I will count myself successful if I can be half the man you are."

They hugged for some time until John was able to control his emotions. He patted Jake's back and backed away. "Laynah is a wonderful girl. You make sure you take care of her as a man of God should. Be kind, don't stifle her, listen when she speaks. You're strong, but so is she. Allow her to be so. Yet ultimately, it's your job to protect her and keep her safe. But make decisions about the home and family a joint thing. Honor her. Respect her."

Jake smiled. "Everything you just said, I can see that you do exactly that with Mom. You're so good to her. It's a great example for me."

"I'm good to her, yes, but she makes it easy. She's so loving and kind to everyone. She lives her faith. How can I not honor that in her?"

"How's she doing? Is she struggling with all this?"

"Not at all. She's truly happy for you both and I think she's looking forward to a little one."

"Uh, that will probably be down the road," Jake warned.

"Well, I'm not gonna tell her that. Don't have the heart."

Jake strapped on his baldric and sword. Donned his white gloves. Stood at attention. "Inspection, sir?"

John nodded. He walked slowly around his son, came back to face him and nodded again. "I see one fine-looking Marine."

Jake smiled, stood at attention and saluted his father.

His father returned the gesture.

Jake nodded. "Let's do this."

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Keegan shook hands with the surprise guests. He was excited to see and hear the results of what they'd planned. It had actually been Ricky's idea, and he was the one who'd gotten the ball rolling. He'd said it was a shame that Jake and Laynah needed music to walk down the aisle and they intended to play bits and pieces of recordings of the chosen songs over the sound system, when they had access to a few of the hottest Grammy-winning recording stars there were, right in their circle of friends. And so, these pros had taken time to cover all the songs Jake and Laynah had chosen and were going to perform them live as each person, or group of people, walked down the aisle.

Keegan was also excited that his own Lizzy had been invited to join them and that she'd actually accepted. She'd said, "Everyone says I have a gift, and God says we should use our gifts in service to others, so, how could I not accept?"

Ricky approached with a giant smile. "Toby! So good to see ya, man." They shook hands. He kissed Caroline's cheek and then took Grace's hands. "Good grief, Gracie, aren't you supposed to be this high?" he asked, putting his hand waist high.

Grace giggled. "Mr. Kino, I'm twenty-five and you know it."

"I do, and you have grown into such a beautiful young lady." He looked at Toby. "I bet you're having to beat the guys off with a stick."

Toby grinned. "I don't need no stick."

Ricky laughed and turned to Brody. "And you, young man. I hear you're making quite a name for yourself at Tennessee."

"I'm working on it, sir."

"What's your current batting average?"

".411, which is number five in the nation right now."

"That's an incredible accomplishment, Brody," Keegan said. "Gabe's best friend, Peyton Murphy, he's headed to UGA on a baseball scholarship. Get Gabe to introduce you. Maybe you wouldn't mind giving him some pointers. He's a good kid with no father to help."

"I'd be happy to do that, sir."

"And I hear you're singing today too?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, they talked me into it. I mean, we sing all the time as a family and they say they needed my tenor voice."

"I can't wait to hear you guys. Okay, well, I'm guessing you guys want to do a sound check. I'll leave you to it." He glanced at his watch. "You have an hour. Will that be enough time?"

Toby grinned. "We got this. Go do what you need to do."

Keegan's phone buzzed, he glanced at the name and put the phone to his ear. "Gabe? What's taking you so long?" He stood silent for a minute. "What the hell? Do I need to come there?"

His words got Ricky's attention. He waited until Keegan hung up. "So, do you need help with anything?"

Keegan shook his head. "Gabe went to pick up his friend, Peyton, who I just mentioned to Brody, and he had to rescue Peyton from some guys who jumped him."

Ricky nodded. "In other words, he had to fight. Is he hurt?"

"No. Gabe had Agent Dalton with him. Peyton is a little beat up, which happened before Gabe drove up. Gabe is fine except he tore his shirt, but says his suit jacket will cover it. He says Peyton's girlfriend is gonna need some first aid on her scraped up knees when they get here." Keegan shook his head.

"This is a small country town," Ricky said. "It doesn't seem like this kind of stuff should happen here."

Keegan sighed. "I've learned that evil is everywhere. It permeates everything."

Ricky smiled. "Yep, and that is exactly why God has called us to fight that darkness."

Keegan nodded, offering a small smile. "You're right."

Fifteen minutes later Gabe arrived with Peyton and Avery. The women took over, taking them both into the Stewarts' home to doctor them and clean them up. Gabe was instructed by Taylor to go wash the dirt off his face and fix his hair.

✞✞✞

Soft, live music started to play. All the people who'd been milling around, taking pics with celebrities or chattering excitedly looked around to see who was playing the music and it caused a bit of a stir. The keyboard was being played by someone they didn't know, but drums were being played softly by a man they *did* recognize, Jeff Jackson, one of the original members of Toby's first band. The two men standing together were immediately recognized: the hunky country star Toby Nash, with a guitar strapped on, and his equally hunky son, Brody Smith. Standing beside Brody, also holding a guitar, was his beautiful sister, Grace Nash, who'd taken on her father's stage name as her own.

The wedding guests began taking their seats. When it seemed most everyone was in place, the music changed to "What a Wonderful World," and John Appel walked Miss

Maddie in, the great-grandmother of the bride. He seated her at the far end of the front row on the left. She patted his hand. He smiled and kissed her cheek. He then turned and went back up the aisle. With "Wonderful World" still playing and being sung, Joe and Shirley Carter, Laynah's grandparents on her mother's side, walked down the aisle and right behind them, Laynah's grandparents on her father's side, Charles and Patricia Stewart. They all were seated in the second row, just behind Miss Maddie.

The music changed to Elvis' "Can't Help Falling In Love," and slowly, John and Jodi Appel walked down the aisle. There were a few murmured awws. Lizzy and Grace shared the lead on this song and it was so beautiful. John looked handsome in his Marine dress uniform. With his blue jacket, white trousers, ceremonial sword at his side, and chest decorated with ribbons and medals, he was breathtaking. His wife of twenty-three years, Jodi, looked like a teenager. She wore a pale-yellow lacy shift dress with matching shoes and a beautiful corsage that Jake had personally pinned on her dress with much love and honor. Her long, straight, black hair shone like silk and her smile was radiant.

Chaz straightened his eldest son's suit jacket and tie. It was almost time for Charlie to walk his mother down the aisle. "Go slow," he reminded him. He turned and looked at his wife. "Lisa, my love, you are radiant. And that corsage, though pretty, pales in comparison."

Lisa laughed.

"How ya feelin', Red?"

"Doing okay, my handsome Marine cowboy," she replied, reaching out to touch the ribbons on his chest and then the sword at his side.

He kissed her softly, then turned to look at his son. "Okay, Charlie, shoulders back, head up, make me proud."

Charlie nodded. "Yes, sir." He held his arm out to his mother. The music changed to "Isn't She Lovely," and Charlie started down the aisle with the mother of the bride. Toby's mellow voice harmonizing with his son's sent chills through all the ladies. Everyone smiled as the beautiful redhead walked with her eldest son. Joe Carter smiled at his daughter. He was so happy and grateful to be sharing this moment. He'd searched for his daughter for twenty-five years before she'd turned up here in Pine Forest. Today he was a happy man.

The music changed again, this time to "Onward Christian Soldiers," causing a smattering of laughter as Pastor Tim, who would officiate, and Grandmaster Kino, who would offer an opening prayer, walked single file down the aisle.

Jake watched and smiled. He couldn't believe that *the* Toby Nash and family were singing at his wedding. He looked around, wondering whether anyone was recording, and sure enough, several people were, including the official videographer, and also Taylor who'd been asked to take video and pics for Gabe's new website.

New music started, this time for the groom: Jason Mraz' "I'm Yours." Jake gave it a few bars before he started like he'd been instructed by Laynah. He got to the front and stood to the right of Pastor Tim. He stood at ease. Jodi smiled up at her handsome son. He smiled back at her. In his uniform, he was a sight to behold.

When the music changed again, the whole crowd burst into laughter as the recognizable opening beats of "SexyBack" began. The eight groomsmen started down the aisle one at a time. Since there were four civilians and four Marines, they'd been arranged

to have a civilian in between each Marine. The civilians wore dark blue suits, white shirts, blue ties and black shoes to complement the Marine dress uniform. Despite their marching music, the groomsmen walked with decorum down the aisle. Marine Shane, then JoJo, Marine Derrick, young Eric, Marine Drew, Logan, Marine Corey and finally Gabe. They all stood in the at-ease position. One could almost hear the sighs from all the females in the audience as they looked over the eight male specimens and decided they were definitely "bringing sexy back."

Chaz lifted his daughter's chin as they stood behind the bridesmaids. "You know I love you, baby girl, right?"

"Yes, Daddy. I've always known, and I'm grateful for that."

"You can always come to me, do you know that?"

She smiled. "I do."

"But now, my sweet daughter, you'll have another man in your life who loves you as much as I do, so trust him, sweetie."

"Do you trust him, Daddy?"

"I wouldn't be walking you down the aisle if I didn't."

"I love him so much."

"I know, darlin'. I'm so happy for you." He bent down and kissed her cheek.

Aralyn tugged on Laynah's dress. "Is it almost my turn?"

Laynah knelt next to her sister. "You know what we talked about. Right after Rose walks down the aisle, then Matt will go, and right after that it's your turn. Remember, when you get to the front, go sit with Mom. Your music is 'Thank Heaven for Little Girls.' It's almost time and I'll tell you when to go."

Rose turned to Laynah and made sure she was ready. She checked her hair. It was perfect. She straightened the shoulder straps of Laynah's white lacy dress. Her eyes traveled down the length of the dress. It had a flounce at the bottom and rose slightly in the front, just enough to show off her white cowboy boots. In the back, it touched the floor. The upper dress hugged her lovely body and then flared out in a froth of petticoats and lace.

"Okay, Bugs, you're absolutely perfect," Rose said.

She held up her right casted hand. "Except this."

Rose shrugged. "Just shows me how strong you are." She smiled and kissed her cheek. "That's me. Gotta go."

Laynah smiled as the bridesmaids' music began. It was such a surprise to have two Grammy winners singing at her wedding. She wondered who was responsible for the surprise. This time, Aunt Lizzy and Grace Nash belted out "This One's for the Girls," by Martina McBride.

Gabe looked over at his mother as she sang. The group was situated on the right side of the barn, just beyond the first row where the Appels were sitting. It was obvious the Nashes were real pros. They knew just how and when to end each song. They'd obviously cut each one to fit the timing and so far, it was perfect. The bridesmaids finished their entrance and the music changed again. Everyone laughed as Laynah's youngest brother, the ring bearer, twelve-year-old Matt, quickly danced up the aisle to the chorus of "Boss of Me." Jake and Laynah had not chosen a best man or maid of honor, so Matt offered a ring to Shane, the first groomsman, and the other ring to Rose.

Just a few seconds later, seven-year-old Aralyn, with the same bright red hair as Laynah, started up the aisle, tiptoeing slowly to her music. She was doing a great job making sure there were rose petals on every part of the aisle. Everyone was smiling and then laughing when she got to the front and still had some rose petals left, and turned her little basket upside down and shook it to make sure she'd used them all.

Finally, the opening fanfare of Wagner's "Bridal Chorus", commonly known as "Here Comes the Bride" sounded, and given what they'd already heard, everyone was a little surprised by the traditional music. But the music suddenly changed and "Hometown Girl" by Josh Turner started. The large congregation laughed heartily, because the words were just so accurate. Toby even changed the name of the team mascot in the song from 'Panther' to 'Rebel.'

Laynah and her father started down the aisle. She looked straight ahead searching, and her eyes met Jake's. Lord have mercy she loved him. Just looking into his eyes gave her so much joy. So much comfort. He smiled at her and her chin trembled like she might start bawlin'. She paused a moment to get herself under control.

Because she stopped, Jake raised his eyebrows and nodded at her. *Don't you do it*, he thought. *Don't you chicken out.* He blew out the breath he'd been holding when she started walking again. He felt Shane, who was standing next to him, reach up and pat him on the back. He glanced at him and nodded with a sigh of relief. Jake looked Melaynah over. Her tumble of red hair had flowers in it. Her dress was sweet and innocent, which made it sexier than if it had revealed a lot of skin. As she got closer, he swallowed hard. How could he come to love someone so much, so quickly? Her father brought her to his side, kissed her cheek, touched her face, smiled at her, shook Jake's hand, and went to sit next to his wife.

Pastor Tim immediately called on Grandmaster Kino to pray. It was a beautiful, heartfelt prayer, and as always when that man prayed, people were moved, and tears welled. Eric squeezed both Jake's and Laynah's hands and went to sit next to Shelley.

Pastor Tim moved smoothly into the ceremony. "We are gathered here today in the sight of God and these witnesses to join together Jacob John Appel and Melaynah Leigh Stewart in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate, instituted of God. Therefore, it is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently and soberly. Into this holy estate, these two young people come now to be joined. Therefore, if anyone can show just cause why they may not be lawfully joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

A few seconds later he went on. "Jake and Laynah have decided to say their own vows, and so, at this time, I turn it over to Jacob."

Jake began with a strong voice, the voice of a man in love. He promised to love her, to cherish her, to protect her, to provide for her, to listen to her, to always be faithful to her, to support her in anything she wants to do, to love God and worship together with her, and to always work toward bettering himself so that he may keep himself worthy of her love. His last words were beautiful. "Laynah, I know that a lot of people in this world say these vows to each other when they get married and then when circumstances change they completely forget all about them, but I swear to you, Bugs, in front of God, and all these people, I will never forget my vows. We're in this for better or worse, no matter what we face, I will never—never break these vows, I will never leave you, I will never be

unfaithful to you. I will always have your best interests in my heart."

Laynah couldn't stop the tears from welling, so when she blinked two large tears ran down her cheeks. She didn't even bother to wipe them away. Pastor Tim called on her and she drew a deep breath and began.

"When Jake and I wrote our vows, we did it separately, so he didn't know what I was gonna say," she said, addressing everyone there. "And yet, if I were to show you my paper where I wrote them down, you would see that I wrote almost exactly the same things that Jake just said." She stopped and looked up into Jake's warm eyes. "That tells me, Jake, that God really did send us to be with each other. We were meant to be. And I vow to you I will love you, I will take care of you, I will support you in all things, you can depend on me to keep the home fires burning while you're away, and to be here for you when you return. I will never be unfaithful to you, I will thank God for you every day, I will plead the blood of Jesus over you every day before I leave my—uh—our bedroom, and I will do it again before I go to sleep each night. I will work hard and never be slothful, I will strive to make myself a better person every day so that you have no reason to be disappointed in me. I vow to worship God with you and I swear, Jacob Appel, I swear, I will never break these vows."

The power in the room was palpable. People were moved to tears by such love and devotion. Pastor Tim had to collect himself. He directed the couple to exchange rings.

Jake quickly removed his white gloves and handed them to Shane, who then handed Jake the ring he'd place on Laynah's finger. "With this ring I pledge myself to you," Jake said, and then pushed the ring onto her finger. It hugged the engagement ring perfectly because it was a set.

Rose handed Laynah Jake's ring and took the bouquet from her. "And with this ring I pledge myself to you," Laynah said. She gently slid the simple gold band onto his finger.

Pastor Tim prayed, "May God and His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, always be at the center of the new lives you are now starting to build together, that you may know the ways of true love and kindness. May the Lord bless you both all the days of your lives and fill you with His joy. In Jesus' name, amen."

The congregation murmured an amen.

"Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder. By the power vested in me by the great State of Georgia, and more importantly by God, I now pronounce that you are husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Jake smiled at Laynah, moved close to her, took her face in his hands as he had done hundreds of times before now and lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was slow, and soft, and gentle, and had all the female onlookers sighing.

The kiss ended and they turned toward the large congregation of about three hundred people. Everyone stood and cheered. The four Marine groomsmen moved in step to stand beside the aisle, two on one side and two on the other. Then, much to everyone's surprise, John Appel and Chaz Stewart joined them on either side. The crowd loved watching the Arch of Sabers ceremony. The music began and Jake and Laynah made their way under the arch. Then, the swords were sheathed and one by one the Marines went to the bridesmaid they were assigned and escorted them out. John and Chaz escorted their wives out. The wedding party formed a receiving line and people came to congratulate the newly

married couple.

Inside, the guys all turned around and started clearing the white folding chairs from the room. All the grandparents were escorted to a large table just for them. With so many hands to help, the chairs were up and gone in fifteen minutes. Caterers immediately started laying out goodies on the giant buffet tables lining each side of the enormous barn. An "all clear" was given to the wedding party and Laynah whistled to get everyone's attention. "Let's party!" she yelled.

The DJ came in and took over. Jake and Laynah quickly made their way over to Toby and his family to thank him.

"That was amazing," Laynah gushed. "I can't thank you enough. Oh my goodness I was so surprised."

Toby smiled. "It was fun, and you can thank Ricky for the idea."

"Oh, I will, but let me just hug you." She threw her arms around his neck. Her Aunt Cindy took pictures. Next she went to Grace and shrieked about how awesome she is.

Jake shook Toby's hand and then Brody's. "Hey, guy, so how's it going? I hear you're doing great things."

Brody smiled. "Naw, I'm just hittin' a ball with a stick. You're the one doing great things."

"We each serve in our own ways. You have the opportunity to influence young kids in so many positive ways. You won't believe the things you can do."

Brody nodded. "Thanks for that. I'll strive to do just that. So, congratulations, man." He looked at Laynah as she was chattering with his sister and his mom. "That is one gorgeous girl ya got there."

"Thanks."

"Funny, I always thought she and JoJo were gonna get together."

"Yeah, thank goodness that didn't work out."

"How's Jo feel about it?"

"He's okay. He says that was years ago and wishes us well."

"Do you believe him?"

"Of course. He's a member of the most honorable family I know."

Brody nodded. "I agree."

A bunch of people came over to congratulate Jake and Laynah, ending the conversation.

As soon as they accepted those congratulations, Laynah spoke to Jake. "Let's go over and serve the grandparents."

Jake smiled. "I already love you more than I did a few minutes ago."

They headed to the grands' table, greeted them and asked what they'd like to eat. They then served everyone except Joe and Shirley who insisted they would serve themselves. Laynah kissed all their cheeks. Jake hugged all the women and shook the men's hands. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'm being called to the floor to dance with my wife."

Jake escorted Laynah to the floor. They waited for the music and were again surprised when Toby with his guitar and Aunt Lizzy came to the mic. They sang the most beautiful rendition of "Unchained Melody" Jake had ever heard. Jake pulled Laynah close and it felt so good, because it was legal now. It was perfect and right and good and it felt so right

to know they'd made it to this point without breaking the laws of God. Waiting had made this moment more meaningful—more exquisite—than he had ever imagined. He would never forget this moment of pulling his love close to him. Yeah, Jake thought, God really knows exactly what He's doing. He nuzzled Laynah's cheek, whispered in her ear. "How ya doin', Bugs?"

"I am in heaven. I can stay like this all night."

"Well, it won't be like this, but it will be all night," he promised, making Laynah giggle.

Chaz and Lisa watched the dance. Lisa with tears in her eyes. Chaz with resolution. Nearby, Jodi watched with tears in her eyes while John looked on with the same solemn resolution as Chaz.

Gabe and Taylor stood side-by-side watching too. Gabe snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Have I told you how beautiful you look today?"

"No," she whispered.

He smiled. "Well, come outside with me and I'll tell you."

She turned to him. "You don't know how much I'd like to do that, but I can't. I have to video for Isla and for your website."

Gabe frowned. "Okay. Well, when are we supposed to do our special dance for them?"

"I'm not sure. I think right before they throw the bouquet."

"Okay, well, when they invite other people to dance, I'm just lettin' you know that you and me are gonna dance, video or not. I need you close to me."

✝✝✝

Ephesians 5:31

"For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Gabe and Peyton stood with plates in their hands, munching on hors d'oeuvres and watching people dance. Gabe had been dancing with Miss Maddie when he'd been told it was almost time for the dance he and Taylor had planned for Jake and Laynah. Avery had run off to find Taylor. The reception party had been lots of fun so far. Everyone was happy and free, and drinking, which was always fun to watch for Gabe.

He especially liked seeing his father loosen up a little. Currently Gabe was watching his father hold his mom very close on the dance floor. Gabe admired his father in his Marine dress uniform. A feeling of patriotic pride welled up inside him and he smiled. And his mom looked so pretty as she looked up into his father's eyes. Anyone who was looking at them could tell they were madly in love. Right next to them, Taylor's parents were also dancing very close. He suddenly realized that he used to think of them as THE Ricky Kino and THE Breanna Adams, and now he just thought of them as Taylor's parents.

Gabe shifted his gaze to see who else was doing the same thing.

Jeff and Mickey were dancing, but they were talking to each other and laughing. JoJo was dancing with Lily and she shrieked as he dipped her low. Gabe smiled. Brody was dancing with Daisy very slowly and he reached up and touched her face. Hmmm. What's goin' on there, he wondered. Daisy was maybe a year older than Brody. He scanned the dance floor for Rose and found her dancing with Derrick. He hadn't seen Mike Moreland which meant Rose hadn't spoken with their Dad yet. Of course, there hadn't really been time for that since Gabe's curt words to her late last night. He hoped she'd come clean soon. He looked around. Violet was nowhere to be seen, and he knew what that meant. His oldest sister, Heather was dancing with Nolan, both her hands around his neck.

Grandmaster Kino was on the very edge of the dance floor, dancing with Miss Shelley. He saw Mark and Bella and Joey and Breez and wondered who was watching the little ones. Logan was talking to Grace Nash, Gabe was sure, about the music industry since that was his focus. Marines Shane and Corey danced with Laynah's old high school BFFs, Holly and Kayla. He saw Pastor Tim dancing with his wife, Jeffy and Cam, Jensen and Kimmie. Sheriff Ty with Miss Jenny. The mayor. His high school coach. So many. The dance floor was crowded. He could just get glimpses of Jake and Laynah in the very center. At the moment they were standing still and kissing. Gabe thought they were probably very much looking forward to... he stopped the thought. But he understood how Jake must be feeling, cuz Gabe himself had imagined many times what would happen once Gabe and Taylor got married, IF they got married.

Toby and Caroline were dancing some slow, sexy, Latin dance and they looked professional. Of course, Miss Caroline WAS a pro and she probably taught her husband to dance. Jason Lee was dancing with Angel, and they seemed to be doing the same dance

and they also looked very professional. That was interesting to Gabe, that one of the toughest and deadliest men in the world was dancing like a pro. He pointed it out to Peyton who merely smiled. Gabe glanced up at him. He had a bruise on his cheek and a scratch across his forehead. “What’s up, Peyton?”

“Nothin’, why?”

“I mean, you’re usually talkin’ a mile a minute. So, what’s wrong?”

“I dunno. Life is changing. Ya know? It’s like, gettin’ serious.”

“Are you talking about goin’ off to college, or are you talkin’ ‘bout that fight today?”

Peyton was silent a minute. “Both I guess.”

Gabe tried to think of what to say. Peyton didn’t have a father he could go to and sort out his feelings with, and Gabe himself was not smart or mature enough, but right now he had to say something to help. He wondered what his own father would say to Peyton. He silently asked God to help him to help Peyton.

He blew out a breath. “So, um, I was thinking those same things pretty recently. Ya know, like, it used to be the most important thing I had to do was make good grades on a history test, or get a hit at the game. And now, it seems I have to think about life and death, heavy stuff. And then Joey Adams asked me if I was ready to be a man or did I just wanna play around and be normal and just have fun the rest of my life. And my dad explained to me that growing up and being a man is not just a number. We have to adjust. Roll with the punches. Take things in stride. Aim for the bleachers.”

Gabe laughed. “He used every sports analogy he could think of to get through my thick brain. So, yeah, things are changing. But you, my freaking awesome best friend in the world have a huge opportunity in front of you to make a difference, not only in *your* life, but in all those around you. Your mom, your brother. All the kids you can influence. Your teammates. Peyton, you are more powerful than you know.”

Peyton sighed. “Not powerful enough to fight off a few punks, though. Or keep them from hurting Avery.”

Gabe nodded. He understood. “Okay, I get what you’re sayin’, but let me put things into perspective for you. Yeah, you’re a big strong athlete, and skilled. But you’re not a trained fighter and it was three against one.”

Peyton sighed.

“And Peyton, I’ve been studying martial arts since I was old enough to walk. And I’ve had a father who was special forces. Fighting is what we do. But you, Peyton, didn’t have all the privileges I had and while I was in martial arts classes you were working. You were cutting grass, working at that grocery store, waiting tables at the steakhouse, working at the Inn. You were taking care of business.”

“That’s bull, Gabe, you were working in those places too.”

“Not like you. Only on school breaks and during the summer. And I was pocketing my money. That’s how I bought my truck. But you were contributing your money to your family to help buy food or keep the power on. That is so much more than I ever did. Yeah, it’s now time for me to start doing stuff for people. But you’ve already been doin’ stuff your whole life. Peyton, you’re one of my heroes. And look, I know you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, but my family will look after your mom and Lucas while you’re gone so that you don’t have to worry. Just go up there to Georgia and rock their world. I believe in you.”

Peyton nodded. "I'll give it all I got. I spoke to Brody. He thinks I'm gonna do well."

"He would know." Gabe thought a moment and decided to tell Peyton what he intended. "So, have you thought about how you're gonna get up there to school? Or how you're gonna get around once you're up there?"

"I guess my mom will drive me. And I have my bike to get around."

Gabe nodded. "Okay, that's cool. But, I was thinkin' that I'm not gonna need my truck anymore once I leave."

"Yeah, that new car is freakin' awesome."

"Right? So, I don't want my truck hanging around, taking up room at my parents' house and not being driven, and I was wondering if you could take it to school and use it. Dad says if you could do that he would be grateful and he'll just add you onto the insurance."

Peyton glanced at Gabe. He absolutely knew that truck was Gabe's baby. Gabe, once again, was trying to help him without embarrassing him. He sighed. He'd allow him to help now, but swore one day, Peyton would pay it forward. He smiled. "I can't believe you're gonna let me drive your truck."

Gabe shrugged. "It's just a thing, an inanimate object. Yeah, it's been good to me. I've been blessed. I hope it will bless you too."

"Thanks, man. Seems I'm always thanking you for something."

"Well you don't have to thank me. I don't need your thanks or your gratitude. I need you to have every opportunity to succeed. And if you wanna be grateful, then thank God for the talent he's given you."

Peyton nodded. "I do."

"So," Gabe went on, "you never did finish telling me, what started that fight today?"

Peyton shook his head. "I don't really wanna talk about it."

"Did you know the guys?"

"Never seen them before."

"They seemed older."

"Yep."

"What did they say to you?"

"Gabe, what part of, 'I don't wanna talk about it' did you not understand?"

Gabe smiled. "Sorry." He glanced up to see beautiful Taylor and Avery approaching. "Looks like it's time for me to dance anyway."

"Do good, cuz I'm gonna video and post it and so are a lot of other people."

"Yeah, I know. Apparently, the more I trend, the more good I can do for people, so, whatever. Hope I don't fall on my face." He stopped and looked Taylor over as she approached and then frowned.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You changed. That dress is very cute, but it's kinda—flippy. Aren't you worried about, um, it like... " He didn't finish because he didn't know how to put it.

She laughed. "Poor Gabe, cat got your tongue? I have on shorts underneath. Don't worry. I'm being modest but giving myself some freedom of movement."

He nodded. "Not that I mind, I just don't want your parents mad at me."

"My mom helped me pick out this dress."

"Oh. Well, okay. Let's do this."

"Wait a minute, I gotta fix you."

"Me?"

"Take off your jacket."

He did and she frowned at his torn shirt. It had a smear of blood on it. She lifted it up. "Did you know you were hurt?"

"It's just a scratch. Happened when the guy grabbed my shirt to keep from falling backward when I tried to break his nose."

Taylor giggled. "You said that so matter-of-fact."

Gabe shrugged. "Well, that's – what I was trying to do."

She reached up and loosened his tie. Pulled it over his head. "Take off your shirt."

He looked around. "What?"

"Just trust me, please."

He took off his shirt. Taylor and Avery looked at each other with a smile.

"Okay, now put the jacket back on. Yeah. That is so sexy."

Gabe rolled his eyes.

Taylor grinned.

The floor cleared as the DJ announced a special surprise for Jake and Laynah. They seated the couple in two chairs at the front of the dance floor and Gabe and Taylor entered and stood side by side. They began by striking Michael Jackson poses to the bridge of "Billie Jean." When they ended that segment with the moonwalk, the crowd went crazy. They were dancing to a five minute medley of a bunch of trending TikTok dances, including, "Stayin' Alive," "Blurred Lines," "Toxic," "Grease," and "Uptown Funk," plus a few more.

When it ended Taylor and Gabe both kissed Laynah's cheek and high-fived Jake. Right away, everyone gathered around to cut the cake. Gabe and Taylor went straight to the refreshment table to get something to drink. Five minutes was a long time to dance. A bunch of people came by to tell them how awesome they did.

Peyton and Avery wanted some pics so they posed a few times, one where Gabe kissed Taylor. Then Peyton and Avery headed off to get some cake. Gabe and Taylor stood there chatting, and watching Jake and Laynah cut the cake, when Caroline Smith approached, a smile on her face.

"You two were simply wonderful," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Caroline," Taylor replied. "That means a lot coming from you."

"Well, I mean it. I understand that neither one of you has had any dance training."

"Naw, we just like to dance," Gabe said. "It's fun."

"I agree. Have you ever thought about training?"

"Funny you should ask that," Taylor said. "My brother and I were talking a few months ago about me loving to dance and I told him I wish I'd known that when I was young because I would've liked to learn."

"Well, it's never too late. I'll have you know I was only a few years younger than you when I began dancing."

"Really?"

"Yes. I had to work hard to catch up, and then once I did, I kept working hard. That hard work got me recognized by a prominent teacher who just recently passed away. She made me head of the 'New York School of Ballet, Nashville Campus' and amazing things

happened from there. I now own all three campuses of the New York School of Ballet in New York, Nashville and Los Angeles."

"There's one in L.A.?"

"Yes, ma'am, and I think you should check it out."

"Well, do you teach more than just ballet?"

"We teach everything. Ballet, jazz, tap, contemporary, ballroom, hip hop, all kinds of street dancing, like you two just did. But still, you need the ballet to improve technique in all styles of dance. It's a good base."

"But I'm so old, I mean, there's big old me, a beginner, standing in a class of little girls."

Caroline laughed. "That would be discouraging, and a little embarrassing, wouldn't it? But that's not how it would be. More than likely we'd arrange private lessons until you caught up. Taylor, you're good. You have a natural talent and you love it. Would you turn your back on what God has blessed you with?"

"No, of course not. How often would I need to train? I mean, I'm still in high school."

"As often as possible, working around your schedule. Tell ya what, I'll talk to your parents for you, and get them to bring you into the school, look around, check out a few classes."

Taylor's eyes sparkled. "Oh, this is so exciting."

Caroline smiled. "I'm glad you think so." She looked at Gabe. "I'd invite you too, because you, too, are a natural, but I know you're headed off to be a warrior."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, ma'am. But maybe Taylor can teach me some stuff."

"Maybe she can. And now, I have a very big request to ask of you both. As you probably know, I was a judge on *America Can Dance* for years. I've been taking some time off, but I'm still one of the executive producers of the show. I'd like you two to come and do the dance you just did on the show, live."

"O M G," Taylor exclaimed. "Seriously? I mean, really?"

"I'm serious. The new season won't start until the fall, and I'm not sure of the time frame yet, but it would be so good to have you two on. You guys are hugely popular with the young people of this country, and you can be such a good influence on directing them to dance instead of other things they do to get into trouble. Dancing is an honorable pastime. It's an art. What do you say?"

"I'm not sure if I can take time off my training at Ameritech," Gabe said with a frown.

"Oh, shoo, no worries there. I'll talk to Jason. This appearance can boost your foundation to heights you wouldn't believe. I'll even add to your foundation. I'll donate two dance scholarships to underprivileged kids at each school location."

"Wow," Gabe said. "I guess I can't turn *that* down."

"Wonderful," Caroline said. "Now, the only thing is, you'll need to clean up your dance a bit, but don't worry. I'll personally help you with that. And the show is taped in Nashville, but I imagine I can steal you away for that weekend. The show airs on Monday nights, but I'll want you there two days before so we can work on the dance. But I'll iron out all the details with your parents." She took their hands, one in each of hers and squeezed them tightly. "I'm very excited about this. We'll talk later after I've had a chance to talk to your parents."

"Yes, ma'am," they both said. "And thank you."

"Thank YOU," she returned and left them.

Taylor looked up at Gabe, her face beaming. "Can you believe what just happened?"

Gabe smiled at her. "It's cool, and I love how excited you are."

He started to pull her close and kiss her, when they were approached again, this time by Sheriff Ty.

He shook their hands, told them their dance was great and then directed his words to Gabe. "Do you mind giving me a little more information about what happened earlier today with Peyton and Avery?"

"I don't know much. Dalton and I, I mean Agent Dalton and I were in my truck goin' to pick up Peyton and Avery for the wedding. Apparently they were taking a little walk while they were waiting on us to get there."

"And where were they when you saw them?"

"They were on the left side, or south side of the old elementary school."

"So that means they walked to the end of their street and crossed over onto Poplar and were headed east."

"Yes, sir. Dalton and I saw a group of people fighting. We didn't realize at first it was Peyton. Two guys had him by his arms and another guy was punching him."

"So there were three?"

"No, there were four. Another guy had Avery. She was trying to get to Peyton to help him, but the fourth guy had her around the waist and was pulling her away."

"And then what happened?"

"We stopped the truck right there on the side of Poplar and jumped out. I charged over to Peyton and grabbed one of the guys holding his arm. I kicked him, and punched him in the face. He reached out and grabbed at me when he was falling down and ripped my shirt. Dalton grabbed the guy who was punching Peyton and held him away, but they all just turned and ran. The guy holding Avery threw her down on the gravel. We didn't bother to run after them."

Ty nodded. He took out his phone. "Is this the one you punched?" He showed Gabe a picture of a man, about twenty years old, with a black eye and bandage over the bridge of his nose.

Gabe squinted. Shook his head. "No, the guy I punched was white. The other one holding Peyton's arm was black, but I don't think that's him. My guy had a red bandana on his head and longish black hair stickin' out the bottom."

Ty nodded with a smile. Swiped his phone and showed it to Gabe. "How about this guy?"

Gabe looked at another man, again about twenty, with a bandage on his nose, a red bandana and long black hair. Gabe nodded. "Yep, that's him."

Ty spoke into his phone. "Put it on record that he's been positively identified." He put his phone away. "Good job, Gabe."

"So, you already caught these guys?"

"Just the one."

"Then who was that other guy?"

"Just an old mug shot of someone."

Gabe smiled. "Oh, I see what you did there. Okay, so, like, did this guy say why they decided to jump Peyton?"

Ty nodded. "Yep. He and the other three were each paid a thousand dollars to find Gabe Tanner's best friend and work him over."

Gabe's face paled. "Wh-what?" He cursed vehemently and then looked at Taylor. "Sorry."

"The men were hired up in Atlanta. They were told that since they couldn't get to you or your family, they were gonna get to someone else you cared about. The guy who hired them was a man named Payne."

Taylor winced. Gabe looked down at her. Her face had gone pale. He put his arm around her. "It's okay. You're safe. I got you, Tay." He looked back up at the sheriff. "Do the Kinos know? Does my dad know?"

"Yes, I just spoke with them and told them I was coming over here to talk to you, that I wanted to talk to you alone. They're waiting for me to finish."

"So, does Peyton know that these guys got him because of me?"

"Yes. They asked him if he was friends with the great Gabe Tanner."

Gabe felt like he was gonna explode. "I don't freakin' get it. They wanted me dead because they thought I might, uh, ruin Taylor. It's not like Peyton, or any member of my family are gonna do something to her. It doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, well, psychopaths don't have to make sense. It seems now he has a personal vendetta against you."

He was breathing hard. His eyes filled with tears. Not tears of sadness or of fear, but tears of rage. He took Taylor's hand and held it out to the sheriff. "Will you take her to her father?" He turned and ran out of the barn.

Once outside he looked around. The sun was going down. There were Tiki torches lighting the path that led from the Stewart house to the barn. Strings of twinkling electric lights covered the front of the barn and the split rail fence. Ameritech agents were everywhere, covering the entire perimeter and more up on the drive. No wonder his father and Jason and Joey had been on their phones so much.

Music drifted out from the barn. It seemed so pleasant. But all of that was tainted by the darkness of evil. He pulled out his phone and glanced at the time. It was 7:30. They'd been partying for about six hours. Some people were already headed home. He knew Jake and Laynah would be leaving soon. He walked, not up the drive, but in the other direction, toward the corral, circling around it and headed out toward the pasture. He looked back and saw the silhouettes of two agents behind him. He walked faster, trying to put some distance between himself and the agents, but after a few minutes he couldn't take any more. He fell to his knees and screamed, "Come on, come on and get me, you—" He used words he knew he shouldn't use but he didn't care at the moment.

Everyone he cared about was in danger because of him. He couldn't live with this feeling. He felt so hopeless, so helpless, and so alone. As if to match what he was feeling, the sky rumbled and opened up and a cold hard rain pounded him. He welcomed the punishment. Hoped lightning would strike. He felt utterly alone. But only a few minutes later he remembered he wasn't alone. He was never alone. He bowed his head and closed his eyes and began to pray. He begged for forgiveness for anything and everything he'd ever done wrong. He begged for the safety of his family and loved ones. He asked God to guide him, to tell him what he could do to fix the situation. The answer came almost as quickly as he'd asked the question. "Trust me."

Gabe's heart slowed. The comfort came. A stillness. A peace. A giving in. Like a sigh. His family will be safe. Taylor will be safe. His friends will be safe. Trust the Lord. Trust Him. Gabe started as a hand touched his shoulder. He turned and looked at his father who knelt down beside him. "Dad." That's all he could get out because of the emotion choking him.

Keegan sighed. "We'll get through this, son. It's a new mission, that's all. God's been sending me on missions to fight the darkness for a long time. We'll make it through."

Gabe nodded. "I just hate that everyone is in danger because of me."

"You listen to me right now. You aren't the cause of this. You're the light. The darkness is trying to put out your light. Don't let them. Rise up and be a warrior. Don't cave."

Gabe drew a deep breath and nodded his head. "Yes, sir. I won't cave. Sorry. I just had a moment of weakness."

"We all do. Now, let's get out of this rain."

Gabe stood. His father put his arm around him and they went into the barn. The moment they entered Taylor came running up to him and threw herself against his chest. He held her tight. "Are you okay?" she sniffled.

He took her face in his hands. "I'm sorry I ran out. I'm okay."

"Oh, Gabe, I love you so much."

"I love you too." He kissed her long and hard. He pulled away. "Are *you* okay?"

"I will be as long as I can be with you."

He kissed her again. They parted quickly, though, when they announced Laynah was gonna throw her bouquet and the newly married couple was about to leave.

"Go on," Gabe said as she ran off to hopefully catch the bouquet.

He watched silently, still feeling the heaviness of the responsibility of fighting the darkness. No wonder his father was so often somber and serious. Taylor did not get to catch the bouquet. Instead it was his sister Violet. She seemed delighted and Gabe smiled and wondered if Agent CJ Blackmon would be the one for her. Everyone was hugging Jake and Laynah and saying goodbye to them. Some of the guys were making lewd comments, which Jake merely laughed at, knowing it was all in good fun. They started toward the door and Gabe moved forward and hugged Laynah, then solemnly shook Jake's hand. "Be careful, Jake. You're going into Atlanta, right? Bad guys are out to get people I love."

Jake nodded. "I heard. It would be their biggest mistake to mess with me or Laynah."

Gabe smiled. "Just be careful."

"I promise, little bro."

"You carryin'?"

"Always."

He turned and grabbed Laynah's hand and they ran through the rain, up to the house where they would change clothes, get in Laynah's car and drive to the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Buckhead. Laughing, they went together up to Laynah's bedroom where their clothes had been neatly laid out.

Laynah's teeth were chattering from the cold rain, or maybe it was from the nerves of being alone in a room with her new husband. She ran her hands over her bare arms. "I hope my dress isn't ruined."

Jake smiled. "Why? You planning on wearing it again?"

"Nope. But maybe our daughter."

He sighed in pleasure at the thought. "Turn around and I'll unzip you."

She did as ordered, tingling to his touch as he lowered the zipper. His hands moved up, spreading the back of the dress open, then rested on her shoulders. He kissed the nape of her neck.

"I can't wait to get you to that hotel."

She giggled. "My bed is right here."

He shook his head. "I'd be too worried someone would knock on the door, wondering what's taking us so long to get dressed."

"I think they'd figure it out."

He stepped away. "Oh, no, once I take you to bed, I'm not letting you out. I've waited this long; another hour or so won't kill me." He started unbuttoning his uniform. She watched as he removed his jacket and shirt. Her heart sped up at the sight of his muscled chest. Suddenly she too was in a hurry. She grabbed her clothes and went into the bathroom and closed the door. He quickly hung up his uniform and pulled on his slacks and shirt. He was just slipping on his shoes when she came back out. He smiled. He was sure she'd pull on some jeans, but instead had on a pretty, white, short dress that came to mid-thigh. She grabbed some white shoes by the bed and hopped on one foot and then the other as she put them on. She was adorable and he just wanted to gobble her up.

Her hair was still damp from the rain but some flowers still remained.

He reached his hand out to her. She took it and they stood there smiling at each other. "Ready?" he asked.

She nodded. "Ready."

They left the room and headed downstairs. Their immediate families were there in the kitchen waiting on them to say goodbye one more time, making them glad they didn't give in to the temptation.

"Where's your suitcase?" Lisa asked Laynah.

"It's already in the car. Jake's is too."

"Okay, now drive safe," Jodi said.

"I will," Jake assured her.

The moms hugged them again.

Laynah's brothers, Charlie and Matt hugged her and kissed her and shook Jake's hand. Little Aralyn started to cry.

"Oh, sweetie, what's wrong?" Laynah asked.

"I don't want you to move away."

"Sweetie, I'm just going on a little trip. I'll be back in just three days, okay?"

"Okay, but Mom says you're gonna live over at the cottage."

"I am, but you can come over and spend the night sometimes."

John and Chaz both looked at Jake, waiting to see his reaction to that.

Jake smiled. "Yes, you can come over and I'll make you your favorite popcorn. Would you like that?"

"Yes."

"And I was wondering if you would make me a new picture to put on my refrigerator."

She smiled. "Sure."

Laynah looked at Jake with so much love.

John and Chaz both took Jake aside. John asked, "Son, you have enough money?"

Jake laughed because it reminded him of going on his first date. "Yes, sir, I do." He then looked at his new father-in-law to see what admonition he wanted to lay on him.

Chaz smiled. "I know that you know she may still be a little fragile."

"Yes, sir, I know."

"So, like, uh, well, be gentle."

Jake had to press his lips together to keep from grinning. "I will. I would never hurt her. I promise. We've already talked about it. I'm a patient man."

Satisfied, Chaz shook his hand and then pulled him in for a hug. John did the same.

They turned and kissed Laynah's cheek.

"Ready, Mrs. Appel?" Jake asked.

"Has it stopped raining?"

"Yes," Lisa answered.

"Then, yes, Mr. Appel," she responded.

"Drive safe," John said.

"Roger that."

He took her hand, and they ran out to the car, which had been pulled from the garage and parked in front of the house. There were white streamers decorating the car and the words "Just Married" painted on both rear side windows and across the back. Just to make sure everyone knew they were from the backwoods, someone had strung a bunch of beer cans from the bumper. Everyone from the barn had gathered around and were throwing rice at the couple from the little bags each person had been provided. Jake and Laynah both looked up in surprise as the males all started shooting Gabe's collection of Nerf guns at them. Jake helped Laynah into the car and as he ran around to get in the driver's side, the guys pummeled him with their entire bags of rice. He caught one and chucked it back at Derrick.

He jumped into the car and they pulled away. Everyone waved and shouted and cheered. Jake watched them in the rearview mirror. Finally, he looked over at his wife. His wife. He smiled. She smiled back.

"Tired?"

"I'm too excited to be tired right now," she said.

"What's that?" Jake asked, pointing to a brown paper bag placed carefully on the floorboard.

Laynah picked it up and looked through it. "It's a care package. Some of the cake. Some of the hors d'oeuvres, two bottles of water, some chocolates and an envelope."

She pulled out the envelope and opened it and smiled.

"It's a card and a check from Grandmaster Kino and Shelley." She read the beautifully handwritten card aloud:

Dear Jacob and Melaynah,

Yours is a union obviously made in heaven and Shelley and I couldn't be happier for you both. We both agree that your wedding vows were the most fervent and heartfelt and holy vows we've ever heard. We knew immediately that you two will have a long, happy marriage and we can't wait to touch base with you on your first anniversary and hear

how you've evolved and grown together.

Shelley put together the food for you because she's thoughtful like that. Together we'd like to give you this gift to help you on your way in your new life as husband and wife. Use it for whatever you want. Do not even think about not accepting. Maybe you can use it as a down payment on that land you want to purchase or for the home you want to place there.

We pray for you all the love and happiness God has in store for you, and for your safety in everything you do and everything you face. As Shelley and I prayed for you this morning, we spoke to the Lord about your job as a Marine, Jake, and about its dangers. We felt such a feeling of peace come over us, it was very comforting and reassuring. So, lift up your head and trust Him in all things. If you ever need anything, please feel free to call on us. We see you as part of our family. We hope you see us the same way.

Always and forever in Christ Jesus,

Eric and Shelley Kino

Laynah looked up with a smile and sighed. "They are just the best, aren't they?"

Jake nodded. "Some of the best people I've ever known."

Laynah unfolded the check and stared at it.

"So? How much is it, Bugs?" he asked as he drove.

She turned, her eyes big. "It's twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Wow."

"We can't accept this," Laynah said.

"Uh, yes we can, and we will. He told us right there in the letter to not even think about not accepting their gift."

"But who gives this much money out of the blue to someone?"

"They do. And you gotta remember, Laynah, twenty-five thou' is nothing to them. You know they're, like, multibillionaires, right?"

"I knew they were rich. I didn't know how rich. They seem so down to earth."

"That's because they don't worship money. They don't worry about it and they don't need it to be happy."

"Well, I understand that, because all I need to be happy—is you."

"Backatcha, Bugs." He pulled into a gas station/convenience store.

"Why are we stopping?"

"I'm gonna cut the cans off the bumper. Don't need all that noise. Don't wanna call too much attention to us, and besides, who knows, some cop might pull me over and say it's a safety issue."

Laynah giggled. "You're probably right. So glad you're thinking ahead."

"I have to in order to keep you safe. My number one priority."

"Number one? What about loving me?"

"That's the *reason* for my number one priority."

"Your mind is so logical and ordered. Just like a man."

"Yep, and I'm gonna get you to the hotel and show you all the ways I'm like a man."

She giggled. "I'm looking forward to it."

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With so many helping hands back at the barn, everything was cleaned up by ten

o'clock, and by eleven the men had most of the lights and high decorations down. Gabe worked hard, doing most of the climbing and reaching. Finally he took down the ladder and put it away. Chaz and John thanked everyone profusely for the help. The caterers were also grateful for the extra help. Some of the flowers had been gathered to put in several of the local churches for their Sunday morning services.

Gabe was so tired that Agent Dalton volunteered to take Peyton and Avery home himself. Gabe walked with Taylor and her brother and cousins back to the Inn. An agent followed at a discreet distance, but Gabe was aware of him. He wondered if he was assigned to watch over Taylor or Gabe himself.

Taylor spoke excitedly about being on *America Can Dance* and her brother and cousins were excited for her. They got to the Inn and the guys went on to the cottages while Gabe and Taylor sat together on the couch in the lobby. They cuddled and kissed. Gabe sighed. "I wish you guys didn't have to leave tomorrow."

"Me too."

"I guess there's no way they'd let you stay here another week, like, at my house."

Taylor smiled. "I doubt that very much. Especially not with some dude trying to kill you and take me."

"Yeah, I have to say, you need to be with your family in familiar surroundings where they can keep you safer."

"I guess. And actually I really want to get home so I can get started on a few things."

"Really? Like what?"

"Well, talking with Miss Caroline makes me want to look into those private dance lessons as soon as possible. And then that reminded me that I've been thinking about trying out for the school volleyball team."

Gabe smiled. "That is awesome, Tay!"

"Well, we'll see. But I'd never make the team with my current backyard volleyball experience, so I talked to Dad and he says he can get me a personal coach to help me get ready for tryouts. I don't have much time, so I need to get home and get to it. Besides, you've reminded me that it's my senior year and I need to make the most of it and really enjoy it and it's not like you're gonna be around that much, so I might as well focus on something, like, occupy my time with something I enjoy."

"I'll try to get time to come see your games."

"That would be great, but, I have to *make* the team first, and that's iffy, but at least I'm gonna try."

"You'll make it. You're a natural athlete."

"Hmm, what makes you say that?"

He shrugged, grinned. "It takes one to know one."

She punched at his shoulder, but missed and grazed his neck.

"Ow, you got my scar."

Taylor leaned over and touched the scar on Gabe's neck. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes, if I, like, accidentally scratch it, or, like, somebody punches me in the throat," he said pointedly.

Taylor giggled. "Sorry. Bad aim."

"You are a black belt," he reminded her.

She laughed as she pulled out her phone and took a picture of his scar. She glanced at

her notifications and gasped. She started scrolling. "Gabe, we already have over a million views of our dance on Teenspotter. Oh my goodness, and it's also on Instagram and SnapChat. O M G, Gabe, millions of views!"

"Yeah, Peyton told me he and some others were gonna video and post it."

"And look at these stills. Here's a close-up of your gorgeous eyes."

"Whatever."

"Ooh, and here's one of your abs under the suit jacket. Just the abs, or, uh, just your midsection. Someone captured it off the video because your jacket is swinging out like you're moving, probably when you do that spin."

He took her phone. "Oh, and look," he said, mocking her. "Here's one of you zoomed in on your gorgeous lips. And here's one of your..." He stopped, sighed and shook his head. "Does this bother you?"

He showed her the pic where someone zoomed in on her chest. She shrugged. "I'm used to it. It's not like there's anything to see."

He shook his head. "Well, I don't like it." He scrolled some more. "And look at this one with that dress flipping up."

She took her phone back. "Those are my shorts."

"That's a pic of your backside." He leaned over and continued to stare at the pic.

"Hmm, stop staring at my backside," she laughed.

"Who's staring at your backside?" Ricky asked as he came in the door.

Gabe jumped up from the couch. "Uh, it's not like it sounded. Sir."

"That's good to know. Well, it's been a long day. Your mom and I are going up to the room. You have one hour."

"Yes, sir," the kids said at the same time.

They sat back down, but Gabe rose several more times as everyone staying at the Inn arrived and went up to their rooms. John Appel made a last sweep of the Inn and locked up. "Gabe you know how to lock and unlock the doors, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Make sure you lock up when you leave."

"Yes, sir."

"And Miss Maddie says you're welcome to anything in the fridge."

Gabe smiled. "Thanks."

"And Agent Dalton is in your truck out front. He says to take your time."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said, but he knew he couldn't make agent Dalton sit out in the truck and wait on him. He turned to Taylor. "I guess I need to get home. I can't make Dalton wait on me."

"I understand," Taylor sighed.

They stood together, swaying against each other as if they were dancing a slow dance. Finally he lifted her chin and kissed her, goodnight. "Come on." He took her hand.

"Where are we going?"

"I can't leave you down here alone."

He walked her up the steps and to her parents' room, kissed her one more time and left the Inn, remembering to push in the code that would lock the door.

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The Kinos left the next day and life in Pine Forest resumed a form of normalcy, only

things were different. Jake and Laynah were now married. Heather and Nolan went back to Tennessee. Gabe and Peyton and their other freshly graduated friends worked on getting ready to pursue the next phase of their lives, rather than planning their next year in high school.

Keegan was working a lot. Ameritech was opening three new branches; New York, Chicago and Dallas. The company was growing by leaps and bounds and being asked more and more to work with the U.S. government and with local police and also with foreign police departments. Keegan, being so occupied, worked out a schedule with his family to know when each of them required protection and assigned the extra agents needed.

Gabe put himself on a strict schedule. Up by 5:30. Workout, shoot, chores, cut grass for neighbors, work on plans for the community center, work on the martial arts tournament to take place right after the shooting contest. Order ammo. Order trophies and ribbons, find volunteer officials. Print up publicity posters and flyers. Print waivers. Get Mark to put him in touch with his webmaster person, so that he can tell them what he needs currently to be on the site, like an online sign-up form for the two contests he's currently holding. And a million other things.

His website was up and running and a YouTube channel and Instagram, TikTok and SnapChat. Someone working for him was already maintaining those sites and adding picture and video content. It was linked to Isla's site. It already had a bunch of videos that had been made of him at the Mini-MART, at the Prom, at his ball games and at the "demonstration" the Mayor had allowed. And now, from the wedding.

On Monday, the 17th, Gabe sat and made his first personal speaking video. It was to air first on Isla's channel and then would be on his own channel. Isla had promised her viewers a video of Gabe sharing some of his thoughts and they were apparently really looking forward to it, which was why she kept asking him if it was ready yet. It took him several tries. He didn't want to say what *he* would say, but what God wanted him to say and so he prayed and waited for the feelings to come into his heart and then for the words to make their way into his brain.

"Hey, I'm Gabe Tanner and I just wanted to come on here and say 'thank you' to everyone. Y'all have all been so great. You've been kind and you supported me and you uplifted me, first at the Mini-MART and then at my ball games. And then, when I was, uh, shot, and grabbed off the street and held hostage, your prayers and positive thoughts truly helped me. I felt God with me. And throughout all the past few months I've been working on doing something with all the money that was raised for me, something that would help more people.

"So, I started a foundation and we're gonna be putting together programs to help people, mostly kids or teenagers. Our goal is to help turn kids' lives around who are moving in the wrong direction, or just help people who need a helping hand out of the ditch, if ya know what I mean. All the specifics will be on my new website at GabeTanner.com. Links to all my social media are on the site, and don't forget to subscribe and hit the like buttons, that is, if you like it. If you want to help there's a donate button, or if you want to do more, contact us.

"I also want to give a huge shout out to Isla August at Teenspotter.com, because without her none of this would be happening. It's her and you, all of her followers, who

have made some pretty miraculous things happen." He smiled. "I wasn't sure what to think about Isla at first. I wasn't used to being interviewed on camera. I wasn't sure what her motive was and I couldn't understand how people could be so interested in some country kid from rural Georgia. But then Isla won me over with her honesty, with her work ethic, and with her testimony, which is beautiful. She's an awesome person, filled with light and I'm proud to know her.

"So, every week, probably on a Sunday, I'm gonna make a longer video and give you a message, maybe something to help you or lift you up if you're feeling down. I don't want this message to come from me, cuz like, I know I'm just a kid. So, I want the message to be something the Lord wants me to say. I want it to come from Him. I prayed a little while ago and asked God, in Jesus' name, what does He want me to say today? What can I say to help someone today? And here's what came into my mind.

"Sometimes life is hard, sometimes it feels like we don't want to get up in the morning, and sometimes it feels like we're all alone. But we're not alone. We're never alone. God is always with us. That doesn't mean He's gonna wave a magic wand and make all of our troubles go away. But while we're experiencing our troubles, He's right there next to you. Reach out to Him and you'll feel His presence and His love, and when that happens, it's like the hard time seems so much smaller, so much easier and then we make it through, and we find we've grown stronger because of the hard time. I know I've grown stronger over the past few months, and I've been blessed with people like you who supported me. So, now, will you help me to support someone else?"

He smiled warmly. "That's all for now. Would love to hear *your* thoughts or *your* comments or *your* ideas. So hit the contact button. Oh, and for those here in the middle Georgia area, we're having a shooting contest at the *Eagle Eye Gun Club*, on Saturday July 6th and I'll be there to give a demo and to speak to you, so come and watch or participate. Also, if you would like to compete in or watch a great martial arts tournament, it will be held the following Saturday at *Pine Forest High School* right here in my home town and I'll be there too. Sign ups to compete will be on my site in a few days. Tickets for both events will be on sale next week. The venues only have so much space so it'll be first come, first served. Hope to see you there!"

Gabe watched the video. He sighed, hoping it was good enough. He wasn't really shy, but he also wasn't comfortable speaking on camera. But he'd get used to it. He sent it to Isla with a note saying he could redo it if she wanted.

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June 18th Tuesday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jodi Appel rose early and headed down to the Inn's kitchen. There was no one staying at the Inn currently now that their wedding guests had all left and it was a welcome break. There would be another slew of guests arriving soon enough. Today, Jake and Laynah would be home and Jodi wanted to get Maddie's help to make them something wonderful to eat at their little cottage this evening. Maddie wasn't up yet, so Jodi started on the one thing she knew they would love, some of Maddie's apple butter muffins.

An hour later the heavenly smell brought John from outside where he'd been doing some landscaping. He was dirty and sweaty and smelly and he came up behind Jodi, wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her neck. "Okay, I forgive you for not working

out with me this morning, since this is the result. Did you make enough for me, or are they all for Jake and Laynah?"

She leaned back against him. "I made extra for you. But go and wash first, you are yucky."

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am." He started to leave but looked around. "Where's Maddie?"

"I let her sleep in. Bless her heart, she's been so tired since the wedding." Jodi took off her apron. "I'll go check on her."

John nodded. He had a sudden bad feeling. He went with Jodi to Maddie's door and stood in the threshold. He knew immediately it was as he feared. He could feel it. He knew she was gone. He watched as his wife tried to wake her and turned back to him, her face pale, her eyes filled with tears.

Sighing, he came forward, searched for a pulse, thought about doing CPR, but she was cold. He lifted her arm slightly. Rigor mortis was starting to set in. She'd probably passed during the night. He pulled out his phone and called for the county coroner. Paramedics could not pronounce death in Georgia, nor transport.

Jodi stood by the bed and took her hand. "She looks so peaceful. She kept saying that Lawrence had been visiting her. I knew it was coming, so I don't know why I feel so terrible. She's with Jesus, she's with her love, she's with her sister who died when she was little, and her parents, and hopefully with her daughter. Oh, dear I need to call Lisa. How do I tell her that her grandmother died?"

"Come on, now, Jo, we'll get through this. And we'll help Lisa, and thanks to you, everyone knew that this could happen. Thanks to you they all took time to spend with her and tell her how much they love her. You helped to make Miss Maddie's last days on earth some of her best."

Jodi nodded. Wiped at her tears. "I'd better call Lisa before she sees the coroner arrive."

Jodi called Lisa. John called Chaz. They both were heartbroken and wondering if they'd hugged her enough and told her they loved her enough. They were on their way over. Chaz called his parents and stopped by the house to collect his mother, Dr. Patricia Stewart, who had been Maddie's doctor for a while and would offer the pronouncement of death. John called Keegan next. The Tanner family was very close to Miss Maddie. The entire family thought of Maddie as their own grandmother and loved her dearly.

Keegan placed his phone down with a heavy sigh and went to the kitchen where he found Lizzy, Daisy, Gabe and Iris.

Gabe looked up at his father intending to tell him good morning, but stopped. "What's wrong, Dad?"

Lizzy turned at Gabe's words. Her eyes searching her husband's.

"Miss Maddie passed away."

There was a gasp from the girls. Lizzy's tears began immediately. Daisy stood still. Gabe slumped back in his chair and watched his father go to his mom and put his arms around her.

Miss Jodi had said it was probably gonna happen, Gabe thought. And now it has. She's meeting Jesus, he thought with a smile. She missed her husband so much. He sighed. She's good. She's okay. He'd danced with her at the wedding, and he was grateful for that.

"Dad," Gabe said. "Was it a heart attack?"

"We don't know yet. The coroner is on the way. She died in her sleep."

"I need to go over there, be there for Lisa," Lizzy said.

Keegan nodded. "I'll take you. Daisy can you get your sisters and help out here today?"

"Yes, sir," Daisy said. "I need to go tell them." She turned and ran up the steps.

"What do you need me to do?" Gabe asked.

"I can't think of anything right now. Just don't go off by yourself."

"I won't. I have a million things to do and Dalton will be with me. But first, I'm gonna tell Taylor."

He didn't have time for a phone call but just texted her.

~ Maddie passed away last night

~~ Oh no! So sorry. R U ok?

~ Yep. Maddie is with Jesus. She was lonely and missing her husband. I believe he's with her now.

~~ I think so too. Let me know when the funeral is gonna be.

~Will do. Love you.

~~Love you too ♡♡♡

At the Inn Dr. Stewart examined Maddie and gave the pronouncement of death. The coroner arrived. Lisa kissed Maddie's hand and moved aside to allow them access. Chaz stood behind her, his hand on her shoulder, giving her the support she needed. He also loved Maddie. In a way, he'd actually had to introduce Lisa to her grandmother about twenty-five years earlier. After Lawrence Lewis died and before Lisa had come back home, it was actually Chaz who'd taken care of Maddie. Looked after her, drove her around, did her yard work, fixed whatever needed fixing. Then Lisa came home, and the Appels arrived and a few years later, the Tanners showed up and Mrs. Madeline Lewis was grandmother to them all. He looked at her smooth face. She looked so peaceful.

Lisa turned away. She couldn't watch them move her body. Chaz ushered her out. "We'll need to call the funeral home. And we need to go home and tell the kids. And Jake and Laynah have to be told."

Lisa winced. "They go away for a few days of wedded bliss and come home to this."

Chaz sighed. "Well, Red, death is a reality and they know that."

"It's a reality, but it seems so unreal, doesn't it? I mean, just yesterday this person that was my grandmother was smiling and laughing and talking to me, and now, she's gone."

Chaz swallowed. He knew just how real death was and though he didn't dwell on it too much, times like this brought his memories of his murdered wife and daughter to the surface. He drew a deep breath.

"It is surreal. I agree. In Iraq it was a way of life." Chaz shook his head. He'd been a corpsman, and he'd had a few young men die in his arms. It was a tragedy. They were young guys, trying to do something great. His own son Charlie had talked about going into the military, following Jake's example. Chaz hoped he would go a different direction.

Lisa realized her husband was struggling, and put her hand on his arm, looked up into his eyes. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Yep. Give me a second." He drew several deep breaths. Sighing, he

redirected his mind. “Do you wanna make the call or shall I?”

“Will you?” Lisa asked.

“I’ll call Jake. Then he can tell Laynah himself and help her through it.”

“You don’t want to call your own daughter?”

“I gave my daughter over into the care of another man a few days ago. I think it would be a show of good faith to allow him to handle this. I don’t know how the last few days have gone. I don’t know what state of mind she’s in. I’m not gonna undermine Jake.”

Lisa thought. Nodded. Smiled at her thoughtful husband. “Okay, I get that.”

They looked up as they heard Lizzy and Keegan’s voices and went out to the foyer to see them. There were hugs and condolences.

“I have so much to do,” Lisa said. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Well, I do,” Lizzy said. “I’m gonna call Pastor Tim and let him know. Miss Maddie loved him.”

“And I can go ahead and call the funeral home,” Jodi said. “Lisa, didn’t you tell me you had all the preliminary things already arranged?”

Lisa nodded. “Yes,” she said softly.

“Come on, Lisa,” Jodi said. “Let’s you and me and Lizzy sit down at the kitchen table, have some coffee and make a list of what needs to be done. Don’t worry, sweetie. We’ll get it all done and Miss Maddie is finally with her Lawrence.”

John, Keegan and Chaz watched them go.

Keegan nodded at Chaz. “What do you need from me?”

Chaz shook his head. “Not sure. I just told my wife I would call Jake and let him tell Laynah.”

John nodded. “You do that. I’ll see if the coroner needs any information. I’m really glad I stopped Jodi from calling Jake.”

Chaz looked up. “Uh, yeah, I’m glad about that too.”

“Well, I’m swamped at work so I’ll get back to it,” Keegan said. “But you need anything, anything at all, just say the word.”

“Thanks,” Chaz said as he shook Keegan’s hand.

Keegan left and Chaz pulled out his phone and stepped out onto the front porch.

“Hey, Uncle Chaz!” Jake answered.

“Jake.”

“What’s up? Everything okay?”

“Okay? Yes. But something is up. Is Laynah nearby?”

“Yeah, we’re at the pool and she’s in the pool having a last swim before we check out.”

“What’s her state of mind?”

“Uh, she looks to be happy. You’re scaring me.”

“Sorry. Don’t mean to do that. I have some bad news and I’m telling you so that you can tell Laynah and see to her.”

“Oookaaay.”

“Miss Maddie passed away last night.”

Jake sighed, blew out a breath. “Man.” He shook his head as tears welled in his eyes. “Man. So, what happened?” he asked, his voice choked with emotion.

“Don’t have a cause of death yet. She died in her sleep. When Jodi went to check on her she was already cold and rigor mortis had set in.”

Jake's eyes filled. She was his adopted grandmother and they were very close. Still, thanks to his mom, they all had a feeling this was coming. He cleared his throat. "Okay, so, you wanna talk to Laynah?"

"No, I want *you* to tell her. You're her husband. This is your responsibility. Then if she wants to talk to me or Lisa she can call us."

"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it. Um, so, how's my mom?"

"She's dealing and being a huge help to Lisa."

"Yeah, that sounds like mom."

Chaz glanced at his phone as it buzzed. "Hey Jake, Ricky is trying to call me. Gotta go. Call me if you need me."

"Roger that."

Laynah got out of the pool and came to Jake with a smile on her face. "Who ya talkin' to?"

Jake sighed. "Sit down, Bugs, I need to tell you something."

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Isaiah 25:8

"He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD
will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach
of His people He will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Two months and four days later, August 22nd Thursday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe looked around at the faces of his family as they chatted and ate his favorite meal; beef stroganoff with salad and homemade rolls and apple pie with ice cream for dessert. He wanted to take it all in. It was his last family dinner as a kid. After this, everything would change. He was leaving in the morning on an Ameritech flight, headed to Los Angeles to become one of Jason's Elite, now called a JETT. It stood for Jason's Elite Tactical Team. They were actually going out a week earlier than he had to report, because his dad had some big time meetings with the upper echelon of Ameritech. The agency was being revamped. His father was being promoted from running the Southeast Division of Ameritech to running the entire Eastern Division, with three different guys taking his place.

Gabe smiled at the revamp. The company was growing in quantum jumps, thus having to have more field offices and therefore have more men to take over running those offices. The cool thing was even the names of certain ranks were changing. His dad told him that Jason said that was because of Gabe's input. Gabe had wanted the agents to receive more honor, more respect, and Jason felt that began with how they were addressed. Whereas right now every agent was simply addressed as 'Agent' and their surname, including Jason and Joey, now, more ranks were being added. Now, Gabe's father was about to be a Division Chief Director and can be addressed as Division Chief or as Senior Agent Tanner. Joey will be addressed as Deputy Chief Adams, and Jason will be addressed as Chief Director Lee or Director Lee.

Agents that will be in charge of the field offices will be SAC, Senior Agents in Charge and can be addressed as Senior Agent. So, Agent Chris Coley, Marissa's husband, who will now run the New York Office, will be called SAC Coley or Senior Agent Coley. Gabe actually knew him because he was close friends with the Kinos. He was married to Mrs. Davis' sister, Marissa. Gabe didn't know the agent who would run the newly formed Chicago office, but he knew the guy who would run the Texas office, Agent Hart Akins who will now be Senior Agent Akins. Most everyone simply called him Hart, and Gabe wondered if he would continue to allow the informality.

Both Agents Chris Coley and Hart Akins had been Jeffy's bodyguards in Africa several years ago and both had been wounded near death in the line of duty. They were dedicated totally to the Kinos and to Director Lee and were best friends with Cam Wallace.

Gabe smiled. Hart Akins had been his father's assistant for a while, being groomed for his new position in Texas, and someone else was also being prepared, this one to one day take over the Atlanta office and it made Gabe very happy. It was his own bodyguard, Andy Dalton. Gabe was really happy for Dalton. He'd gotten a late start in life because of his

addiction, but he had put himself together and was making up for lost time. Sighing, Gabe realized his mind had wandered and he brought himself back to the present moment.

He watched Iris hold her fork out to his mother to give her a requested bite of her pasta. His mom licked the sauce off her lips and laughed. His father reached over and used his thumb to gently wipe a bit of sauce off her cheek and put it to his mouth. It was an intimate gesture, and Gabe's cheeks reddened a bit. He loved how in love his parents were. It was the best feeling.

He thought back over the past few months. Jake and Laynah's wedding had been awesome. Then only a few days later, Miss Maddie passed away and even though he knew she was sad and missed her husband, he was sad and missed her. They all did. Her presence was sorely missed. Her cooking too. The funeral had been nice. He'd never seen so many flowers in one place. The Kinos had flown home the Sunday after the wedding and then turned around and flown back here the next Saturday. Miss Maddie requested in her will that Grandmaster Kino would give a prayer at her funeral and as always, it was special and the congregation attending the service was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Miss Maddie gifted a giant sum of money to Gabe's foundation. She'd already signed complete ownership of the Inn over to Lisa years ago. She willed her recipe book to Lily, who loved to help her cook since she was little and was now in culinary school. Miss Maddie gave a beautiful quilt she'd made with the ladies in the town to Miss Jodi, an old book about local Native American tribes to John that he'd always loved, and a scrapbook she'd kept of Jake's accomplishments since he was a baby to Jake. Finally, she'd given Laynah the crib her husband had handmade for her own daughter and then several smaller items to her other great-grandchildren, Charlie, Matt and Aralyn: a collection of baseball cards, an antique train set and an antique doll in a wedding dress. Not surprising, the collection of baseball cards turned out to be quite valuable.

At the July fourth celebration in Pine Forest, which was a gigantic deal, Miss Maddie's absence was enormously felt because everyone had been feasting on her treats for seventy years. People came from all over the state for the Pine Forest home town Independence Day activities and the Inn was full. People were happy to hear that there will be another Inn soon. The town was definitely growing.

This year the town for Independence Day was more crowded than ever because of Gabe's newfound fame and because the *Gabe Tanner Three Gun Quick Shot contest at the Eagle Eye Gun Club* had been on the Saturday, two days after the fourth. It was a huge success. Gabe gave a demonstration of his own skills and a speech about the 2nd Amendment. He quoted stats on how many lives guns had saved and on how the right to protect oneself against evil was needed and sanctified. You'd think he was running for office and some people actually started a Gabe for President meme, which he thought was silly. He had to stand and sign autographs for hundreds of kids. The contest ended up costing him four thousand dollars and he brought in twenty-eight thousand dollars. It was amazing how generous people were. His speech and his gun demo were videoed and posted which brought in more money for his foundation.

The very next week was the *Gabe Tanner Martial Arts Invitational Tournament.* The mayor and school board had given him permission to use the high school and in return he would donate money to improve the football field and buy a new scoreboard. Gabe and Master Appel and a few of his students including the Stewart boys, the Anderson twins,

and Laynah, performed a demonstration. That and highlights of the tournament were videoed and posted. Again, he'd been asked for hundreds of autographs, from kids and adults, and lots of girls who all wanted selfies. It cost him a little more money to pull it off, close to eight thousand dollars, but they still netted about ten thousand dollars. Gabe made sure the public knew that all of the proceeds were going into their local community.

It made Gabe extremely happy to present Mrs. Murphy with a brand new Toyota Corolla. He'd thought she'd be embarrassed, but she was a practical lady and understood to turn down the gift would not help her children. She also accepted help in the refurbishing of her home, just fixing the broken things and updating her appliances. She was grateful and promised to pay it forward. Gabe still had a few thousand dollars left and used it to help several more townspeople whose homes seemed to be run down. He and his father, Agent Dalton, and a few men from their church, did most of the work themselves.

Gabe still turned his truck over to Peyton to use for school and Mrs. Murphy's old car was repaired and saved for Lucas to use when he got his license. The Murphys and Tanners had a big dinner for Peyton when he left for college at the end of July. It was a bittersweet time.

Now, Gabe would be leaving in the morning and he was feeling pretty nostalgic about leaving his mom and his sisters. He loved them maybe more than life itself. He glanced up at his oldest sister, Heather, who'd driven back for this special dinner. She'd brought Nolan again, and last night, after a conference with the parents, they'd made the big announcement that they were getting married. Gabe was happy for her, but also sad. Like Peyton had said, life was changing. At least it would be a while before Heather married because they said the engagement would last at least a year and they had no date picked out yet. His sisters were all ecstatic though, and already making plans.

Thinking of his sisters, he was glad that both Rose and Violet had finally 'fessed up to his mom and dad about their clandestine relationships. He'd been in his father's office when Rose poked her head in, he recalled.

"Dad, got a minute?"

"Yes, Gabe and I are about done."

"Gabe can stay, cuz he knows what I'm about to say."

Gabe was surprised. "I do?"

"Yes, and don't smirk."

His father nodded. "Okay, have a seat."

She sat down slowly. "I'm, uh, well, I've been dating someone."

His father was silent, just like he'd been when Gabe was telling him about the fight behind the school.

"And, I don't really know how I feel about the guy, except that maybe he's cute, and maybe he's pretty interesting."

"Ya know, Rose, that's fairly superficial."

"Yes, sir, I get that. I just don't know what to say about him yet."

"Do you have feelings for him?"

"I like being with him– I think."

His father had merely raised his eyebrows.

"I mean, I like being around him," she'd amended. "He's– kinda interesting."

"Are you gonna tell me who he is?"

She nodded and drew a deep breath. "It's Mike. Mike Moreland."

Again, his father had been silent.

"So, like I expected a bigger reaction," Rose said.

"Did ya now?"

"Yes, and so I'm guessing that means that you already knew." She glanced at Gabe and he raised his eyebrows at her.

Keegan nodded. "Yes I did know, and I have to say I'd almost given up hope that you were gonna tell me."

"Sorry, Dad."

"Rose, is there something I've done that would make you think you can't come to me and tell me anything?"

"No, it's not like that. But I know you share everything about us kids with Mom, and I know she doesn't need any stress and I didn't want to say anything because I didn't know if I was ever gonna see him again."

"From what I know you've seen him many times now."

"I've been seeing him a lot because he's gonna leave town now that the shoot is done. He has another account he's working on in Denver."

"Okay, so, how do you feel about him leaving town?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure how I feel. I'll let you know."

"Have you made each other any promises?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like being exclusive."

"Oh, no. Nothing like that."

"And how does he feel about dating a girl who once held him at gunpoint?"

"He doesn't like that part."

"And how do you feel about him not liking that part?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure what you're getting at, Dad."

"I'm just saying that guns have been a part of your life. Don't go changing yourself to please someone. He has to like you for who you are, and not for who he thinks you should be."

Rose sat silently. Finally, she nodded. "Thanks, Dad."

"Thank you, sweetheart, for finally telling me about Mike. I hope you'll keep me and your mom informed on how things go."

"I will. I didn't feel good about sneaking around anyway."

"Good. Oh, and Rose, just so you know, I like you just the way you are. A strong, no nonsense, level-headed, beautiful girl, who shoots straight both figuratively, and literally."

She came and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Daddy."

He smiled. "You're welcome."

Gabe sighed as he remembered the conversation. He himself, just like Rose, wasn't sure how he felt about Mike Moreland. He'd always thought it was strange that Rose had decided to date him. Regardless, Gabe was glad Rose had finally come clean. The

conversation between Violet and their father had not gone quite the same, mostly because she was not the one to come tell him about her relationship with Agent CJ Blackmon. It was Agent Blackmon himself who'd knocked on their front door early one morning. Gabe had let him in and he asked to see his dad. But his father was making breakfast for his mom and he'd told Gabe to tell CJ to come in the kitchen.

"What can I help you with today Agent Blackmon?" Keegan said.

"Sir, I need to speak to you about something personal."

"Okay, can you speak while I cook?"

"Yes, sir."

"Gabe, make yourself scarce please."

"Uh, that's okay. He can hear," CJ said quickly.

Gabe shrugged and sat down at the kitchen table, eager to hear, because he was totally interested in what he hoped was about to be said.

"Go on, Agent," his father said.

"Well, sir, I wanted to talk to you about your daughter."

"I have six daughters."

"Oh, uh, yes, sir. I'd like to talk to you about Violet."

His dad only sighed but remained silent as he broke eggs into a bowl to scramble. He did nod his head.

"Violet and I, well, we uh, what I mean is, your daughter, like, is a very special girl."

His dad had stopped cooking for a moment and looked sternly at the agent. "It will probably go better for you if you man up and come out with it."

CJ lowered his head in defeat and nodded. "Yes, sir. Agent Tanner, I think I'm in love with Violet. I've been seeing her behind your back and I know I'm breaking the rules and I have no excuse for it, except when I'm not with her I feel like, like, I don't even know what to call it. Empty I guess. I know it sounds weak, but I'm totally blown away. So, I'm here to do two things, beg to be able to openly date Violet, and beg for my job, because if things go the way I hope, I'll need to support her, and I can't support her if I don't have my job."

His dad arranged the eggs and some toast on a plate as if CJ had just told him the weather is nice today.

His dad turned. "Hold that thought."

He grabbed a fork and a glass of OJ and went upstairs.

CJ looked over at Gabe with a smile. "How am I doin'?"

"I think so far so good. He doesn't look like he's gonna blow. Then again, he usually doesn't."

"Doesn't blow?"

"No, doesn't look like it. There's no warning."

"Great."

"So, why'd you want me to stay?" Gabe asked.

"Well, we've all heard the stories of how Agent, uh, I mean Director Lee jumped on Jensen when he and Kimmie were gettin' together. Thought you might be a buffer."

Gabe's dad came back into the kitchen. "Jensen was caught leaning Kimmie back over the desk and having at it. Not a smart move. But, you using my son as a buffer— pretty

smart."

Gabe smiled.

"Have a seat," his father ordered.

CJ sat down at the table.

"So, you know you've blatantly broken my number one rule. My daughters are off limits."

"Yes, sir."

"Was it worth it?"

"It will be if I end up marrying Violet."

"Good answer. But let's look at another scenario. I fire you, and all of the years you've put into being an Ameritech agent, all the hard work, all the hopes and dreams, will be for nothing. And then, as you mentioned earlier, then how would you support my daughter?"

"Yes, sir, I know I'm walking on thin ice. I know I could lose everything. But Violet, she's special. She's worth the risk, Sir."

"Let's look at another scenario. You realize you're attracted to my daughter. You think you absolutely must do something about this attraction, so you come to me man to man and ask if I could bend the rules for you and allow you to date Violet. Then, you two fall in love and it would've been something her mother and I saw coming from afar off, instead of like this."

CJ was silent.

"You don't have anything to say about that?"

"I do, sir. But I don't really want to say it."

Gabe's brows rose this time.

"I suggest you rethink that. The thin ice you were walking on is breaking."

"What happens if the ice breaks, sir, if you don't mind my asking. I mean, I'm just examining all my options."

"If the ice breaks, you have no job and no Violet. So talk."

He swallowed hard, nodded his head. "I wanted to do just what you said, come to you and ask permission to date Violet. But..." he stopped.

His dad simply waited. Gabe had always marveled at the power of silence when used by his father. It made you want to spill your guts.

CJ shifted uncomfortably. "But– Violet begged me not to do it."

Gabe remembered that his dad's eyes closed for a brief second.

"Did she say ***why*** *she didn't want you to come to me?"*

"Not really. She seemed— afraid. She seemed panicked whenever I would try to speak to her about it."

Gabe thought his heart would break at the look of hurt in his father's eyes. Right then, there was a thumping on the stairs and Rose and Violet came into the kitchen. Violet stopped, looked from face to face, her own going pale.

"What's going on?" she asked softly, her eyes already filling.

CJ rose to his feet. "I'm sorry, Violet. I had to speak with your father. I simply couldn't stand it any longer. I needed to show integrity."

Violet looked at her father, her eyes blinking back tears. "Daddy, I'm sorry. It was all my fault. Please don't be mad at CJ and please don't fire him."

"Come on, Gabe," Rose said. "Let's give them some privacy."

"No," Violet and CJ said at the same time.

His dad sighed. "Tell me Violet, how is it all your fault?"

"I was being selfish. I didn't want him to tell you because I didn't want you to be disappointed in me for having feelings for someone who works for you, and for having feelings for someone I'd just met. Because, you know, what happened in New York. But when I met CJ, it was like, I don't know, love at first sight? Gosh, I know how silly that sounds. That was before I found out that CJ felt the same way about me. By then, I didn't know how to tell you without getting CJ fired. I didn't want to be responsible for hurting the man I was falling in love with."

His dad looked at CJ. "You were supposed to be protecting her."

"Yes, sir. I know that, and I did."

"And you don't think you were distracted?"

"Dad, didn't you fall in love with Mom when you were supposed to be protecting her?" Violet asked.

"You have your facts a little mixed up. Your mother was taking care of me after my accident."

"Yes, and I know it's not exactly the same, but still, you knew that being there was putting her in danger and you knew there would come a time when you would have to protect not only her, but us girls too, right?"

"Yes."

"And did loving her make you distracted, or make you super vigilant?"

His father sat there silent for several moments. He nodded. "Good argument, Violet."

"So, what are you gonna do?" Violet asked her father.

"Well, let's see now, Agent Blackmon has mentioned that things are getting pretty serious."

"He did?"

"Yes, he did. And he actually said, that the way things are going he's gonna need his job so that he can support you."

Violet's mouth fell open.

CJ shook his head and drew a deep breath.

"So, to the marriage thing, for now, I'm gonna have to say 'no'—for now," he added again. "Push that out of your minds. Waaay out of your minds. I will however, give him permission to date you, and we'll just see where this goes from here. I will also allow him to keep his job. The fact that he is one of the best helps that. But that puts me in a bit of a situation as far as setting an example for the other agents. They'll see that there was no consequence for breaking my rule."

"Maybe you should just get rid of that rule," Violet offered.

"Nope. My daughters are off limits to the agents. If they want an exception considered, they'll need to be a man and come convince me otherwise. If they aren't brave enough to do that, they aren't agent material. Agent Blackmon was very close to losing his job because I was becoming impatient. But his job is safe for the time being."

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, Daddy."

"I'll even commend him for finally standing up to you, my sweet daughter, and coming

to me man to man, like he knew he should've done in the first place."

CJ heaved a sigh of relief.

"But there has to be consequences. Agent Blackmon, starting tomorrow, you will spend the next two weeks in the custodial sanitation department."

CJ nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And do the job well, like your life depends on it, because, well, it does. Any job worth doing is worth doing well."

"Yes, sir, absolutely. Thank you, sir."

"And, Violet, it's unsettling to me that you seem to be afraid of coming to me about something. About anything."

Violet looked down.

"Have I ever yelled at you?"

"No, sir."

"Have I ever hit you?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know that I love you?"

"Yes, sir. And I love you too, Daddy."

"Then please, don't be afraid to come to me about anything at any time."

"I'm not afraid of you, Daddy. I just don't want to displease you. I don't want to disappoint you." She looked up. "And I realize that's exactly what I did by not coming to you."

He smiled. "We'll just let this go and start fresh."

She nodded.

"Well, just one more thing," he said. "You falling in love with someone would never disappoint me, even if it's innocently misplaced like up in New York, as long as you're keepin' it clean." He looked at CJ.

"Oh! Yes, sir, absolutely. I fell in love, but I'm not stupid."

Gabe felt much better about leaving, knowing that everything was out in the open and settled with Rose and Violet. And now he was sitting at dinner with all of these amazing people, knowing he will be leaving in the morning. His eyes moistened.

"Gabe?"

He shook his head to snap himself out of his reverie. "Yes, sir?"

"You okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah, just trying to remember every second with the best family in the world."

"Aww, little bro, you gettin' mushy on us?" Rose said.

Gabe cleared his throat. "I guess so. Peyton talked to me before he left. He said life was changing and it seemed kind of sad, and in an effort to try to help him I told him to try to embrace the moment wherever he was and that to be men we have to adjust and pivot and roll with the punches, or something like that. But ya know, I get what he was talkin' about. Life IS changing. I mean, it's not like I wanna stay and go back to high school and play ball all of my life." He stopped, grinned. "Or, maybe I do."

Everyone chuckled.

"But really, I remember when Heather left for college. I mean, she really never came

back, except for short visits. And then the very next year Rose and Violet graduated and left for college. Even though I know the circumstances for them coming home weren't good, still, I was really happy when they came home and decided to go to Gordon and live here. And the same for Daisy and Lily. I was so happy they were gonna stick around. And then there's Iris." He turned and touched her little turned up nose. "Everyone's favorite. The next time I see her, she'll be three."

"So, sweetie, what are you saying?" Lizzy said. "You just want to stay frozen in this moment?"

"I mean, yes, but no, of course not. I want to go and make something of myself. And I miss Taylor and want to see her. I guess I'm just trying to take this all in."

"You're gonna make new memories, my sweet boy. I'm so proud of you. Even with what you're saying, those are the words of a mature young man who understands the preciousness of family and of life."

"I agree with your mother," Keegan said. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

"And what you all just said is going on his social media, cuz I have it all recorded," Rose said as she put her phone down.

Gabe rolled his eyes.

"What? You told me to record our dinner together, didn't you?"

"Not to go on my site."

"I'll edit it. Don't worry, I'll only keep in the parts that don't make you look like a complete idiot."

"Gee, thanks, Rosey."

"You're welcome, Gabriel Tanner."

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That night before bed and the next morning too, there were lots of hugs and kisses and admonitions for safety and smartness. That morning, Gabe enjoyed his last country breakfast for a while: his mom's fluffy buttermilk pancakes drenched in maple syrup, link sausages, and ice-cold raw milk. He was sure gonna miss the country air and country food.

Right after breakfast they headed toward the airport. Once they were in the air, Keegan handed Gabe a small box.

"What's this?" Gabe asked.

"It's from Jason, or I guess I need to get used to saying, Director Lee. It's a small step toward your goal."

He looked inside the box and there were two cards. Gabe eyed them carefully, reading everything on them, even the small print. One was an Ameritech Agent ID showing he was officially employed as an Ameritech Agent/Security Officer. Gabe smiled. "Wow. Cool."

"There will be a different one once you complete basic training, but this is a good start. Think of it as a learner's permit."

He then looked at the other one. It was a weapons permit for the state of California.

"So, I'm only eighteen. How did Jason, uh, Director Lee get this?"

"Ameritech has a special agreement with California that allows selected agents to carry at eighteen. Director Lee had you approved under that agreement. Your permit covers your firearms training and concealed carry while on duty. And remember, as an agent, you are always on duty. This permit doesn't authorize open carry, and even when you're twenty-one, I don't recommend it."

Gabe nodded. He knew that was because open carry was like a beacon, especially in Cali.

Gabe and his dad talked almost the whole flight, mostly about his training. Gabe had an advantage there and had been pre-training all summer. Working hard, getting stronger, getting faster, shooting while running and while backing up, reloading on the move, swimming miles, holding his breath, cross-training, climbing, knife fighting, everything they could do to help him get ready.

Part of why *Keegan* was coming to LA was not only the revamping of Ameritech, but revamping JETT training. They wanted to make it harder than ever. They wanted to make it so hard, especially on the first day of training, that most guys would immediately drop out. That would make JETTs the real elite, the cream of the crop. The original Jason's Elite would be part of this new training and therefore needed to test themselves. And that included Keegan, who at forty-nine, was much older than the other originals.

It was Friday morning. They would stay with the Kinos over the weekend, then Gabe would report the next week. So, he was looking forward to spending the weekend with Taylor. There was a big Ameritech meeting scheduled for early Saturday morning around the Kinos' giant dining room table which looked more like a boardroom table.

Gabe was not invited to that meeting which was fine with him. Instead, he and Taylor would be going to her volleyball practice at her school because she did indeed make the team. He was looking forward to watching her play.

It was always a long trip from the ATL to LA and Gabe was glad when they finally pulled through the gates of the Kino estate. As usual, Grandmaster Kino and Shelley came out to welcome them back. When Gabe bowed to Grandmaster Kino he felt something strange. A knowing. A premonition. But he couldn't place it. It made him dizzy for a second or two. Eric reached out and took his hand. "You okay there, son?"

Gabe swayed, put his hand to his head. "I think so. That was weird."

"Another vision?"

"No, just an odd feeling."

"You must be hungry," Shelley said. "Come on in, get settled and come to the kitchen."

Gabe hugged her. "Yes, ma'am." He pulled out his phone and glanced down when it buzzed. He looked up with a smile. "Taylor is on her way over."

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August 23rd Friday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Gabe and Taylor were going at it hard out back on the volleyball court. Gabe was slamming it down at her and she was bumping it back. He was giving her some instruction and she was taking it well, mostly because he was saying pretty much the same type of things her coach always said. They stopped to drink some water.

"So," Taylor said, a little breathless. "Did you also play volleyball in high school?"

"No, they don't have boys' volleyball in our school. Actually, not in most high schools, but some schools do. It's a growing sport for guys."

"Then how do you know so much about it?"

He shrugged. "Well, when we came in from football practice the girls would either be practicing or playing a tournament in the gym and us guys would hang out and watch."

"So, you thought it was an interesting sport?"

He grinned. “Sure, yeah, it was interesting. But, honestly, I mean, a bunch of athletic girls in those cute little black shorts, that’s hot. And, like, I am a guy.” He shrugged like that should pretty much explain it. And it pretty much did.

Taylor laughed. “Well, I appreciate your honesty, anyway.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her to him. “But it’s that picture of *your* backside that I blew up and pinned to my bedroom wall.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Yeah, I am. I don’t have a picture of your backside on my bedroom wall. I rolled it up and brought it with me.”

Taylor punched him and he instinctively blocked it.

“Oh, you think you’re good?” she threatened.

“I do.”

She threw another and another. It turned into an all-out battle. Taylor trying to take him down and Gabe trying to spar without hurting her. It was a challenge. The two agents guarding their perimeter were sorely tempted to turn and watch but didn’t dare. The battle went on for a good five minutes until Gabe wrestled her down into the sand and pinned her. She struggled to get out from under him.

“Be still,” he said, his breath coming hard.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll make you.”

She tried to knee him. He shifted and blocked. “Wow, that was dirty. I warned you.” He lowered his head and kissed her. She immediately stopped struggling.

Bree watched from the kitchen window with a smile.

Ricky stood next to her, frowning. “I don’t think I like what I’m seeing.”

“She started it,” Bree said. “I remember you and I wrestling around like that.”

“We were a lot older—by about ten years.”

She turned and put her arms around his neck. “Wouldn’t it be fun to go back to that time and do it all over again?”

He smiled. “Indeed it would. But we don’t have to go back in time. We just need to get home.”

She giggled. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

“You do that.”

“Okay then, we’re leaving right after Mom’s special dinner.”

“Looking forward to it.”

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August 24th Saturday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jason looked around the table at the faces of the men who’d helped to make Ameritech a successful international agency, one that was making huge strides. Sitting to his right, first and foremost, Grandmaster Kino, who had taught Jason most everything he knew since he was a little kid. He’d put Jason on the path. Next to him, Justin Lee, Jason’s older brother and Eric’s best friend. Justin had brought Jason along on that fateful first meeting with Eric and now kept Ameritech legal with his team of attorneys working around the clock. Also at the table was Ricky Kino, on board and always ready to use his celebrity to help a cause and who’d been deputized a few times for special missions. There was Mark

Adams, Justin's protégé and the guy who would soon take over for Justin, Joey Adams, a JETT, the meanest badass there is and the one who loves Ameritech with his whole heart. Joey could see the potential of the equalizing abilities of the agency, the power to level the playing field, and he will one day run it.

Others present at the meeting were sniper/sharpshooter Jeff Davis, who was one of his earliest agents, Cameron Wallace, who was the first Elite, and Jason's son-in-law, Jensen Deal, who was a sharpshooting, super-hacker computer expert. They were all JETTs and all crucial to the agency. Then there was former Special Forces operator Keegan Tanner, a man Jason had recruited personally, seducing him away from the FBI. Jason depended on his expertise on many levels. Then there was the Aussie, Jon Sweet, a JETT, who may one day run the field offices down under. Also present, Ron Willard, Leonard Dixon, Franz Klose, and Kang Minjum, who represented the agency in Britain, Canada, Germany and South Korea respectively. Sweden's Director was unable to make the meeting but would be joining them via the internet.

The women present—Asia Parker, Tina Gray, Jackie Bonner and Tasha Carrington—were also an integral part of the agency, the first three running accounting, human resources and public relations, and the last one was Jason's personal assistant. They were not only experts in their respective fields, but they were well-trained martial artists and marksmen, and had participated in several ops. Four women and fifteen men present, but they weren't the only ones who were major contributors. Some of the best had been left as a skeleton crew to run things during the next several days while this revamping of Ameritech took place.

Jason smiled. "Thank you for that prayer, Ricky. Though it pains me to say so, it was surprisingly just as beautiful as your father's prayers."

The group laughed. Jason and Ricky were known to constantly bait each other.

Ricky smiled. "You are so welcome, Jason. I figure with you running this meeting we need all the help we can get."

Jason nodded. "You speak the truth. Moving on, I'd also like to take the time to thank Shelley and Eric for their hospitality and Shelley and Angel for that delicious breakfast."

"You're welcome," Angel called sweetly from the kitchen as she and Shelley worked on cleaning up, wiping down counters and putting food away.

Jason went on. "Tasha has placed in front of each of you a packet of information. I will expect all of you to read it carefully and commit it to memory, which should be no problem by the time we get through it over this coming week. If you'll open your manuals to page seven, we're gonna go over the new geographical locations and service areas." He stopped, eyebrows raised when a phone buzzed.

Eric turned his phone over to see who it was, and looked up. "Sorry, it's the gate, gotta take it." He started to stand and walk away.

Jason nodded. "Stay. We'll wait."

Eric hit speaker. "This is Eric."

"Sorry to interrupt you, sir, but we have a bit of a situation. There's a woman here at the gate who says it's imperative that she speak to you. She's crying and pretty much begging to see you. Says it's a matter of life and death."

"Describe her, please."

"Latina, long dark hair, maybe in her thirties."

Eric glanced up at Jason. “Send her up.”

“Yes, sir. Oh, and she says you’ll pay for her Uber.”

“She’s correct.”

He ended the call and glanced at Jason. “Can it be so easy that the woman we’ve been searching for simply shows up?”

“I guess we’ll know soon,” Jason said.

Mark stood. “I’ll go pay the driver.”

Jason nodded. “Jeff, go with him, and Asia, pat her down.”

They both rose to do his bidding.

“Shall we do this in your office, Eric, or you wanna handle things here?”

Eric looked around. “The people at this table could possibly end up being part of what’s going down, and it might be a good exercise to see how Ameritech’s senior leadership swings into action and works together. Let’s do it here so we don’t have to go through the trouble of repeating everything she says.”

Jason nodded and quickly explained the situation to those who were not already privy to it. “Be aware, see if you can pick up things she says that we might miss.”

They moved around, making a place for the woman near Eric. Some of the agents stood and casually leaned against the wall to make the meeting seem less formal. They all looked the woman over as Asia escorted her in and asked her to sit in the designated chair. She seemed hesitant, nervous, even frightened.

“It’s okay,” Eric assured her. “We were having a meeting, but all of these people are here to help.”

She was Latina, pretty, had long, thick black hair back in a low ponytail. Her body was fit. She wore jeans and a red T-shirt that had a logo on it in black and yellow that read, *Carlita’s Early Learning and Daycare.*

She turned toward Eric immediately. “Oh, Señor Kino, gracias, gracias.”

Eric smiled kindly and nodded. “De nada. ¿Habla inglés?”

“Si, si, yes.” She was breathing hard. “Sorry. When I’m very upset I go back to Spanish.”

“I understand. What’s your name?”

“Luciana Ramirez.” She wiped her tears with her hand and Shelley appeared with a box of tissues, placed them in front of the woman and retreated back into the kitchen.

“Luciana, how can I help you?”

“Señor Kino, there is a terrible thing happening. It could even happen today. You have to stop them, please.”

“Are you in danger?”

“Yes, but it’s not me I need you to help. It’s the children.”

“Someone is gonna hurt your children?”

She started crying again, harder, sobbing almost uncontrollably.

“Luciana,” Eric said softly, taking her hand. “If you want me to help, you’re gonna have to calm down and tell me everything, okay?”

She grabbed a few tissues and nodded. “Si, yes, yes. I’m sorry.”

“Your children, where are they and what danger are they in?”

She shook her head. “Not *my* children.”

“The children at your daycare?”

"Yes, but it's not really a daycare. That's a cover."

"Who are these children? Are they being trafficked?"

She drew a deep breath and shook her head. "No, Señor Kino not trafficked. They are *your* children."

Eric glanced up at Ricky, his heart starting to speed up. "Who, Jeffy? Bree? Who?"

"No, these are babies. Oh my goodness, those precious babies," she blubbered.

"Luciana," Eric said sternly now. "Calm yourself and explain."

She sniffed. "Before, before, when that horrible Dr. Black took you and your wife, he took your samples. Your wife's eggs and your seed. He, he made babies. YOUR babies. He used surrogates."

Eric was now breathing hard and Ricky put a hand on his shoulder to calm him.

"How many babies did he make?" Jason asked.

"Seven. I think it was seven. Two of them died within a few months of their birth. I took care of the five that were left. Me and two other women, we take shifts. They are so precious, so precious, and I love them so much. But we found out a few months ago that one of the little girls was deaf. And, and..." She burst into tears again and it took her a moment to calm down enough to speak. She sniffed. "They said they didn't want imperfections and that horrible man, he, he came and took her and he killed her. He didn't think I saw, but I did. He put his hand over her nose and mouth and killed her. She struggled so hard. Sweet, sweet Maria."

There was a whimper in the kitchen and Eric looked up to see Angel try to catch Shelley. Mark quickly ran in the kitchen, lifted his mother, carried her to the living room and laid her on the sofa.

Eric looked back at Luciana. "What man? Do you know his name?"

She nodded. "Mr. Payne. I don't know if it's his first name or last name. He says Payne is all we need to know because that's what we'll feel if we tell anyone that we are taking care of a billionaire's children, because people want to kidnap them and hold them for ransom."

Eric now spoke through his own tears. "How old are the—*my*— children?"

"They are two."

"All of them?"

"Sí, all born in May. You have to save them. He's going to kill them all."

"How do you know this?"

"After he killed my precious Maria I started sneaking around. I got into his office. Found files on you and your wife and your daughter, and on all the surrogates and the babies. That's when I found out they were your children. When we were hired to take care of the children, we were told that they were septuplets and that they had grown so large their mother had died in childbirth. We were told their father was in jail but was very rich and will pay us handsomely for their care. When the first two died we thought it was a natural death, but now I'm not so sure. Once we found out the truth we were so scared and that's when I tried to call you, senor Kino, but I ran out of time. But, sir, I overheard him, Mr. Payne, I heard him talking to the lady, I don't know her name, but he talks to her a lot."

"How do you know he's talking to a woman?"

"He talks to her on speaker. I can hear the whole conversation if I sit on the stairs,

which I started doing during nap time to find out more information. The woman said that your wife's eggs are old and they were going to get new eggs and this time use seed that comes from Dr. Black. He said if they get new eggs then there is no need to keep these children because none of them have shown any signs of being special. I know he was talking about killing the babies like he did Maria."

"Luciana," Jason said. "Where are they being kept?"

"At a house at 1027 Berino Drive in Santa Clarita. It says *Carlita's Early Learning and Day Care* on the sign out front of the home."

"Joey, get me recon on that location STAT," Jason ordered.

Joey immediately got on his phone and walked away from the table.

"Where do they intend to get more eggs?" Eric asked.

She looked up. "From your granddaughter." Before Eric could even register that statement, she went on. "Señor Kino, you have to get them out of there. If I don't show up for work they're going to know I told someone. They will move them or maybe even kill them right away, though I don't think they'll do that until they have your granddaughter in their hands and the way they talk, I think *that* will happen very soon."

Ricky stepped away and called the agents who were currently with Taylor and Gabe.

Jason took over. "Mrs. Ramirez, tell me everything else you know; the setup inside the daycare, where they sleep, where they play, where they eat. Who is with them? How much security is there inside and out? How often is Payne there?"

"Mr. Payne lives there, on the top floor. It's a large house on a corner lot. If you drive down the side street there is a well-to-do neighborhood. Inside there are always guards at the front door and the back door. Those are the only doors in and out of the house."

"What about outside? Any security outside?" Jason asked.

"I've never seen any guards outside. The children eat and have lessons on the main level. The kitchen is in the back of the house. The back door is in the kitchen. Just inside the front door is a big room with some sofas and chairs. Sometimes I sit there and read stories to the babies." She dabbed at her eyes. "Little Maria never seemed interested except when I showed her the pictures. I told Mr. Payne she needed to see a doctor, that I think she can't hear. So he had the doctor come to the house and run tests on her. The doctor said Maria was deaf. And then Payne killed her and it was my fault." She burst into tears again. "Please tell me you'll get them out of there."

"Yes, we'll get them," Eric said softly, his heart breaking.

"And my friends. Camilla and Lonnie, they are so afraid. Mr. Payne will kill them too. And they will kill me when they find out I came to you."

"We'll get your friends too."

"And can you please get me a ride back to the Daycare?"

"I'm not sure that you should go back," Eric said.

"Oh no, I must. I have to. If I don't the children could be in worse danger. I have to show up on time. Please. If I show up, it will give you a little more time to make your plans, and I can assure the safety of the children. If you tell me when you will come, I will make sure they are all downstairs in the basement. That is where they sleep and where they play so that their noise doesn't bother Mr. Payne. I can keep them safe down there until you come."

"Jason?" Eric asked.

He nodded. "I'm gonna need to work with the police on this one. We'll escort Luciana back to the house as if we were her Uber driver. Do the children take a nap?"

"Yes, sir. Every day at 2:30 until 4:00. Downstairs in their beds."

"Can you keep them all together in one room today for their naps or will that draw attention?"

"Yes, I can do it. All their beds are in the big room at the end of the hall."

"Can you draw me a diagram of the floor plan?" Jason asked.

She sniffed. "Yes."

"Pen and paper, Tasha."

"Keegan, organize Overwatch, please," Jason ordered.

"In a neighborhood it may be difficult to find higher ground," Keegan responded.

"I don't care if they have to climb a tree. Find it."

"Roger that."

"Rick? Did you reach Agent Trout?"

"Yes. Gabe and Taylor are at volleyball practice at the high school gym. Agent Ward has the door, Agent Trout is recon and Gabe is also carrying. I told them to come straight back as soon as practice is over."

"No, have the agents bring them to my home. I'll run the operation from there. I need my equipment. I'm going there in just a few minutes. I'll feel better if they're near me."

Ricky nodded and walked away again to call in the change.

"Joey? How long?"

"Coming in right now, there was a chopper in the air and I diverted him." Joey nodded at Jensen. "Jensen, I'm having the helo send you current surveillance. What do you see?"

Jensen clicked some keys on his laptop. "The aerial feed is coming through, and I'm into their interior cameras. I count—" He paused. "Seven. On the main level, one in a room to the far left, two near front entrance, two near the back. Down one level, there are two more. And then there are four much smaller signatures. I assume those are the children."

"That's one extra," Jason said. "Luciana, do you know why there would be more than one downstairs with the children?"

She started to cry again. "No, unless the doctor came again, or unless Lonnie stayed after her shift. If the doctor came that could mean one of the babies is sick."

Eric took Luciana's hand. "We are gonna go get the children."

"Soon?"

"Today. Jason will let you know what time." He stood. "But if you'll excuse me, I have to see to my wife."

Eric went immediately to the living room. Shelley was now sitting up, tears streaming down her face. Mark had his arm around her. Eric sat down next to her and she threw herself against him. He held her tight and let her cry it out. He understood, because he felt like doing the same thing. A child, his child, he didn't know existed had been brutally murdered. Possibly two others. His gut wrenched with the pain. Shelley looked up into his face. He schooled his features. She needed to see strength and be reassured. "We'll get them out, Shelley. We'll get through this. Trust me. Trust God. I need you to be strong, not for me, but for these little ones. Can you do that?"

She sniffed. Raised her head. "Yes, Eric, I can do it."

"That's my girl."

Before Jason left for his home, he, Joey, and Keegan, on the phone with the captain of the Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff's Station, organized teams to plan the storming of the daycare center and the rescue of the children. Jason's contacts with the FBI were also brought in on the case. Luciana was given a vest to wear under her shirt and her ride back to *Carlita's Day Care Center* arranged. The rescue was planned to take place at approximately 3 PM, one hour after Luciana would arrive to work at the daycare.

Lastly, Jason looked at Eric with a frown. "I don't suppose I could get you to stay here and wait for us to return?"

Eric shook his head. "That's a ridiculous question. Jason, I won't interfere or get in your way. I'll go straight downstairs to the children when you give me the okay. Ricky will be with me. And Jason, you have to know the law is not gonna just let me take those children home without having them examined at a hospital and a ruling in court. It could be some time before I'm able to get to them if I don't go with you. And I need to get to them first so that I can do this right, with as little trauma to their minds as possible."

"You're correct about the courts. They would normally be put into foster care until the courts go through all the red tape. But I've just spoken to Justin and he is arranging to have you and Shelley be the foster care providers. So, as an alternative, I don't suppose I could get you to wait at the hospital until they arrive?"

Eric shook his head. "Another silly question. Imagine for a minute that these are your and Angel's children. Think about it."

Jason sighed, nodded. "Okay, but you wait for my clearance."

"Yes, sir," Eric said sarcastically.

"I mean no disrespect, Eric. It's my love for you that makes me so protective."

"That is understood, Jason, and by the way, that was great foresight, arranging the foster situation. Well done."

"Yep, I get that ear of corn every once in a while."

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Still Saturday Morning

Brookside High School, Newport Beach, CA

Gabe watched Taylor with so much pride, he was beginning to understand how a father felt when watching his kid play sports. Taylor was a natural athlete. Quick, strong, fast thinker, and she was very coachable. All the drills the coach was putting the team through, she excelled at. She was short compared to most of the girls, but extremely nimble. Her vertical jump was superhuman. Her serve was powerful. She wouldn't be a hitter, but would be a libero—at least, that's how he'd do it if he were coaching. *Oh my gosh*, he suddenly thought, *if I were coaching?* He smiled. *I sound like my father*.

Taylor's long hair was back in a high ponytail. She wore an old, faded, Kino Challenge T-shirt and some of those tight black shorts Gabe had talked about. Her knee pads were black, her shoes white with black trim. She was a thing of beauty. A work of art. He blew out a deep breath as he appreciated the scene.

His phone buzzed. "Hey Dad, how's the big meeting?"

"It didn't happen. There's some stuff goin' down. It's too much to tell over the phone. The agents are gonna take you and Taylor to Jason's house as soon as practice is over. Stay there until further notice."

"Yes, sir. Sounds big."

"It is. Stay awake and aware at all times. See you tonight."

"Okay, and, uh, Dad, be careful."

"Copy that."

Gabe looked at the time. Practice had just started and was supposed to go a couple of hours. He looked at Agent Ward who stood at ready by the gym door, watching everyone. Agent Trout was not currently visible, but Gabe was sure he was nearby. He focused back on Taylor. It was gonna be a long day. He decided to pass the time by making a video to post.

He held his phone up. "Hey everyone. So, today I'm here at a high school gym watching my girlfriend practice volleyball," he began.

He spoke for about ten minutes, talked a little about the next phase of his life without giving out too much information. Satisfied that it was good enough content, he ended the video and sent it to the web girl who would edit and post it.

Near the end of practice, the team ended up dividing into two teams and playing a scrimmage game. Gabe had fun cheering for Taylor. He was so proud of her and happy for her. And she seemed happy too, if the big smile on her face said anything. The game ended and the team stood in a circle and listened to the coach talk and correct and tell them not to miss the next practice which would be Monday after school. As soon as he dismissed the team, almost all of them came toward Gabe. His eyebrows rose and he stood with a smile on his face.

"They all asked me to introduce you to them," Taylor explained. "So, everyone, this is Gabe Tanner. Gabe, meet the team. That's Lola, and that's Lauren and that's Bianca..." She went on to name ten more girls.

Gabe smiled and shook hands with each of them and offered a warm hello. A few of them asked for his autographs on their personal volleyballs. Several asked for selfies.

"Well, I just need to go get my bag out of the locker room," Taylor said.

Agent Ward stepped forward. "Ask one of your friends to get it for you. I don't want you out of my sight."

Lauren volunteered and hurried away.

"What's going on?" Taylor asked.

"We have a situation and we're to take you and Gabe to Jason's home immediately after practice. We've already dallied enough with all this autograph stuff."

"Is everyone okay?" Taylor asked. "My family, are they okay?"

"Yes. But we need to go."

Lauren came back with the bag, hugged Taylor and they turned to leave. But outside the gym doors Taylor shook her head. "Sorry Agent Ward, but I can't hold it another second." She pointed next to the concession stand. "There's a restroom right there. You can check it out first and then stand right outside the door, but I really gotta go."

Sighing, he nodded. He went in the restroom. It was empty. He came out. "Okay, it's clear."

She smiled sweetly. "Thank you."

Gabe and the two agents leaned against the wall to wait.

A few seconds later a woman pushing an elderly woman in a wheelchair came to the restroom. She looked suspiciously at the men since they were standing right at the door.

"Excuse us," Agent Ward said as Gabe and Agent Trout moved away and Agent Ward held the door open. The woman pushing the chair thanked them profusely. Agent Ward had seen them in the gym during the practice and figured she was the grandmother of one of Taylor's teammates.

"I guess I'll go too," Gabe said and headed to the men's room. He turned with a smile. "You wanna check it out for me too?"

"You're locked and loaded?" Trout asked.

Gabe nodded.

"Well then you go ahead, Gabe, I got faith in you," he jested.

Inside the women's restroom, Taylor stood at the mirror, taking her hair down out of the ponytail, and fluffing it up. Finally she turned on the water and washed her hands. She smiled kindly at the old woman as she passed on her way to the accessible stall, but the lady pushing her chair stopped right behind Taylor.

"Oh my goodness, young lady. You have the most beautiful hair."

She gathered Taylor's hair into her hands.

Taylor frowned at her for being so forward as to lift her hair, but thanked her for the compliment.

The woman pushed Taylor's hair over to the front of her shoulder as she continued talking about how pretty she was, then suddenly there was a prick.

"What are you doing?" Taylor asked as she started to struggle away from the woman, but she suddenly couldn't move. Her eyes caught the reflection of the needle as it was being pulled from her neck. Her breath was coming fast, her world was going black.

The old woman stood and quickly grabbed Taylor and shoved her down into the wheelchair. She then pulled the blue floral dress she wore over her head, revealing that she—was a he. They worked quickly. The man held up Taylor's limp body while the woman pulled the dress over Taylor's head. She then gathered Taylor's hair back up in a band, pushed a gray wig onto her head, threw a blanket over her lap, a shawl around her shoulders covering part of her face, removed her shoes and replaced them with the old woman's clunky black ones. The woman quickly turned and pushed the wheelchair out of the restroom. Once again, Agent Ward held the door for them. And once again, she thanked him profusely.

A minute later Gabe came back out. "She isn't out yet?"

The agents both shook their heads.

Gabe frowned, knocked on the restroom door. "Taylor, you okay?"

"Almost done."

Gabe frowned. Her voice sounded odd. He slowly opened the door. "Taylor?"

There was no answer this time and no one in sight. He started opening stalls and when he got to the last one a man came at him. Gabe yelled and quickly put him down with a couple of forward elbows. The agents came running in.

"She's not in here," Gabe said, panic in his voice.

Agent Trout looked up as it quickly dawned on him. "The wheelchair."

Gabe took off. As he ran down the corridor that led to the front of the gym he could see through the glass doors and what he saw was terrifying. A white van was parked out front, the side door was open, the empty wheelchair in front of it, and the woman who'd been pushing the wheelchair was jumping in. He slammed open the glass door and ran at the

van. A man in the front passenger seat squeezed off a few rounds at him, but luckily missed. The van took off.

Gabe did not slow down. He didn't even hesitate. Cutting across the long school drive he headed out at an angle across the parking lot, hurdling curbs and hedges at full speed to the drive that led out of the parking area. The van was gonna have to turn left and come right at him, which it was getting ready to do. He pulled his Glock as the van turned left and sped toward him. Two quick shots and both front tires blew, but the van didn't stop. Gabe had no choice. He fired five times at the driver-side windshield and the van slowed and rolled to a stop. The passenger pointed his gun out the window and fired several times. Gabe was hit in the upper left thigh, but this time he remained on his feet and kept squeezing the trigger.

He advanced toward the van and fired six more times. The guy finally stopped firing and slumped over, but Gabe had been hit again, in the upper left chest, and he slowed. He forced himself to stay on his feet and stumbled to the side door of the van and jerked it open. A woman leapt out at him and immediately drove her knife into his side. He fell and landed on his back on the street, one hand around her wrist to keep her from moving the knife and his other hand he clamped around her throat squeezing as hard as he could. Thankfully, Agent Trout finally reached him and jerked the woman off Gabe and knocked her out with one solid punch. Trout then jumped into the van to assess Taylor's condition.

Gabe groaned and reflexively pulled the knife from his side and tossed it onto the street. He tried to get up and get to Taylor.

Trout jumped back out of the van. "Stay down, Gabe. She's okay. She's sedated, but she's breathing." He took off his shirt and pressed it against Gabe's chest wound.

Agent Ward arrived with the man from the restroom sitting in the abandoned wheelchair, his wrists cuffed to one of the arms.

"ETA of medical is five minutes. Hold on, Gabe," Ward said.

Trout threw him his cuffs. "Cuff her and give me your shirt."

Trout took the offered shirt and pressed it with his other hand against Gabe's side. He was extremely relieved when he heard sirens in the distance. He looked at Gabe's face. "Hey, buddy, open your eyes and look at me."

Gabe did as ordered.

"You hang in there now, got it?"

"Yes, sir," Gabe mumbled.

"Gabe, you gotta hold on. Taylor will be very upset to wake up and find out you didn't make it, so you freakin' hold on."

Gabe drew a ragged breath. "Hurts pretty bad."

"You're tough. You can take it, right?"

"Yes, sir," he said, breathing in gasps.

"Gabe," Ward said as he looked down at him, trying to distract him from the pain. "That was some pretty good shootin' there, buddy. You saved Taylor. She could be long gone by now."

Gabe closed his eyes, sighing in relief and gratitude that she was okay.

They all looked up as three Newport Beach Police cars came screeching up, and right behind them, two ambulances.

Ward and Trout moved out of the way as paramedics took over.

"Which one is Agent Trout?" an officer asked.

Agent Ward had called Jason, quickly explained the situation and Jason had then relayed the information to the police himself. He briefed them on the ongoing investigation of Taylor's attempted kidnapping, and told them they could verify everything with the FBI. Ameritech's growing reputation and Jason's rapport with law enforcement always made these types of situations much easier, and today was no exception.

The officer, currently unable to get Gabe's statement, walked around with Agent Trout, being the lead agent, who pointed out what he saw happening as he ran toward the van.

"Tell me this, how did the young man get here so much faster than you?" the officer asked.

Trout smiled. "Well, the answer was in your question. Young man, and faster. This kid is freakin' fast."

"And apparently a good shot."

"No, not a good shot, a real sharpshooter—sniper-quality."

"Sounds like he's a prodigy."

Trout nodded. "He is."

The officer nodded, but frowned as he looked over the two dead men, both slumped over inside the van. Gabe's Glock lay on the street along with the knife he'd pulled from his side. Both would be gathered into evidence. Detectives arrived, and while the police processed the scene, Trout went to check on Gabe's condition which was critical but stable. They would be airlifting him to Redwood Hills in LA. Ward checked on Taylor's condition, which was stable. She was already starting to stir a little bit, which was a good sign. She would also be taken to Redwood Hills by special request.

Trout made the call to Jason to give a status report.

✞✞✞

Still Saturday....

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Keegan glanced at his phone before he answered. "Yes, sir?"

"Is Ricky nearby?"

"Yep, he's right here."

"Put me on speaker. This information is for the two of you."

Keegan motioned to Ricky. "Jason wants to speak to us together."

Ricky came immediately, a bad feeling in his gut. Truthfully, he'd had a bad feeling since he woke that morning.

Jason explained what had happened. Taylor was fine. Gabe had been shot twice and stabbed and was in critical condition. Keegan felt like he would be sick.

"Keegan, you're dismissed. I'm sending a car to take you to Redwood."

"Thank you. Uh, Jeff and Franz are on overwatch."

"Got it. Hey, listen, Keeg, Gabe is stable. That's a good thing. Prayers goin' up."

Keegan sighed. "Again, thank you."

"Ricky, what is your plan?" Jason asked.

He sighed. "Taylor is okay, right? She's been drugged but she's okay?"

"Yes. I've been assured that she is unharmed and already coming out of it."

Ricky nodded. "Okay, well then, I feel strongly that I need to stay with Dad. I'll have Bree get to the hospital for Taylor."

"And I'll go with her too," Shelley said from across the room. "And we'll get Jeffy there too, so she can care for Gabe."

"Good. Keep me informed," Jason said before he hung up.

Ricky grabbed Keegan by the shoulders. "Listen to me, Keegan, your son is a hero. He saved my daughter from, well, who knows what. He probably saved her life and he gave his all to do it. I will be eternally grateful to him, and I'll tell him that myself when I get to the hospital this evening—because I know he's gonna be fine."

"Thanks, Rick," Keegan said with a slight nod. "I look forward to that happening." He sighed. "I need to call my wife."

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John 15:13

"Greater love has no one than this,
that someone lay down his life for his friends."

Chapter Thirty-Four

August 24th, Saturday 2:45 PM
Santa Clarita, California

Jeff and Franz found high ground just across the side street that ran next to the daycare, on the roof of an older home that was being used as an antique shop. The shop owner was pleased to help because she'd always had suspicions as to what was going on in that daycare. The same children, who all looked very much alike, played on the playground equipment every day. There were only five children, and recently only four. One of the customers of the shop had told the owner that she'd tried to take her children there and had been told they were full and couldn't take any more children. So the antique shop owner granted permission for the men to use the roof and she vacated the shop for the day for obvious safety reasons. They lay flat on the rooftop with a perfect view of the front, side and back of the daycare.

They spoke softly to Jason, letting him know they were in place. "Cameras on both corners of the house and front porch," Jeff added. "Can we take those out in case they're monitoring them?"

"Give me a few minutes," Jensen replied.

Down the street, out of sight, FBI agents, Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies, and paramedics waited. It had been decided that Ameritech would be the ones to take and secure the premises because of the fragility of the situation. Every agent, every officer, and also Grandmaster Kino, Ricky and Mark had an earpiece and could hear all that was going down.

Joey and Asia would approach the front door, as a couple looking for daycare services. Cam and Jon Sweet would cover the back. Four more agents and four FBI formed a perimeter around the home turned daycare. Eric, Ricky, and Mark sat in a vehicle caddy-corner from the house, watching and waiting for the moment they could get to the children. It was 3:00. Go time.

"Before this goes down," Jason began, "so that we can go in on a high note, Rick, fill everyone in on Gabe and Taylor's conditions."

"Gabe is out of surgery and in recovery. He's out of danger, and in stable condition. Taylor is awake and in good condition."

"Okay, thanks. Agent Deal, report."

"We have three sitting in the kitchen. Two in the front room area, also sitting. One downstairs down the corridor to the north, last room on the left. Also in that room are the four children."

"Agent Adams?"

"We're a go."

"Agent Wallace?"

"Go."

"Let's do this," Jason said.

Joey and Asia approached the home in a car and parked on the curb out front. They made their way up the walk, onto the porch and tried the door. When it didn't open, they knocked.

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Still Saturday....

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

Keegan paced as he waited. When the doctor had come out and told him Gabe was in recovery and should heal with no complications, Keegan had immediately fallen to his knees and thanked God and then called his wife, who was on the way to the airport.

The bullet in the upper left chest had been just high enough to miss the lung. The bullet to the outer left thigh had embedded in the muscle. The stab wound to the left side of his abdomen had done the most damage. The knife nicked his large intestine, which had been repaired. He was on antibiotics to prevent infection. He would be in some pain for a while, but they expected a full recovery.

Keegan had just been told that they were moving him from recovery to ICU and they would come out to bring him to his son. It seemed like it was taking hours for that to happen, though in actuality, it was only fifteen minutes. Finally he looked up to see a woman in blue scrubs come out to him with a kind smile on her face. "Mr. Tanner?"

He nodded.

"Come on back."

She turned and he followed.

"He's sleeping again. He'll be in and out for a while until the drugs wear completely off, but he's doing well."

She led him into the room. "There's a chair right there. If you need anything, let us know. I'll be in and out every few minutes. My name is Kelli."

"Thank you, Kelli."

She checked Gabe's fluids, watched him breathe for a minute, touched her hand to his shoulder, a gesture of compassion, Keegan thought, and she left the room.

Keegan sat next to Gabe and took his hand. He put his other hand to Gabe's forehead and thanked God again. Thinking of his sweet wife and what she was going through, he took a picture of their sleeping son and sent it to her.

Lizzy sent back a brief message. *"Thank you, Jesus."*

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Still Saturday....

Carlita's Daycare, Santa Clarita, California

Joey knocked firmly on the door. Asia pasted a pleasant smile on her face.

Agent Deal spoke in their ears. "Be advised, one from the kitchen has gone down the hall to the north side of the house and entered the room on the right. The two sitting in the kitchen are now on either side of the back door. At the front door, one is behind the door, next to the one answering the door. They all appear to be armed and have weapons in hand except the one opening the front door."

"Can I help you?" the man said.

Joey looked him over. Mid-thirties, jeans and red daycare T-shirt, untucked.

It was Asia who spoke. “Hi,” she said brightly. “We just moved to the area and saw your daycare sign, so we thought we would stop by and check the place out.”

The man gave a slight smile. “Yeah, uh, well thanks for stopping by but we aren’t accepting any more kids.”

“Oh no, can you reconsider? It’s only one more, and he’s really a good kid. He never causes any trouble,” Asia said.

“Sorry. You’ll have to go somewhere else.”

“We are really desperate for a daycare.”

“Listen, lady, it’s like, state laws, ya know how the government is. Can’t bend the rules and lose our license.” He started to close the door.

Joey put his foot in the door quickly and shoved it open. The guy stumbled back and went for the gun at his waist. But with Joey’s speed, the guy didn’t stand a chance. He was disarmed and on his back in seconds. The one behind the door stepped back and raised a shotgun. But again, Joey being so quick, had the gun pointed up toward the ceiling just as it went off. He took the weapon from the man, then used it to knock him unconscious.

At the same time, Cam and Jon entered through the kitchen door and quickly took out the two men. As the agents cuffed the unconscious men and dragged them all into the front room, they didn’t like what Jensen had to say.

“Hey guys, the perp that went down the hall to the room on the right. He’s gone. Disappeared. I’ve lost him on the cameras. He was there one second. The next, just gone.”

“Jeff?” Jason asked.

“No one has exited the building from the three sides that I can see.”

“That means he’s found a blind spot in the cameras. Be aware and don’t let him get downstairs.”

“Copy,” they all answered.

“I’ll search this floor,” Joey said. “Asia, watch these guys. Cam, you take the upstairs. Jon, secure the stairway to the basement.”

Joey headed straight back to the last room on the right. He entered, gun drawn. It was an office. There were monitors for the cameras outside that had been disabled, desk, chair, computer. The only other furniture was a large steel cabinet. He opened the cabinet. It was empty. There was no outside exit. Joey opened the door of a small closet. It was empty, but he searched, looking for secret walls. He went to the window facing the backyard. It was closed and locked. He went to the one on the north wall. It too was closed and locked. He looked out at Jeff and Franz on the roof of the building across the street. “That’s me, Jeff, don’t shoot me.”

“I admit, it was tempting.”

Joey went on to check every room, every closet. “Main level clear, Jason,” Joey said.

“Top level clear,” Cam reported.

Joey spoke next. “Jason, send in the troops to take in the four in the front room and to toss this place and find Payne. I’m headed downstairs to the children.”

“Are we clear to come in yet?” Eric asked.

“Let the feds do one more sweep, Eric,” Jason responded.

While the feds did just that, Joey made his way silently down the steps and slowly worked his way back toward the large room that occupied the whole north end of the house. As he went he checked every nook and cranny, every room, every closet, just in

case somehow Payne had been able to sneak downstairs. Joey finally reached the last door and opened it. Luciana stood in the room with a plastic baseball bat in her hand. Joey supposed it was all she could find with which to defend the children if needed. When she saw him she sighed in relief and dropped the bat, and softly praised Jesus.

He took in the room. There were five small youth beds, each with safety rails. One of them was in the corner and had no mattress. There was a large bookshelf with little cars, and trains, a Buzz Lightyear and Spider-man, books and dolls, and blocks and more. There was another, much taller bookshelf across the room to Joey's right, oddly with almost nothing on it except a few children's books. On either side of that shelf, were two dressers.

"Where are the children?" he asked, though he was pretty sure he knew. There was a small child's mattress turned on its side and leaning against the wall. She motioned toward the mattress and he moved forward and slowly pulled the mattress away.

Four pairs of large, brown eyes looked up at him, and his heart took a tumble. Three boys and one girl. All of them had dark brown hair, clean and neatly combed. They were frightened. Luciana knelt down in front of the children. "Okay, my sweet babies, remember I said some very special people were coming to visit you today?"

"I bememba," the little girl said.

Joey knelt down. "Hello there," he said softly.

Two children smiled. The other two looked at Luciana. She nodded her head. "Say 'hi' to the nice man."

"Hi," they all mumbled.

Joey looked into each of their eyes and the tears welled in his own. He drew a deep breath, stood, turned and walked away, trying to get his emotions under control. These tiny, innocent lives were his siblings. They had strong spirits. Their presence was powerful and he was overwhelmed. God brought them into the world in a different way, but they were spirits of light.

"Report, Joey," Jason said.

He had to clear his throat. "They're here. All four. And Luciana."

"Any sign of Payne?"

"No. How did he slip away?" Joey asked.

"That's what *you* have to figure out."

There were footsteps on the stairs and Joey walked out of the room to usher Eric, Ricky and Mark back to the children. They came quietly into the room and had pretty much the same reaction as Joey.

Eric actually gasped, and immediately knelt down.

"Hello, little ones," he said softly.

All four children smiled this time, as if somehow, they felt their connection to him.

"I'm Eric. What's your name?"

They all looked up to Luciana. She nodded with a smile. "Tell him your name," she urged.

"I'm four-Angeweena," the tiny girl said.

Eric held his hand out and without him saying a word, she placed her hand in his. "It's very nice to meet you, Angelina." She gifted him with a big, breathtakingly beautiful smile, that was very reminiscent of Jeffy. His emotions welled up.

"I'm two-Noah," one of the boys said quickly, and held his hand out.

"So very nice to meet you, sir," Eric replied. He looked up at Luciana. "Four? Two?"

"They were given numbers, in the order they were born," she explained. "We were told we could name them if we wanted, but they had to know their number."

Eric sighed and turned to the next boy, who seemed a little bigger but also more shy than the others. "What's your name?" He held out his hand.

Slowly, the boy put his hand in Eric's. "One-Manny."

"It's Emmanuel," Luciana said, "but that's a hard name for him to say. And you don't know what a big deal it is for him to do what he just did. I mean, speak to you and give you his hand."

Eric smiled at the boy and squeezed his hand lovingly. He turned to the last one. "And you? Can you tell me your name?"

He nodded.

"Okay, what is it?"

"Five-Abwaham."

"Ah, that's a fine name indeed. You all have such great names," Eric said. Then repeated the sentence in Spanish. They all smiled.

"I'm so sorry, Señor Kino. I do speak both Spanish and English to them. They are learning both languages, but I admit, I'm more comfortable with Spanish."

"No worries, Luciana."

"Eric, how much time do you need to prepare the children to be transported?" Jason asked.

Eric thought. "I want them to be kept together, so if they're not able to do that, then I'll take them to the hospital myself."

"I'll relay the message. And my original question?"

"Give me about fifteen minutes. I want as little trauma as possible."

"Yes, sir, Grandmaster Kino, sir."

Eric chuckled.

"I'm gonna go up and go through that back office again," Joey said.

He trotted up the stairs and went to the office. How could Payne be here one minute and simply disappear? He had to be around here somewhere. Joey went back to the closet, there was nothing in it. He tested the walls again, and the floor. It was an old house and had solid hardwood floors and there was no opening.

He walked around the room. Why a giant steel cabinet that's empty? He opened it again, checked the sides and floor. This time he noticed a few small scratch marks on the edge of the bottom where it meets the side of the cabinet. He pulled his knife from his pocket and wedged it between the side and bottom and lifted.

His heart sped up as the bottom of the cabinet lifted up and he looked down into a shaft with wooden slats nailed to the studs, like a ladder, leading down. He peered down. It was totally black, but even as he looked, a ray of light shone into the dark space. "I think I've found him," Joey said softly.

And then, he heard voices and realized Payne was speaking to Eric downstairs. "Damn, he's in the room." He lowered the steel door quietly, turned and took off.

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Eric and Ricky and Mark had all spoken to the children and told them they were gonna go for a ride with the firemen, and Luciana was gonna go with them and it was gonna be

a grand adventure. They'd just started to usher them out of the room when the tall bookshelf swung out like a door, and Payne stepped forward, gun aimed at the children.

Eric, Ricky and Mark stilled, put their hands out.

"Eric, I've been wanting to see you again for a long time now," Payne said.

"I bet."

"Did you think I would simply let you take these brats and walk them out of here and give the world four more Kinos?"

Eric blew out a breath. "You wanna take me on, let's do it, but these are just innocent children. Let them go."

Eric didn't really think he would do that, but he knew Joey or someone would be back any second now and he just needed to buy some time.

"I'm not letting anyone go." He pointed the gun at Luciana now, who was crying and trembling. "What did I tell you would happen if you told anyone about these brats?"

Luciana only cried.

"So now, because of you, I'm gonna take you out, and then I'm gonna wipe them out and you only have yourself to blame."

It all happened so fast. Payne didn't wait another second. He fired his gun at Luciana and then turned it on the first boy. Eric yelled and leaped in front as the gun fired again and another gun fired from behind Ricky.

Ricky looked around. Luciana was down. Payne was down. And Eric was down. His father was lying on his back, a bright red stain blossoming on his chest.

"No, no, no," Ricky cried. He threw himself down over his father's body. "Oh, dear God, no!"

Ricky immediately straddled his father's waist, pressing his hands over the wound. It appeared the bullet hit him dead center. Mark pulled his shirt over his head and pushed it up under Ricky's hands, then turned to check on Luciana. She'd been wearing a vest. She stirred and sat up. Joey checked on Payne. He was dead.

"Report, Joey!" Jason said, panic now evident even in his usually calm voice.

Joey drew a breath. "Payne is dead. Eric's been hit. It's bad, Jason," Joey said, his emotions clogging his throat.

"Dad," Ricky cried. "Dad, hold on." He pressed hard on the wound.

Eric opened his eyes. "Stop, Ricky. I need—to speak." His breaths were ragged and shallow.

"No, don't talk, just hold on. It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay."

"Ricky—stop."

"No, Dad, I won't stop. I won't give up. You– hold– on. I can't do this without you. I can't live without you."

"Yes, you can. Ricky, listen."

Ricky was now sobbing uncontrollably. "Please, God, please dear Jesus, I'm begging You, please don't take him."

Mark, also crying, fell to his knees.

Joey, with tears running down his face, also fell to his knees.

Luciana went to the children and gathered them to her against the wall, trying to shield them from the horrible sight.

Jeff scrambled down off the roof and came flying into the house, headed straight

downstairs and stopped short. “Oh God,” he said, his voice breaking as he took in the scene. He fell to his knees.

Cam and Jon made their way downstairs. When Cam saw Ricky trying to hold his father’s life in his hands, he also fell to his knees. He loved Grandmaster Kino like the father he’d never had. Eric had rescued him and made his life worth living. “Please, Lord, please help him,” he prayed aloud.

Everyone, hearing or seeing what was happening, began one by one falling to their knees, and pleading for a miracle.

Ricky pressed harder against Eric’s chest.

“Ricky, listen, son. I need— to speak.”

“No,” Ricky cried.

“Rick, I love you, son. I love you so much. You have to step up and take over.” His voice was breathy and weak.

“No, Dad, please,” he sobbed. “Please— I can’t do this.”

“You can and you will,” Eric forced out sternly. “Now listen.”

Ricky quieted—sniffling, tears running down his face.

“There’s a letter—top drawer—desk. Tell my children—Bree, Mark, Joey, Jeffy, I love them and I expect them to rise up. Jason—I love you, and poor Justin, this is gonna hurt him the most.” He took a breath. “Tell him how much his friendship has meant to me.”

He coughed and blood spattered out of his mouth. He swallowed, drew a ragged breath.

“And Shelley?” Ricky asked. “Think of Shelley. You can’t leave her. Now hold on.”

“She knows how much I love her.” He paused, drew a few breaths. “Shelley will be okay—‘cause she always comes through—especially when things get bad.” He breathed two breaths. “But you have to help her with these little ones.”

“Dad, pleeeaaase,” Ricky pleaded.

“I love those grandchildren, make sure they know, and one more thing, tell Gabe—I’m proud of him.”

“Tell him yourself.”

He was whispering now. “You have to let go, Rick. I’ll see you again. Do you believe in God, and His gift to us, or was it just all talk?” He drew a ragged breath. “Do you believe or not?” he demanded.

“Yes, I believe,” Ricky answered, sobbing. “Yes, but I won’t let go. And if you stop breathing, I’ll breathe for you. And if your heart stops beating, I’ll do CPR. I will NOT give up,” he said, practically shouting.

Eric coughed again. “I would—expect—nothing less.” He closed his eyes, breath very shallow now.

His eyes opened again. He smiled, now shedding tears himself. “I— see my father and mother.”

Ricky shook his head. *This cannot be happening. My father, Eric Kino, was invincible.*

“And I see your mother, Rick. I see Ann,” he whispered as tears ran from his eyes and down the side of his face toward his ears.

His eyes closed again. His breathing stopped.

“No,” Ricky cried. “Mark breathe for him. I’ll keep his heart going.”

Mark did as ordered.

Only a minute later the paramedics touched Ricky on the shoulder and got him to move

away from Eric so they could work on him.

They worked on him quickly, going through every protocol to save his life, but even they felt it was hopeless. Jason had ordered a chopper the minute he'd heard Eric was down. Once he was airlifted, those left behind simply stood outside the house in shock and watched the chopper disappear. No one speaking. No one moving.

Ricky watched the chopper as it soared overhead, and flashed back to the time Shelley had been airlifted, way back when she'd been drowned by a giant rock. And his own wife had been airlifted when she'd been shot in the chest. Both times, he'd been assured that the patient was gonna be just fine, but there were no assurances today.

✞✞✞

Still Saturday...

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

After checking on Taylor, Jeffy went in to see Gabe in the ICU. She was extremely grateful to him for saving her niece. He was still pretty out of it. With Keegan's permission, she pressed her forehead to Gabe's, searched his mind and found him. She probed his body with her mind and prayed for his healing in Jesus' name. After that, she felt confident that he would be okay.

"Find anything interesting in there, Doc?" Keegan asked.

She smiled at him. "He's gonna be just fine. Don't you worry anymore."

Keegan nodded. "I'll try not to."

Jeffy took his hand and squeezed. "Thank you for raising such an amazing young man, who was able to save my niece. I'm grateful."

"I am too."

Jeffy took her leave and went back to Taylor's room. Her mother and sister were there, filling Taylor in on everything. First about the fact that she had a new aunt and three new uncles and they were only two years old and how that came about and the men would be rescuing them right about now. Of course, she was blown away like everyone else and very much looking forward to seeing them. Then she was given more detail about what had gone down with her attempted kidnapping, and what Gabe had done to save her. Naturally, all Taylor wanted to do was go to him.

"Sweetie," Bree said. "Wait for him to wake up. Then we'll see if we can get you in to see him. I'm sure he'll want to see you just as much."

"But you're sure he's gonna be okay?"

"Very sure," Jeffy said.

"When can I go home?"

"They'll probably release you pretty soon," Shelley said. "They just wanted to be sure there are no residual effects from the drug."

"Well, when they release me to go home, I'm going in to see Gabe."

Bree nodded. "I understand."

Taylor looked at her mother, her grandmother and her aunt. "I'm so happy to be able to see you. For a brief second, I thought I'd never see you guys again."

"We're so happy too, Taylor. So grateful that God sent one of His finest warriors to look after you," Shelley said.

"He is fine, isn't he?" Taylor said dreamily.

The women laughed, but stopped when Jeffy suddenly jerked.

"Oh, no," Jeffy said, her eyes filling immediately.

"What is it?" Shelley asked, worried that one of the children had been hurt as they were being rescued.

Jeffy looked around, breathing hard. "I, I have to make a call." She ran out of the room.

She called her father. "Please answer, Daddy. Please, please answer." But he didn't. She tried again. And again he didn't, and she knew. This was it. This was the time that she and her father had seen in a vision three years earlier. "No," she cried.

Her phone buzzed, and she felt relief for a second. But it wasn't her father. It was Ricky.

"Hello?"

She heard Ricky draw a breath. "Jeffy."

"No—tell me he's gonna be okay," she cried.

"I wish I could, baby girl."

Like everyone else who realized what was happening, Jeffy sank to her knees. The news was just too hard, too unbelievable to take. Even though she'd seen a vision and she'd discussed it with her father, somehow they thought it was an event way off in the future. Not now. "Where is he?" she asked her brother.

"They've airlifted him and he should be there at Redwood before I can get there."

"Is he—I mean, is he still alive?"

Ricky sniffed, tried to speak. "Jeffy, I don't know. The paramedics are not allowed to give a pronouncement of death."

She opened herself to her brother and the wave of horror and despair hit her so hard she almost passed out. She gave a soft moan.

"Jeffy, I won't be there for at least an hour. Do you hear me?"

When she didn't answer he drew a deep breath and spoke louder. "Jeffy, listen to me, I need you to pull yourself together. You have to tell Bree, and then the two of you have to tell Shelley before he arrives at the hospital. I don't want Shelley to see him without a little warning. Do you understand? Do you hear me?"

She sniffed. "Yes. What happened?"

"He was shot."

"Where?"

He drew a deep breath and blew it out. "In the chest."

"Where in the chest?" she asked, panic in her voice.

"Looked to be the exact center."

Jeffy knew if he'd been hit in the heart there was little to no chance of survival and she whimpered.

"Jeffy, listen now, where's Taylor? Is she still in emergency?"

"Yes, they're gonna release her in a few minutes."

"Okay, good. Tell my wife I'll be there in an hour. I have Mark and Joey with me. Jason should get there before me. Hold on, sweetie. Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Close your eyes. Father, we need Your help. This thing You're asking us to do is so hard. You know what we're pleading for, a miracle, that You would spare his life. Father, he now has four little children that need to know him, so please, please." He was silent a minute. "But Father, we're always willing to trust You and do Your will, so whatever is

Your will, we promise, we will—not—turn our backs on You. So, please, give us peace, help us to do this hard thing, in Jesus' mighty and powerful name, Amen."

"Amen," Jeffy whispered.

"Jeffy? What's wrong?"

Jeffy looked up to see Bree coming down the corridor.

"Is that Bree?" Ricky asked.

"Yes," Jeffy said as she wiped at her tears.

"Tell her I'm on the way." He ended the call.

Bree knelt down where Jeffy was on her knees. "Sweetie, what's happened? Are the children okay? Did something happen to one of them?"

"I, I didn't even ask. I suppose they are or he would have said something."

"Was that Ricky?"

Jeffy reached up to Bree and she pulled her to her feet. "Yes. Ricky says it's Dad. Dad has been shot in the chest and they've airlifted him. He's coming here."

Bree drew a breath. "How bad?"

Jeffy shook her head. "I opened myself to Ricky. He thinks he's gone."

"Oh no. Oh, dear Lord, no," Bree cried softly. She immediately thought of her mother and tried to fight back her tears.

Jeffy went on. "Ricky says we have to tell Mom before Dad gets here and that he'll be arriving any minute."

Bree nodded. "Okay, yes, we have to tell her. Oh, Jeffy, this is gonna kill her."

"We don't know that he's gone yet. It's just what I felt from Ricky."

"Okay, okay." She drew a deep breath to calm herself. "Let's go tell her."

They went back down the hall and into the little curtained-off area. Taylor was being checked over by a nurse. Shelley looked at them when they came back. "What's wrong? What happened? Are the children okay?"

"We assume the children are fine. But something bad *has* happened, Mom," Bree said as she came close and put her arm around her mother.

"Is it Joey?" she asked immediately, panic in her voice.

"No, Mom, it's Eric."

"Is he okay?" Her voice now soft.

"We don't know. We don't know his condition. He was shot in the chest."

Shelley's eyes filled.

"Where in the chest?" Taylor said from where she sat on a bed. "Cuz Gabe was shot in the chest and he's gonna be fine."

"He was shot in the center of his chest," Jeffy said. "He's being airlifted to this hospital and should be arriving any minute."

"Is he still alive?" Shelley asked, as the tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks.

"We don't know, Mom."

"Tell me the truth Jeffy. Shot in the center of his chest. It would hit his heart, right? Can anyone survive that?"

"Sometimes they can, but— it's unlikely."

The nurse turned. "Dr. Kino, I'll go see what I can find out." She went to Shelley and squeezed her arm. "Mrs. Kino, I'll be right back."

Bree and Jeffy both hugged their mother, then Bree turned and went to her daughter,

who was now in tears.

"I don't want Granddaddy to die," Taylor sobbed.

"Me neither, baby girl," Bree murmured.

The nurse came back, her face pale. "His ETA is five minutes. He coded twice in the chopper. That's all I can tell you."

Jeffy shook her head.

"Tell me, Jeffy. Tell me the truth," Shelley said, her voice full of emotion.

Jeffy thought. He'd coded twice which had both good and bad sides, carrying both hope and danger. But given what Ricky thought, and the vision that both Eric and Jeffy had, and her own feelings currently, it didn't look good. "Mom, there's only a small chance that he'll survive."

Shelley nodded.

"I'm gonna go get Miss Taylor's paperwork," the nurse said and left quickly.

Shelley got down on her knees. "I'm gonna do what Eric would do if the situation were reversed."

Immediately, Bree, Jeffy and Taylor joined her. They bowed their heads and Shelley poured her heart out to God.

The nurse came back just as the prayer was ending. She saw them on their knees and waited at the door, closing her own eyes and adding her prayer to theirs.

The women rose and the nurse entered. "We're setting up a special private waiting room for your family and friends. There's already a few here. If you'll follow me, I'll take you there."

They went out in the corridor, but there was a loud commotion, doctors and nurses running, calling orders out. Shelley turned to see her husband on a gurney. They were almost running with him. There was blood on the sheet that covered him. His eyes were closed. He was deathly pale. It didn't even look like Eric. This could not be Eric. Eric was strong and healthy and vibrant and full of life and power.

Bree cried out as she tried to catch her mother. Jeffy and Taylor turned to help, lowering Shelley to the floor. But it was the strong arms of Jason who scooped her up.

"Where's the waiting room?" Angel asked.

The nurse led them there. Bella and Breez were already there. They'd both been crying. Jason set Shelley on a small sofa and Angel sat beside her, taking her hand. Bree got her a little paper cup of water from a cooler. Shelley opened her eyes and saw Angel. She didn't have to say anything. Angel gathered her in her arms and simply held her.

"I'm gonna go see if they'll let me consult," Jeffy said and quickly left the room.

More people began to arrive. Justin and Lori. Kimmie, Mickey. Everyone's phones were blowing up. A few people were texting. Jason left the room.

✞✞✞

Keegan had been watching his son sleep when his phone buzzed.

"Hey Jason. Mission a success?"

"The children are safe. Luciana is with them and they will be transported with Luciana from the local hospital in Santa Clarita to where Shelley is here at Redwood."

"Transported here? What are you not telling me?"

"I'm getting to it. I just don't know how to say it." He sighed. Drew a deep breath and went on to tell Keegan the whole setup. How Payne disappeared. How he reappeared. And

what happened after that.

Keegan listened quietly and immediately went into service mode. It was what he'd been trained to do by John Appel and Grandmaster Kino himself. He could curl up and grieve, or he could help wherever help was needed and right now, it was his boss that needed help. His boss who'd totally changed Keegan's life nineteen years earlier.

"Jason, I know what you're thinking. But hindsight is 20/20."

Jason was silent a moment. He shook his head. "No, this is on me, Keegan. Totally and completely. Why did I make sure Luciana had on a vest and not Eric? Why did I let them come in the house when we didn't know where Payne was?"

"Because you assumed he'd gotten out somehow, or at the very least he was hiding. That's what I would have assumed. The house had been searched and was filled with agents and FBI by that time, right? No one felt there was any danger. If he was still in the house you probably expected to find him cowering in a closet somewhere, right?"

"I appreciate your effort, Keegan, to relieve me of the burden, but I should have known Payne would not go down without taking someone with him. Dammit, I should have known. I was so focused on Eric's interaction with his children. I wasn't thinking of his safety."

"Where are you?" Keegan asked.

"I'm in the hospital. Outside the waiting room."

"I'm coming to you."

"No, don't leave your son."

"He's sleeping. I'm coming to you."

Keegan ended the call and went to Gabe's side to check on him before he left the room. He brushed his hair back off his forehead. His heart swelled with love. His son, as Ricky said earlier, is a hero. He almost gave his life to save Taylor, to save the girl he loves. Keegan didn't discount that love because they were young. Gabe knows what love is. He'd shown it many times. He loved with his whole heart. Keegan leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Be back in a little while," he whispered.

✞✞✞

Taylor slumped down in a chair in the corner of the waiting room, scrolling through the text messages and notifications that were coming in. One was from Isla August.

~~Hello Taylor, the news said you and Gabe were attacked this morning. And now it says that Grandmaster Kino has been transported to a hospital for a gunshot wound. I want to start a prayer chain for you all, but I don't want to give out false information. Can you clarify? You don't have to give me personal details, but just some general information.

~Yes, Gabe and I were attacked. They were trying to kidnap me and Gabe stopped them. In the process he was shot twice and stabbed and he is in stable condition. He saved me.

~And yes, Granddaddy has been shot and it doesn't look good. They're not sure if he will make it. Please pray for him. Please get everyone to pray for him.

~~Gabe is a hero. And yes, we will get everyone in this whole nation to pray for your grandfather.

~Thank you so much ♡†

She scrolled some more and found messages from Peyton, Avery, and several of her new volleyball teammates.

She started answering them, one by one, and the more she answered questions about what happened to Gabe, the more she wanted to go see him. She looked around. Everyone was either talking softly or crying. She needed Gabe. She stepped out into the corridor.

Jason and Mr. Tanner were standing there talking and they both looked over at her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Keegan smiled at her. "It's all right, honey. Are you okay?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry Gabe got hurt because of me."

"It wasn't because of you, sweetie. Put the blame on the one responsible," he said firmly, casting Jason a pointed look—not in accusation, but as a reminder.

"Mr. Tanner, may I go see Gabe?"

Keegan looked back at Jason. "We'll talk more. You have a lot of people still depending on you, Jason. Stop beating yourself up and take charge."

Keegan put his arm around Taylor. "Come on, sweetie. I'll walk you there."

Taylor nodded. "Is he awake yet?"

"He wasn't when I left, but maybe he is now."

When Taylor entered the room, Nurse Kelli was just leaving. Taylor crept up beside the bed and looked him over. There were electrodes attached to his chest and a white square bandage on the upper left side. There was another bandage lower, toward his waist. She couldn't see his leg because he was covered from the waist down. She couldn't hold back the tears. He looked so helpless.

"Don't cry," Gabe whispered.

Taylor gasped and looked back up at his face.

Keegan came to the bed quickly at the sound of his son's voice.

"Hey, Taylor. Hey, Dad."

"Son. Welcome back. How ya feeling?"

"Sleepy."

"No pain?"

"Not yet."

"Your mom is on the way."

"Wow, was I hurt that bad?"

"Uh, yeah. It was bad. You were in critical condition. You're stable now."

"Cool."

Taylor took his hand. He smiled at her.

"I'll leave you guys to talk," Keegan said. "But first, Taylor, can I speak to you outside a moment?"

"Yes, sir." She followed him out of the room and looked up into his eyes.

"I need to ask you to not tell him about your grandfather. Not yet. I need him to get stronger. He is very close to Grandmaster Kino and I'm not sure how he would react."

Taylor nodded. "Yes, sir. I understand."

"Thanks. Go ahead and spend some time with him. Don't leave the room by yourself. Call me, or someone when you're ready to go back to the waiting room."

"But isn't the danger all gone? The bad guy is dead, right?"

"I'm not taking any chances while your family is so vulnerable right now."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Tanner."

Keegan nodded.

✞✞✞

Ricky, Mark and Joey had to fight their way through reporters and paparazzi to get into the hospital. Ricky was not his usual smiling, good-natured self. They made their way to the private waiting room. When they opened the door, Bree immediately went to her husband, put her arms around him and held him tight. He rested his head on her shoulder and let her be a balm to his soul. Bella did the same for Mark, and Breez for Joey.

When their wives finally released them, they looked around, each searching for the one affected the most. Shelley was standing by the window with her arms around Justin. It was hard to tell whether he was comforting her, or she was comforting him. Jason approached Ricky.

"Do we know anything yet?" Ricky asked.

"No. Jeffy was allowed in and she's in the OR now. We haven't heard anything. In a way that's a good thing. That means they're still fighting for his life."

Ricky nodded. "That's right. Because I truly expected to get here and have you guys tell me he's gone." His eyes filled again. He looked around at the group. "Where's young Eric, and Logan and JoJo?"

"They're on the way," Bree said. "They got hung up in a traffic accident. Not theirs, someone else's."

"As soon as they get here, we need a prayer circle."

Jason nodded. "You're absolutely right."

"Are the little ones here yet?" Ricky asked.

Jason glanced at his watch. "Should be here soon. We sent a car to collect the other two caretakers, Camilla and Lonnie, however, the FBI wanted to question them first so it's taking longer. I asked them to keep the initial questioning short due to the current circumstances."

"Has Shelley said anything about the children?"

"She's very eager to meet them," Bree said. "But also anxious. When they get here, we've arranged for another room to allow Shelley some private time with them."

Ricky nodded. They all looked up when the three young men walked in. Young Eric immediately came to his parents, put his arms around his father and cried. JoJo and Logan went straight to Mark and did the same.

"Where's Taylor?" young Eric asked.

"She went with Keegan to see Gabe," Jason replied.

"How's he doing?"

"He's stable." Jason shook his head. "That's a fine young man."

"I'm so grateful for Gabe. I have no words for how grateful I am for what he did to save my sister."

"I'm pretty sure everyone here feels the same way."

Keegan opened the door and walked in. "Any news yet?"

"Not yet," Jason said. "Where's Taylor?"

"I left her with Gabe with strict instructions to call one of us to come get her when she's ready to come back."

"Everyone," Ricky said, "I'm not trying to take over or be the Grandmaster, because I could never fill my father's shoes." He stopped a moment because his voice clogged with emotion. Drawing a breath he went on. "But now that we're all here, can we pray for Dad

together?"

"Yes," everyone murmured.

"Wait, I haven't been able to do this yet." He went to Shelley and she looked up into his eyes. He was transported back to the time they'd first met and he knew that Shelley was in love with his father. She leaned forward and placed her head against his chest as a fresh wave of tears hit her. He hugged her tight.

"Come on, you stand between me and Bree."

Everyone gathered together in a circle and linked hands.

"Who wants to pray?" Ricky asked.

Almost everyone spoke up.

Ricky's eyes filled at the response. He nodded. "Good, then we'll take turns and just go around the circle." He tugged on Bree's hand to his right. "You start, Bree."

"Wait just a second," Keegan said. "John is zooming in. They want to pray with us."

"The more, the better," Ricky agreed.

"Okay, we're in," John's voice said over Keegan's phone.

They bowed their heads and Bree began her prayer.

✞✞✞

Taylor listened intently as Gabe gave her his version of what went down, from the man in the restroom to the last stab of the knife. He told her what he was thinking, what he was feeling and the fear that drove him, which was losing her, or having her suffer or be afraid, or wondering if she'd ever see her family again. He'd been through that and it was hell and the thought of her going through that kind of hell was inconceivable to him. He'd been willing to do anything he had to do to keep it from happening. He got to the end of his telling and grimaced in pain.

"You're hurting?"

"Yeah."

"Which part hurts the most?"

"The stab wound."

"You want me to go get the nurse?"

He squeezed her hand. "No, not yet."

She sighed. "So, how do you feel, I mean like, emotionally?"

"Hmm, not sure what you're getting at. I feel grateful that you're alive and well and standing here talking to me. And grateful again that I'm alive and lying here talking to you."

"How do you feel about killing two people?"

"Oh. That." He lay quietly, thinking about it. "Hmm, I don't know how I feel. I thought I would feel worse. But, like, I don't really feel that bad about it. They gave me no choice. I shot out the tires and they were still coming at me. I couldn't let them get past me no matter what, 'cause you were in that van. So, I couldn't move out of the way, and they intended to run me down. So..." he sighed. "I stopped them by shooting the driver. If the other guy hadn't been shooting at me, I would have let him live. But he shot me, and I did what I had to do and I don't feel bad about it. Do you think that makes me a bad person?"

"No, Gabe, that makes you my hero."

He smiled, and then squinted his eyes and made a face at the pain.

"What's that face about?" Nurse Kelli asked as she came in to check on him.

"He's in pain," Taylor supplied.

She checked him over and left the room. She returned with a syringe and injected the medication into his IV.

He closed his eyes. "Now I'm gonna get sleepy again."

"That's okay, Gabe. Sleep. I don't want you to hurt."

"Okay." He breathed deeply.

"I love you, Gabe."

He smiled. "I love you too, Tay."

Taylor watched him sleep for another fifteen minutes and then called her mom, who told her someone would be right there to get her.

It turned out to be her father, accompanied by Mr. Tanner.

"Daddy," Taylor said.

"Baby girl." He hugged her. "I am so happy to see you standing here alive and well."

"Daddy, have you heard any news about Granddaddy?"

"Not yet."

Keegan motioned at her to remind her to not let Gabe know.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"How long was he awake?" Keegan asked.

"Almost the whole time I was here. But he started having some bad pain and they gave him something in his IV and he fell asleep right away."

Keegan nodded. "Thanks."

Ricky walked up to the bed, placed his hand on Gabe's head. "Thank you, Father, for this amazing young man. Bless him with healing and peace, in Jesus' name."

"Amen," Keegan said.

"I guess we'll head back down. Your brother is anxious to see you."

"Okay, but Dad, maybe we can stop by the gift shop."

"What do you need?"

"Not me. You. Maybe they'll have a T-shirt or something, cuz..." She pointed at his shirt.

He looked down. His father's blood streaked his shirt. He sighed and nodded. "Let's go see."

✝✝✝

Though there were almost twenty people in the waiting room, it was relatively quiet, so when Jason's phone buzzed, everyone noticed. Jason rose and went out and came back only a few minutes later.

"Shelley?"

She rose, a questioning look on her face, her heart pounding.

"Your children are here. They're in another room. I'll take you to them."

"Mom," Bree said quickly. "Do you feel like handling this right now?"

Shelley offered a small smile. "I appreciate your concern, but yes. These are mine and Eric's children and he just offered his life to save them. So, yes, I want to do this right now. But maybe you can come with me for a little emotional support."

Jason led the two of them down the hall, around a corner and to a small room. Shelley took a deep breath and went in, Bree right behind her.

Luciana looked up. She held two children on her lap. Another woman held a third, and

another woman held the fourth.

Shelley smiled. “Hello.” She came in the room with Bree and closed the door behind her. Her eyes looked into the beautiful brown eyes of her children, who all looked up at her with small smiles on their faces. “I’m Shelley Kino,” she said to the two women she didn’t know.

Luciana pointed. “That’s Camilla and that’s Lonnie.”

Shelley nodded. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“This is Grandmaster Kino’s wife, the real mother of these children,” Luciana explained in Spanish.

Shelley frowned when they didn’t seem too happy to see her. She sighed. Looking around, she decided to sit down in the middle of the floor. She placed her hand on the carpet in front of her. “Luciana, will you please sit down here? And Camilla and Lonnie too, with the children.”

They did as she asked. Shelley ignored the women and focused, zeroing in on her children. Her children, she thought. And Eric’s children. She smiled at them. “Well, I know it’s been a long hard day for you little ones,” Shelley began. “But I’m very happy to meet you. My name is Shelley. Can you tell me your names?”

“I’m four-Angeweena.”

“Angelina? Oh my goodness, what a pretty name for a pretty girl.”

Shelley held her hand out, unknowingly just like Eric had done earlier. Angelina placed her hand in Shelley’s and Shelley instinctively raised it to her lips and kissed it. The child giggled. The sound made Shelley tear up. She looked the child over. Her hair was long and thick and a very dark brown, almost black, like Eric’s. It had a soft curl to it, like her own.

She turned to the little boy next to Angelina. “And what’s your name?”

“One-Manny.”

“It’s Emmanuel, but that’s hard for him to say. And the numbers are ...”

“My sons told me about the numbers. I understand. But we’ll put a stop to that soon.”

She looked at Manny. Held out her hand. “Hello, Manny.”

He smiled.

“Put your hand right here,” Shelley said, pointing to her own hand.

He did as he was told. She squeezed his hand and wiggled it, making him smile. Then quickly pressed a kiss to it before she let go.

She turned to the child on Lonnie’s lap. He was already smiling at her. “I bet you can’t tell me *your* name.”

“I can so. It’s Noah.”

“Oh my goodness, you’re so smart,” she exclaimed. She held out her hand and he placed his in it and she gave his hand a big kiss, making a silly smacking sound. All the children laughed. She turned to the child on Camilla’s lap. “What’s your name?”

He smiled but didn’t answer.

“Oh, I see, you’re gonna make me guess. Hmm, is it, ummm, Barney?”

He smiled and shook his head.

“Oh, I know, it’s Buzz Lightyear.”

His eyes lit up, but he shook his head. Angelina giggled.

“Aw, man, this is hard,” Shelley complained. “Is it, Mickey Mouse?”

"No, it's five-Abwaham."

"Abraham! Oh—my—goodness that is an awesome name. I'm so happy you told me!" She held out her hand for his, he gave it to her and she kissed it too.

"Can you say my name?" she asked. "Shelley. Can you say Shelley?"

All but Manny complied.

Shelley looked up at Bree who still stood near the door. "Do you have your phone?"

"Yes."

"Take some pictures of them, please." She looked at Luciana, Camilla and Lonnie. "This is my daughter, Breanna Adams."

"Oh, sí, señora, we know who she is," Luciana said, nodding excitedly, the other two women nodding also with big smiles.

Shelley smiled. Bree's fame was sometimes helpful and sometimes not. Today it was helpful. "Bree, take a pic of Luciana, with all the children, then Camilla with all the children, then Lonnie with all the children, and then me with all the children."

Luciana sat with her legs spread and all four children on the floor in between. "Look up at the pretty lady there," Luciana explained. She looked at Shelley. "They've never had their picture taken before. We weren't allowed to photograph them."

"I see. Well then, this will be fun. Take the pic, Bree."

Bree did. Shelley took the phone and showed the picture to the children. "See, there's you, Angelina, and that's Noah, and there's Abraham, and there's Manny. Isn't that cool! Now everyone make a silly face." Shelley showed them a funny face and they all copied her and Bree snapped the pic. Shelley showed them the funny face picture and they giggled.

They went on to do the same with both Lonnie and Camilla. Finally, it was Shelley's turn. All the children were sitting in front of her and she put her arms around them as the three caretakers moved to sit back in their chairs. Bree took the pictures. The children giggled as Shelley took the phone and showed it to them. "Okay, sweet babies," Shelley began. "Everyone turn around and look at me because I have a story to tell you."

The children turned and sat looking up at her. Luciana, Camilla and Lonnie watched from their chairs. Bree smiled. Her mom had maneuvered the children away from their caretakers without any fuss or trauma. Bree was amazed by her mother. She was giving her all to these children right now, even while her husband fought for his life in an operating room nearby. Bree realized that these children, who were actually Bree's and Ricky's siblings, were about to become a tremendous focus for the entire Kino/Adams family. They looked a lot like Jeffy and her own two children. So beautiful, so innocent, and so in need of both a mother and father. *Please, dear Jesus, allow Eric to live.*

✞✞✞

Matthew 19:14

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Chapter Thirty-Five

August 24th Still Saturday Evening...

Shelley smiled and drew a deep breath as she directed her thoughts to what needed to come next. "Help me, Father," she whispered. "Once upon a time, there was a queen and a king. The queen was very pretty. She looked a lot like you, Angelina. And the king was very handsome, he looked a lot like you boys.

"Now this King and Queen were very happy. They had ten children. Ten!" She held up her hands and wiggled her fingers. "Can you count with me?" They counted off her children. "That's how a family is supposed to be. A mother, who was the queen, and a father, who was the king, and then they have children. And together they all love each other very much.

"But then something terrible happened. There was this like, um, like a tricky monster. On the outside, he looked like a man, but on the inside he was a very bad monster, and the tricky monster came and took the five littlest children away from the mother and father."

"Away from da King and Queen," Noah supplied.

Shelley nodded. "That's right."

"Did he look wike a T-Rex?" Manny asked.

"Oh, I think so," Shelley answered. "But he didn't look like it on the outside. Only on the inside. Because he was tricky."

"What did he do to dem?" Angelina asked. "Did da monsta man eat dem?"

Shelley sighed. "Oh, no, he didn't eat them, thank goodness. But he took them away and locked them up in a house. He wouldn't let them go back to their mother and father. He wouldn't let them go anywhere except out in the backyard to play. It wasn't so bad, except the King and Queen missed their children and cried for them. And the older brothers and sisters wanted their little brothers and sisters back so that they could play with them and hug them, and take them swimming, and take them to ride on the merry-go-round, and take them to the store and buy them an ice cream cone, and ..."

"I wove ice cweam," Manny said suddenly.

Shelley touched his nose. "I bet you do. Me too!"

"What happened to the chidwen?" Abraham asked.

"Well, it was sad. They were away from the King and Queen for so long that they forgot about them. They couldn't remember that they once had a father and mother and older brothers and sisters. But the children did have three special fairy mothers who took care of them. They fed them, and helped them get dressed, and played with them and read to them and taught them lots of things. And, then one day, one of the fairies, a very brave fairy, found out that the children they were taking care of really belonged to the king and queen and she went to the King's castle and told them that she knew where the children were being kept by the man who was really a monster."

Shelley looked from face to face. They seemed worried about the outcome.

"And so, the king and the brothers, who were princes, came to the house and killed the monster and took the children back. The queen and her daughters, who were princesses, were so very happy to see her children again that she hugged them and hugged them and hugged them. She couldn't stop hugging them."

The children all smiled.

"Did you like the story?"

"Yes," they all said softly.

"Well, now, I have something else to tell you. Ya see, the story I just told you, it was a true story. That means it really happened. And guess what?"

"What," they said excitedly.

"The little children in that story are really you guys. You children were taken away from your real mother and father and couldn't remember them."

The children were silent.

"And Miss Luciana, and Miss Camilla, and Miss Lonnie, they are the fairy ladies who took such good care of you."

The children all looked up at the women, who smiled sweetly at them.

"And Bree"—she pointed at her daughter—"is a princess, and she is your big sister. And I, my sweet children, I am the queen, which means, I am your mother."

"You are?" Noah asked.

"Yes, sweetheart. I'm your mother."

"Our mother died," Angelina said with a frown.

"No, the fairies told you that your mother died because the monster made them say that, but it wasn't the truth. Your mother didn't die. I'm right here. And I'm very happy to see you and finally talk to you. And I'm gonna take you back to the castle and take such good care of you."

"Where's da king?" Noah asked.

Shelley smiled sadly. "Do you remember today when the man named Eric came to you?"

"Yeah, he got kill-ded."

Shelley's eyes filled because he may very well be correct. "Well, he's the king."

"He was nice," Angelina said.

"Yes, he's very nice. Super nice. He's in this place, close by, and some doctors are trying to help him so that he can live. We've been praying really hard that God will let him live."

"God woves us," Noah said firmly.

Shelley looked up at the women, nodding her head in gratitude that they taught the children about God. "Yes, He does. Very much," Shelley agreed.

She decided it was enough for now. "So, who is hungry or sleepy?"

"I'm hungwy," Manny said.

"Bree, will you get Taylor to come help you take the children down the hall to the vending machine and get them a little snack. I'm sure they haven't had any dinner. And while you do that, I want to talk to these ladies a minute."

Bree went to get Taylor and came back quickly.

"Hey!" Taylor said brightly when she came in. "Who wants a treat?"

All of the children jumped up. “Well, then, follow me.”

Amazingly, they followed her right out the door and Bree filed in behind. Taylor had always had a way with the children.

Shelley turned to Luciana. “Do you ladies have your own families to take care of?”

“Si, yes, we all do.”

Shelley frowned. “Then I suppose you wouldn’t want to continue taking care of the children. I mean *help* me take care of the children, like a nanny type situation?”

“I would,” Luciana said. “But my family lives very far from your home.”

Both Lonnie and Camilla nodded their heads in agreement.

“Okay, I understand. But would you consider staying on a few days until we get the children settled in?”

“I can,” Luciana said. “But just overnight.”

“I cannot,” Camilla said. “I have a newborn baby. I only worked for Mr. Payne from eight in the morning until two when Luciana gets there. Then I have to get right home. Even now, it’s so late, my husband keeps asking when I will make it home.” Her eyes moistened. “I love these little ones, though. Do you think I could come by and see them sometimes?”

“Yes, of course. They’re gonna miss you too. We’ll pay for your transportation whenever you want to come to visit. And if you need to leave now, I’ll have Jason arrange a driver to take you home.”

“Gracias, señora.”

“What about you, Lonnie?”

“I can stay tonight, but I have to be home by 7:30 in the morning.”

“Hmm, that might be difficult to arrange depending on what happens here with my husband. It might be best if you go ahead and go back with Camilla.”

She nodded, but Shelley didn’t miss the worried look on her face. “And I’ll be happy to provide you with transportation if you ever want to come and visit the children.”

Shelley thought again. And it dawned on her. “So, if you don’t mind me asking, how much was Payne paying you to watch the children?”

“Seven hundred dollars a week,” Luciana replied.

Shelley nodded. “And now, you’ll have no income.” She paused, thought. “I’ll continue to pay your salary until you’re able to find another job. Will that help?”

“Sí, yes señora,” Luciana answered for them all.

“Do you own your homes, or rent?”

“Rent,” they all said.

“I would also like to prepay your rent for you for a year, just as a thank you for taking such good care of my children and as a boost to your income. So, I’ll give you my cell number and you text me the information, where you live, and who you rent from. Okay?”

They nodded. “Sí, gracias señora.”

“And if there’s anything else you need, please let me know. I want to help you. I’m so grateful. You can call me anytime. I mean it. Anytime, no matter what you need.”

There was a knock on the door and Shelley opened it to see her daughters-in-law, Breez and Bella standing there.

“Hey, Shelley, we were thinking. It’s dinner time. Why don’t we take the children back to your house for you, feed them and figure out some sleeping arrangements. We figure

you're gonna want to stay with Eric when he gets out of surgery. We think we can help more if we do this for you rather than sitting around worrying."

Shelley nodded. "Thank you, ladies. I would be grateful if you could do that. Luciana will go with you to help since she knows the children and they might be more comfortable with her there. I'll get Jason to arrange a ride."

"No need. He has a van waiting. Breez and I will be right behind it and Agents Trout and Ward will be right behind us."

"Thank you girls. Keep them all together. Jeffy and Cam are currently staying in Jeffy's old room, so try the room next..."

"No offense, Shelley, but we got this," Breez said.

"Okay. Sorry. My mind is a little all over the place."

"Understandable," Bella said.

"So, where are *your* babies?" Shelley asked.

"We have a couple of teenagers from down the street who are gonna spend the night at my house, and Em is there too," Breez answered.

"I feel like I'm in a dream, and I can't wake up," Shelley said. "Or more like a nightmare."

"We know. We feel the same way. Hang in there. Hopefully we'll know something soon."

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August 24th Still Saturday Evening

Special Waiting Area, Redwood Hills Medical Center

Shelley felt lost. Totally lost and alone. Breez and Bella had taken the children, along with Luciana and Agents Ward and Trout, to the house. The house she'd shared with Eric for the past thirty years. Eric, who was her rock. Eric whom she loved more than her own life. Eric whom she missed desperately. Eric, the most amazing man in the world, and she wasn't the only one who thought that. Millions of people thought the same thing. Millions of people credited him as the man who changed their lives. The man who truly lived his faith. The man they would most like to emulate.

Tears welled up in her eyes again as they had been all day. He'd now been in the OR for three hours. How much longer could it take?

"Look at this," Taylor said to no one in particular. "There are literally millions of people writing out prayers for Granddaddy and for Gabe. I mean, millions. Wow."

She started reading them out loud. At the end of each prayer, the room at large would utter an 'amen.' It was a good way to pass the time and it was what they were doing when the door opened and Jeffy stepped into the room. She wore scrubs and looked as if she might fall over from exhaustion. She was now over five months pregnant and she'd been on her feet for hours. She looked at the group of people who wouldn't be happy to hear the news. Her husband went to her immediately and sat her down. "Tell us, baby," Cam said.

"He's out of surgery and on life support, meaning there are machines breathing for him and keeping his heart beating. The good news is the bullet didn't go directly into his heart, but it did nick the heart. That's what took so long, trying to repair the damage. He almost bled out. He's been given a massive blood transfusion."

"Condition?" Justin asked.

"Extremely critical."

"Prognosis?" Ricky asked.

She shook her head. "It doesn't look good."

"But he's alive," Joey said. "Right?"

"Yes. He's in a deep coma. Hopefully, as his body heals, we'll be able to take him off life support and he'll wake up and breathe on his own."

"But you don't see that happening," Mark stated.

Her eyes filled and spilled over as she shook her head.

"Can I go in and see him?" Shelley asked.

Jeffy nodded. Wiped her tears. "Yes. One person at a time."

Shelley stood, headed for the door, then turned. "Some of you won't remember this, but remember that Positive Input Plan you guys used on me when I was getting ready to fight in the MART? That starts right now. Go in, see him, speak to him, tell him you love him, tell him a funny story, tell him anything positive. Pray for him. Lay your hands on him and heal him, in Jesus' name. Nothing else will be tolerated." She turned to Jeffy. "Where is he?"

"He's in ICU, just two stations down from Gabe."

"So that you all will have a chance to see him, I will only stay for ten minutes this first time. Next person be ready in exactly ten minutes," she ordered. She left the room.

"I'm sorry," Jeffy said. "I'm so weary. I should have been more positive."

"You were fine, Jeffy. We needed to know the brutal truth," Ricky said. He smiled. "I was just thinking about what Dad said today, about Shelley always rising up in a bad situation. It appears that's what she's doing." He looked up. "Jason, I'd like to get a recording of what he said to me. Shelley may eventually take some comfort in what he said."

"I'll take care of it," Jason said softly.

"We'd all like a copy," Mark said. "Especially Justin, and Bree and Shelley, and Jeffy, who didn't hear what he said."

Jason nodded and closed his eyes briefly. He turned and left the room just as Keegan was coming in. Keegan looked around the room and wondered what he could do or say to help these people he loved. He too, was sick over what was happening, but war had taught him to pull it together and save the living.

"I heard Eric's condition from the nurse that's taking care of Gabe. I'm sorry. Look, whatever happens, we'll all get through this together. Somehow, some way. All I can do is try to think of what he would tell us to do. I love him and have so much respect for him and I think he would tell us that we have to not grieve but put our trust in God. He always told me that nothing is random, that God has a plan. So, I'm gonna try to show God that I trust Him. I'm gonna try to walk the walk. I mean, we all talk a big game, don't we? We talk the talk. We gotta walk the walk and keep the faith. I believe in miracles. Do you?"

Ricky nodded. "I do. I've seen too many to deny it. I guess it just seems different, it being my father. I mean, he's the patriarch. He's always the one walking the walk as things happen in our lives, bolstering our faith, making things right. It hurts so much that I can't turn to him and ask him what to do."

"What would he say about that?" Keegan prodded.

Ricky thought a minute and nodded. "He'd say it's not him I need to speak to, it's my Father in heaven I need to ask."

Keegan nodded. "Which is a little harder and requires more faith. But Ricky, if anyone has that faith it's you. You're the one who, out of the blue, said you felt led to share some thoughts with me, a person who at the time was a virtual stranger to you. You felt led to say things to me that answered every question I had about God. You are just as connected as Eric, and you are the one who brought me into the fold, and therefore everyone in my family also. You are my hero, Ricky, and I have every confidence in you." He motioned around the room. "And I'm sure I speak for a lot of people in this room."

They all quickly agreed.

"Now, I have another hero who has been an extreme blessing to me in my life, and he's not doing so well right now."

"What's wrong with Gabe?" Jeffy asked.

"Not Gabe. He's fine. I'm talking about Jason."

"What's wrong with my brother?" Justin asked.

"He's blaming himself for what happened to Eric."

"That's ridiculous. He knows better than that."

"He says he should have had a vest on Eric. He says he shouldn't have let you guys in when Payne was still missing. He says the whole thing is on him and it's tearing him apart."

"Well, it's not on him," Joey said. "Actually, it's on me. I was in the room. I thought it was secure. It's all my fault. I let you all down."

"Okay, now," Mark jumped in. "You guys have gotta stop this. You know good and well that Eric would call you down about all this feeling guilty crap. You wanna honor him? Then remember the lessons he's taught you. Joey, there was no way you could know that the bookcase was a door."

"I should have known. I should have been more alert. More suspicious. A person doesn't just disappear."

"You *were* more suspicious. You went up to the guy's office and you figured it out. That was a good job."

"Except I should have waited to let you guys in until *after* I figured it out."

Mark shook his head and sighed. "Hindsight is twenty/twenty. But let's just break this down a minute. If Eric hadn't been there, Payne would have simply stepped out from that bookcase and gunned down the children. Eric was meant to be there to save those babies. And he did. He's said many times, he'd give his life for another in a second, and he did just that. He threw himself in front of that bullet. Maybe God meant for him to do that. Maybe God has a plan. We need to trust Him, like Keegan says."

There were a few moments of silence while everyone thought about Mark's words.

Finally, Keegan nodded. "Well done, counselor."

Justin nodded. "Well done indeed, Mark, and I need to go find my brother and say those exact same things to him. I need to go do that for him rather than sitting here feeling sorry for myself. I need to do what Eric would have me do, which is to help the people he loves in any way possible." He rose. "Excuse me."

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Shelley braced herself and entered the room. Unfortunately, it was every bit as bad as she'd imagined. She approached the bed. They had him sitting slightly upright. He had a breathing tube in his mouth. She watched his chest going up and down. His chest was bare

except for electrodes and a small bandage over his heart with a tube protruding out of it. She felt so much love and compassion for him that the tears ran freely over her cheeks. Reaching over the railing, she picked up his hand. There were IVs in both hands and she was careful to not disturb them. This person in the bed didn't even look like Eric. Her Eric was strong, and powerful. Her Eric was quick witted and fast on his feet. He worked tirelessly. He played and fought and taught and made love and it was so hard seeing him like this. She rubbed her fist under his palm. "Oh, Eric, I'm so sorry this is happening to you. I love you so much."

She broke down for a minute and allowed herself to sob openly. Then, she shook it off and went on. "I know you know that. I'll keep things together for the family until you get back, but only until then, so hurry and get well. Please Eric. You can do it! You are the strongest person I know." She sighed. "I met our children, Eric. They are so beautiful and so sweet. But they're a little bit scared and they need– their– father to help them through this giant upheaval of their lives. I don't know how to ease their way. They need you and your other children need you and, oh, Eric I need you." She closed her eyes.

"Father, would it help if I beg? Can I reason with You? I don't mean to be disrespectful. I know I don't know Your plan. I get that from my human perspective I can't understand why this is happening. So, please, give me Your eyes so I *can* understand. Give me Your heart. Give Eric Your heart. These new children, they need their father. You know how valiant and special Eric is, and You know how good he would be with these new spirits. Please, Father, I beg You, give him more time. I beg you to heal him. I beg You to let him live. Father, I know that Your will be done, and whatever that is, I'll abide by it, but I'm still begging for Eric's life. I realize it's selfish of me, but I can't help myself. Forgive me. Forgive me. I will do Your will. Always, in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, amen."

She squeezed his hand. "I'll be back, my love. Other people need to see you. Hang in there, Eric. You can do it." She raised his hand to her lips, turned and left the room.

Everyone looked up as Shelley came through the door of the waiting room. "Who's next?" was all she said.

Ricky stood and went to give Shelley a quick hug before he headed out.

Shelley looked up into his eyes, so like Eric's. "Brace yourself."

Ricky nodded and left the room, while Bree moved forward and put her arms around her mother. She felt directly responsible for the two people closest to Eric, his wife and his firstborn child; her mother and her husband. She hoped she could be strong enough to help them through whatever is to come.

Keegan stood. "I'm gonna go check on Gabe."

When he got to Gabe's room he was startled to find two nurses, one on either side of the bed, working on him.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Kelli smiled at him. "Everything's okay, we just had a little mishap, huh Gabriel?"

Gabe didn't smile but nodded his head.

"He ripped out his IV," Kelli went on. "And in the process ripped a few stitches in his side."

"I'm sorry," Gabe said, his voice soft and weak. "I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

She patted his shoulder. "Don't you worry about it, sweetie."

Kelli put another piece of tape across his arm, where they had moved the IV site and turned to smile at Keegan. "He had a nightmare. Get him to tell you about it. I actually know his history. I follow him on Instagram and I saw the video of his abduction so I completely understand what happened. The doctor on call is on his way and should be here in a few minutes to see what needs to be done about the stitches in his abdominal wound. My shift ended at seven, so I won't be back until tomorrow morning." She looked back at Gabe. "The nurse coming in is Kristi. You'll like her, she's a cutie."

Gabe smiled. "That seems to be an epidemic around here."

Both nurses snorted. Keegan smiled. Even in his current condition, his son was such a player.

The nurse who'd been working on cleaning blood off of Gabe's face and arm and abdomen and chest finished up and turned to scoop up the pile of sheets on the floor and left the room.

Kelli frowned at Gabe. "You've moved way down in the bed. Mr. Tanner, do you think I can get your assistance?"

"Sure."

"You go on that side and I'll go here. Hold him just under his armpit. Now Gabe, bend your knees and put your feet flat on the bed and when I count to three, you help by using your legs to push yourself up."

Gabe nodded.

"One, two, three."

He pushed himself so high up that his head bumped the headboard.

"Oh, well, that was easy. I'm not used to having my patients be so strong." She checked his IV one more time and then touched his forehead. "See you in the morning."

"Thank you," Keegan said.

She smiled. "You're very welcome."

Keegan turned his attention to Gabe. "So, you wanna tell me what happened?"

Gabe nodded and drew a deep breath because he felt so weak. "I dreamed I was back in that building. The one where Mia took me. My wrists were tied together and I was trying to get them apart. I don't know exactly how I ended up ripping out the IV, but I know when I woke up I was sitting up straight, my hand was pumping out blood all over the place and my side was burning. Kelli came running in, and the other nurse too. That's really all I know."

Keegan sighed. "Okay, well, no harm done, right?"

Gabe offered a slight smile. "Well, I guess, I mean, only a little harm done. I'm sorry, Dad."

"Don't apologize for something you have no control over."

"Well, I have a little control now, because I told Kelli that I don't want any more pain medication. It puts me too far under. I don't like it."

Keegan nodded. "I think you might change your mind about that, but we'll see."

The doctor arrived. He was a young man, and spoke with a strong Indian accent. He greeted the Tanner men and quickly looked over Gabe's abdominal wound and left the room. He came back just a few minutes later with a nurse and a suture kit. He efficiently repaired the stitches in Gabe's side, checked the bandages on both his chest and his thigh, spoke briefly to Keegan and left.

The nurse gathered up the suture supplies and looked at Gabe with a smile. "I'm Kristi. I'll be your nurse for tonight. If you need anything, if you feel strange, like you get dizzy or nauseated, you push that button. Nothing is too small. And I'll be in and out all night long. What's your pain level right now on a scale of one to ten?"

"It's about a five, but it doesn't really matter because I don't want any more medication for pain," he said weakly.

She smiled. "Well, okay, but you may change your mind, but we'll see." She turned to Keegan. "Mr. Tanner, that chair leans back if you'd like to get some sleep."

He nodded. "Thank you. So, Gabe's mom will be arriving in a couple of hours. I guess we can't both be here?"

"Not usually, but I'll check and see if we can make an exception, since she's coming from such a long way away."

"How do you know that?"

She smiled. "Everyone knows that Gabe Tanner is from Pine Forest, Georgia, that he saved Taylor Kino, that he's a hero, and that he was shot. Millions of people are praying for him as we speak and I'm honored to be able to be the one to take care of him tonight."

Gabe smiled. "Well, Ms. Kristi, I don't know about that hero part, but can you do me a favor?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, what do you need?"

"Tell Kelli when she comes to work in the morning that I agree with her."

"That's it?"

Gabe grinned. "Yep, that's it."

The nurse left and Keegan smiled at his son. "Well done. So, Gabe, really, how are you feeling? I mean both physically *and* emotionally. Be honest. You doin' okay?"

Gabe frowned. "I'm in a little bit of pain, but I can handle it. I'm really tired and it feels like a huge effort to speak. But I do want to talk to you about something that's buggin' me. Taylor and I were talking about what went down today and, well, it's about me killing those two guys."

Keegan nodded. "I figured you'd need to talk about that sooner or later. I know it's a strange, almost surreal feeling and it might make you feel down or sad for awhile, but it eventually will start to ease."

Gabe frowned. "That's the problem, Dad. I don't feel bad about it. What kind of person am I that I can kill two people and not even feel remorse about it? Am I some sort of psychopath? Am I evil? Is that why I've been so obsessed with guns my whole life?"

"Wow." Keegan took a moment to process what Gabe just said. "Son, you are the farthest thing from evil that there is. You're God's warrior. You dispatch evil. That's what you did today. First, those men tried to kill you. And they had no qualms about taking a young innocent girl away from her family to what probably would have ended in her death, but not before she suffered immense abasement."

"Abasement?"

"Humiliation and degradation. Who knows exactly what things Payne and Black had in store for her. Even if she'd made it out alive she may never have recovered emotionally. And you, son, are not a psychopath. Psychopaths don't feel normal emotions. You feel things deeply. Maybe too deeply. Your current feelings are evidence of that. And your so-called obsession with guns is because I introduced you to them at a young age and you had

a natural talent for shooting. Would you say Michael Phelps had an obsession with swimming, or Michael Jordan had an obsession with basketball, or Eric Kino had an obsession with martial arts?"

Gabe nodded. "I get it."

"I wish you could continue to go on without feeling the weight of shooting those men. You don't feel it now, probably because you're still in rescue mode. You'll eventually come down off that, and it will sink in, and you will feel it. I know, because, well, I know. You love God, you love Jesus, and you will feel His love for all of mankind and feel how much it hurts Him to have people choose evil."

"But isn't killing also evil?"

"David killed Goliath. Was he doing evil, or was he being God's warrior? David was saving the lives of his people. He was a hero. And today, Gabe, you were a hero."

Gabe sighed. "Okay. I think I understand. Thanks, Dad. So, you never did tell me, what happened today that got your meeting cancelled?"

Keegan looked down. He really didn't want to lay it on his son right now.

"Dad?"

Keegan looked up. "I'd rather not say right now."

"Why? Did you have to kill someone?"

"No. What happened, happened after I came here to the hospital to be with you."

"Why don't you want to tell me?"

"Because I want you to relax and recover."

"So, you're saying that whatever happened today would make me not be able to relax? Well, knowing that makes me not able to relax. Did someone get hurt? What happened? Is Jeff okay? I won't be able to rest without knowing."

Keegan sighed. He'd totally botched that. Knowing what happened to Grandmaster Kino would destroy Gabe. But now Gabe would suffer with the not knowing. Maybe he could tell him, but play it down.

"Dad?"

"Okay, I'll tell you what happened. Before the meeting even got started today, someone came to the gate at the Kinos' house."

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Eric Kino Jr., known to the world as Ricky Kino, stared down at his father in disbelief. How could this happen? How could they start out the day as honored guests at an Ameritech meeting and end up in a hospital with his father barely clinging to life. In one day the Kino family had grown by seven and lost three, probably four, he thought in dismay. As much as he wanted to think positive as Shelley had asked, his father's last words played through his mind. He'd acted as if he knew this was coming. He'd begun trying to say goodbye almost immediately.

Ricky's eyes filled as he remembered those few horrific minutes. It was a nightmare that he would never forget, whether his father lives or dies. His father asked him if he believed all they professed to believe or not? Now, his strong, rock of a father was lying here, a machine breathing for him, which Ricky was pretty sure he would hate. His father had stated very clearly that it was time for Ricky to stand up and take over. He'd actually been saying things like that all year, again, as if he knew what was coming.

He remembered the strange joint vision his sister and father shared three years earlier

at Jeffy's engagement party. His father had been speaking to the group and his body had suddenly jerked, his chest caving in, and he fell back. It had looked so much like he'd been shot in the chest, that Jason's agents actually started looking for the shooter. That wasn't just a figment of his imagination. That really happened, and now it has come to pass. Why would they be given a vision of his father being shot in the chest? Was it because he was going to pass out of this world, or because he would survive? He needed to speak with Jeffy and see if there was any part of the vision she hadn't shared with the family.

He took his father's hand in his. This strong hand, that could do so many things. Squeezing it, Ricky spoke softly. "Dad, I know you want me to stand up and help the family. And I will. I give you my word. I accept the challenge. But that doesn't mean I'm giving you permission to leave us. Please, please don't leave. Not now. Your children, the new little ones, they need to know you. So, I'm asking you to buck up and power through. I know you might be tired. You've worked so hard your entire life. You're always the last to bed and the first to rise. I get it. But I'm asking you to wait for your rest in our Father's arms a little longer. We need you. Earlier today you said Shelley would be okay. And she's trying hard to be brave for you. But I see the fear and the hurt in her eyes and I feel like it's not fair for you to leave without her. I'm asking you to fight. And if this is your plan, dear God, I'm asking you to consider changing it. Yes, Father, we will all pick up our crosses and carry them if it is Your will, but Father, this is a hard burden to bear, and yeah, I guess I'm asking if You're willing, please take this cup from us."

Ricky stopped his prayer because he was overcome with emotion. Finally he said, "Forgive me for my weakness, Father. I will trust in You. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."

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Keegan finished the telling of the story, watching his son's eyes carefully. "And he was brought here to this hospital, and he's just right down the hall from here. He was in surgery for hours to remove the bullet and to repair his heart. He's not conscious and we're waiting for him to wake up, but we don't know when that will be."

Gabe blinked and tears ran down his face. He was sick. And shaken. And had never in his life felt as bad as he did at this moment, not even when he'd been kidnapped and thought he was gonna die. And at this moment he thought he'd gladly trade places with Grandmaster Kino. He'd gladly trade his own life for his.

"Gabe?" Keegan said softly.

"I knew there was something wrong, back at the house. I had a dream, remember? I thought Grandmaster Kino had a heart attack. I guess you could call it exactly that, an attack on his heart. I can't stand this. I can't do it."

"What do you mean?"

Gabe only shook his head as the tears continued to fall.

"Do you want to talk about it, son?"

He shook his head.

"Sometimes it helps to talk about what you're feeling."

Gabe's chin quivered. "Not now."

"Son..."

"I'd like to be alone, please."

"Are you sure?"

He didn't answer. He actually turned away onto his right side, grunting with the pain

it caused him to do so. He welcomed the pain.

"Okay. Well, I'll step out for a little while," Keegan said. He turned to leave the room, but stopped at the doorway at the sound of his son, weeping. He thought that sound would be something he'd never forget. He left the room and went to speak with the others.

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Ricky glanced around the room. The boys, young Eric, JoJo and Logan, sat in a circle, talking softly with Taylor, obviously trying to comfort her, but having to wipe away their own tears as they did. Jeff had his arm around Mickey. His father had counseled her extensively. Lori was whispering to Justin. Being a trauma nurse, she was probably trying to ease his fears. Angel sat with Shelley, while her husband Jason, stood stoically against a wall, much like Ricky himself was doing. Kimmie had not been feeling well and Jensen had taken her home. Bree sat on the other side of her mother, her arm draped around her shoulders.

The door opened and Keegan stepped in. He looked around at all the grief and sighed. He nodded at Ricky, and also took a place against a wall, trying to figure out how he could help these people.

Ricky was trying to do the same thing. Looking around, he realized that everyone had now been in to see his father. Everyone came back from doing so with the same pale face, strained expression, and tear tracks. He shook his head. This couldn't go on. It was time for him to do what his father asked. He pushed away from the wall. "Jeffy?"

She looked up.

"When you and Dad had that joint vision back a few years ago, at your engagement party, tell me exactly what you saw."

Her lips trembled. "I saw Dad get hit in the chest with a bullet and blood spread out in a circle. I knew it was precognitive."

"You never told us exactly what you saw or that you thought it was a prediction of things to come. Why?"

"That was by Dad's request. In his vision, he'd seen it coming and felt the pain and even lost consciousness. He, too, felt it was something he would one day face. He didn't want people to worry, so he asked me not to say what we saw. He'd come to accept it, willing to go be with God, if that was the plan. He prayed and asked for confirmation, but—silence."

Ricky sighed. "In the vision, did you see him actually die?"

"No. It was an assumption."

"And that's what everyone here is doing now. Assuming. Dad says to never assume."

Keegan cleared his throat. "Gabe just reminded me that he had a dream that Eric had a heart attack. Remember? It was so real that Gabe ran to the Inn to see him and make sure he was okay. It was actually on his birthday."

Ricky nodded. "So, why would they be given a warning, if there was nothing we could do to avoid it? Is it so that we would accept it? I don't think that's it."

Ricky closed his eyes. "Father, help me to understand, please," he whispered, barely audible.

He opened his eyes. "These words just came into my head. When we're given trials it's to hone us, sharpen us. Zechariah 13:9, 'This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I

will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'" He nodded his head. "We *will* call on His name, and He *will* answer us. But it may not be the answer we want. How many times has Dad said those words to me? So, if God is refining us, testing us, we need to do what Dad asked and rise up. Pass the test. With or without him, as much as it pains me to say that.

"One of the last things Dad said to me before he closed his eyes was actually a question. He asked me, 'Do you believe or not?' I do. I do believe. God is real. He's shown me too many miracles. Like Keegan said earlier today, we all talk the talk. It's time to walk the walk. Look, it's been a long day and it's almost nine o'clock. We all have things to attend to. We need to organize into shifts. Someone needs to stay tonight."

"Well," Shelley began. "As much as I want to be at Eric's side, I need to be at the house in the morning for the children. I think I need to be there when they wake up their first morning in their new home."

"I agree," Ricky said. "I'll stay with Dad tonight. Jason, you have a company in upheaval that you need to run. Justin, you and Mark need to make sure the custody paperwork for our new brothers and sister goes through smoothly. Joey, Jeff and Cam, I'm sure Jason has things you could handle for him to get on with the revamping project that still has to go forward. And like I said, we'll take shifts with Dad. Who wants to relieve me in the morning?"

"I will," Justin said. "Mark? Can you handle the office? I'll be available by phone."

"Absolutely."

"Ricky," Shelley said. "I would like to hear the recording of what Eric said to you. Those words are important to me, I mean, if that's okay."

Ricky looked to Jason who nodded. "I'll get that to you first thing tomorrow."

"Thank you. And I'll be here tomorrow by the afternoon," Shelley said. "Justin, that will give you some time to work before the day is over."

Justin and Ricky both nodded.

"And I can take the next night shift," JoJo said.

"Okay, JoJo, sounds good. And that's enough for now," Ricky said. "Before you all leave, can we have another prayer?"

Keegan spoke up. "Lizzy will be here any minute. The driver is turning in now. Will you wait just a minute so that she can join?"

"Of course."

"Good," Taylor said. "Cuz I need a minute. There are some people who want to Zoom in with us the next time we all pray together."

Keegan nodded. "Actually me too, with John. He has my daughters with him."

Young Eric nodded. "Me too, give me a second or two. Some studio people have asked me to Zoom them in."

"Lizzy's coming in the door. I'll go get her and bring her back here."

Keegan walked to the emergency room doors and watched his sweet wife walk toward him. She looked tired. And worried. And pregnant. She was only about four and a half months along, but was already starting to show because she'd had five previous pregnancies, and, as she told Keegan, you start to show earlier with each one. She smiled as she came through the doors, walked straight up to him, put her arms around his neck and leaned her head against his chest.

He held her tight, and realized she was crying as her shoulders shook. "Oh, honey, I know. It's okay. Gabe is gonna be okay."

"And Grandmaster Kino?"

"That I'm not so sure about. Right now, the family is waiting on us to pray with them in the waiting room before they disperse for the night." He tilted her face up, smiled at her and wiped her tears away. "I love you, Elizabeth."

She sniffed. "I love you too." They walked to the waiting room.

Everyone greeted Lizzy and then they formed a circle like before, linked hands, like before, but this time Ricky suggested they also kneel. They all quickly dropped to their knees.

"I'll start," Ricky said, "and we'll go around the circle. If you don't feel like praying, or are feeling shy, there's no shame in that, just tell the next person to go."

Ricky prayed a powerful prayer, next to him Jason did the same, and it went around the large circle. No one opted out. What they didn't realize was that Isla was on Taylor's Zoom call and their prayer circle included about two thousand other people.

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Gabe was happy to see his mother. They cried together and she stroked his head until he fell asleep. Lizzy insisted on sitting on the smaller chair next to the bed and let Keegan take the reclining chair for the night. He woke in the hours just before dawn, as nurses went in and out of the room. He saw Lizzy asleep, the bed rail lowered, her head on the mattress next to their son.

Keegan rose, went to her and kissed her cheek. "I'll be right back." He found a bathroom to freshen up and stopped by Eric's room. Ricky was standing by his father's bed, his hand on his chest. "Hey Rick."

Ricky turned. Gave a slight smile.

"Any change?" Keegan asked.

"No."

Keegan sighed. "Give him time to heal. God's timing is perfect."

"Who told you that?"

"You did."

Keegan had the inkling that Ricky needed a man's strength to help him. He went to him, and pulled him in for a hug. Rick laid his head on Keegan's shoulder. Keegan patted him on the back. "You're my brother in this, Rick, and we'll handle this together, whatever happens."

Ricky sniffed and Keegan hugged him tight, like he would his own son. Finally they pulled apart. Ricky nodded. "Thanks for that."

"I'm just two doors down if you need me." He turned and headed back to Gabe's room to see if he could get his wife to rest.

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Psalm 34:18

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Chapter Thirty-Six

August 25th Sunday Morning
Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

They wanted him to drink some water. He tried and accomplished it. They wanted him to eat some jello. He tried and accomplished it. Now they were telling him that he had to eat something. He'd refused. It wasn't because he was trying to be difficult. He simply didn't feel like eating. He couldn't eat. His stomach was queasy. Every time he thought about Grandmaster Kino, he thought he was gonna be sick. He just wanted to be left alone. But now they were telling him that he absolutely must have nourishment in order to heal and if he couldn't eat, they were gonna have to insert a feeding tube.

"Mom, Dad, can you please just check me out and take me home? Please?" Gabe begged.

His father sighed. "Gabe, your body is not healed enough yet. Your condition is still precarious. Please, just try to eat. Please, do this, if not for me, then do it for your mom, or do it for Taylor. Please just try."

Gabe sighed in defeat. "Okay, I'll try. But I'm eighteen. It seems like I should be able to decide for myself if I can go home."

"You can. But as your father, I'm asking you to cooperate."

"Okay, I'll cooperate, but please, at least go get me something that's all-natural, no stupid artificial butter, and some clean protein."

"I'll take care of it," Keegan said and pulled out his phone.

Gabe shook his head. "Ya know, if I was still on pain meds they wouldn't be trying to make me eat cuz I'd be asleep," he muttered.

"If you were asleep, they'd probably insert the tube," Lizzy returned.

Gabe frowned.

"Now, please, whatever your dad orders for you, just eat it. Or do I need to call your sisters? I'm sure Rose would have a few good words to say to you."

Gabe knew his mother said that to get a smile out of him. But he didn't feel like smiling. He felt like screaming. Not very mature, he thought. He sighed. "I'll eat."

Lizzy smiled and patted his head.

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August 25th Sunday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Good morning, my sweet babies," Shelley crooned as she slowly came into the room. Bella and Breez had pulled the top mattress from the bed onto the floor and then pulled another from a bed one room down and brought it into the room. Both women and all four children were camped out together on the two mattresses.

Everyone looked up at Shelley.

"It looks like you all had a big party last night."

The children were pretty quiet.

Sighing, Shelley sat down on the floor. "Do you remember who I am?"

"You're my mother," Angelina said softly.

"That's right, sweet girl. So, you can call me Mommy if you want to."

"Are you my mommy too?" Noah asked.

"Oh yes."

"I want Luci," Manny said.

"Okay, sweetie, take my hand and we'll go find her." They all joined her while Bella and Breez straightened up the room.

Shelley made a game of opening the doors to each bedroom until they finally found where Luci spent the night.

Luci sat up in bed when her door opened. The children all ran to her and jumped into the bed with her.

Of course, Shelley knew they'd be attached to her, which is why she'd asked her to continue on as their nanny. Shelley smiled at Luciana. "Good morning. These children are surely gonna miss you. If you can't come and be their nanny for a little while, do you think you could come to visit them a few times a week for a couple of weeks?"

"Sí, señora, I think I could do that. But I have no transportation."

"I'll arrange for your transportation. Speak with your husband and let me know what two days you would be available and I'll have someone pick you up."

"Yes, ma'am."

"So, we need to get these babies cleaned up and dressed. Do they have more clothes with them?"

"Si. I brought as much of their things as I could grab from the daycare."

"You are a gem," Shelley said. "We'll get them dressed. I hope you can stay for breakfast."

"Si, I will help you with breakfast and then tell you as much about them as possible. And then I'm sorry, but I must get home because the FBI people are coming to speak with me."

"I understand."

Breez and Bella also helped to get the children ready for their day, and in no time the children were sitting in improvised booster seats at the kitchen table. Shelley decided to make pancakes, because usually no child could turn them down. This time was no exception.

Agents Ward and Trout, who had also stayed the night, certainly loved the breakfast too. They let Shelley know that they would be with her at all times. They'd been assigned to watch out for her and the children until further notice. Though the gesture on Jason's part was thoughtful, it brought on tears when Shelley realized the reason for it. It was because Eric was not here. Jason knew Eric wouldn't want Shelley to be alone here without the protection of a man. It was painful coming home late last night and making her way through an empty house and worse, into her empty bedroom, and still worse, into her empty bed.

In the middle of breakfast, Ricky, Bree and Taylor came in. The children were very happy to see Taylor again. Her beauty, combined with her bright personality and infectious

laugh made her a magnet for children. Everyone helped to clear their plates and Taylor took the children downstairs to what used to be the grandchildren's playroom, but would now be used much more.

Ricky, looking very tired, hugged Shelley.

She looked up at him, hope in her eyes.

He shook his head. "No change. Justin is with him. He'll let us know."

Please, dear Lord, she prayed again silently for the umpteenth time today. *Please heal him. Please bring him back to us. In Jesus' name.*

"Mom," Bree said. "I thought I'd help you make a list of things we'll need for the children." She motioned at the books piled in the kitchen chairs to improvise booster seats. "Like some booster seats for the table. Beds, strollers, toys, clothing, linens, food, and all that stuff. Then we'll try to order most of it online if possible."

Shelley nodded. "Okay. Ricky, don't you need to go home and try to get some sleep?"

"Yes, and I will, but right now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go to Dad's study for a bit."

"No, of course I don't mind. This is your home."

Ricky made his way in, closed the door, went behind his father's desk and sat in his chair. The wave of emotion hit him hard and he had to work to get himself under control. Slowly, he pulled out the center drawer. Neat and clean as always. There was an envelope with his name on it. Not sealed. He picked it up and pulled out several pages of a handwritten letter. Slowly he opened it and started reading.

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Shelley recorded all the information Luciana could give her about the children. Their current schedule. Their favorite foods. Their idiosyncrasies. Their emotional and mental awareness. Their likes and dislikes. Their health problems. As it turned out, Luciana was starting to have concerns about Manny possibly having some learning disabilities, and she'd been terrified that Payne would find out and murder him too.

Shelley thanked Luciana for doing the right thing. For loving the children. Even knowing it would be dangerous and cost her job, Luciana had still gone to find Eric. Shelley promised to help her with anything, for the rest of her life. And she offered to start a trust for Luciana's two children. Then she hugged her and sent her home.

Then Breez and Bella announced that they had to get home to their own children, but that Mickey Davis and her two boys were coming over to take care of the children so that Shelley could get back to the hospital this afternoon. Shelley hugged her beautiful, sweet daughters-in-law and thanked them. They promised they'd be back the next day.

Right after they left, Shelley received a text from Jason containing a recording of Eric's last words. Bree got the same text, as did Breez, Bella, Mickey, Justin, young Eric, JoJo and Logan. Bree and Shelley listened to it together. Several times.

Shelley couldn't hold back the tears. Hearing his voice, hearing him trying to say goodbye, it was heart-wrenching, especially since he said goodbye to everyone but her. Pushing that aside, knowing he had his reasons, she looked at Bree. "He saw his parents and Ann. I didn't know that. He's not coming back to me, is he? Now that I hear what Ricky heard, I understand why he seemed to have no hope." She shook her head and the tears fell again.

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At the hospital, Justin was doing the same thing, listening to Eric's last words and coming to an understanding. He didn't even try to stop the tears. He stood and went to the bedside.

"I just heard what you said, my friend, and I'm gonna have to argue with you. I don't care if you saw Ann. You wave at her and tell her you'll see her later. Right now, you have a whole lot more you have to do here on this earth. You have four children to raise. You have to take care of your wife. You have young grandchildren who need to know you. You have students around the world who are feeling like their prayers are being ignored. I guess I need to take that one up with God, but as for you Eric, you are not a quitter. In those words you spoke after you were shot, you told us to rise up. Well, Eric, *you* rise up first. *YOU*. Haven't I always been there for you through everything? Well, I'm gonna need you to be here for me this time. I'm not begging you. I'm ordering you to come back here and fill the gap with the rest of us. Yes. I'm angry. So you'd better buck up."

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Hoping to distract her mother, Bree sat at the kitchen table with her tablet and looked online for things they needed to buy for the children. They ordered most everything quickly, because Shelley hated to shop.

"I'd like to have another prayer circle," Shelley said, when the shopping was over. "I'd like to do it once I get to the hospital this afternoon while I'm standing next to Eric. I wish we could get everyone together again, but since that's not possible, maybe we could do like, a joint call or something?"

Bree nodded. "We could do a giant Zoom meeting. I'll arrange it. All you'll have to do is click on the link on your phone and we'll all be there. I'll make you and Ricky the conference leaders and you can mute or unmute whomever you want."

"If you'll arrange that, I'd appreciate it so much. No matter how hopeless things are, I can't give up. I wish we could get the whole world to pray for him at the same time."

Bree smiled. "Well, maybe not the whole world, but we can get millions. I'll work on it. You be ready for the Zoom meeting. We'll schedule it at 3:30 this afternoon."

"Thank you, sweetie." Shelley then rose and announced she was going downstairs to play with and get to know her children.

Bree immediately set up the Zoom meeting and then placed a call to three parties. John and Jodi Appel, who would contact the churches and martial arts communities, Toby and Caroline Nash who would contact the music and dance communities, and Isla August, who would contact her millions of followers, who would then contact other large influencers. She then gave them the link to the Zoom call, and added if people couldn't get on the call, then please take a minute to pray at exactly 3:30 p.m. Pacific Time. Then she promised that Ricky Kino himself would lead everyone in prayer for his father. Finally she contacted the corporate director of Kino Martial Arts and put out word for every single studio to contact every single student and have them all pray for Grandmaster Kino at exactly 3:30 pm PDT.

Having taken care of that, Bree took a little time to go back and cancel a few orders she and her mom had just made, and change them to something more fanciful. For example, she changed the four youth beds to an elaborate princess bed, surrounded by a castle with three prince warrior beds around it. The adorable setup would fit perfectly in the large blue room, which had always been blue, but soon, Bree knew, would change. It was the room

right next to Eric's and Shelley's room. She changed a few more things before she glanced at the time and realized Ricky had been in Eric's study for a few hours now.

He'd been coming home from staying the night at the hospital and said he'd meet Bree and Taylor at the house, he needed to get something from Eric's study. He was supposed to go home and get some sleep. Deciding to check on him, she rose, went down the hall to the study, and quietly opened the door. Ricky lay sound asleep on the large, tan, leather sofa. Looking at him, knowing how he was suffering, her heart swelled with compassion and love.

She came into the room and closed and locked the door and went to kneel beside him. This man, Ricky Kino, was revered by the world. He'd done over eighty movies, most of them blockbuster hits. He'd been picky about what movies he'd do. He chose only films in which morality and honor played major roles. If the bad guys win in the end, he refused to do it. Not because bad guys don't sometimes win, which was evident in their lives presently, but because he didn't want it planted in people's minds to accept the bad guys winning.

Most actors are intimidated by the studios and the threat that if they don't do certain roles their career would be over. But not her man. Nothing intimidated him, because he didn't care if people loved him or hated him. He didn't care if he never made another movie. His career was not what was important to him. He only wanted to serve God.

His youthful good looks, his gorgeous, muscular body, handsome face, thick dark hair, beautiful lips, made the females of the world swoon. When he smiled at you, your heart melted. When he frowned at you, you felt real fear. He was an amazing person. And he was currently broken. There wasn't really anything more she could do to help the situation with Eric, but she could offer her husband some comfort and release.

Kneeling beside him, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. He only slightly stirred. She kissed his lips, softly, and when he responded, she deepened the kiss. Finally, he moaned and his hands came up and tangled in her hair.

He pulled her away, looked into her eyes. "Oh, woman, don't start what you don't intend to finish."

"Oh, but I do intend to finish. The door is locked and I intend to give you comfort."

His eyes closed as his body and heart responded to her words. He didn't say anything else. Only pulled her back for a kiss that he hoped would never end.

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Keegan and Lizzy had decided to check into a hotel on Beverly Boulevard that was just down the street from the hospital, rather than driving all the way back to Crystal Cove to the Kino estate. Lizzy contacted Bree and asked her to bring Keegan's and Gabe's luggage the next time she came to the hospital. Currently, Lizzy was at the hotel, and was supposed to be resting, but she was uneasy. There was so much heartache right now, and it seemed no one was able to pull out of it, and that included her Gabriel. He'd eaten like he promised. And then he'd vomited, like he promised. They'd given him some nausea meds and it seemed to help. He nibbled on some crackers and kept them down. But Lizzy knew the feeding tube would be next. Her phone buzzed.

"Hey honey."

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry to interrupt your rest, sweetheart, but you probably need to get back up here."

"What's happened?"

"The blood work they took earlier this morning came back. Gabe has an infection. They just switched antibiotics, but he's definitely not feeling well. I thought you would want to know."

"I do, and I'm on my way."

Lizzy dressed and hurried back to the hospital. Keegan moved away from the bed to allow Lizzy to get a look at her son.

Gabe blinked up at her.

"Hey, sweetheart," she said, brushing his hair back. He didn't answer her. His eyes were glassy, his breathing shallow. "Gabe? Can you speak to me?"

"Don't feel so good, Mom."

Kelli came in with a new bag to add to his IV. Lizzy drilled her with questions and was horrified by the answers. He had an infection in his bloodstream spreading through his body. He was now on two different antibiotics. A minute later the doctor came in to examine him. He also checked his wounds. The wounds themselves didn't appear to be infected, but there was definitely an infection present in his bloodstream.

Gabe looked up at his mother. "Don't cry. I love you, Mom. Where's Dad?"

"Right here, son," Keegan said, reaching out and taking Gabe's right hand.

Gabe shifted his eyes over because he didn't feel strong enough to even move his head. "I love you, Dad."

"We love you too. You're gonna be okay, Gabe. Don't give up."

"I'd like to see Taylor, please. I wish my sisters were here. And I need to see Taylor."

"Stop talking like that," Lizzy said. "You just focus on getting well."

Gabe closed his eyes. He'd prayed and asked God to take him instead of Grandmaster Kino. He didn't want to tell his parents that he thought maybe God had taken him up on his offer. He was a little bit scared. But he knew God was real and he knew he'd see his family again one day. Taylor would be devastated. But she would be either way, and this way, she'd have her grandfather's wisdom to get her through. He was really sleepy, and allowed himself to drift off.

"Why is he not responding to the initial antibiotics?" Keegan asked.

She sighed. "Antimicrobial resistance is a fairly common thing. And there are strains of bacteria that have developed resistance, like MRSA, which is a staph infection and could possibly be what is infecting Gabe," Lizzy answered.

"So, should we be worried?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm worried." She choked back the emotion. "I'm scared out of my mind, Keegan. An infection like this can and does kill. Once a staph infection gets into the bloodstream it can cause septic shock." She pulled out her phone and called Bree.

"Hey Lizzy. How's Gabe?"

"He's taken a turn for the worse."

"What? Oh, no, what's happened?"

"He's developed an infection and it's not responding to the antibiotics. They've changed up the meds, and we're waiting to see if he responds. I'm calling because he's asking for Taylor. I wonder if there's a way to get her up here to the hospital."

"Yes, of course. I'll bring her up right away."

"Thank you, Bree."

"Of course, and I'll add Gabe to the giant prayer circle that we're doing this afternoon."

"Again, thanks."

Bree hung up and turned back to her husband who was getting dressed again. His face looked a bit more relaxed. "Did you hear?"

He nodded and sighed. "I guess I shouldn't ask if anything else could go wrong."

"I'll go get Taylor. She and I will head up to the hospital. You wanna come?"

"Not yet. I'll stay with your mom until Mickey gets here."

"You know Agent Ward and Agent Trout are here."

"Yeah, I know. But I want to see my new siblings again and spend a little time with them and with Shelley."

"I understand. See you about three then?"

He pulled her close and kissed her. "See you at three."

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August 25th Sunday Afternoon

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

Taylor gazed down at the boy she loved. He was pale. He now had a feeding tube inserted in his nose. The heart monitor bleeped out a steady rhythm. "Gabe?" she said softly.

His eyes blinked open. "Tay," he whispered. "I just wanted to tell you I love you."

"I love you too, Gabe," she said. "Please get well."

He sighed. "If I don't, Tay, then you have to move on. Okay?"

"No, not okay. I won't move on. Don't you leave me. I'll never love anyone except you."

"Not true."

"Yes, it is true. Please Gabe, don't talk like this. Please try to get well. Please try to live. Please, I'm begging you."

"I need to sleep now."

"Are you ignoring what I said?"

"Will you stay and hold my hand for a while?"

She squeezed his hand. "I won't ever let it go."

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Shelley and Ricky arrived at the hospital and went straight to Eric's room. Then Ricky immediately turned around and headed to see Gabe.

"What's his condition?" Ricky asked, looking over Taylor's shoulder at the boy who'd saved her life.

"Serious," Keegan answered.

"Is he responding to the new antibiotics?"

"We don't know yet."

"Well, we're about to do a giant prayer circle and he's about to have millions of people pray for him. If it's God's will, he'll get better."

"Jeffy came in to see him," Lizzy said. "And she says she still has confidence that he'll pull through, which is the only reason I'm not a total basket case right now."

Ricky nodded. "I've never known Jeffy to be wrong."

"Thank you for that," Keegan said.

"Okay, I'd better get on the call, it starts in about ten minutes."

He went back to Eric's station. He spoke to Justin who'd been with him all day. Justin told Ricky that Eric had not responded to any stimuli and they were gonna be doing an EEG on him. Ricky closed his eyes briefly with the pain. He understood that the reason for that would be to determine if his father's brain was functioning at all.

Ricky clicked on the link to join the meeting and had to blink several times to see what was happening. There were already twenty-seven thousand people in the meeting and it was growing by the second. It was humbling to realize how many people loved and cared for his father. He drew a breath.

"Hello everyone. Ricky Kino here. We'll start in just a few minutes. I'm gonna give people a few more minutes to join. Thank you all for your love and support. Wow, we have a lot of people coming on this call. We're almost at capacity, which is fifty thousand people. I'm touched and humbled by this amazing show of support. I guess it's time to get started. Before we pray, let me just say, that there's another person we're gonna pray for along with my father. Most of you know, Gabe Tanner is two doors down from where we are right now. The same bad guy who shot my father also sent people to kidnap my daughter, and Gabe intervened and saved her life. In the process he was shot twice and stabbed. We thought he was out of danger, but he's taken a turn and now is fighting for his life as an infection rages through his body. So, we'll pray for both this young man and my father."

He waited a few more minutes and then Ricky bowed his head and began praying. His prayer was powerful. Humble. He said that in the scriptures, it tells us many times to talk to our Father in heaven and ask him for what we need or even desire, and He, who knows best, will answer our prayers, and he confessed that today, they were asking for a miracle. He prayed eloquently for both the man and the young man. He broke down emotionally a few times, but forged on. He acknowledged that everyone who now prayed with this group understood that they were willing to abide by God's will, whatever that was, and if His will was to take either one or both of these people, he asked that those who were left here on Earth would be comforted with peace and understanding.

Then he asked God to bless all of those who prayed together today, that they be filled with the Holy Spirit, that they be touched by God, and that they will know of a surety that He is real. Ricky promised that he would continue to fight evil here on this earth, and to occupy until Jesus comes. He then asked for forgiveness right there in front of what would become millions of people once the videos were put out. Forgiveness for his need for vengeance, forgiveness for sometimes acting rashly, and forgiveness for sometimes not thinking about others' needs. He prayed for much more over the course of about thirty minutes, and ended the prayer as always, in the name of Jesus Christ.

He'd been in the zone, and when he looked up, the people around him, Bree, Shelley, Justin, two nurses, and a few people he didn't know, were all wiping tears from their faces.

He smiled. "Too long?"

Bree laughed. "Hot mic, Ricky. You're still on the call."

"Oh, sorry. So, everyone, I just want to thank you again, for joining your prayers to ours. If you feel like it, we'll do this again every day at this same time, until something changes. Until then, be blessed." He ended the meeting.

"That was beautiful, Ricky," Shelley said softly. "I'm sure Eric will be very proud."

"Yeah, hopefully he'll tell me himself in a few days."

"Hopefully."

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In Gabe's room, Taylor and Lizzy also had to wipe tears away.

"What did you think about that prayer, Gabe?" Taylor asked, squeezing his hand. "Gabe?"

He opened his eyes. "It was a really good prayer." He was breathing hard. "I'm just gonna rest my eyes."

Taylor sniffed. "Okay, Gabe."

Keegan eyed his wife. Oh man, this was not gonna be fun. Their son was very sick. A day ago the doctor had spoken about possibly moving him out of ICU very soon. That was not an option anymore. Could Keegan follow his own advice? Just yesterday he'd spoken to the Kino family, told them no matter what they'd get through this. Was *he* talking the talk and now God was asking *him* to also walk the walk? He had to, didn't he? He had no choice. Drawing a deep breath he silently swore to himself and to God that he would remain faithful no matter what happens. *But please, dear Lord, don't take them both.*

The moment he had that thought, words came into his head. *Let—go.* Keegan nodded his head in acceptance.

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August 27th Tuesday Afternoon

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

It'd been almost exactly seventy-two hours since a bullet hit Eric Kino's heart and turned the Kino family's world upside down. It wasn't that their family hadn't faced their share of challenges and hardships and heartache. Eric had been badly beaten and then later made to watch the rape and torture of his wife. Ricky had been kidnapped and tortured almost to death. Jeffy had been briefly taken when only a child and again as a teenager, both times the intention was to end her life. Bree had been shot in the chest, and lost a baby due to an attempted rape. Mark had almost lost his life by falling off a cliffside while trying to save the life of his soon-to-be adopted son. Joey had been shot in the chest in retaliation for saving an abused woman from her husband. JoJo and Logan had been taken and badly beaten as a warning to their Aunt Jeffy. Jeffy had grown up and had two different groups of people trying to kill her or take her, which had led to the actual taking of Eric and Shelley, which resulted in the bad guys collecting their eggs and sperm for what they said at the time, was for DNA testing. Now, that had led to the creation of seven children, three who were now dead, at least one of them murdered.

Yes, they'd had their share of hardships, yet somehow, they'd always come through, and a big reason for that was because of the God-given wisdom, teachings, and training of their patriarch. Now that patriarch lay in a bed in the ICU, machines keeping him alive. Thirty minutes ago, at 3:30 in the afternoon, the family had held their third worldwide prayer session. Coincidentally, it had been found that Eric had been shot at exactly 3:30 PM. Of course, the family knew that there was no such thing as a coincidence.

Two days ago, the Sunday Zoom prayer meeting had not only attracted attention as a record-setting Zoom meeting of fifty thousand participants, but as one that had the most shares, and of those shares, the most viewed. Ricky Kino had prayed the first time, and the world had made millions of comments of how they had been filled with the spirit just from listening to him pray.

The next two sessions Ricky had prayed again, but also Bree, and Mark and Joey and Jeffy. Each session also included healing prayers for young Gabriel who'd offered his life to save Taylor Kino. The world was buzzing and the pastors of the world were taking the opportunity to invite the masses to their congregations. It was like a huge revival. Yet still, there had been no change in Eric's condition, and even worse, Gabe's condition had deteriorated.

Young Eric, JoJo, and Logan had taken time to drive to the canyon at the cliff-side, where they'd made a blood oath to each other many years earlier. They'd had an amazing spiritual experience there that they would never forget, and they went back hoping for the same connection. They would ask for a miracle for both their grandfather and Gabe, their adopted blood brother. They'd had to hurry back, to get JoJo to his afternoon football practice on time. JoJo hadn't wanted to continue playing, but had been asked to push forward since he was a Heisman candidate. He didn't care about that either, but had been convinced that his grandfather would want him to push forward and not give in to heartache and grief. His father, Mark, said, "Doing these hard things, pushing on even when our hearts are breaking, this is what makes us warriors."

But now, thirty minutes after the third beautiful, spirit-filled prayer meeting, the family had just been given the news that Eric's brain was no longer functioning. He was gone.

Keegan, pacing back and forth by Gabe's bed, knew immediately that something was wrong. He glanced over at his sleeping wife. Lizzy had fallen into an exhausted slumber in the reclining chair. It wasn't that he'd heard any loud wailing. The Kino family was usually pretty low-key, keeping in control of their emotions, except for maybe an occasional outburst of anger shown toward the evil that was taking over the world. But there was a low murmur, a silent rumble of activity, and Keegan wasn't even sure he wanted to know what was going down.

He looked up when Heather, who'd flown in with her sisters to be near their brother, poked her head in, tears running down her face. She motioned at her father and he came to the door.

"What's happening?" Keegan asked.

Heather shook her head. "The two doctors who ran those tests this morning just came and told the Kinos that Eric is brain dead."

Keegan sighed, felt the pain but pushed it down. His eldest daughter leaned her head against his chest and he held her. His whole family had been very close to the Kinos. Eric had doted on the girls since they were toddlers. And everyone knew there was a huge connection between Eric and Gabe. Gabe would be devastated. Keegan turned at the sound of his son, whimpering and he went to him immediately. Gabe's eyes were open and he had tears running down his face.

"You heard that?" Keegan asked his son.

Gabe only nodded. "He can't be gone, Dad," Gabe whispered, mostly because he was too weak to speak any louder.

"I hear you, son. I feel the same way. But I can't give in to the grief. I have to trust God. If it was time for Eric to go back into the arms of his Father in heaven, who am I to question it?"

Gabe sniffed, but didn't reply. Lizzy woke and was filled in and did her best to maintain her composure. She took her son's hand and stayed by him while Keegan went

down the hall to the Kino family to see what he could do to help.

He didn't know who to hug first. Bree had her arms around her mother. Joey, Mark and Jeffy were in a huddle. So, Keegan went to Ricky, placed his hand on his strong shoulder. Ricky looked up at Keegan.

"What can I do?" Keegan asked.

"I'm not sure," Ricky replied, his voice choked with emotion.

At that moment one of the doctors came back into the room. "Excuse me, Mrs. Kino," he said.

Shelley pulled away from Bree and went to where the doctor stood next to Ricky.

"There's something I'm afraid I have to ask you. It's about organ donation."

Shelley's eyes filled. Ricky started to intervene in the conversation, but Shelley cut him off. "I need time to pray and figure out where to go from here. You will keep my husband on life support until I give you permission to take him off. I will let you know about your question at that time. Until then, you will keep him on life support and take care of him as if he was still alive. You will give him fluids. You will give him nourishment. You will be gentle and kind and respectful to him. Am I understood?"

The doctor's face registered surprise, but he nodded his head. "Of course. But I must let you know, we can't keep him going indefinitely. There is a time limit, in order to harvest... "

"That's enough," Ricky said. "She understands. She's asked for a little time and consideration. That's all."

The doctor nodded and took his leave.

Shelley looked up at the man, whom she had loved as her own son for the past thirty years. "Thank you, Ricky."

He nodded. "We need a family meeting, at the house, tonight. I need to share the letter Dad wrote with everyone."

"The one he spoke of when he was shot?" Shelley asked.

"Yes."

"I thought that was personal between Eric and yourself."

"No. It was addressed to me, but it's for all of us."

"Who do you want at this meeting?" Bree asked. "I'll make the calls."

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August 27th Tuesday Evening
Redwood Hills Medical Center

While Violet and Rose watched over Gabe, Keegan and Lizzy had gone out to speak with John and Jodi Appel, who along with Jake and Laynah had accompanied the Tanner girls out to L.A. Rose took Gabe's hand and squeezed it. The lab guys had just come to take more blood from Gabe. He'd opened his eyes and then promptly gone back to sleep. Now, they were waiting to hear the results of the latest tests. Were the new antibiotics working or not?

Gabe's hand jerked, and Rose smiled at him. "Hey, little bro."

He didn't answer.

She squeezed his hand and gave it a little wiggle. "Gabe?"

When he still didn't answer, she touched his cheek. "Gabriel Tanner, I'm talking to you."

Violet went to the other side of the bed. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s not responding at all. I mean, hasn’t he at least opened his eyes and smiled every time we speak to him?”

“Maybe he’s just really tired.”

“Gabe,” Rose said loudly. She squeezed his cheeks. “I don’t like this,” she said as she pushed the call button.

Only a few seconds later, nurse Kelli showed up.

Unable to keep the panic from her voice, Rose spoke quickly. “I can’t get him to respond to me at all.”

Kelli took over trying to rouse Gabe. Quickly evident he was unresponsive, she paged the doctor. “You might want to get your parents,” she said kindly.

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Gabe felt almost immediate peace. His heavy heart eased. The emotional pain simply vanished and his heart was full of love and joy. Still the tears fell down his face, but these were not sad tears. These were tears one feels when their heart is so filled with love and compassion that they simply cannot contain it.

He looked around him. He was standing in a large, lush green field. His feet were bare and the grass was soft and cool. He wore his favorite pair of jeans. They were the old ones that had gone soft. His chest was bare. There was no pain, and then he realized his wounds were gone. No pain in his side, none in his thigh or chest. He felt amazingly good. Strong. Healthy.

Looking up he saw that the sky was blue. The sun was shining. There was bright light trickling down between the leaves of a giant tree standing about fifty yards away. He thought he saw two people standing under the tree and he moved toward them. As he got closer he knew one was Grandmaster Kino. The other was the likeness he recognized as Jesus. They were conversing, and smiling, and Jesus pulled Grandmaster Kino against his chest and hugged him. Gabe wanted one of those hugs desperately and started forward.

He came to a halt though, as another man stepped in front of him. He smiled at Gabe. “Go no farther,” the man said, his voice soft and yet like the sound of the rumble of thunder in the distance.

Gabe shifted his eyes to look closer at the man who’d stopped him. He seemed slightly familiar. He had blond hair and blue eyes. He was tall and muscular, and strangely wore Army fatigues, except he too had bare feet. “Do I know you?”

The man smiled. “From your earthly perspective, you only know *of* me.”

Gabe frowned.

“I was once married to your beautiful mother.”

“Bradley Anderson?” Gabe said.

The man smiled and nodded.

“Wow, so you’re my sisters’ father.”

“I’m their biological father. I had to leave them. But your father has loved them and cared for them as well or better than I ever could have, and I am so very grateful to him.”

Gabe smiled at that. His father was everything in Gabe’s eyes and heart. He frowned though with his next thought. “Are you very upset that my father is now married to my mother?”

“There can never be too much love to go around.”

Gabe nodded in agreement and then frowned again. "So, like, are you upset that your own mom and dad didn't want to help your own children?"

"You're a very deep thinker, aren't you, Gabriel?"

Gabe smiled. "I don't know about that. It's just a thought that popped into my head."

"It made me very sad that my parents chose the path they did. They chose to allow hatred and resentment to rule their decisions. They forgot what Jesus taught about forgiveness and love. They got caught up in Satan's world, where the idea of fame and fortune on Earth for their only son was the most important thing to them. They've missed out on so much, on the knowing and loving of my beautiful daughters. There is so much more beyond this earthly realm. But it's difficult to see from the human perspective. Listen now, here is the message I was supposed to give to you. Fame and fortune, power and money mean nothing. It's love that counts. If you're blessed with fortune, use it to the betterment of the kingdom of God. This will bring true, unshakeable joy that cannot be affected by human disappointments or sorrows."

Gabe nodded. "I get that, because I love my father and mother and sisters so much. I'm really glad they're in my life. Oh..." he stopped. "Am I—still alive? Oh, man, I must be talking to you because I died! Oh, wow, my poor family. And poor Taylor. She's lost her grandfather and the guy she was gonna marry in the same day."

The man smiled. "Has she?"

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August 27th Later Tuesday Evening

Redwood Hills Medical Center, *Los Angeles, California*

Keegan stepped in and looked around the waiting room. Just yesterday, this same room was filled with the Kino family. Today it was filled with his own family plus the Appels, and Jeff and Mickey Davis and their boys. Keegan sighed and cleared his throat. "Lizzy is in with Gabe right now. He is still not conscious. The MRSA infection is pretty much raging through his body. They've put him on vancomycin and another broad-spectrum antibiotic. If these don't work, his organs will begin to shut down. That's all I can tell you for now." He drew a deep breath, determined to be strong for his family. For his girls.

Nolan was currently holding Heather as she cried. Rose paced back and forth. Violet remained seated, her head in her hands. Daisy and Lily stood in a corner, face-to-face, whispering and crying at the same time.

Jodi Appel held Keegan's youngest daughter on her hip but brought her to him when she cried for her daddy. He took his daughter in his arms and held her close, doing his best to not think about the way little Iris always wanted her brother above everyone else.

John Appel came and put a hand on Keegan's shoulder. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He was there for support no matter what happened and he knew Keegan knew it.

Jeff approached. "Hey, Keegan, I hate to leave, but we need to get to the Kinos' family meeting."

Keegan nodded.

Jeff looked up into the man's eyes. There was so much pain there. "I, uh, I love you, man. I love Gabe. I love your family. I won't stop praying for you all."

Keegan swallowed as his eyes misted. He nodded. "Thanks, man."

Jeff, Mickey and the boys headed out.

Jake and Laynah sat close together whispering. “I’m trying so hard to understand what’s happening, but it doesn’t make sense to me,” Laynah said. “I mean, Gabe is special, ya know? I believe he’s meant to do big things. Just think of the power he has right now, the whole country looking up to him, all the kids who see him as their role model. Why would God take him now? If God takes him now, then all the millions of kids who love Gabe and look up to him, they’ll think, like, what good is God?”

Jake nodded. “I agree with you and that’s why I feel strongly that Gabe is gonna get well.”

“You do?”

“I really do. Every time I pray about it, I get a feeling of peace, like God is telling me to not worry. Everything is gonna be okay.”

Laynah closed her eyes. “Please, dear Father, let it be so, in Jesus’ name.”

“Amen,” Jake finished.

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August 27th Tuesday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky looked around the large living room. All three sofas and the loveseat were occupied. Chairs from the dining room had once again been brought in. In attendance were Shelley, Bree, Angel, Lori and Justin on one sofa. Joey, Breez, Jeff and Mickey on the middle sofa. And Jeffy, Cam, Kimmie and Jensen on the third sofa. Bella and Mark occupied the loveseat. Sitting in chairs brought in from the dining room were young Eric, JoJo, and Logan. Jason leaned against the front windows and Ricky stood quietly in front of the large entertainment cabinet.

Taylor, feeling unable to cope with what was happening to her family and to Gabe, chose to take the children down to the playroom. Since those children included Joey’s and Breez’ Sophia, Kelstyn, and Ledger, and Mark’s and Bella’s Emily, and the new Kino children, Angelina, Noah, Manny and Abraham, eight children, both Daniel and Jeremy Davis volunteered to go with her to help. Taylor left her phone recording video so that she could have the opportunity to watch at a later time, when she felt stronger.

No one could bring themselves to occupy the large chair that Eric usually took during family meetings, and so it remained solemnly and almost benevolently empty, which painted a poignant picture.

“Before we begin,” Ricky started. “I’d like to open with a prayer. Mark? Will you do us the honor?”

Mark bowed his head and prayed, and at the end asked a blessing on the family to be comforted in this hard time.

“Thank you, Mark,” Ricky said softly. “I, uh,” he stopped. Shook his head. Waited for the emotions to subside. Blew out a breath. “I believe you’ve all had a chance to hear the audio, and some of you to see the body-cam footage of what went down Saturday afternoon. In that audio you hear Dad tell me that there is a letter in his desk.” He held the letter up. “It was addressed to me, but the letter is for all of you to hear. The first part is to me, but I’ll share that part with you too, because it seems you should know what Dad’s asking of me.” He stopped and pulled the letter out of the envelope and carefully unfolded it. “The, uh, date is May first of this year.”

"My beloved son." He had to immediately stop and get his composure. He cleared his throat.

"My beloved son, if you're reading this then I'm guessing the worst has taken place. There are things I need to say to you and to my family. I suppose I don't need to tell you that the family includes Justin and Jason and their families, and the Davises. To me it would also include Marissa and Chris, the Stewarts, the Appels, the Nash/Smiths and the Tanners, but since they're all on the east coast, please make sure they get a copy of this letter."

Ricky shook his head. "That sentence tells me that he had no idea when this event would happen." He went on.

"On the day of June Flower and Cam's engagement party, I'm sure you remember the strange vision that put both Jeffy and me on our backs. We both had a knowing that we had seen an event that would take place. I would be shot in the chest, right in the center, where there would be little chance of survival. I'm assuming, since you're reading this letter, that it has taken place. As I sit here writing this, I'm asking God to help me to write the words that would help you. Rick, it's time for you to take the lead. I know you've said time and again that you can't fill my shoes, and as long as you continue to think that, then you're right.

"I've tried to show you over the past few years that you are completely capable. That you are a light, and that the world needs you. They need to hear from you. They need you to take an active part in teaching them. And the family also needs you. God has shown me that I must get out of the way to allow you *to step out of my shadow. So, step up, Rick, step out, and shine. No one will resent you for it. They expect you to do it. You're a Kino. Be strong, son. The fight is not over. You have a few more rounds to go. So, train. Learn. No fear. Show me and the world that what I've taught you was not in vain. I love you, Ricky.*

My amazing beautiful family. Oh how I love you. Bree, Mark, Joey and Jeffy. Please don't feel slighted that I singled Ricky out. I need him to lead you, to love you, to protect you and to keep you all together as I would do, so I had to single him out. But that doesn't mean that I don't love every single one of you just as much. I do. And it doesn't mean that I don't think every single one of you is absolutely capable of stepping up. Ricky is simply the eldest. I couldn't be prouder of you all. Not one of you has disappointed me in any way. I pray God will keep you and help you through the heartache I know you're feeling. You're all warriors and I expect you all to step up.

Rick, Bree, Mark, Joey, and Cam, I don't need to tell you that Jeffy is special. That she was meant to come to this world and heal it. That's why Satan started trying to take her out while she was still in Shelley's womb. And he tried again when she was seven, and again when she was fifteen, and again and again, and again. Continue to protect her. Be ever vigilant. I'm happy, and I know Shelley, too, is happy, that Cam and Jeffy have come back to live here in our home. I hope they remain. I see many more babies being raised in our home."

Ricky looked up. "Obviously, he had no idea when he wrote that sentence that he

himself would provide those children for this home." He sighed and went on.

"Cam, I'm so very grateful that you came to me to ask how you could make a relationship with my daughter work. I'm so proud of you and what you accomplished. Don't stop progressing. How I wish I could see the new life you and Jeffy are about to bring into the world and be part of his or her life. Yet, in a way, I will be, as long as you are diligent in teaching the things I've taught you.

"Bree, you and Ricky brought two beautiful amazing souls into our world with young Eric and Taylor, two extremely bright lights who will rock this world. I can't tell you how overjoyed I am that you, Bree, and Ricky finally found each other. I couldn't have chosen a more perfect mate for him myself. You are equal to his strength, and he will need that strength sorely in the coming days. I love you. I'm depending on you.

"Mark, what an amazing young man you have grown to be. A strong warrior and logical and level-headed. I think of you as mine. I think Ricky also thinks of you as his. And you are his as he's been your teacher most of your life. Your heart is so filled with love and compassion for your family and for others. I couldn't be prouder of you. I'm grateful that you found Bella, a sweet and beautiful daughter of God, and Logan, who will teach the world through song. I'm so grateful you brought them into the fold, because I love them fiercely. I'm grateful for the blessing that having JoJo in our family has been. The world is blessed to have him. We are so blessed to have him. Thank God Sandy Carter honored Beth's wishes and brought him to us. Thank God. And now, we are blessed again with little Emily. Be strong, Mark, and protect these young warriors from the darkness of the world.

"Joey, again, what an amazing young man. And again, I feel as if you are mine, and again, Ricky also claims you, as he should. You are a gifted warrior. Your mind is bright and brilliant. Your body is strong and fast and never-tiring. But I see past that hard exterior to the love you have in your heart for everyone. I see how your heart melts at the sound of your children's voices. What beautiful angels they are. How lucky you are to have Breez, such a strong companion to love, and one who loves you so completely. Because I love you so well, I couldn't be happier for you.

"Justin and Jason, the world has not known stronger, wiser, braver, humbler or more loyal friends. You may not be related to me by blood but I count you as my brothers. I love you, and your beautiful wives, and Kimmie, who has been such a beautiful companion to Jeffy. And I don't mean to leave out Jensen, whose strength and love add so much to our family.

"Jefferson Davis. You know I have to smile whenever I think of you. Like my Joey, you are an amazing warrior for God and you brought Mickey into our lives and we love you both as if you were ours. And we love your boys, Daniel and Jeremy, and I wish I could see what amazing young men they will turn out to be. Be diligent and strong in teaching them.

"My grandchildren. How do I speak to my grandchildren? I'm at a loss. The little ones, Sophia, Emily, Kelstyn and Ledger, what joyous spirits they are! Please remember to treat each of them as individuals, addressing their different needs and different personalities. And the older ones, Taylor, Logan, young Eric and JoJo. Such warriors. You have already far surpassed what I hoped for you. Guys, be like your fathers, strong

in body, strong in faith, strong in spirit. May you find yourselves lovely and worthy companions.

And Taylor, my beautiful granddaughter, I know you believe you've found the one. I hope you're right, because that Gabriel Tanner is a special young man, and the fact that you see that tells me this is something special. However, keep in mind sweetheart, that you're young and he's young, and things can change and mistakes can be made. If things go awry, get back to God. Don't ever turn your heart away from God. Not on purpose and not inadvertently. Both you and Gabe have enormous callings, and that you may end up pursuing those callings together is a pleasant thought. Regardless, know that I love you both.

As for the Appels, Stewarts, Coleys, Nash/Smiths and Tanners, I have personally counseled many of you. Maybe most of you. I feel like you are mine. You belong to me. I love you all with a fierce love, one that makes me travel across the country to see you whenever possible. You are all God's warriors. Stay strong. Be vigilant.

Lastly, my students. The masters who train in my schools and the ones who made their own schools, my students from the Grandmasters all the way to white belts who've just begun, I love you. I honor you. I respect you. Work hard. Keep training. Be me. That may sound strange, but that's why I began teaching. I wanted to protect some people but I complained that I couldn't be everywhere at once. I couldn't clone myself. Then, my father told me that indeed I could. I could train others. I could train the world. I could teach them more than just a fighting skill. He told me to teach them honor, love, integrity, sportsmanship, forgiveness. Teach them all how to be good and moral and Christ-like. That's what I tried to do. Please, keep the legacy going.

All of you that I've mentioned in this letter, my family, friends and my martial arts family around the world, may be in mourning right now. You may be wondering why I've been called back into the arms of my Father in heaven. It might be very hard on you. But God has a plan and He has revealed a little of that plan to me as I've fasted and prayed about this very matter since that vision years ago. I've tried hard to listen, and then I had the following words rush into my brain. I could barely write them fast enough. I pray now that God will help me to write those words down correctly. I want to write them exactly as I heard them, so realize these coming words are from God's point of view, not mine. These are the words God spoke to me. It went as follows:

"When this event comes to pass, there will be millions of people praying for you to recover. I will not be ignoring those prayers, though it will seem as if I am. There is a great lesson to be learned here. One you, my son, learned when you were a boy inside that cave. The rest of the world, my beautiful sons and daughters, could not be inside that cave with you, trapped and clinging to life, and so, I use your impending death as their lesson. I hope they learn it well. Do you remember what you were asked to do inside that cave? You were asked to reach out to me through prayer and then just listen. You were not to ask me to save you. You were not to beg for your life. You were to let go and accept that my will for you is part of the plan, even if that plan includes your passing from this earthly life to your eternal, immortal life.

"It took you three days to let go. Three days of suffering and pleading and weeping before you finally accepted your own earthly demise. You even finally looked forward to passing through the veil and being with me. You had regrets, that you hadn't fulfilled your

mission, one to teach the world. You asked forgiveness for this. You've more than made up for it over these past sixty years. This last event will teach the world the same lesson you had to learn in that cave. One of letting go and accepting that my will is part of the plan, and to do away with regrets by rising up and doing the work that is left to do before my Son returns for His bride.

"Millions will plead for your life, your family especially. Their love for you is beautiful. I understand their grieving. You are a strong presence in their lives. But they must turn their hearts and minds away from the earthly existence, and focus on what they can do to serve, and to further the kingdom, which will bring true joy. They must let go—concede—allow—and accept.

"Remember when my messenger spoke to you and asked you if you understood why your circumstances changed? You said, your father taught you a martial arts lesson about going with the flow of energy. You said: "If you're in a car and being swept away in a flood, you push and push and struggle to get the car door open so that you can get out, but the pressure is too great. You have to stop pushing against the water. You must become one with the water by opening or breaking the window and allowing it in, then the pressure changes and suddenly, you can open the door. Not resisting will allow your circumstances to change. Go with the flow." I am asking everyone who prays for your life to open the window and allow the water in. Open, and allow the anguish and pain to fill them. As you, Eric, have taught many times, you must experience the pain fully, wallow in it, and then accept it, before you can let it go.

"This is a hard lesson, but one that will cause great awakening and evolution for the souls of those who love you. They must accept that some things are simply part of the plan. When my beloved Son came to earth and was being tried and beaten, as He approached the taking of the cross, there were many who loved Him who prayed for His survival, who prayed for a miracle, who prayed and begged for Me to remove the cup from Him. Even my Son briefly asked for the same at one moment, and then immediately accepted the bitter cup and acknowledged that MY will be done. If I had answered their prayers, there would be no redemption, no salvation, no gift, no resurrection, and therefore, no joy. But there was a plan and it was beautifully fulfilled.

"Some, however, instead of asking for my Son's life, asked for comfort, for understanding, and those prayers I did indeed answer. So, I am asking for all those who love you to feel the pain, accept it, rise up, and stand in the gap and help others to do the same. I will send my Holy Spirit to bless them with peace, with understanding and with comfort. I would that I not lose one soul because they are unwilling to accept the pain, unwilling to pick up their own cross and bear it." <end>

Ricky looked up. "It stopped there, what God said to him, and Dad's own words pick up here."

"It feels that there is more for me to write, but my mind is tired. For now, if this ends up being all I write, let me leave you with a few more notes. The world is watching to see what our family will do in times of deep crisis. How do the Kinos respond? We cannot just talk a big game. We must practice what we preach. I myself am almost failing in that, because I'm having to accept that I may not be around to see Jeffy's child, or maybe I will

but won't see it grow up. I have to accept the fact that I won't be around to hold my sweet wife when she needs comfort or to feel her kiss. I have to accept that I will no longer be able to serve her or my children and grandchildren and friends and their families. This grieves me, and I've requested that this cup be taken from me. But do I know God is real or not? I do know. And I know we will one day all be together. So, suffer not, my loves. Use this event to teach the world how we live and die, how we back up what we preach. I believe I've taught you well. I know the Holy Spirit has borne witness to you. Rise up.

Shelley, my love, there is a letter for you in the back of my nightstand drawer. Be strong my Shelley girl. I thank God for you every day.

One more thing. If for some reason I end up with the medical community trying to keep me alive through artificial means, you know I wouldn't want that. Justin has my legal Living Will. He also has my will and intentions for the estate. My dearest friend will take care of everything in my absence. Listen to his counsel.

With all my love and care and blessing and heart,

Eric

"And then, you can tell he wrote the next part quickly, because it's hard to read."

Quick Update: August twenty-fourth. I have found I have other children. I am going out to find them and bring them home. I will add my wishes and intentions for them soon. If that doesn't happen, I trust Shelley, Ricky, Bree, Mark, Joey and Jeffy to go with a best-guess scenario, and for Justin to make it legal.

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Isaiah 55:8-9

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are
your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are
higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than
your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Gabe's mind was moving fast. Gabe had just said to Bradley Anderson that Taylor had lost her grandfather and the guy she was gonna marry, both on the same day, and the man had answered, "Has she?"

Gabe looked closely at the man. He'd just implied that Taylor may not lose both her grandfather and her future husband on the same day. Gabe wondered what Mr. Anderson meant. "Are you saying we won't die?"

"It's not for me to say."

"Well, who *can* say?" Gabe asked impatiently.

"Only God himself, or His son, Jesus Christ."

"Well then, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I want to talk to one of them, please."

Bradley smiled. "Of course you do." He moved away. "I'll see what I can do," he said in a sympathetic tone.

The man walked away. Gabe looked to see if Grandmaster Kino and Jesus were still under the tree. They were. Gabe called out to them. They both looked in his direction. Gabe waved. Grandmaster Kino put his hand to his heart to show he was touched by Gabe's effort. Jesus smiled. Gabe thought, maybe he shouldn't have called out. Gabe stared at him and thought hard, '*Please come speak to me, sir, I mean Lord Jesus. Please. I need to ask you something.'* Gabe said the words inside his head because it seemed irreverent or disrespectful to yell again.

"Hello my handsome boy."

Gabe turned to see two people standing next to him. They were a young couple and again they seemed slightly familiar. The woman was small, with light blond hair, very pretty in a cute elf-like sort of way. The man was much taller and had light brown hair. They were both dressed oddly, in clothes like a farmer might wear. The man wore overalls and a checkered shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His arms were tan and strong, his chest broad. The woman wore a dark blue skirt that came down past her knees, and a white blouse and an apron. They both stood on the soft grass in their bare feet.

"Hello," Gabe said. "Do I— know you?"

"Well you most certainly do. You've eaten enough of my blueberry muffins to turn into a blueberry yourself."

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "Miss Maddie?"

"Yes, child."

Gabe's eyes filled and spilled over again.

"Oh, dear, sweet boy, don't cry. This here is my Lawrence."

Gabe smiled. "Hello." He looked back at Miss Maddie. "We sure do miss you."

"Aww, thank you child. I miss everyone, but don't worry. We'll all be together one day. For now, I want to tell you something. When you wake up, you make sure to tell everyone

that I'm okay. Tell them that God and Jesus are real. And to make sure they try very hard to follow the teachings, because they'll be called upon to help God at a later time. That's the message I was supposed to tell you."

"You said, 'when I wake up.' So, does that mean I'm not dead?"

She smiled sadly. "Not yet, dear."

"Not yet? Does that mean I'm still gonna die? Because my family and Taylor are gonna be so sad."

"I know, dear. But I don't have a say. Maybe you should speak to the Lord."

"I'm trying to, but he doesn't hear me."

"Of course He does, dear." She smiled. "Well, we have to be off."

Lawrence nodded. "Thank you, son, for being so kind to my Maddie."

Gabe teared up again. He nodded and watched them walk away. Immediately he looked over to see if Grandmaster Kino and Jesus were still under the tree. They were not. He frowned. He really wanted to speak to Jesus. Miss Maddie said Jesus hears him. Well, actually, Gabe didn't need anyone to tell him that. He knew Jesus heard his prayers, so, he sank to his knees straightaway and tried to pray. "Jesus, can you hear me? Will you come and talk to me? Please? I, uh, saw you talking to Grandmaster Kino. Please come and talk to me too. Please. I have an argument to make." He continued to say those same words over and over.

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August 28th Early Wednesday Morning

He prayed so hard. It seemed he'd been praying for hours.

"Gabriel."

He looked up from where he knelt in the grass, and his heart almost burst in his chest. "Thank you, sir, I mean, thank you, Lord Jesus. Thank you." He was already down on his knees, but he fell over at Jesus' feet. Jesus knelt down and helped him to rise.

Gabe couldn't stop the tears. He was suddenly overwhelmed with love and joy and peace and he couldn't stop crying. Jesus pulled him against his chest and Gabe thought he could stay right there forever.

"One day, you *will* be by my side forever, but for now, let us reason together." He pushed Gabe back away from him, steadied him and let go.

"Um, reason together?" Gabe asked.

Jesus smiled such a kind and compassionate smile, and it seemed to Gabe that His eyes were twinkling, as if He were amused.

"Yes. You said you have an argument to make. I don't think you really meant that you want to argue with *me*, so I believe you want us to reason together."

Gabe smiled. Jesus was awesome!

"What shall we reason about?" Jesus asked.

"I, um, well, with all due respect, I was gonna see if I, maybe, I could talk to you about Grandmaster Kino, if maybe we could change God's plan just a little bit?"

"In what way?"

"Okay, well, I figure you can see what's in my head, but I'll try to put it into words."

Jesus nodded. "Putting it into words spoken aloud, helps you to organize your thoughts and figure out what you really want to say."

"Okay then, well then, you see, so, Grandmaster Kino just found out he has four more

children and they would be so blessed to be able to know their father, cuz he's such a good man and a good father, I mean like, look at Ricky and really at all of his kids. I mean, I know you know what a good man Grandmaster Kino is, and I know that's maybe not a good enough reason to let Grandmaster Kino live a little longer, if it goes against your plan, but here's the thing: my sister told me that millions and millions of people are praying for me and for Grandmaster Kino. People all around the world."

"Yes, they are indeed."

"That's a lot of people. And so, that means they're all turning their hearts toward God. They're all praying in Your name to heal Grandmaster Kino and to heal me. Some of those people are just beginning to like, wake up, ya know? Just beginning to think that, hey, maybe there really is a God. So, I was thinking, it wouldn't be good if all those people, especially the ones who are just learning to pray, it wouldn't be good for them to think that prayer doesn't work. They might start thinking, like, no, there is no God. And that might make them turn their backs on You and never listen to the gospel, never let it into their hearts. But just think, if You send the Holy Spirit to them to help them understand, and then they see a miracle that Grandmaster Kino is alive and well, and they see that their prayers have been heard and answered, it would be a real miracle, because he's already been pronounced brain dead, which everyone knows is really just dead.

"I may be speaking in circles, and maybe I'm not seeing the whole picture, like I'm just seeing it from my human perspective, but, I thought I should at least present the argument, I mean not an argument, but at least a good *reason* to allow Grandmaster Kino to live. It could be like a giant revival. All these people will be witness to a miracle. They'll all know that you really do hear and answer prayers. And they'll all be touched by the Holy Spirit bearing witness to them, that all this is real." He frowned. "Hmmm."

Jesus nodded. "Go on. Express the thought that just came into your mind."

"Well," he sighed. "I was just thinking, if you save Grandmaster Kino, then other people will say, like, why didn't God save *my* loved one, and there may be a lot of people out there who get mad that You let one live and the others die."

Jesus nodded with a smile. "And what could be done about that?"

Gabe swallowed and tried to think. "Um, maybe You could just heal *everyone*, but— I guess that's not how it all works, cuz like, I know that each person has their own path to walk." He frowned. "Hmm, well, if *I'm* gonna be allowed to live I could tell them about this conversation. I could tell them that God and His Son Jesus are using this particular healing to show them that God is still working today like he did back in biblical times. I'd tell them that sometimes you don't heal someone because that was the plan for their life, to like, teach people how to overcome loss and sadness, but at this time You are calling all of them to get saved, to turn their hearts to God. I mean, I have a lot of followers, like on social media and stuff, and so does Isla. By the way, she's pretty awesome, isn't she?"

Jesus smiled. "She's doing the Father's work. You brought her into the fold."

Gabe shook his head. "*She* came to me. I wasn't even very open to speaking with her."

"Why do you think Breanna found her and asked her to come see your tournament?"

Gabe thought. "Because— you led her to do that?"

He smiled, nodded. "Nothing is random. Now, go on about your revised plan."

Gabe sighed. "Okay, well, so with Isla, and all the people who have been on the prayer sessions, and my followers too, I could explain to them that Grandmaster Kino dying and

then you healing him, it was like, part of the plan, a plan to turn people toward God, and to testify to them that God is real, that You are real, that the gift is real."

"You would tell them that Eric living is part of the plan?"

"Oh, well, I wouldn't want to be dishonest, so I would tell them that this is part of the *new* plan, or... " A light went on in Gabe's head. "Or– was it actually part of the original plan in the first place and I'm just now figuring it out?"

Jesus smiled. "Well done, Gabriel. Now tell me, what if part of the plan was that only one of you would live?"

Gabe sighed. "Well then, I'd have to ask you to take me." He stopped, blew out a breath, nodded his head. "I mean, as much as I want to live and marry Taylor, I could stay here and you could send Grandmaster Kino back, because he has really little children to care for now, and *he* can just tell the people about the plan instead of me." His eyes filled again. "I mean, maybe you could talk to my dad and mom and give them peace so they won't be so sad. And my sisters too, especially Iris, and also especially Taylor. And really, anyone who is like, really sad over me, like you know, Peyton and Jake."

Jesus nodded. "They have all prayed mightily over you. Continuously. Your request is honorable but unnecessary. Gabriel, there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends, and that is what you've offered to do." Jesus placed his hand on Gabe's head. "I bless you, young Gabriel, with strength of body, mind and spirit, and that you will always find the right words to speak to spread the Word, for I AM the Word. And it will be as you wish. You both shall live."

Gabe blinked, looked up. "Wow," he said softly, reverently. "Really?"

Jesus smiled. "Verily."

"Thank you, Jesus. Thank you so much. May I hug you one more time?"

Jesus pulled him close and hugged him, and again, Gabe was so filled with the light of love and even strength, that he thought he might pass out. He fell to his knees, sobbing. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you."

"Hello there."

Gabe looked up and quickly stood. It wasn't Jesus anymore, but instead was a pretty lady. She had black hair and blue eyes. Her skin was smooth and white and her smile was again, a little familiar. "Hello," Gabe said softly as he stood and sniffed and wiped at his eyes.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your prayer."

"Um, that's okay. So, do I know you too?"

"Not really. But you know my son."

Gabe frowned, trying to think of who she could mean. "Was this Mary?"

She smiled at him. "My son is Ricky Kino."

Gabe's mouth opened. "Oh, so, you're Grandmaster Kino's first wife. Wow."

"Yes. My name is Ann."

Gabe felt uncomfortable, and sort of shuffled his feet. Shelley was Grandmaster Kino's wife and so was this lady.

She laughed softly. "It's okay. I love Shelley. I'm so grateful that she was able to love Eric and Ricky so unconditionally. There's never enough love to go around."

Gabe nodded. That was the same thing that Mr. Anderson said.

She went on. "I'm here to deliver a message, Gabriel. I will begin by telling you that

Eric loves you and thinks you are very special, which is why he put you in his letter."

"His letter?"

"Yes. He wrote about you in his letter. Remember that. Remember what I'm telling you. You're going to wake up, Gabriel. When you do, it's very important that you do exactly as I say. People will try to stop you, but you must be stronger than them." She went on to tell Gabe what will happen when he opens his eyes and how he must battle through to do the thing he was supposed to do. Gabe listened closely, nodding his head. He was feeling more and more tired, like he could barely keep his eyes open. Ann began to sing a song to him. A beautiful song. He was told to remember it. He was so tired. He guessed meeting with Jesus was draining, like with all that energy running through his body and stuff. What was he thinking? Meeting with Jesus? He must be dreaming. But if he was dreaming that had to mean that he was still alive, right? He felt pain again. Pain in his head, his eyes, his side, his leg and his chest.

Funny, when he was in that place, wherever it was, he felt no pain. Had he even been there? It was just too real to think otherwise. He remembered she told him, the lady, Miss Ann, she told him Satan would whisper to him and tell him that it didn't really happen. She said he had to show great faith, and believe. He began to hear the beep, beep, of a heart monitor. He realized it was his own heart. He took a deep breath and sat up.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was still in the hospital, in the ICU. There was no one in the room. The place seemed deserted. Suddenly, it came back to him in a rush and he remembered what he had to do. He began by carefully removing the adhesive tape that held his IV in place and slowly pulled the needle from his arm. He laid it down and held his fingers over the spot for a full minute. No one came running in. Strangely, no alarms sounded. When he'd pulled his IV out the last time, all kinds of alarms went off. He quickly pulled the sheet from across his waist. He had no hospital gown on. That presented a problem. He started ripping the electrodes off his chest. Still no alarms sounded.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. So far no dizziness. He placed his feet on the floor and slowly stood. There was pain, but not bad enough to keep him from standing. He did so gingerly. Wondering if he had any clothes, he looked around and spotted the metal cabinet at the wall near the bathroom. Limping over, he opened the top drawer and found his wallet and cell phone. He opened the next drawer and it was empty. He opened the next drawer and found his jeans and shoes. No shirt. No underwear. No socks. He lifted the jeans up. They had blood on them and a hole on the left leg. They would have to do. It was better than trying to wrap a sheet around his waist, and he certainly couldn't just walk around naked. He pulled the jeans on and then the shoes.

Then he remembered the last thing Miss Ann said. It was a scripture. He went back to the top drawer, but no, there wasn't a Bible, so he picked up his cell phone. Unfortunately, it was not charged. Sighing, he put it back and headed toward the doorway.

It was so quiet. Where were the nurses? Where was his family? Did they think he was dead? Had he been pronounced dead and they'd left? He remembered Miss Ann, Ricky's mother told him he'd have to work quickly. He was breathing hard. He didn't know if it was because he was in pain as he moved around or because he was scared. He got to the door and peeked out. No one in sight. Making his way out into the hall, he turned left. He knew Grandmaster Kino was two doors down, or two stations down was what they'd said.

As he drew close, he saw through the glass walls that the whole Kino family was in the outer chamber area. And Gabe's family too. And the nurses, and others. His heart was pounding. He was just a kid, and he had a big job to do. He heard a doctor talking.

"Now, when we turn off the machines you may hear some rattling of breath..."

Gabe stepped into the room. "Wait. Stop. Don't do it," he said loudly.

There was a giant gasp as Gabe's family and his nurse rushed toward him.

"Gabe! You're awake, you're walking, how?" Lizzy exclaimed.

He held his hands out. "Wait. Stop. Don't touch me." He drew a deep breath. "Listen to me. I know this sounds crazy but you have to stop what you're doing. Please."

"Gabe, you don't know what's happening," his father said.

"Yes, I do." He looked over at Ricky. "You can't turn the machines off. Please. Mr. Kino, you have to listen."

"Gabe," Keegan said sternly. "This family has been through enough."

"I know. I know. But you have to listen." His emotions welled up. He glanced around the room. Taylor stood frozen, the look on her face unreadable. Mark and Joey Adams seemed calm. Young Eric, JoJo and Logan seemed interested. "Please— you can't turn off the machines. Not yet." He sniffed and wiped the tears from his face.

"Gabe, honey, do you know what brain dead means?" Justin's wife Lori asked.

"Yes. And he's not really. It just appears that way. Please, you have to believe me."

The doctor stepped forward. "I'll get security," he said to Shelley Kino.

"No!" Gabe yelled now. "Don't touch me." He threw himself down on his knees in the middle of the floor. "Please Mrs. Kino," he sobbed. "Just listen to me."

Ricky Kino moved forward and spoke kindly and calmly. "We understand how you feel, Gabe. We all feel the same way, but my father wrote a letter and specifically asked to not keep him on life support."

"The letter! That's right," Gabe said through his tears. "I almost forgot. She told me to tell you that Grandmaster Kino loved me and that was why he put me in his letter."

"How do you know that?" Shelley asked.

"Who told you?" Ricky asked.

Gabe sniffed, wiped at his nose. "It was– your mom, Mr. Kino. She said her name was Ann."

Now Ricky started to tear up.

"Please– let me tell you what happened. I was told to convince you to not turn off the machines until tomorrow, the third day. The third day."

"Okay, son," Keegan said, "take a deep breath. We'll listen. Be calm and tell us what happened. Who told you that?"

Gabe nodded. Staying on his knees, he drew a deep breath. "I think I died or something."

"You fell into a deep coma," Lizzy explained. "The doctors didn't give you much of a chance to make it."

"Okay. So, while I was in a coma, I went to this place. It was beautiful. Warm. Sunny. Green grass. I saw Grandmaster Kino there," he cried, feeling the emotions of that moment. "He was standing underneath a huge tree talking to Jesus. I swear. You have to believe me. They were talking and smiling and Jesus hugged Grandmaster Kino. It was so beautiful and I wanted to get a hug from Jesus too. I wanted it so bad. I started to go to

the tree but a guy stopped me."

"Who stopped you?" Ricky asked, now very interested in everything Gabe had to say.

Gabe looked toward his mother. "It was Bradley Anderson."

Lizzy gasped, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Who's that?" Ricky asked. "The girls' father?"

"Yes, Lizzy's first husband," Keegan supplied.

"He said I couldn't go any closer."

"What did he look like?" Keegan asked.

"He was big. Tall, muscular. He was wearing Army fatigues. He had blond hair and blue eyes. He said he was grateful for you, Dad, and how you loved his girls. He talked about his parents and how sad it was that they missed out on knowing such awesome girls. And he told me to not get caught up in fame and fortune like his parents did. I asked him if I was dead and he said he couldn't say, and I asked him who could tell me, and he said God or Jesus only had a say in that, and I said, then let me speak to one of them, and he thought that was funny and said he'd try, and went away."

"He's obviously hallucinating," the doctor said.

Ricky sighed. "Um, Doc, we're gonna need a little time to discuss some things. Give us a few minutes for privacy and we'll come and get you when we're ready."

The doctor frowned, nodded and took his leave.

"What happened after Bradley went away?" Lizzy asked.

"I called out to Grandmaster Kino and waved and he touched his heart, like, to let me know that he heard me, I guess. I wanted to talk to Jesus but I didn't think I should yell at him, so I prayed. I asked him to come over here and talk to me, but when I looked back up they were both gone. Then Miss Maddie and her husband came and spoke to me and that was like— way cool. And I told Miss Maddie that I was trying to pray to Jesus but I didn't think he heard me, but she said 'of course he does,' and then she went away. Oh, and she gave me a message. She misses you all, and we are supposed to work hard to follow God's teachings because He's gonna be calling on us to help him with something.

"And then after Miss Maddie went away, I tried praying again, and then— all of a sudden, He was standing right next to me. Jesus. It was so awesome! I mean, there was like power and love flowing out of him, all around Him. I just wanted to stay right there next to Him forever." Gabe went on to describe their conversation in detail, and as he did, others in the room began to sink to their knees too. Gabe knew it was because they could feel the presence of Jesus. His power was so strong, you just wanted to sink down to the ground.

"And so, He said it was always the plan to get millions of people to turn to God, and to see if it justified bringing Grandmaster Kino back. And Jesus said that I did good in figuring it out. Like, figuring out the plan. He said, 'Well done, Gabriel,' and it made me feel happier than I've ever felt in my life."

"So, Jesus is gonna bring Granddaddy back to life tomorrow because you asked him to?" Taylor asked.

He smiled at his beautiful girl. "Not because *I* asked Him to, but because of the righteous prayers of millions of people. Because with every prayer they always said they would accept God's will. And Miss Ann told me to mention the letter to show you that I really did speak to her, because there was no way I could know that I was in the letter. But

I almost forgot. She told me to mention the cave and someone named Kai. And I was supposed to tell you all to let the water flow in."

The entire Kino family gasped.

"And she said Kai was a miracle and tomorrow is gonna be another miracle and she told me to sing this song. It goes like this. *Where do I begin, to tell the story of how great a love can be, the sweet love story that is older than the sea, the simple truth about the love he brings to me, where do I start*." He sang the song the best he could.

What he didn't realize was that everyone was not only blown away by his beautiful voice, but the song itself was the music in the music box that Eric and Ann together had given to a sick child before she died. Both Shelley and Ricky now also dropped to their knees. The whole room was weeping.

"So, do we dare believe him?" Lizzy asked. "I know it seems so crazy, but my son wouldn't lie. Not in a situation like this."

"Not in any situation, Mom," Gabe corrected.

"Do we dare believe that tomorrow Eric will open his eyes?" Bree asked.

Gabe hiccupped. "You don't have to believe me. Just give it until tomorrow. If it doesn't happen, then just put me in a psycho ward somewhere and throw away the key. But what could it hurt to wait just a little longer?"

"Why do we need to keep him on life support?" Logan asked. "I just mean, if God wants to raise Granddad from the dead, He could just do it, right?"

Gabe shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe he's not really dead. I mean, maybe it just appears that way. I don't know. I just know that Miss Ann told me it was important that you listen to me and believe me."

Ricky nodded his head. "I know why. It's because, we have to show some faith," Ricky said calmly as the answer dawned on him. "God's not asking much. He's asking for just a little show of faith. Enough for us to listen to this young man, for us to reason together, as Jesus said, and show just a tiny bit of faith. To believe. Just believe, and demonstrate enough faith to keep Dad on life support until the third day."

"Oh, and there was something else," Gabe said, still weeping. "But I didn't know what it meant because my phone is out of battery and I didn't see a Bible anywhere. It was a scripture. It was second Kings, chapter 20, verses one through five."

Rose quickly pulled it up on her Bible app and read, "In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, 'This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.' Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, 'Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: 'Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, "This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD."'"

"Wow," Gabe said, sniffing. "On the third day. I don't remember ever reading that scripture. How could I not remember something like that?"

"On the third day," Ricky said. "And Jesus was resurrected on the third day."

"Please, tell me you'll hold off," Gabe pleaded.

Ricky looked at Shelley. “It’s your call.”

Shelley nodded. “Of course we’ll wait.”

“Thank you,” Gabe said softly. “Thank you.” He was suddenly very tired and was thinking he might need help to get back to his room.

Ricky looked around at everyone. “Well, while we’re all on our knees, can we take a moment to have a word of prayer?”

Everyone quickly agreed.

Ricky prayed, thanking God for Gabe’s recovery and for his experience. He also said, “Father, forgive us for having a difficult time with what Gabe has told us. We want it to be true with all of our hearts. I think some of us are afraid to hope, only to have our hearts broken again. But we will be vigilant, Lord, and watchful because we know, all things are possible with You and through You. We are truly looking forward to tomorrow and having my father back with us.” After thanking God several more times for all of their many blessings, he closed in Jesus’ mighty name.

Most everyone stood, but Gabe remained on the floor. Jeffy made her way to him as he knew she would. She knelt down in front of him. The room quieted as they watched the exchange. She looked him over. He was ultra masculine in only his torn and bloody jeans and tennis shoes, like a warrior returned from battle, and the muscles of his chest and arms not having diminished at all. His dark hair was tousled, his face still wet with his tears, his dark lashes were darker because they were wet and his blue eyes glistened. He had scars on both shoulders from his abduction experience. The bandage on his upper left chest moved up and down with his heavy breathing. He blinked up at her.

She smiled. “You didn’t want anyone to touch you so that I could read you clearly?”

Gabe nodded.

Jeffy hadn’t touched him yet, but she already had tears on her face. She slowly shook her head. “Oh my, Gabe, you really did speak to Jesus, and hug him. I can feel it and see it clearly. Clearly. The power, the love, it is emanating from you. Oh my goodness, it’s wonderful. Oh, Gabriel,” she said. “May I touch you?”

He nodded.

She reached out and put her hand on his chest. She moaned and began to weep. She leaned forward and placed her forehead against his, whimpered and then swooned. Cam was there to catch her as usual. He put her on her feet. She opened her eyes and looked around. “If you all could see or feel what I just did, I think you’d wish for your own death. Jesus is so beautiful. He’s love, and power and peace and strength and calm and joy and justice, all together. Wow, Gabe, you are truly blessed. And he laid His hands on you and blessed you. Wow, I’m grateful to know you.”

Gabe shook his head. “Not to know me. To know Him. All glory be His. But I tell ya, I will never forget this. Never.”

Jeffy looked around. “And Gabe forgot to tell you, that he is supposed to talk to all the people on the prayer call today, and God is gonna send His Holy Spirit to every single one of them to testify that the story they hear from Gabe is real and true. And we need to let Isla know that Gabe will be speaking on the call today, so that anyone who wants to set up a double Zoom, like a joint livestream, can do so.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Bree said.

Taylor finally approached and sank down on her knees in front of Gabe where he

remained on the floor. "I thought I'd lost you," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that, cuz I know how I'd feel if I thought I'd lost you, cuz when I realized those guys had you, I did think I'd lost you."

"So, like, are you still, um, you?"

He smiled. "Of course I am."

"And you still love me?"

He nodded. "With all my heart."

"Then can I touch you?"

He rose up off his haunches and pulled her to him and held her against his chest. "Thank you, Jesus," he whispered.

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August 29th Thursday Morning

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

Ricky paced back and forth past his father's hospital bed, thinking and hoping and praying. "Please Father, don't let my lack of faith keep the miracle from happening. Forgive me for doubting."

He shook his head. It was so easy to doubt, even with all the signs and wonders they'd been given. He supposed that's the human frailty. He thought about all Gabe said on the Zoom call yesterday afternoon. As he'd spoken, Ricky himself had been filled with the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had promised Gabe. It gave him immense hope that today's miracle really would take place. But immediately the doubts crept back. What if it didn't happen? He sighed.

"Let go."

Ricky stopped. Looked around. It was God's voice inside his head, he knew that. *Okay. Let go. Let the water flow. If it doesn't happen, then we're no worse off. We'll just have to accept it all over again. Either way, God's will be done.*

Shelley was there sitting quietly in the chair beside Eric's bed. She was thinking about all that had taken place. Gabe's sudden healing was a miracle. He'd been at death's door. The infection had been rampant. Even the Vancomycin hadn't worked. He *was* gonna die. And now, twenty-four hours later, tests showed he was completely infection free. Even his wounds seemed to be healing at an accelerated rate. He asked to be released from the hospital, but they asked him to stay another day and make sure he had no setbacks. He acquiesced. His recovery yesterday was the buzz of all the doctors and nurses. Hopefully, Eric's will be today's buzz.

But Shelley also couldn't help but think of what Jeffy said. If we could experience the place they were at, the place Gabe traveled to and saw Eric with Jesus, people would want to die to be there. And here they were, calling Eric back. Calling him back to a fallen world where there was darkness and evil and heartbreak and tears, and suffering. Was she being selfish? No, she thought, it wasn't selfish, because in this world he would also have joy and love and laughter and physical pleasures, and— miracles. *Please God, let there be another miracle today.*

Also, was it selfish to want her amazing husband to raise their children? She hadn't been able to spend a lot of time with the children yet. But just thinking of them this morning, seeing their faces light up when she came into their room. Getting hugs and kisses from them and speaking to each one individually, like Eric had written in his letter.

He is gonna love each little soul so very much. She smiled with the thought.

Doctor Piney, one of the doctors who'd run tests on Eric to determine whether he had any brain activity, came into the room. He nodded and smiled. "Good morning Mrs. Kino. How are you doing today?"

She smiled slightly. "Well, I could be better."

"Yes, I understand. Well, we're gonna do another EEG."

"Why? Has there been a change?" Ricky asked.

"We'll know soon. We want to run another test because we discovered some of our equipment wasn't functioning properly."

"What equipment?" Shelley asked.

"Well, Mr. Tanner yesterday was able to remove his IV and his heart monitor with no alarms going off. We've been looking into the problem and think we've had some kind of electromagnetic anomaly. We just want to run another EEG on Mr. Kino's brain and see if we had a false reading."

A tech came in rolling a cart with a monitor and the supplies and began attaching electrodes to Eric's head. It wasn't long before the test was under way. The doctor watched the readout for about ten minutes and then left the room without a word. Twenty minutes later he came back with another doctor. Together they looked at the readouts. The second doctor's mouth dropped open.

"What's wrong?" Shelley asked.

Dr. Piney turned, his face blank. "Preliminary results seem to show some normal brain activity, waveform frequency of eight Hertz. We'll have to study the test and get back to you."

"So, what does that mean? You're saying he's not brain dead?" Ricky clarified.

"At this point, it appears he is not. But something is not quite right."

Ricky's heart soared but he tried to stay calm and focus. "What is not right?"

"An eight-hertz rhythm can occur in an awake adult, but it can also sometimes occur in someone in a coma. We need to examine the full pattern before we interpret it. Given the change from the previous test, we'll need to verify these results carefully."

"But the real thing here, the important thing," Ricky began, "is he's not brain dead."

"It *appears* he is not, though the anomaly of the test needs to be investigated."

Ricky and Shelley looked at each other and smiled. Shelley had tears in her eyes.

"So, if he wasn't brain dead and we had taken him off life support yesterday, what would have happened?" Ricky asked.

"It's possible he would have passed, or begun to breathe on his own."

Ricky nodded. "And if we decide to take him off life support today, the same applies?"

"Yes. However, give us some time to study the test. We don't want to give you false hope. We have no idea what happened to our equipment to give us an erroneous reading of no brain activity and we apologize."

"No apology necessary," Ricky said. "We don't believe there was anything wrong with your equipment."

"Oh there was definitely something malfunctioning. Mr. Tanner's alarms didn't go off and there was an EEG readout of zero activity. Now, the alarms are working, and the EEG is definitely showing brain activity."

Ricky nodded with a smile. There was no arguing faith vs science with them. They

were not able to comprehend the existence of God. But maybe this will plant a seed. "How long will you need to study the test results?"

"At least a few hours, maybe longer."

"And once you finish that?"

"If the results are verified, then I see no reason to put off trying to get him off the ventilator and see if he will breathe on his own."

Ricky nodded. "I'm sure you can understand our anxiousness to get this resolved."

"Yes, we can. We'll get right on it."

"Thank you," both Ricky and Shelley said at the same time.

The doctors instructed the tech to run the test a little longer than usual and to send the results to them STAT. They then took their leave.

Ricky and Shelley turned to each other and hugged each other for a long time.

"This is really happening," Shelley whispered.

"It seems to be," Ricky said. "Isn't it bad of us that even with the evidence right here in front of us we're still afraid to hope that it's real? I mean, that's the way it is, it seems, with anything to do with God. It's so difficult to believe even when the signs are all around us. We are so blessed that He's showing us right here in real time that what Gabe saw and what he said, what we believe, it's real. I am so unworthy."

"I'll try harder to be worthy," Shelley said softly. "And I'll begin with a prayer of thanks." She knelt on the cold hard floor, right there with the tech still in the room. Ricky knelt beside her and they prayed. Not long after they finished their prayer, the tech began to remove the electrodes from Eric's head and pack up.

She smiled at them as she began to wheel the cart out. "Thank you Mrs. Kino, and you Ricky Kino, and your whole family. Thank you for living your faith so beautifully. Just being around you, hearing the stories of what took place yesterday, it will forever change *my* life."

Shelley hugged her. "Thank you for sharing that with us. It means so much."

They watched her leave. "So," Ricky began as he turned to smile at Shelley. "Shall we deliver the news to the fam?"

She nodded. "Yes. It's a glimmer of hope that what Gabe told us yesterday is really gonna happen. It's actually more than a glimmer. It really is happening."

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Lizzy came into the room. Gabe sat on the side of the bed, his legs swinging back and forth. He grinned at her as she walked in. "Mom, did you hear the news?"

"I did. I've cried so many tears of joy over the past twenty-four hours I don't think I have any left." She put her bags on the bed beside Gabe and started taking things out. "I brought you some clean clothes and bought some new shoes because the others had blood all over them."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you, Mom."

Lizzy looked up, surprised.

"I just thought I'd tell you right now, since yesterday I thought I'd died and wouldn't be able to tell you ever again."

She moved close and took his face in her hands. "I love you too, sweet boy." She kissed each cheek. "Boy, do you need a shower."

He sniffed his underarms. "Pretty bad, huh?"

Lizzy nodded.

"I can't wait to get out of here and take one, because I'm sure Taylor wouldn't want to be around me right now. And I can't wait to see the sky and the sun, and the trees and the grass, and eat some good food. Honestly, I wish I could just go home to Georgia. I mean, I missed my Ameritech training window. Next class doesn't start until January I think. I'm homesick."

Lizzy wiped at her eyes. "And I thought I didn't have any tears left."

Gabe sighed. "Mom, I would like to walk down the hall and see Grandmaster Kino. Do you think that would be okay?"

"Hmm, yes. That's where your father is. Here, take your stuff, go in the bathroom and take a quick sponge bath, wash your armpits and get dressed. You'll feel so much better. And you'll smell better. And use lots of soap."

Gabe laughed and started into the bathroom. "Dad says that you giving him sponge baths is why he fell in love with you."

Lizzy's cheeks turned pink. "He did, did he? I'm gonna smack that man."

Gabe chuckled.

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August 29th Thursday Afternoon

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

Grandmaster Kino's wife and children and the older grandchildren waited quietly in the outer room. The ventilator support was withdrawn for the breathing trial and everyone stopped breathing for a few seconds as they waited and watched. The doctor had called it a breathing trial. Ricky squeezed Shelley's hand. And then, Eric drew a breath.

The whole family breathed a sigh of relief. They were quiet, each saying their own prayer of gratitude. Gabe and his father watched through the glass. Gabe turned to smile at his dad. "It's gonna happen. It is happening. I knew it would."

"Your mom says they will do a few more breathing trials before they remove the tube from his throat."

Gabe nodded. "They can do all their earthly stuff. But I know he's gonna live. I know. And I'm so grateful. Thank you, Jesus. I know You can hear me. Thank you."

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The next day, Shelley sat by her husband's side, still in the ICU. They'd extubated him a few hours earlier. He was breathing on his own. His heart rate was perfect and beautiful. His blood pressure was perfect. He seemed completely healthy. His color had come back. Shelley stood to speak to him once again. She touched his handsome face, traced her fingers over his cheeks and his lips, pulled a few strands of his hair off his neck.

"Wake up, Eric," she whispered. "I bet you would really love to go for a walk on the beach. Wake up and we'll walk and watch the sunset, or take a swim. You can float on your back like you do so often and look up at the sky. Let's make it a date. We'll spend a whole day on the beach, and then take a shower, and make love, and eat a late dinner. No, wait. Gotta change that up. We'll spend a day on the beach making sand castles with the children. Then we'll give *them* a bath and feed them dinner and make some homemade ice cream and read them a story and pray with them and put them to bed, and THEN we'll make love. How does that sound?" She sighed as she thought about it.

"Sounds great."

Shelley gasped. Looked closely at her husband. His eyes were open. "Eric?" she cried.

"Yes, my love," he said softly.

She sniffed. "Oh, Eric, it really is a miracle."

"I know. Don't cry, sweetie. We're so blessed to have more time."

"Gabe told us you would come back to us."

"I know. I saw him."

"And you saw Jesus?"

"Yes, and I spoke with him. He is," Eric stopped. "He is—everything."

"Thank you, Jesus, thank you," Shelley said. She wiped her tears. "I have to tell the family. They're all on the verge of a breakdown." She pulled out her phone. *"He's awake*," she quickly texted. She smiled at her husband. "Shall we count to ten?"

They didn't get past three. Ricky came flying into the room, followed closely by Joey, then Mark, then the women, and then the older grandchildren, all but JoJo. Gabe stood at the door to his room, smiling. What a wondrous sight. What a happy day. "Thank you, Father, in Jesus' name," he whispered.

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September 6th, Friday Afternoon

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

It'd been seven days since Grandmaster Eric Kino had awakened. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, the grass was green. The flowers surrounding the front fountain seemed brighter than ever. Gabe was running through the grass barefoot in exaggerated slow motion, as Taylor and seven-year-old Phia helped six two-year-olds and two three-year-olds, Em and Kel-Bell, try to catch him.

It was obvious that little Iris had played this game many times. Not a bit shy, she tried to tell her new friends that it's okay, he won't really hurt them. She caught her brother and he fell down and let her tackle him. Iris jumped on but he reversed and started tickling her.

Noah's eyes lit up and he joined in, so Gabe rewarded him with a good tickling. Ledger, Joey's very ruff and tuff boy, jumped on full speed. The boys' giggles, made Angelina brave enough to run and jump on Gabe and he gave her the same treatment, the tickle monster. Finally Manny, and Abraham, who was already nicknamed Abe, and Em and Kel-Bell joined in with Taylor's help. Gabe had a different plan. He grabbed Taylor by the wrist and jerked her down beside him. She shrieked and laughed.

"Okay, everyone," Gabe commanded. "Let's get her!"

Taylor tried to scramble away but Gabe held her fast. She laughed and giggled as eight tiny pairs of hands tickled her, or, at least tried to. Taylor finally pretended to cry to get them to stop and it worked almost too well.

The four new Kinos stepped back, not sure what to think, but Iris was laughing. "I kiss it better," she said and jumped into Taylor's lap and kissed her cheek. The others' eyes brightened and they followed suit. The whole thing ended in a group hug.

Over on the front steps Laynah sat with Jake videoing the whole thing. She then immediately sent the video to Isla. Also watching and videoing were Bella and Breez who were also chatting with Luciana and her husband and their twelve-year-old son and ten-year-old daughter.

Inside, Gabe's five older sisters, his mother, plus Mickey, Angel and Lori, were busy setting up a huge homecoming meal. The men, Keegan, Jeff, Joey, Mark and Justin with

Bree supervising, were busy putting the new bedroom together that had finally arrived.

"So, what do ya think, Luciana?" Bella asked. "How do you think they're gonna do?"

Luciana smiled. "I think they are gonna have a very happy life, señora."

"And are you sad about being away from them?"

"I'm gonna miss them very much. But when I found out who they really were, I knew I had to tell someone and I knew that would mean they would be out of my life, but at least they would be safe and well-cared for. I'll be okay. This is as it should be."

Out in the yard, Taylor's phone buzzed and she looked at it. "They're almost here," she said softly to Gabe. "Okay, little ones," Taylor said sternly. "It's story time."

They all sat in a circle around her, eyes wide.

"So, Angelina, Noah, Manny and Abe, do you remember the story that your mommy the queen told you last week?"

"About the monster?"

"Yes. But the good guys killed the monster and he's never coming back. Remember?"

They nodded and Taylor went on. "But remember the king got hurt?"

"Yes, he got died," Noah said softly.

"Yes, he did, but God said it wasn't quite time for the king to die, so God healed him and now he's all better!"

Gabe watched Taylor's expressive face. She was amazing and if he didn't already love her, he would fall all over again. She glanced at him and he smiled at her.

She smiled back and went on. "And guess what? The king is your daddy."

"Our Mommy already told us that," Angelina said.

"Oh, well, excuuuuuuse me," Taylor said in a silly voice, making the children laugh.

"Well, your daddy is coming home to see you and he's gonna be driving up that driveway any minute. He's gonna be so happy to see you! So let's all stand up, and when you see the car coming, start waving, but don't run toward the car. You have to wait until the car stops. Now, keep watch and let me see who will see the car coming first."

Gabe watched the children as they watched for the car. It was only a few seconds later that they all started waving. And, of course, Ledger headed toward the driveway immediately. Gabe ran after him and scooped him up. "Oh, no, little guy. You were told to stay still."

"I want my granddaddy," he yelled.

"I get it, buddy," Gabe said. "We all do. Just wait for him to get out of the car and you can see him."

The car pulled up and stopped and everyone crowded around. Ricky and Cam got out of the front and opened the back seat doors. Jeffy climbed out, on one side, and Shelley climbed out of the other. Shelley then moved out of the way and Ricky bent to help his father out of the car. He pulled him forward and Eric stepped out and straightened to his full height. He slowly looked around at his amazing family with a smile on his face—that kind smile that everyone loved so much.

The people who'd been inside the house were now at the door and on the large front steps. The others stood just to the front of the car. The only ones who hadn't been able to make the homecoming were Laynah's family and Jake's parents who'd had to fly back home. Lisa Stewart was not feeling well, and Jodi felt like she should stay with her. Also currently missing was Jason who had not arrived yet, though he promised he would be

along shortly.

For such a large group, it was surprisingly quiet. Eric let his eyes take in each person. "Hello, everyone," he said softly, his voice, as always, quiet and commanding at the same time.

There was a murmur of 'hi's' and 'hellos' and a few 'heys.'

"We're so happy to see you standing there," Justin finally said. "And to hear your voice. It's almost dreamlike."

"I'm very happy to see you all again."

He felt a tug on his pant leg.

"Are you da king?" little Angelina asked.

He knelt down slowly. He wanted to deny it and tell her that Jesus is the King, but Shelley had told him about the story she'd used to explain things to the children. "Well, yes, I am the king of the story your mother told you," he said softly.

"So, dat means dat you are my daddy," she said.

He smiled. "That's right. And that means that YOU are MY little girl."

She smiled and reached her hands up to him, a clear signal she wanted him to pick her up.

Ricky started to intervene but Eric waved him away. "I think I got it."

Eric put his arms around the little girl, pulled her close and pushed his feet hard against the concrete drive. When he didn't move, Ricky gave a little help under his arms and Eric finally stood, holding his daughter in his arms. She looked around proudly.

"I want up too," Noah said loudly.

"Okay," Shelley said. "Let's get the king into the house and into his chair and each of you can take a turn sitting on his lap."

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"Are you tired, Eric?" Shelley asked after he'd held and spoken to each of his youngest children and then received hugs from the rest of his family.

He shook his head. "Not at all. I'm just trying to take it all in. Trying to see things from your point of view. Trying to think how I would feel if you or Ricky had died, not just the feeling of loss, but the letting go and acceptance that would require. You all have reacted like true warriors. Accepting the loss, picking yourselves up, and continuing to fight."

"Not so sure about that, Dad," Ricky said.

"Don't listen to him," Keegan replied. "Rick stepped up and you would've been so proud of him."

"That's true," Joey added.

"He really was great," Mark said. "I mean, I found myself wanting to talk with him, ya know, like ask for counsel like I always felt with you, Eric."

Ricky smiled at Mark. "That is an awesome compliment."

Eric smiled and nodded. "I have no doubt."

Angel and Lizzy came into the room. "Food is ready everyone. Go along both sides of the kitchen island and then hit the back counter and then sit wherever you'd like. Dining room table, kitchen table, outside in the sun or in here in your laps," Angel said. "Eric, who would you like to bless the food?"

Eric looked up at Ricky. "I've been a little out of touch. You decide."

Ricky nodded, his eyes sad. His father was still trying to get him to step up. He had no

problem doing that in his own home, or when his father wasn't around. But not now. "Dad, I know what you're doing, and when the time comes I will step up. But for now, we're all so grateful to have our leader back with us. Please help us to regain that safe-and-secure feeling and please, take over."

Eric nodded. "Very well. Justin, would you do us the honor?"

Justin nodded with a smile and gave thanks and blessed the food.

No one moved toward the kitchen. It was Gabe who broke the ice. "Well, if no one else wants to go first, I'm not shy. Come on, Manny, let's go chow down." He took the boy's hand and went to grab a plate. Taylor followed with Iris and Angelina. Shelley took both Abe and Noah and headed in.

"Eric? Can I get a plate for you?" Joey asked.

"No, I can do it myself, but thanks. You go help your wife with all those babies."

It was a wonderful meal. Eric decided to sit out in the sunshine, which was no surprise to anyone. Most everyone else did the same, just because there seemed to be a need to be close to Eric. At first Gabe and Taylor and the kids all sat at the kitchen table where their new booster seats were, but when they realized everyone was going outside, they relocated to sit in a circle on the deck. After the meal, as the day wound down, they all came inside and sat in the large living room, Eric in his wingback chair.

"Angel?" Eric asked. "Is Jason gonna come today?"

"He's on his way. He had to meet with the FBI, but he'll be here soon."

"It's strange, Eric," Shelley said. "Just over a week ago we all sat in this room all together and Ricky read your letter to us."

Eric's lips pressed tightly together. He sighed. The ordeal had been very hard on his family.

"And no one would sit in your chair," Mark said. "It's like we were making sure you knew you were supposed to be there."

Eric nodded. "And so, Gabe, that prayer session, when you spoke and told the story, did it get to a lot of people?"

Gabe smiled. "It was awesome. There were the fifty thousand people from the Zoom call, and then about ten thousand people on other linked Zoom piggyback calls, and the live broadcast on Teenspotter, and several other live streams, like this guy who dances and has like three million followers, plus the shared zoom videos and the video that was put on my own website. My web person estimates that the session has been seen or heard by more than twenty million people. That is crazy-unheard-of, and I hope that means that twenty million people have been filled with the Holy Spirit and had their hearts turned toward God. Now, I know that a lot of them were already with God, like us, but still, they got a boost, a refresher, a revival. And the pastor at our church back home, Pastor Tim, you know him, he says that their membership has increased by a third in less than a few weeks, and he also says that other pastors he knows around the country have reported the same thing. It's freakin' wild!"

"But it's not only churches," Jake said. "Like, my Marine buddies couldn't stop talkin' about it and want to start goin' to church or just meet with each other. But they said if they just meet with each other they won't get inspired, so they were thinking they could get you, Gabe, or you Ricky, to Zoom with them and do a little prayer meeting once a week."

Ricky nodded. "That's cool, and that's doable. I mean, how hard could it be to pray

with a few people on a weekly basis?"

"Right?" Gabe agreed.

"Especially for the military," Keegan added. "They would really appreciate someone praying for their safety and for their families while they're deployed."

"This sounds like the beginning of a beautiful plan coming together," Ricky said. "You work on it, Jake, and give me a call."

"Yes, sir, I will."

Eric smiled. "This is excellent."

Everyone looked up as Jason walked in the door. "Hello everyone. Better late than never."

He went straight to Eric. Eric stood. Jason stood there looking at him, his eyes filling with tears. He'd been working so hard he hadn't had a chance to see Eric at all since he'd miraculously recovered. "So, it really is true," Jason quipped.

Eric smiled. "I heard you've been beating yourself up over all this."

Jason looked around. No one made eye contact. He looked back at Eric. "Maybe."

"Well, I know I don't have to say the usual."

"No, sir, you don't because everyone said it for you."

Eric nodded. "Good. And I also heard Mark made a great argument about why things went down the way they did."

"Yes, sir, he did."

"Well, are you gonna just stand there or..."

Jason stepped forward and hugged Eric fiercely. "Eric, don't you ever ask to come along on a mission ever again."

Eric smiled. "Okay, I won't ask."

Jason shook his head and stepped back, his mind moving on quickly as was his habit. "Listen, I have a lot of information. Maybe I can meet with you later?"

"Hmm, maybe you can just tell us all now."

"Um, Bella and I will take the kids down the hall to rest and watch a movie in the playroom," Breez volunteered.

"Before you do," Luciana said. "We're probably gonna be leaving here soon, so may I say goodbye to the children?"

"Of course," Shelley said.

Luciana hugged and kissed each child and told them she would come by next week to see them. Then Breez and Bella gathered their own children and the new Kino children and Iris Tanner, and headed down the hall. Everyone laughed as they heard the argument begin.

"I don't wanna watch *Frozen*, I wanna watch Buzz Lightyear," Manny said.

"The movie is called *Toy Story*," the older Sophia informed him.

"Yeah, I wanna watch *Toy Story*."

"I wanna watch *Finding Nemo*," Angelina said.

"Luciana," Eric said softly. "We are so grateful for what you did and we will be forever in your debt."

She shrugged. "No need for thanks. What else was I supposed to do?"

"That's just it. You could have done a number of other things, but you did the right thing, knowing there was great risk to yourself. If you or your family need anything,

anything at all, don't hesitate to call. I understand you and Shelley have already arranged some things, but we don't really know your personal situation. If we can help, let us know. No request is too great." He looked at Luciana's husband. "Paul, Sé que debes estar orgulloso de tu esposa. (I'm sure you are very proud of your wife.)"

He smiled. "Sí, señor Kino, estoy muy orgulloso de ella." (Yes, very proud of her.)

Eric nodded then turned to Jason. "Jason? What do you have for us?"

Jason looked around. "Some of this may be hard to hear, but maybe it will be good for you young people to know and understand that true evil exists. This is not just an aberration. Evil is out there and is growing, which is why God needs as many warriors as He can get until Jesus comes." He nodded his head, resigning himself to the task at hand. "First, Payne Lanske, pronounced dead at the scene. We finally found his family."

"Please don't tell me there's another family out for revenge," Ricky said.

"No, just the opposite. Family doesn't really seem too broken up about it. His father died when he was a kid. Mother and two sisters raised him. He went into the military and did well for himself but never went back home. Apparently, the military did a number on him. He was an alcoholic loner until Julian Black found him."

Jason sighed at the all too common story. Without a good, strong, and loving father in the home, children go astray. Satan knows that and works very hard to undermine the family unit. "Okay, next." He hesitated because this one was gonna be hard. "Brace yourselves." He paused, drew a deep breath. "There were actually— ten surrogate mothers and ten children."

Shelley winced. "Oh no."

"From the records we found, the first child born of the ten was Emmanuel. Number two, was Noah. Number three was a stillborn female. Number four, was Angelina. Number five was Abraham. Number six, was another stillborn female. Number seven, a male child, two days old, diagnosed with Down syndrome, was what they called, 'terminated,' and what I call, murdered."

He paused at the gasps in the room, sighed heavily and then went on quickly, trying to just get it all out. "Number eight was another male child. He made it to eight weeks, and was diagnosed with a congenital heart defect. He too was 'terminated.' Number nine was a female, Maria. You already know what happened to her. And the tenth child born was a male, found to have a minor condition of a 'possible clubfoot' at nine weeks of age, was scheduled for termination, but instead was given to an unknown female. We are still trying to discover his whereabouts."

"I, I can't stand this," Shelley said softly.

Eric stood, slowly headed to the sofa where Shelley was and sat down beside her. He carefully wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "Go on, Jason."

He nodded. "Sorry. I know this is hard to hear. And it gets worse. Are you sure you still want me to go on?"

"I do. Anyone who is uncomfortable is free to leave. The rest of us will completely understand."

Paul Ramirez stood. "Si no te importa, I think I will take the children outside to the truck. Luciana, we'll wait for you there."

Eric nodded, stood, shook the man's hand.

Jason waited for them to take their leave and then went on. "The well-paid doctor in

charge of the children, who also attended their births has been arrested. All ten surrogates," he stopped, looked around, breathed. "All ten surrogate mothers were—'terminated'."

There were several gasps and curses from the group at large. "We've found the remains of at least four of the women and two of the children, one of them being little Maria, in a mass grave at the back of the property. We expect to find more. All ten women had been reported missing by their families. All the children were born at the daycare facility in a birthing room upstairs that is now only a storage area. The four security guards were arrested. We will need the testimony of Luciana, Camilla and Lonnie.

"The woman in the van, who pushed Taylor out in a wheelchair and also stabbed Gabe, is being held without bail as well as the man in the restroom that Gabe knocked out. The van driver and the passenger have already been laid to rest. They were brothers. Their family was pretty shaken up by what happened to them and could eventually be a problem. Not because they've given any threats or signals, just speaking from our past experiences. Be awake and aware, Keegan. I will get you their names and whereabouts and you will need to look into every person associated with them."

"Last but not least, the woman, Marilyn Monroe, and yes, that's her actual name, who was Dr. Black's assistant back when they collected the samples from Eric and Shelley, was the hands-on operator behind the IVF procedures of the surrogates and Black's contact on the outside to carry out his orders. She has been found and detained. Apparently all termination orders came through her. She is being held without bail. Eric, Shelley, Jeffy, and I believe it was Jeff and Keegan, and whoever else remembers her from the original raid on GEDNAR will have to testify. She was another one who was released during the COVID hysteria. There is a truckload of video of her procedures on the surrogates. She's definitely going down." He sighed. "Alright, I know that was a lot to take in. I'm sure there will be some questions later when you've all had a chance to digest some of the information. So, Eric, I guess I'm done for now."

"May we get a list of the names of the surrogate mothers?" Shelley asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I will get those to you."

"Well," Eric said. "You've been working very hard, Jason. Thank you for your effort."

He nodded. "I'm thinking I should've gone with the original thought to speak to you privately at a later time. I think I ruined the party."

Eric smiled. "Nonsense. We don't do that 'wait until it's more convenient' kind of thing. There is no time like the present. And you saved me from having to expend the energy to tell everyone else. We'll handle it. But you haven't ruined the party." He looked around. "Is everyone still happy that Gabe and I are alive?"

The crowd laughed. "I'm still happy," Justin said.

"Me too," a few others said.

"Good. And now I have a lot of people I need to thank, so everyone grab some dessert and come back in here and let me pray with you and spill my heart out to you."

✝✝✝

September 6th, Late Friday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric and Shelley stood in the doorway together watching the children sleeping in their new little beds. So precious. Their little lives were so precious. They were grateful for

them, and they wondered what the children's missions will be in this life, their calling, their purpose.

Shelley sighed. "I already love them so much, I feel as though my heart will burst."

Eric nodded. "Me too."

Sighing, they checked the monitor one more time, and the door alarm that would let them know if a little one decided to wake up and go roaming, then turned and headed to their own bedroom, which was the next door down from the children.

Keegan and Lizzy Tanner were down at the other end of the hall, in Bree's old room, and Jake and Laynah Appel were in Ricky's old room. The Anderson girls divided up between Mark and Joey's old rooms across from Bree and Ricky's. Gabe had been invited to stay the night at Taylor's home and accepted readily. He wanted to spend the weekend with her before he went home to Georgia for a while.

Shelley turned the knob of their own bedroom door, shoved it open and stood there staring at the room.

"Is there a problem?" Eric asked softly from behind.

She sighed. "I love your voice."

He knew she was saying that because she thought she'd never hear it again. He looked past her into the room, trying to see it from her point of view. He sighed and nodded in understanding. "So, this room has been looking pretty empty and cold?"

She nodded. "Especially that first night. I thought I'd lost my husband and I had four new lives to look after and I needed to talk to you so desperately, to share with you everything I was thinking, but you were gone."

He pulled her back against him. "But not anymore, right? I'm right here."

She turned and placed her hand on his face. "Are you really here or am I dreaming? I mean, what if I wake up?"

"I'm here, Shelley girl. I'm so sorry you had to go through that trauma. But really, you grew stronger through all that happened, right?"

"I guess I did, but Eric, I don't want to be strong anymore," she said with a little pout which made him smile. She sighed. "I want to go to bed and have you hold me and let me cry and you kiss away the tears."

He chuckled. "Then that's what we'll do. First though, I really want to take a shower. I feel dirty and, what's that word you like to use?"

She grinned. "Yucky. You feel yucky. Go shower. Do you need help?"

He smiled. "Why yes, I think I do."

She laughed. "I'll be right there."

Thirty minutes later, both of them freshly scrubbed, they lay in bed face-to-face, looking into each other's eyes. The cleansing had been symbolic, putting the past behind them. There was no need for her to cry now because that had happened in the shower. Now, simply relaxed, clean, and dry, they reveled in each other's presence.

He kissed her and she sighed.

"I will never ever take this for granted again."

"Me neither," he said.

"Eric, did you feel any regret about coming back here, back to this dark world and away from the presence of Jesus?"

"I'm not away from His presence, sweetheart. I feel Him closer than ever. And I would

never regret coming back to be with the people I love so much, to be with them, to fight evil side by side with them. Do you think if given the choice, I would want to stay in that peaceful place and allow you to fight alone? Tell me that's not what you think of me."

"No, I don't think that. I just kind of felt guilty for calling you away from such a beautiful place as Gabe described it."

"My place is by your side, always."

"But one day, you'll leave us."

"One day. Or maybe we'll go together. Either way, my love, it's the circle of life. Still, God knows the grief and agony we go through when we lose a loved one. That's why He sent His Son—that's why He offers eternal life, that's the purpose of His gift. His grace. His gospel. That's what it's really all about. 'Wherefore comfort one another with these words,'" he quoted.

He kissed her again. "I'm here, Shelley girl. Sleep now. If I remember correctly, children don't let anyone sleep in."

Shelley sighed. "The children—aren't they just beautiful?"

"They are. They look just like their mother."

✞✞✞

Nehemiah 8:10

"Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

✞✞✞

Don't panic and get ready!

Book #10 picks up right where this one leaves off.

The book grew too large to keep it as a single volume. God literally gave me scenes to write and sometimes before I could finish one scene, He gave me two more. I could barely keep up. The words poured out of me, through me really, and the whole process has been quite an amazing and spiritual adventure. I will never forget this time in my life and I'm so grateful to God for being with me and for all of the synchronicities and supernatural confirmations He gave me throughout this process.

People, God IS real!!

My heart is full and my love for each of you grows. Love! Love! Love!

Dear Father, who art in heaven,

I come before Thee at this time, as I finish this anointed book that You had me write, I mean, asked me to write, for I know I indeed had a choice. I'm so grateful for this time You have spent with me, speaking to me daily, telling me what to write, showing me what to write, and then giving me confirmations that I was indeed hearing from You. I am so grateful. My love for You, for Jesus Christ the Only Begotten Son, has grown to such overflowing that I cannot express it. My gratitude is the same, too great to express properly. I know I am unworthy, and yet You have seen fit to use me, and I am so very grateful.

I pray, Father, for your blessings on all who read this book. I pray You will fill them with Your Holy Spirit like You did me as I was writing, or even more, like You did the characters in the book as Grandmaster Kino was praying, or as millions prayed for Gabe Tanner. I plead the blood of Jesus over all who read these words, bringing them healing in *every* aspect of their lives.

I pray, Father, that I can continue to do Your work and Your will and that I will fulfill my contract in honor. And I do this in the mighty name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

A Note from McCartney Green...

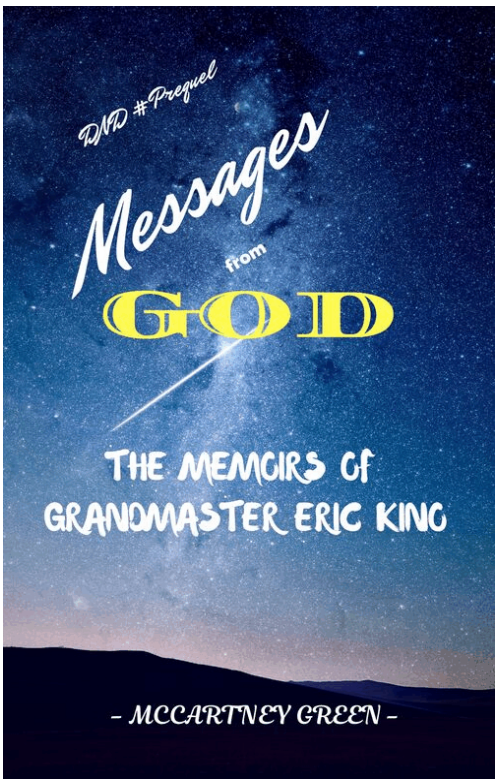
I will go where God leads me, I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...
Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.



Continue the Journey

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series

by McCartney Green

#1 A Healing-In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children-In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home-In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow-In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels-In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls-In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors-In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower-In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name (Part Two)
#11 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name (Part Three)
#12 Feed My Sheep-In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us-In Jesus' Name
#14 Such A Time As This-In Jesus' Name

Prequel- Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

All Books Free Download at: mccartneygreen.org

About the Books

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series currently includes fourteen novels and one prequel memoir. Each story brings its own message of faith, courage, love, healing, and hope while following the ever-growing circle of family and friends surrounding the Kinos.

Although each book contains a complete story and may be read on its own, the characters' lives continue from one novel to the next. Readers will experience the fullest journey by beginning with Book One and reading the series in order.

#1—A Healing—In Jesus' Name

When Shelley Adams crosses paths with Grandmaster Eric Kino, she is still carrying wounds from a trauma that changed the course of her life. Eric sees far beyond the frightened, uncertain woman she believes herself to be—and recognizes the strength, beauty, and purpose within her.

A Healing introduces the Kino and Adams families, the Lee brothers, and the dangerous Crane brothers in a story of love, courage, spiritual healing, and freedom from the victim identity. It is the beginning of the family—and the journey—that will grow throughout the entire series.

#2—Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name

Fourteen-year-old Toby Nash is an ordinary boy with an extraordinary heart. He loves baseball, dreams of helping and healing animals, and thinks becoming a singer might be pretty cool someday. Then he meets twelve-year-old Caroline and recognizes the carefully hidden signs that something is terribly wrong in her life.

As Toby and those around him struggle to protect a wounded child, Suffer the Children confronts the devastating realities of abuse while showing the difference one observant, courageous person can make. It is a story of rescue, patient love, faith, and the long road toward learning to feel safe.

#3—Finding Home—In Jesus' Name

Lisa Lewis has spent years building a successful life while distancing herself from the painful family secrets she left behind. When circumstances bring her to Pine Forest, Georgia, she encounters Chaz Stewart, his remarkable family, and the

grandmother who never stopped loving her.

Finding Home introduces Chaz, Lisa, Maddie, Jodi, John, and the Pine Forest family whose lives will soon become closely entwined with the Kinos. Through romance, danger, buried truth, teen pregnancy, incest, and post-traumatic stress, this story asks what it truly means to come home.

#4—Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name

The entire Kino family returns in a story centered on movie star and martial arts champion Ricky Kino and the fiercely independent Breanna Adams. Their love has never been simple, and the choices they make will affect not only their own future but the lives of the young people watching them.

As danger takes root close to home, Weeds Grow explores family relationships, fatherhood, personal identity, sexuality, fear, hatred, and the courage required to confront what has been allowed to grow in darkness. Some weeds can be pulled. Others fight to survive.

#5—Angels—In Jesus' Name

Widowed mother Lizzy Anderson is raising five little girls while working nights as a nurse and doing everything she can to hold her family together. Special Agent Keegan Tanner is dark, dangerous, driven—and carrying evidence that could expose a horrifying criminal operation.

When their lives collide, Lizzy and Keegan are drawn into a battle involving corruption, assault, child trafficking, and powerful people willing to destroy anyone who stands in their way. With help from the Kinos, the Pine Forest family, and Ameritech, they must discover whether wounded people can still trust love—and whether ordinary human beings can sometimes become angels for one another.

#6—The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name

Jeff Davis returns in a story that introduces Mickey, a fierce young woman who has spent much of her life believing she is expendable. When she is taken by people who place no value on human life, Jeff and the growing Ameritech family will risk everything to bring her home.

The Worth of Souls is a story of kidnapping, sacrifice, courage, first love, and

the immeasurable value of every human soul. It also offers an unforgettable glimpse of teenage Jeffy Kino and Cameron Wallace—two young people whose connection will help shape the future of the series.

#7—Warriors—In Jesus' Name

Shelley's youngest sons, Mark and Joey Adams, are grown men now, each carrying the teachings, strength, and example of the family that raised them. But even the strongest warriors may find themselves facing enemies they cannot defeat with physical skill alone.

Warriors confronts domestic violence in its most recognizable and insidious form—the gradual isolation, control, fear, and destruction of a person's spirit. It is a story about recognizing abuse, finding the courage to escape it, and learning that true strength is not found in domination, but in love, protection, truth, and freedom.

#8—June Flower—In Jesus' Name

June Flower Kino—Jeffy to those who love her—has grown from the miraculous child introduced in Book One into a gifted physician whose discoveries may change the future of medicine. But there are powerful people who will do anything to prevent that future from arriving.

Her journey takes her across the world, into danger, loss, breathtaking beauty, and the lives of two unforgettable Ugandan children. As Cameron Wallace returns to protect the girl he never stopped loving, the entire cast of the series gathers for a sweeping story of courage, family, sacrifice, healing, reunion, and one final twist that reveals the story may be far from over.

#9—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name

The next generation steps forward as the series moves between Hollywood and Pine Forest, Georgia. Young Eric Kino begins questioning the path laid before him, while Marine Raider Jacob Appel returns home and discovers that the girl he has known all his life may no longer be merely the little sister figure he left behind.

Meanwhile, seventeen-year-old Gabe Tanner—the charismatic only son in a family of beautiful sisters—is beginning a journey that will alter the lives of both the Tanner and Kino families. Love grows, danger gathers, and a shocking ending

given to the author in a dream changes everything.

#10—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Two

The story continues as Gabe Tanner and those who love him struggle with the consequences of what came before. Families draw closer, young relationships deepen, and faith is tested as darkness attempts to reshape the lives of the next generation.

At the same time, Eric Kino III begins to see his own path more clearly when he encounters a young woman stranded beside a highway. One act of compassion opens the door to a story larger than either of them expects, proving once again that a seemingly ordinary moment may be part of God's extraordinary plan.

#11—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Three

As Young Eric recovers and the younger generation rises to meet challenges of its own, old roles begin to shift. Children become leaders. Parents learn to step back. New heroes emerge, new relationships take root, and Gabe and Taylor's growing influence creates waves far beyond their families.

The expanding circle of Kinos, Tanners, Appels, Stewarts, and friends is eventually drawn toward Pine Forest, Georgia, where new spirits are arriving, long-awaited purposes are becoming clear, and an enormous undertaking will require every willing hand and faithful heart.

#12—Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name

The warriors gather in Pine Forest with a mission: to serve God's children, meet practical needs, restore hope, and allow miracles to unfold. What begins as a tremendous act of faith and generosity grows into something far greater than anyone imagined.

But darkness does not stand by quietly while people are fed, healed, reunited, and awakened. As opposition mounts, this extraordinary family refuses to be deterred. Secrets are revealed, wounds are healed, lives are transformed, and the command to "feed My sheep" becomes far more than a simple call to provide food.

#13—For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

For the first time, celebrate the Christmas season with the Kinos, Tanners, and the enormous family of friends God has gathered around them. As they prepare to honor the birth of Jesus Christ, they discover new opportunities to serve, forgive, welcome, and love.

Old friends return. Former enemies reappear. Strangers arrive carrying needs that may not be immediately visible. Through celebration, surprises, conflict, and acts of compassion, For Unto Us asks what might happen if people celebrated the Savior's birth not only with words and traditions, but by becoming His hands and heart in the world.

#14—Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

A mysterious stranger arrives in Pine Forest searching for answers about his family's past—and carrying the weight of a darkness that has plagued generations. His arrival may also hold an unexpected answer for twenty-three-year-old Lily, Miss Maddie's former protégée and now a gifted chef at the Pine Forest Inn, who has begun to wonder whether everyone in her family has found love except her.

But the stranger's story is only one part of a much greater gathering. Grandmaster Eric Kino begins to discover that he is not the only person whose life was changed by an angelic encounter at the age of ten. One by one, others emerge—men who disappeared for three days, returned with a calling, and were sent to teach the world.

The Spirit reveals that there are twelve in all. As these chosen men are miraculously drawn together, their first shared mission leads them to Pine Forest, where dark forces are already at work and an entire family is under attack. Old mysteries awaken, new love takes root, and warriors from across the world gather for a battle that may reveal why each of them was called for such a time as this.

What Readers Are Saying

Featured Reader Review...

"I just finished book nine in this series—DND #9—and I can honestly say I've been hooked since I started a few weeks ago. I found the author's website and began listening to her read the books aloud, and I haven't been able to stop since.

"The best way I can describe these books is that they're like a "how-to" manual for living as a Christian, told through an incredible story. Despite being the best fiction I've ever heard, the characters stay true to their faith—they don't cuss, and they don't sleep around before marriage. Instead, they lead by example, showing what it means to live a life guided by Christ.

"The books don't shy away from real-life struggles either. They walk you through tough situations, showing how to respond with faith—when to pray, how to pray, and how to lean on God through it all. I've read the Bible so many times that, at one point, I started to feel a little numb to it. But these books brought a fresh perspective that reminded me why I love Scripture in the first place.

"I'd recommend this series over watching TV or just about anything else the world has to offer—except reading the Bible itself."

More Reader Comments...

"I know deeply in my heart that your books will indeed be used as training manuals. My spirit was a witness to that when I heard you speak it when I first started listening to the books. That lit a fire under me to listen to them all, ASAP!" Yvonne Espy

"Angels is my new favorite book! I had the weekend off and all I did was read. I couldn't put it down. I only have a few pages left but I don't want it to end. Plus when I finish I will have to wait until your next book comes out. I just wanted to tell you how much I LOVED reading this book!"

"Just when I thought your books couldn't get any better I was proven wrong with Weeds Grow! What an exciting, great book. I am having trouble getting my work done because I can't put it down. You are an amazing writer and I have to say WOW!"

"I absolutely love DND #1. I can't wait to start reading the other books in the series. I was amazed at how addicted I became to the book. I can't stop thinking about the characters and their stories. I can definitely relate to Shelley's self confidence issues. Her strength is so great and makes me feel like I can be as strong as her in whatever situation life has to throw my way. Thank you for writing such an inspirational and motivating book."

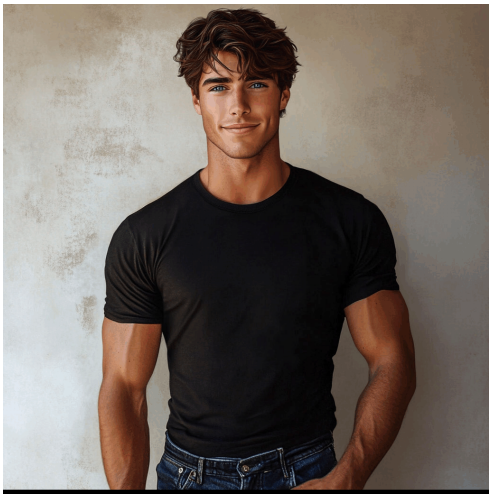
"I have read the first three books and I love them all. They are addicting! The problem is, I don't get enough sleep when I read them because I can't put them down! I am now having withdrawals because I don't have the 4th book. McCartney- you are great."

"I have read everything you have put out and have been patiently waiting for more. I love them all as they are all unique and different. Can't wait for more.(a thankful fan)"

"Just wanted you to know I loved all your books. Now, I am doing something I only do with my all time favorites. I am going back and reading them again. Thanks for sharing your gift. P.S. You are the real deal!"

"Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another one of your books soon. Hugs!"





Gabe Tanner



Taylor Kino



Rose Tanner



Violet Tanner

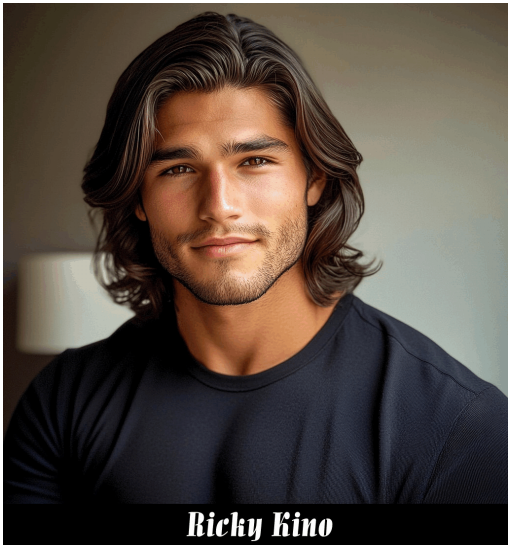


Iris Tanner - 2 Years Old


Jake Appel


Melaynah Stewart

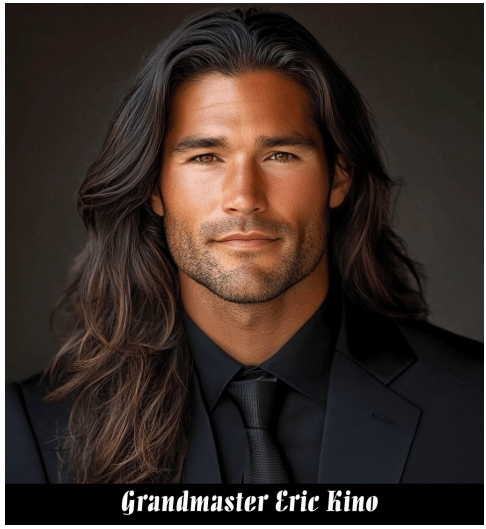

Breanna Adams


Ricky Kino





Shelley Adams Kino



Grandmaster Eric Kino

Continue with DND #10 Circle of Life - In Jesus' Name Part 2
Sneak preview...

"Our families, our loved ones, are a stewardship. God is trusting us to serve Him by serving them.
So be the best husband, wife, father, mother, brother,
sister, uncle, aunt, cousin that you can be.
Fill your heart with love and compassion
and steadfastness, and discard bitterness and jealousy.
And remember forgiveness. Because we all make mistakes."

~Grandmaster Eric Kino~

September 6th Midnight Friday
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor couldn't sleep. So much had happened in the past two weeks. It felt as if a whole year had gone by instead of two weeks. She'd almost been kidnapped. She almost lost her grandfather. She nearly lost the boy she loves. She gained an aunt and three uncles, all only two years of age.

She'd also missed a whole week of school, three volleyball practices, and one scrimmage game, the first week. She'd gone back to school this past week, but it'd still been strange, like everything had changed. She'd also missed her mother's birthday on August twenty-seventh, ten days ago, and her own birthday on the thirtieth, a week ago. Not that missing a birthday celebration was important; not when you compared it to losing a family member, or watching your one true love pass away in a hospital bed.

Right now, that one true love was just down the hallway, sleeping in one of the guest bedrooms. Gabriel Tanner. She wasn't the only one that loved him. Millions of people now knew and loved him because of his gigantic social media presence that had begun during an impromptu martial arts tournament. That presence had grown to a record-breaking presence because he'd been abducted, and now more recently because he'd risked his life to save hers, twice. He deserved the honor and the praise, but he was so humble, the fame actually embarrassed him.

He was also famous for his faith, for his relationship with Jesus, and for his powerful story and prayer after he emerged from a coma to talk about miracles. Every young girl in the country wanted him, but he was hers and he was just down the hall. Normally, if she woke in the middle of the night she'd pick up her phone and call him because he was usually three thousand miles away in the little rural town of Pine Forest, Georgia. But tonight, she just decided, she was gonna pay him a personal visit.

She swung her feet over the side of the bed, padded to the door, opened it quietly and peered down the hall. Her parents' bedroom was on the main level, which meant, besides her and Gabe, the only other bedroom currently occupied on the upper level of

their home was her brother's, young Eric. Everyone called him "Young Eric," because he was a III. Her grandfather was called Eric and her father went by Ricky since he was a young boy. Taylor looked left, to make sure there was no light coming out from under her brother's door, and then headed to the right, to the first door on the left past the staircase.

She stood by the door to listen. No sound. Slowly she turned the knob and peeked into the room. It was pitch black. She slipped inside and quietly closed the door. She heard his breathing catch. Heard him move.

"Tay? Is that you?"

She smiled at the sound of his voice. Just a little over a week ago she'd been told that he was dying. She thought she'd never hear his voice again. "Yes, it's me," she replied and moved forward.

He sat up and switched on the bedside lamp.

She came and knelt down on the floor beside the bed and sat back on her haunches. She couldn't help but smile. Even after being awakened in the middle of the night, he was so good-looking. His thick, dark hair was tousled. His blue eyes sparkling. He smiled and the dimple in his left cheek almost made her swoon.

"Taylor, what's goin' on?" he asked.

"I couldn't sleep." She smiled slyly. "And normally, when I can't sleep, I just call you. But I decided I'd take advantage of you actually being right here in my home."

He turned on his side and looked down at her. "Why can't you sleep?"

She shrugged. "I just keep thinking about everything that's happened over the past two weeks. I mean, you were gonna die. And then you didn't. You were miraculously healed. And Granddaddy WAS dead, and then he came back to life. And before that, you saved me from those guys, and I don't even know what they would have done to me, but I overheard my parents talking about it and I can't even conceive the things they were saying. I'm so grateful that you saved me." She shivered, her teeth slightly chattering.

"Are you cold?"

"I don't know if I'm cold or if me thinking about what's happened is giving me chills. It's all so surreal."

He raised the covers. "Come here and I'll make you warm."

She couldn't turn him down. She climbed in beside him and turned toward him and he pulled the covers snugly around her and put his arm across her body and pressed her close to him.

"There. All better?"

"Umm," she purred. "Much better."

He smiled at her, tilted her face up and kissed her, several times.

He touched the front of her nightshirt. "Cute."

She giggled. "I've had this Tweety-bird night shirt since I was like, twelve."

"And it still fits?"

"Well, it was too big for me when I got it. Now, it's only slightly too small for me."

"I guess you haven't grown too much in four years."

She frowned. She'd just turned seventeen a week ago, but nobody remembered.

Nobody remembered for a good reason. They'd been at the hospital for a week, pretty much saying goodbye to both Gabe and her grandfather. Her silly birthday wasn't important. Still, she was gonna have to remind him soon that she was seventeen. But not now. She didn't want him to think she was being petty.

She smiled at him and reached up and touched his face. "I have to keep reminding myself that you're really here. I keep telling God, 'thank you.' And I keep wondering, if after all you've been through, after speaking with Jesus face to face, are you still the same boy I fell in love with?"

He sighed. "I'm the same, but I'm also different. I now really do have to tell the world as much as I can that Jesus is real, and I'm not telling others because of my faith, but because I know. I know He's real. But, Tay, I'm still the same human boy, because– it's taking a great deal of willpower to not put my hand on you right now and see what's under that Tweety-bird nightshirt."

"Oh. Hmm, I'm supposed to help you with that, right? I guess I need to leave." She frowned. "Guess I'm not a very helpful companion because after thinking I'd lost you, and having you right here, I want to give everything to you and I'm wishing I could touch you too."

He blew out a breath at the thought. "Then I guess it's up to me to be the strong one this time. But, ya know what? I just realized, maybe I am a little stronger because the thought of speaking to Jesus again and telling Him I fell, I so don't want to have to do that. So, I'll be strong."

She sighed. "Aww, I love you so much, Gabe. Tell me what Jesus looked like."

✝✝✝

Pi, Pi, Everywhere is Pi

Pi is a reminder that what appears random is in fact, part of God's perfect order.

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745028410270193852110555964462294895493038196442881097566593344612847564823378678316527120190914564856692346034861045432664821339360726024914127372458700660631558817488152092096282925409171536436789259036001133