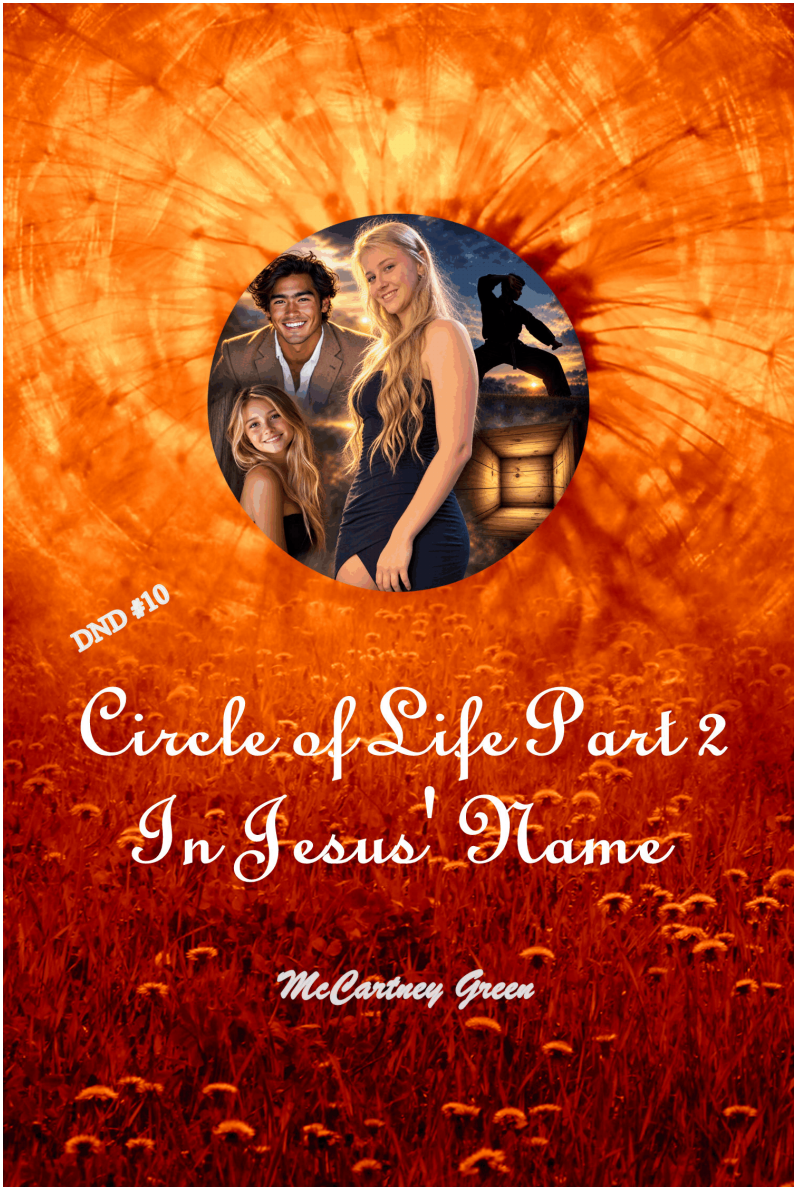

DND #10
Circle of Life Part 2
In Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

DND # 10

Circle of Life
In Jesus' Name
Part II

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!

Keeping Tabs

Book #10 begins September 7th,
a few hours after the end of Book #9.

West Coast Family

Kino Sr. Family
Eric turned 70 June 14
Shelley will be 65 Oct 27
Emmanuel (Manny) will be 3 May 2
Noah will be 3 May 7
Angelina will be 3 May 10
Abraham (Abe) will be 3 May 11
Missing child will be 3 May 27

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Rebecca born May 8 - stillborn
Rachel born May 12 - stillborn
Luke born May 13 - Down syndrome; murdered May 30
Simon born May 15 - congenital heart disease; murdered July 9
Maria born May 22 - hearing impaired; murdered two years later

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Kino Jr. Family
Ricky (Eric Jr.) turned 52 May
Bree (Breanna) turned 49 Aug 27
Eric III will be 21 Dec 14
Taylor turned 17 Aug 30

Mark Adams Family
Mark will be 40 Oct 29
Bella will be 40 Jan 29
JoJo (Joseph) turned 21 June 11
Logan turned 20 July 17
Emily will be 4 Dec 11

Joseph Adams Family
Joey (Joseph) turned 38 Aug 22
Breez will be 35 in April
Sophia turned 7 in May
Kelstyn will be 4 Dec 16
Ledger will be 3 Nov 23

Wallace Family
June Flower (Jeffy) Kino Wallace turned 28 on March 15
Cameron (Cam) Wallace turned 30 July 17
Expecting baby in November

Lee Families
Justin turned 66 in March
Lori turned 52 in April
Jason turned 58 in April
Angel turned 55 in May

Deal Family
Kimberly (Kim) Lee Deal will be 27 in Feb
Jensen Deal is 29
Expecting baby in November

Davis Family
Jefferson will be 44 Nov 8
MacKenzie Daley will be 43 Feb 3
Daniel will be 13 Jan 8
Jeremy will be 12 Jan 10
Expecting baby in November

East Coast Family

Coley Family
Marissa Coley turned 29 Aug 2
Senior Agent Christopher (Chris) Coley is 30
Expecting baby in November

Smith Family
Tobias (Toby Nash) is 55
Caroline (Caro) is 53
Grace (Gracie Nash) will be 26 in Feb
Brody turned 22 in July

Stewart Family
Chaz (Charles Anthony III) is 49
Lisa (Lewis) turned 46 May 15
Charlie (Charles Anthony IV) will be 15 on Feb 11
Matt will be 13 Jan 20
Aralyn will be 8 Feb 9
Expecting baby in December

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Maddie Lewis (Lisa's grandmother) was 87 when she left this world this past June 18

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John Appel Family
John is 50
Jodi turned 48 last Feb 14

Jacob Appel Family
Jacob (Jake) will be 22 Feb 28
Melaynah (Laynahbug) will be 21 November 22

Tanner Family
Keegan Tanner will be 50 Feb 8
Lizzy turned 42 April 10
Heather will be 25 Jan 10
Rose will be 24 Dec 25
Violet will be 24 Dec 25
Lily will be 23 Dec 19
Daisy will be 23 Dec 19
Gabe turned 18 June 14
Iris will be 3 Dec 10
Expecting baby in December

Others in the Community

Nolan Sawyer - Heather's fiancé, turned 28 April 26 [Tennessee Rancher and Veterinarian]

Agent CJ Blackmon turned 28 in May

Mike Moreland [Advertising Entrepreneur] will be 26 in September

Murphy Family
Rebecca Murphy is 36 [teacher/motel maid]
Peyton Murphy turned 18 in July
Lucas Murphy will be 15 Jan 9

Agent Andrew Dalton will be 39 Jan 5

More of the Stewart family:
Lisa's father-Joe Carter is 62, owner of Joe's Bar and Grill
Shirley Carter is 60

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

Charles Stewart Jr. - Chaz' father who owns the Stewart ranch
Patricia Stewart - Chaz' mother, a retired cardiologist

Cindy Stewart Clark - Chaz' little sister. She is married to Bo Clark and they have a daughter Kylie, who is 15

Dr. Stephanie Stewart-Ross - Chaz' youngest sister. She married Parker Ross and they have a son, Parker, who is 12

✝✝✝

Blessed be the God and Father
of our Lord Jesus Christ!
According to his great mercy,
he has caused us to be born again
to a living hope through the
resurrection of
Jesus Christ from the dead
~ 1 Peter 1:3 ~

✝✝✝

And without faith it is
impossible to please him,
for whoever would draw
near to God must believe
that he exists and that
he rewards those who seek him.
~ Hebrews 11:6 ~

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No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.
1 Corinthians 10:13

✝✝✝

"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~

****Note to Reader: DND #9 was Part I, and this book, DND #10 is Part II. This book should not be read before Part I. Print copies are available on Amazon. [I have prices down as low as Amazon will allow.] Or you may go to mccartneygreen.org or injesusnamemanuals.org and download for free.*

Chapter One

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."

"It was strange. He kind of shifted. He looked like every picture I've ever seen of him, though each picture can be really different. It was like, he was the most beautiful part of every likeness. He was — beautiful, handsome I guess. Bright. His eyes smiled. He exuded love. Sometimes his hair was kinda golden, sometimes, brown, and sometimes white, all in a few seconds. Sometimes it was longer and sometimes shorter. He was strong, fit. I remember that because a lot of renditions I've seen show him in a different way, like kinda frail."

"That's interesting."

Gabe nodded. "And mostly, he was powerful. The power was almost too much to take. But when he moved away, you immediately wanted more. It was addictive. Even now, I want to be near him again."

"Maybe that's why I crave being near you, because you also exude a power, Gabe. Maybe that's why so many people follow you. They feel it too. You're addictive."

"If they feel a power, it's not from me, it's the power of God. And I just hope I can do His work and His will." He looked at her beautiful face, ran a finger down her nose to her lips, kissed her again. "Aaand I think you and I were supposed to find each other."

She smiled. "I think so too. Funny thing though, we've been around each other almost our whole lives."

He yawned deeply, and then ran his hand over her hair. "Hopefully, that will continue. So, tell me all about it, babe."

"Tell you all about what?"

"After you were drugged. The next thing I knew, you were standing by my bed, holding my hand. What happened before that, like what happened when you weren't standing by my bedside? I want to know everything from your point of view."

"Oh, well, that's a big order. Why do you want to know?"

"Just trust me." He didn't want to tell her that getting her to talk about what she went through would help her emotionally and mentally. That's what his dad says, anyway.

"Okay, well, I have a vague recollection of riding in the ambulance," she began.

✞✞✞

September 7th, Saturday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric trotted down the steps and headed straight to the kitchen and straight to make himself a protein smoothie. "Good morning, Dad," he mumbled.

Ricky finished downing a bottle of water and turned. "Morning, son. Missed you on the beach this morning."

"Sorry. I overslept. Guess I was really tired."

Ricky nodded. "Your mom is too. I imagine it's because we exerted a lot of energy over the past few weeks, and then Dad coming home yesterday. The body can only take so much."

Young Eric smiled. "And yet here you are, having just worked out."

Ricky nodded. "Well, I try to push through. I like it when things are difficult for me. It also helps me think."

Young Eric shook his head in wonder. "When I grow up I wanna be like you, Dad."

Ricky sighed. "No, be like you."

"So, tell me, Dad, what did you think about and did you come to any conclusions?"

"I guess I'm just still trying to integrate into my psyche everything that happened over the past two weeks."

"Yeah, I'm still, like, shaking my head at the miracle. I mean, every time I think about it, I get all emotional," young Eric said.

"Me too. And grateful. So grateful," Ricky said with a sigh.

"Ya know, there are a lot of people on social media who are claiming the whole thing is a fake. Like, a publicity stunt."

Ricky shrugged. "You know how I feel about the media, mainstream or social. And logically, why would we need or want publicity?" He shook his

head. “Remember, there are also a lot who are hearing the call and recognizing the truth. ‘Let them who have ears to hear,’” he quoted.

Young Eric nodded.

“Did you notice if your sister or Gabe were up and about yet?”

“Didn’t see either one of them. I do know that Gabe was pretty wiped out. He says he’s been feeling like he could sleep all day, every day.”

Ricky frowned. “He might either need some extra recuperation time, or some conditioning. Think I’ll go up and speak with him.”

Eric nodded as he dumped a banana into the blender.

Ricky went up the steps and headed straight to Gabe’s door. He rapped his knuckles a few times on the door, turned the knob and pushed it open. He froze, gave his blood pressure time to settle and leaned quietly against the door frame.

Gabe stirred and looked up. “Hey, Mr. Kino. What’s goin’ on?” he asked sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

It was the soft tone to his voice that woke Gabe completely. He gasped, sat up quickly. He immediately shook Taylor awake. “Taylor, wake up,” he said firmly.

“Hmm? Is it morning already?”

“Uh, your Dad is here.”

She gasped and sat straight up. Her eyes wide.

“Uh, Mr. Kino, it’s not what it seems,” Gabe began. “I mean, um, nothing happened.”

“Keep going.”

Gabe nodded. “Um, Taylor was having a hard time sleeping. She came in my room and she was sitting by the bed on the floor, just talking about, you know, like, the miracle, and she shivered and I told her to come under the covers and I’d make– her– warm.” He slowed, because he realized how that sounded.

Ricky’s eyebrows shot up.

“I mean, well, what that sounds like, that’s not what I meant.” He blew out a breath.

“Isn’t it?”

Gabe thought. “I mean, I didn’t mean it in like a suggestive way. I swear.”

Ricky waited.

Taylor crawled out from under the covers and out of the bed and stood beside it.

Ricky looked her over as she stood there in her Tweety-bird night shirt.

“Do you have anything on under that, young lady?”

Taylor frowned. “No, sir.”

Gabe drew a quick breath. “I did *not* know that. I swear. I wouldn’t lie to you, Mr. Kino.” He too got out of bed, wearing nothing but his boxer

briefs.

Ricky shook his head and looked at Taylor. "And I suppose you didn't know he didn't have anything on but his underwear?"

She smiled. "Well, to be honest, I did know, because like, his chest was bare. But Daddy, it's like he's wearing shorts, so it's not that big of a deal."

"I'm, uh, sorry Mr. Kino. She was struggling with some things and I encouraged her to talk about everything that happened and how she was feeling and I guess we fell asleep. I've been really tired lately and I can't seem to get enough sleep, and when I do sleep, it's like dead to the world kinda stuff. If I'd woken up and realized she was still in bed with me I would've sent her back to her room, or – taken her back to her room."

Ricky closed his eyes. Pointed at Taylor. "You scoot, and get dressed. You have to have breakfast and then you have volleyball practice."

She started out, then turned and kissed her father's cheek. "We didn't do anything, so go easy on him. Besides, he almost died just a week ago."

Ricky smiled. Shook his head and turned back to Gabe who was now sitting on the side of the bed.

"Sir, I..."

"Gabe, you don't have to say anything else. You saved her life. I'm thinking that maybe you saved my father's life too. So, I trust that you have Taylor's best interests in your mind. But, I also remember what it's like to be a young man with girls everywhere trying to get to you."

Gabe nodded in understanding. "I guess because you were such a big movie star, you had a lot of girls comin' at ya."

"I did. And I actually finally gave in."

Gabe's mouth opened, but no words came out.

Ricky nodded. "It was a bad time and actually, in a way, you're in the same position."

"I'm no movie star."

"You're just as popular. And all those pictures of different parts of your body getting millions of views, you think that's because they think your shorts are attractive?"

Gabe blushed.

"I'm just sayin', you're in a difficult position. You have to be strong. Even if the girl making advances is my own daughter."

"I'm trying really hard, sir. I don't want to have to tell God that I was weak and that I gave in."

Ricky nodded. "Been there, done that, and it's not fun. So, you keep being strong. And I have to say, that it would help if you don't tempt yourself by inviting her into your bed to get warm."

Gabe grimaced, nodded his head. "Yes, sir, of course, you're right. It's just that she was shivering, and the need to help her, to protect her, I mean, it's really strong."

Ricky chuckled. "Well then, I guess I have nothing I can say to that,

huh, since it was your overwhelming need to protect my daughter that saved her life? Well done."

Gabe smiled.

"You're taking her to volleyball, so, you'd better get dressed."

"Yes, sir."

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September 7th, Saturday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jake Appel slapped a hand over his wife's mouth. "Shh, Laynahbug," he said with a chuckle. "If you scream we'll have a bunch of men come running into the bedroom to see what's wrong and that would be very embarrassing."

Laynah giggled and then sighed with pleasure as Jake rolled to her side and pulled her over to lay her head on his chest.

She ran her hand over the ridges of muscle. "I'm so happy, Jake. I am so very—content."

He smiled. "Me too."

Laynah sighed. "We'll have been married for three months coming up next week, and it's been the happiest three months of my life." She frowned. "Except for the few weeks you've had to report to Camp LeJeune."

"I know, baby. I'm happy too." He didn't say anything about the "having to report" part, because there was simply nothing to say about that. And soon, it wouldn't be for a week. It would be deployment, and though they knew it was coming, it was gonna hurt pretty bad.

She sighed, using her finger to draw circles on his chest. "You know, you made good on your honeymoon promise."

"Hmm, what promise was that?"

"You said you were gonna make love to me all night long."

He smiled, thinking of the most amazing night of his life.

"But then we got the call about Grams," she said softly. "I really miss her, but it was so cool that Gabe saw her when he, uh, died I guess. Or nearly died." She sighed. "First Grams, and then Taylor and Gabe, and then Grandmaster Kino. I'm still having trouble digesting everything that's happened."

"But you know, Bugs, you and I, we somehow knew Gabe was gonna pull through, remember?"

"I remember. Every time I prayed I had a feeling of peace come over me, like Jesus was whispering, 'Don't worry, everything will be alright.' Ya know what I mean?"

"I do. That's exactly how it seemed."

"I wonder why we felt that way and everyone else was so worried and so sad and so desperate."

"I've thought about that and I think it's because we weren't Gabe's immediate family, and with that little bit of separation, we were able to have

a better perspective. As much as we love Gabe, I mean, he's like my true little brother, still, maybe we weren't quite so desperate because we didn't live with him on a daily basis. That's what I think, anyway."

"Sounds logical."

"And now, here he is, living and thriving and almost completely healed. Ah, Bugs, God is so good."

She snuggled up under his chin. "Yes, yes He is. And I'm so grateful for how things turned out." Her fingers moved down to circle his navel.

"Me too." He reached down to stop her hand. He pushed her off his chest and leaned over her. "And I'm grateful for you." He lowered his head and kissed her. Softly at first, and then passionately.

He looked up, thinking for just a second.

"What are you thinking?" Laynah asked.

He smiled. "I'm thinkin' the sun is about to come up so I'd better hurry."

✞✞✞

Eric senior gazed around the dining room table at so many people that he loved, and most of them weren't even related to him. The Appels. He'd known John since he was a teenager. He was only a year younger than Ricky. He'd met Jodi shortly thereafter at one of his classes. Both of them were amazingly special people. John went into the military, Marine Special Forces, but eventually came home to stay. Their son Jacob hadn't come along until John was almost thirty. Now "little Jake" was a Marine Raider.

Then there were the Appels' next-door neighbors, the Stewarts. They were only represented today by Melaynah because her mother was having a difficult pregnancy and the rest of the family stayed in Georgia. Eric met the Stewarts through the Appels. They too, were amazing people and Eric discovered they had a connection. Lisa Stewart's mother, Lou, had become the owner and CEO of Golden Hotels. Lou had maneuvered a takeover when the former owners, the Crane brothers, who were Eric's nemeses, ended up on the wrong side of the law, well, one of them on the wrong side of the veil. Then when Lou passed away, she'd left the hotels to Lisa, who'd then come to Eric to get advice on how to deal with the acquisition.

Now, their eldest, Laynahbug, was married to Jake. The Stewarts also had three other beautiful children; Charlie age fourteen, a new high school freshman, Matt, age twelve, and little Aralyn, age seven. And soon, if all goes well with the pregnancy, another one due in December.

Then there were the Tanners. A large family of nine currently, but that would soon change. Ricky had taken notice of the Tanners and befriended them, way back before Lizzy and Keegan married. Keegan had been in the news, first touted as a hero who'd brought down a child-trafficking ring, and then vilified for using "excessive force" while trying to rescue Jeff Davis from the terrorists who'd been trying to buy the babies. It was a hard time. And now, here was Keegan sitting at Eric's breakfast table with his sweet

wife and their six daughters. Five daughters from Lizzy's first marriage plus one soon to be son-in-law, Heather's fiancé, Nolan Sawyer, and finally, little Iris, the youngest. But not for long, because Lizzy too was expecting in the beginning of December. Their son, eighteen-year-old Gabe, was currently staying at Ricky's house because he wanted to spend time with his girlfriend, Ricky's daughter, Taylor.

Then there were the four newest faces, two-year-olds Manny, Noah, Abe and Angelina, Eric's and Shelley's own children. They were born by surrogates using stolen sperm and eggs from when Eric and Shelley had been abducted three years earlier. They'd only found out about the children two weeks ago. Now here they sit, their beautiful brown eyes, sweet smiles and even sweeter spirits melting everyone's hearts.

Jeffy and Cam were also living in the Kino house. Cam had to leave early this morn for work, but he'd be back by the afternoon. Eric's eyes met Jeffy's. She used to be his youngest child. Now she had four younger siblings. Five, if with the help of Jeffy's psychic abilities, they are able to locate the fifth living child with the club foot who'd been given away. There had actually been ten surrogate children, but two died at birth and three had been murdered, as had the ten surrogate mothers. Eric sighed as he allowed the ache to subside.

Jeffy smiled at him. He knew what she was thinking. It was exactly two weeks ago that they'd sat around this table at an Ameritech meeting and had no idea that their whole world would be turned upside down. But here they were, though not all the same people at the table, still, people he loved, respected and admired, sharing breakfast with him, with his new children. God is amazing, and Eric knew God had those murdered children in His arms.

Shelley put her hand on Eric's shoulder as she placed a breakfast plate in front of him. "Are you trying to decide who to call on to bless the food?"

He smiled. "There are so many choices, I can't decide. Any volunteers? Who would like to say the blessing?"

"Me, me, me," Iris said loudly.

Eric nodded as everyone laughed. "Iris it is, then."

"Iris, do you want me to help you?" Rose asked.

Iris frowned. "No, I can do it mysef. Gabe tode me how."

Everyone smiled. Eric was watching Iris when she looked right at him.

"Bow yo head," Iris commanded.

They all chuckled. Eric complied.

"Deah Fawder, tank you so so so so much fo awr food. Pweez bwess it. I wuv you Jesus, so so so much. In Jesus name, a– men."

"Amen," they all repeated.

"That was beautiful, Iris," Eric said.

"I wanna say it," Angelina said.

"Okay, one more. And if anyone else wants to say it after Angelina, you'll have to wait until lunch. Got it?" Eric said.

They all nodded. They bowed their heads again while Angelina said almost an exact duplicate of Iris' prayer.

They all ate their food and chatted about what would be taking place that evening.

Finally John Appel looked up. "Eric, I just want to say thanks, for including our families in your, what, I guess your 'goodbye' letter. It meant a lot to us to know that you love us, because we all truly love you, and we continue to thank God every day that you're still among us."

"Amen," Lizzy said.

Eric smiled. "It was a strange event, wasn't it? I've been pondering it. The event itself must be significant in its timing, I think. I mean, almost three years earlier, Jeffy and I had that vision. Then right before it happened, Gabe had both a dream when we were visiting in Georgia, and a vision right here in our own kitchen. Why would God give us that heads-up? What is the significance?"

Keegan frowned. "You don't think that you and Gabe being on death's door, having joint NDEs has meaning enough?"

"Yes, of course I do. It was a truly miraculous occurrence. But I'm getting a thought that this miracle and the subsequent revival in faith sweeping the nation is not the only thing. This is like, a prelude to something. Or preparation for something. Something even bigger."

"Oh, Lord, I don't know if I can take anything bigger," Lizzy said.

Keegan squeezed her hand.

"I think you'd be surprised at how much stronger we can become," Eric stated. "I'm just saying, be ready. Stay in prayer. Stay vigilant. Don't get distracted. I was told that Gabe had a message from Miss Maddie, to be sure to follow God's laws because He is preparing His warriors for something. That sounds pretty big to me."

Jake Appel nodded. "Until Jesus comes, we gotta stay strong and continue to occupy, which means to me, to hold the light in a world of darkness. Gabe and I have talked about that and it's what both of us will try to do, even to the giving of our lives if necessary."

Laynah sighed at his words. Rose reached under the table and squeezed her hand.

Eric nodded. "Commendable, of course, as in John 15:13. 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.' We must be ready to do just that or to accept that, and to continue in the faith and know that we'll see each other again. God knows that the hardest thing in life is the death of a loved one, and He has made it possible that all of that sorrow will be wiped away. In Revelation 21 it says, 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' What a beautiful promise." He looked

around and gave a soft laugh. “Sorry. Guess you didn’t realize there would be a sermon at breakfast.”

“No, but we’re grateful to be preached at by you, Daddy,” Jeffy assured him. “Because the alternative is not preferable.”

Everyone agreed.

Shelley rose and went to her children to urge them to finish their breakfast, promising them a trip to the swings and slide in the backyard with Daisy and Lily Tanner, and little Iris too. That got them taking big bites of their scrambled eggs.

The rest of the group helped to clear their dishes and clean up quickly because they all had a big project to finish by four o’clock.

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September 7th, Saturday Morning
Denver, Colorado

Mike Moreland stood in the beautiful park at sunrise, watching as his friend and photographer/videographer worked magic, making the somewhat attractive fitness guru, Merrill Mitchell, look like a superstar. The lighting was perfect. The mountains in the Denver setting made the ideal backdrop for the shoot. The company, Mitch’s Fitness, was about to get hot and their fitness videos and sportswear were gonna sell millions in merch. Though, for the first time, Mike had a few misgivings with the services that his new client offered.

He’d almost turned her down. He usually made it an absolute rule that he must completely believe in whatever his client was selling. He’d seen a lot of fitness crazes. This woman was into smarter not harder kind of stuff. Sounded good, but it felt a little off for some reason and he was having a hard time figuring out why he felt that way.

The woman was not bad looking. She was fit and trim, full of energy, positive and upbeat. She was also powerful, almost overwhelmingly so. And maybe that was what sold him. She was blonde, but not a natural blonde like Rose. Merrill’s hair had dark roots. But she was very fit, and very buxom. Still, if he were to be honest, she was no more fit than Rose Anderson. He smiled at the thought of Rose. Maybe it was because of Rose that he wasn’t comfortable with the smarter not harder approach. Rose believed in working hard at something. She didn’t believe in magic pills. He was sure of that. He actually admired her for it. And yet, he had some mixed feelings about Rose too.

Though Rose didn’t work out like this woman, she seemed to be every bit as fit. He knew Rose did the martial arts thing a few days a week and she did weight training to supplement that discipline. She rode horses. She went to gun ranges. He shook his head. That was a big red flag for him. He was still trying to understand her obsession with guns. He wasn’t sure if he approved. He’d never shot a gun, never even held one. He didn’t know anything about them really, except that they made him uncomfortable.

Unfortunately, he DID know what it was like to have one pointed at him, because Rose had drawn on him herself.

He couldn't tell if Rose was truly interested in him. He was thinking he was fairly interested in her. She got to him. She was definitely hot. She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever dealt with and he definitely wanted her in his bed. But Rose was Victorian when it came to that, though he did like a challenge and thought it would be fun to climb that mountain. It did seem like she occupied his mind a lot when she wasn't around.

He thought about the ad they'd shot with Rose and her sisters. It'd gone immediately viral, as he knew it would, especially once he'd let it be known that both sets of twins were the half-sisters of *THE* Gabe Tanner. It didn't bother him a bit that he used the boy to manipulate the media. And just as he'd promised, *Twin Wave Beauty* sales skyrocketed, giving both himself and the twins a hefty paycheck. Of course, there were more steps to be taken for *Twin Wave*; holiday ad specials and the like, but he knew what he was doing and had no doubt that *Twin Wave* would be on a hot gift list this coming holiday season.

He came back to the present as the shoot ended and Merrill Mitchell, nicknamed "Mitch," approached him with her wide, gorgeous smile.

"So, what do ya think?" she asked.

He took her hands, smiled warmly. "I think you're gonna be the next Ally Brooks," he said, naming the current fitness trainer to the stars.

She clapped her hands together. "I'm trusting you to make that happen."

"And I'm trusting you, cuz I don't get paid until that happens."

She grabbed his arm. "Oh you'll get paid," she murmured. "And now that this is done, whaddya say we go celebrate?"

He grimaced. "Well, I have a lot of work to do, aaand, Miss Mitch, it is only nine o'clock in the morning."

"Ah, come on. Everyone needs a little down time," she said, leaning close, touching his face. "You're always so businesslike, Mike. You need to relax, and I can take care of that for you. I can make you relax." The suggestion was clear.

Why not, he thought. He could pretend it was Rose. "Okay, Mitch, I may have time for a couple of drinks at lunch. Go home, change. I'll pick you up at noon."

She kissed his cheek. "Awesome! See ya then."

He nodded.

Because he could do what he did so well, namely, make people and companies into stars using social media, he was used to beautiful women throwing themselves at him. He usually had no problem with that, but it felt like work today. Maybe he was becoming immune to it. Maybe working up close with the Tanner twins, four of the most beautiful girls in the world, maybe it ruined him for anyone else. Well, he *was* tense, and *he did* need a little down time. Even though he'd just agreed to a date with the lovely

Mitch, he pulled out his phone and pushed a few buttons.

"Hey, Mike."

"Hello, Rose. How's Gabe?"

"He's great. Almost back to normal. How's your shoot going in Denver?"

"I'm about to wrap. Looks like it's gonna be another winner."

"I'm impressed," Rose said.

"Good. That's my quest in life, to impress you."

"Hmm, and how do I impress *you*?"

"Well, you're probably the most beautiful girl I've ever met."

She laughed. "Other than my twin."

"Right, other than her."

Rose decided to press. "And that's it? I mean, beauty is only skin deep. At least that's what they say."

Mike sighed. "Well, first, don't diminish the power of beauty. Still, I'm sure that now that you've finally graduated and received your business degree, and really set your mind to something, you'll be pretty darn impressive."

Rose frowned because it sounded kind of like a veiled insult. "Gee, maybe one day I'll be impressive," she said sarcastically.

"Sure you will," he placated. "Like the client I'm working with now, she's very focused, very powerful. I'm sure you'll be like that."

"Well, one can only hope," Rose muttered.

Mike picked up on her sarcasm and realized he'd made a mistake. "And Rose, you were a natural when we were shooting the ads. Heck, with your beauty and my brains, we could take over the world."

Rose gave a brittle laugh and then sighed. "So, what's next on your agenda?"

"I'll be flying out tomorrow."

"Where to?"

"Well, I guess that's up to you. When are you headed home?"

"On Monday. Tonight we have a big deal party and tomorrow we're all headed to church together."

"Oh gee, that sounds like loads of fun," he said sarcastically.

Rose frowned. "Going to church IS fun. You should try it sometimes."

"Yeah, not really my cup of tea."

"Well then, what is your cup of tea? Do you not believe in God at all?"

"Not really," he replied flippantly as if it wasn't important.

"Well now, that's a shame, because I guarantee, He believes in you."

"Yeah, Rose, I hear what you're saying, but to me that sounds like you telling me that Santa Claus is real."

"Wow," Rose said, shaking her head. "You know, there's way too much evidence that there is much more going on in this world than we can experience with just our five senses. Too much evidence to deny it."

"Yeah, okay, well, tell ya what, maybe one day, if we ever have some time to kill, you can explain all that to me."

"Oh, you can count on it," Rose said fervently. "I think you'll find something to consider, Mike. I mean, did you hear everything I told that happened with Grandmaster Kino and Gabe?"

"Sure, sure, I mean, that's interesting, but those things can be explained. But I'll listen to what you have to say, and while you're at it, maybe you can explain how owning guns can go along with a supreme deity."

Rose was silent a moment because he'd thrown her off. She drew a deep breath. "I can do *that* right now. Ya see, under *God* we have the divine right of free will, that is the right to choose our own path, and to make our own decisions. Many people exercise that freedom of choice by owning guns so that we can defend ourselves. And our Constitution, having been written by *Godly* men, guarantees that our government will not interfere with that right, the right to defend ourselves, to bear arms. The dark side lies to you, they try to make you think that you can give up your guns and let the good-hearted government defend you and take good care of you and that's a load of BS. The reason a government would have to disarm their citizens is not a good one. Think hard and figure that one out. And if your objection to owning guns is gun violence, I can tell you that the answer to gun violence is not taking guns away from law-abiding citizens. And guns don't—"

"I know, I know, guns don't kill people, people kill people," he added sarcastically. "And with that, I really need to go, Rose, I, uh, I need to get some stuff done here before I fly out tomorrow."

"Oh, well, okay." She drew a breath, realizing she may have flown off the handle. "So, again, where are you flying to?"

"I guess I'll just head back to Portland for a little bit."

"Oh, okay," Rose said, realizing she'd pretty much made him decide to go home to Portland instead of coming to visit her. "Well," she began, "so, maybe we can meet up sometime before the holidays?"

"Maybe. I mean, actually, we'll *have* to because you and your sisters are scheduled to do some Christmas ads for *Twin Wave*."

"We'll *have* to? Okay, I get it. So, give me a call and we'll figure when we will *have* to get together," she said sarcastically.

"I will."

She sighed. "Have a safe flight, Mike."

"Thanks, and you have a blast at church."

"Yep. Bye." She ended the call. Stared at the phone.

"You okay, Rosie?" Violet asked, joining her in the Kino kitchen.

She shrugged. "I guess. I have a feeling I won't be seeing Mike anytime soon."

"Why not?"

"I think he just broke up with me, without really saying the words."

"Did y'all have a fight?"

"Not really. But he just compared God to Santa Claus and also pretty much insinuated that I'm all beauty and no brains, and I kind of went off on him. Me and my stupid sarcastic mouth."

"Oh," was all Violet could think to say. She had no idea what to say to make her sister feel better.

Rose smiled at her twin, putting on a brave face. "Mike and I have never really discussed God or religion before. I guess I just assumed he understood how I felt about those things. I mean, I'm pretty forthright, aren't I?"

Violet smiled fondly. "Uh, yeah, I'd say so– to put it mildly."

Rose only smiled slightly at the tease.

"I mean, if he doesn't want to believe, that's fine, but he shouldn't disparage what I believe, right?"

"No, he should know you well enough by now to know that speaking ill of God would be hurtful. Especially knowing what we all just witnessed."

She looked up. "Right?"

"He does know, correct?"

"Yes, I went to great lengths to explain it all, because I thought it would be a good 'spread the Word' type thing." She looked down, shaking her head.

Violet sighed and put her arm around her sister. "Oh, honey. Don't be sad."

Rose nodded. "Trying not to be." She looked up. "Do I come across as dumb?"

"Uh, certainly not."

"Tell me the truth, Vi."

"I am telling you the truth. You were the one in school with straight A's without even studying. You're the one Dad talks to about politics and economics and business. Honey, you have a brilliant and quick mind."

Rose fought back the emotions that surged.

"Oh, Rosie," Violet said as she threw her arms around her sister. "You can't let what some guy said off the cuff define you. I know you have more confidence than that. And maybe he didn't really mean it the way you think."

Rose wiped at her eyes. "I mean, logically, I didn't really know if this guy was right for me. I even told Dad as much. So, I'm not sure why this hurts. What if I'm supposed to teach him about God? What if I'm his chance to find salvation and I just blew it?"

"If you're supposed to teach Mike about God then God will let you know. You said he didn't actually say the words. Maybe he's just a little confused."

"Yeah, but I got a distinct vibe. Let's just see how long it is before he calls again, that is, IF he calls again."

"Okay. Let's just see. So, you wanna go see what we can do to help Shelley for tonight? I mean, that'll give you something to focus on."

"Yep. Let me just run upstairs for a minute." She turned quickly and ran up the front staircase.

Violet watched her go, her heart breaking for her always strong, always confident, always in control sister.

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Psalm 91:5-6

"You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday."

Chapter Two

September 7th, Saturday Morning
Brookside High School, Newport, California

The moment they walked into the gym at Brookside High School, the entire team came running over to see Gabe. They hugged him, took selfies. Gabe smiled and chatted while Taylor went to the locker room. He watched her go. Exactly two weeks ago, they were in this same gym, but with two bodyguards. So much had happened since that fateful day.

Fateful day, he thought again. It had been a big day. That's why God had sent signs and visions to Grandmaster Kino, Jeffy and himself, not that he thought of himself in any way like them. Though, for some reason, God had decided to give some prophetic signs to him. He wasn't worthy, but he would try harder to be worthy.

He settled back on the bleachers to watch practice. Then he remembered that last time, he'd made a video and decided it would be a good time to do another one. He pulled out his phone and went live.

"Hey, everyone, Gabe Tanner here. It was two weeks ago today that I made a video from this high school gym watching Taylor's volleyball practice. And that's what I'm doing again. She's doing great. Hopefully, I'll get to see her play. Maybe we'll go live on a few of her games. Let me know if you'd like to see that.

"Anyway, I just want to say thanks again for all the prayers and well wishes as our families just went through a really hard time. We've been so blessed and these hard times have made us even stronger in our faith. I admit, I gave in to sorrow and grief over Grandmaster Kino. I wasn't living by my faith. I've learned so much. I've read many of your experiences that you all have posted and I see that we've all learned a lot. All I know is, I wanna be a better person and help more people. I hope you do too.

"My body is healing and getting a little stronger every day, so I'm gonna fly back home and work on some community projects. Let me know what you're doing too. We can post your pics and videos on my website. I missed my window, so my new job training at Ameritech and my freshman year at college won't start until after Christmas.

"So, let me tackle something right here, right now. I've read some of the comments that some people think that what happened when I was in the hospital was a big stunt, or fake or something like that. I have to say, for those who are claiming that, I don't think you're being very logical. I mean,

really, do you think the hospital and doctors would all go along with making some big fake thing just for my publicity? Do you think Grandmaster Kino, known for honor and truth and integrity, would go to those lengths to fool everyone? I'm not gonna try to convince you. It doesn't really bother me that you think what you think. It actually doesn't make a bit of difference to me. But it DOES make a difference to you and to your eternal life. Just remember that Jesus said that those who have ears to hear, WILL hear. That means, God's children will hear His voice and come to Him when called. He's calling you.

"I hope those of you who doubt will open your hearts and minds to the possibility that God is real. Just to the possibility. But either way, listen, I'm not mad at you. I love you all, and will pray for God to wrap His arms around you and bring you happiness. Of course, I pray *that* because I know what kind of true happiness only God can bring. Okay, well, I guess that's enough preaching for today. Hey, don't forget to hit the 'like' and 'subscribe' buttons. Peace out."

He put his phone away and looked up just as Taylor turned and smiled at him. Lord, she looked good. Those tight shorts, those muscular thighs, her sweet smile, her big gray eyes. The girl was something else. He loved her. He wanted her. He hoped that they would still be together in a few years so that he could marry her. But he was also smart enough to know that things could change. He sighed.

He watched as everyone worked on their serve. She had a tremendous vertical jump which gave her an amazingly powerful serve. Yeah, he had to get to some of her games, but he'd already told his mom that he was gonna go home for a little while. He had to figure it out.

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Taylor couldn't take her eyes off her cute boyfriend. She was so happy and proud that he was hers. She was trying hard to concentrate on practice, but she had to glance over at him every once in a while. He was so hot. He wore jeans and you could tell his thighs were thick and athletic. He had on a light blue knit shirt that matched his blue eyes. It also accentuated the muscles in his arms and chest. His thick, dark hair had a little wave to it. It was short on the sides, but a little longish on top causing the bangs to fall over his forehead. Any girl would envy his long, dark lashes, and his perfect mouth that was so good at kissing her. He had a gorgeous smile and that dimple in his left cheek was simply stunning.

She sighed and turned back just in time to dive for the ball, making a perfect dig. She heard Gabe clap and tell her it was a good job. She didn't dare look at him. All she wanted to do was be near him. All the time. Forever. She yearned for him and she had no idea how she was gonna make it until her eighteenth birthday when she could make the decision to be with him. Not that she would go against her parents' wishes, but if they believed her to be mature enough, maybe they would agree with her. One more year.

She drew a deep breath. She would make it. She would live in the moment as her parents and Gabe always encouraged her to do.

Once practice ended, the team went back to the locker room to gather their belongings. As they straggled back out, some left, but most came over to chat with Gabe again. He was kind and amiable and joked around with them. They clicked off pics almost continuously. When one stopped, another started. He didn't mind anymore. He was getting more and more comfortable with it.

Taylor made her way over. He hugged her right there in front of everyone, and then kissed her softly and quickly before the coaches saw, because if Brookside was anything like Pine Forest Public High School, PDAs were not allowed. A few of the girls made that funny "awwuuh" sound, which made Gabe chuckle.

"Well, it was nice to see y'all again," Gabe said.

The girls giggled. Taylor smiled. Her guy was adorable.

At first Gabe didn't understand what was so funny, then he realized they were laughing at his southern accent when he'd said, 'y'all.' Trying hard not to roll his eyes, he looked at Taylor. "You ready, Tay?"

She nodded. He took her bag and her hand and they headed out.

She slowed as they walked. "So, you said, the van that they put me in was parked right out there?"

"Yes. And it took off that way," he said as he pointed east, to his right. "And I took off that way," he said as he pointed at a diagonal northeast.

He went on to describe the whole incident. They even walked over to see if his bloodstains were still on the drive. They were. It made Taylor shudder and they decided that was enough of that. No more looking back today. They got in the car and headed out to grab some lunch at a local strip mall that featured gourmet hotdogs. Gabe stuffed down three to Taylor's one. She was just wiping some mustard off his cheek when a guy and two girls came up to their table.

"Hey, we're sorry to bother you, but you're Gabe Tanner, aren't you? And you're Taylor Kino, right?"

Gabe and Taylor had to finish chewing and swallow. Finally they smiled.

"Yes," Gabe said with a nod. He had to keep himself from instinctively checking for the gun on his hip. He usually didn't do that, and it was a bad habit to get into. He guessed he was still a little jumpy.

The girls giggled. "Can we have your autographs?" one of the girls asked, holding out a permanent marker. She handed the marker to Gabe.

"Um, so what do you want me to sign?"

She touched her pink shirt, just above her breast.

Taylor could've been insulted because of the obvious discourtesy, but she was used to the public and actually laughed.

Gabe shook his head. "How about I sign the sleeve." It wasn't stated as

a question.

He signed the sleeves of both girls and then they asked Taylor to sign the other sleeve. The boy shook Gabe's hand. "It's actually an honor to meet you both. At my church, we prayed for you and Grandmaster Kino. What happened was quite an experience for all the people who prayed for you, and I hope you realize what an amazing example you two are for kids everywhere."

"Thanks, man. We've been blessed and we just want to serve God in any way we can."

"And you make other people want to do the same. Would you two mind signing my hat and let me get a selfie? Then we won't bother you anymore."

They did as requested and the trio said their goodbyes and left them.

"Sorry about that," Gabe said.

"About what?"

"The disrespect."

Taylor smiled. "God is gonna send us tests. When you're in the public eye, everything is a test. Not only is the world watching, but God is watching."

"That's very wise of you, Tay."

She giggled. "I can't take credit. Those are my father's words. And BTW, you just passed that test with flying colors."

Gabe grinned. "Whew, that was close."

"What are you saying?"

"I almost did as she asked without thinking."

"Liar."

He laughed. "Come on, let's get back to the house. We still need to shower and go over to the family dinner at your grandparents'."

"Wish we could get out of it and just spend the rest of the day and night cuddled up together on the sofa."

"One day, we'll be able to do just that."

"One day when?"

"Don't be so pushy."

"When?"

He chuckled. "You know what day I'm talking about, but right now, let's focus on the present moment."

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September 7th, Late Saturday Afternoon

PAC Coast Highway, Newport Coast, California

Jordan Brooks grunted as she tried with all of her strength to loosen one of the lug nuts on the wheel of her Honda Civic. She tried using her foot and jumping up on the lug wrench, but that only made it fall off the nut and caused her to tumble down onto the rocky pavement, skinning her knee and smashing her finger against the car.

"Ugh," she growled as she stood back up and kicked the tire. She looked

up as a BMW pulled over onto the side of the road just in front of her car. She hoped it wasn't some sicko pervert and no one would ever hear from her again. She hoped it *was* a guy strong enough to loosen the lug nuts. He walked back to her rear driver's side tire where she was standing.

She eyed him as he approached with a smile on his face. He certainly looked strong enough. Actually, he looked slightly familiar.

"Having a little trouble?" he said calmly. He eyed her, quickly noting the tiny line of blood on her knee, the low-cut little black dress with tiny straps at the shoulders and the one-inch heels. Her blond hair was up in a messy bun and she stood still and ready, as if she might need to spring away if necessary.

She gave a slight smile as she twisted the lug wrench in her hands. "Yes. I can't seem to loosen the lug nuts."

He held his hand out. "May I?"

She placed the wrench in his hand. "Thank you. If you'll just loosen them, I can do the rest."

She watched him as he smiled as if she'd said something funny. He took off his sport coat and laid it over the back of her car. She couldn't help but notice that her assessment was pretty accurate. Without the jacket she could see that his chest and arms were ripped with muscles. He bent down and with very little effort loosened all of the lug nuts.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I really appreciate you stopping. It was very kind. I can take it from here."

He smiled. "I have no doubt, but would you consider letting me finish the job?"

"Really, it's not necessary."

"I totally believe you. However, I'm gonna have to explain to my family why I'm late, and when I tell them that I stopped to loosen the lug nuts for a young lady but didn't finish the job for you, they're gonna give me a really hard time."

She laughed. "Well, we can't have that, huh?"

"No, we really can't." He started jacking the car up the rest of the way.

"You could just *say* that you did it for me," she offered.

"I could, but I never lie."

"Oh, well, that's refreshing."

"Where were you headed?"

She screwed her lips into a pout and he could tell she wasn't sure if she should tell a stranger where she was going.

"It's okay. You don't have to say. I was just curious because you're all dressed up." He lifted the spare tire, frowned. "Instead, I'll tell you where *I'm* going. It's a family surprise birthday party."

"Oh, that sounds like fun. And here I am making you late."

"Well, the party doesn't start for a while. I was going to help set things up. And anyway, I didn't have to stop, so if I'm late it's my own fault. But

when I saw you try to jump on the wrench and fall down, and then kick the car, I had to stop, if only to thank you for the laugh."

She made a face.

He sighed. "But I'm afraid we have bigger problems."

"What problems?"

"Your spare is flat."

"It is?" She reached out and squeezed it and it didn't give. "It doesn't feel flat."

"Well, it is. I'll show you." He put the spare tire on the car and lowered the jack. It quickly became obvious that the tire was indeed flat.

"Oh, no, now what am I gonna do?" she mumbled. "And my phone is dead because I let my roommate borrow my charger." She wrung her hands together and looked up at him. "May I use your phone?"

"Of course." He picked up his jacket and pulled the phone out of the inside breast pocket, unlocked the phone and handed it to her.

She took the phone and thought a minute and then shrugged and punched in some numbers. "Mom? Hey, I need you to do me a favor. Give me Jackie's number. I *do* have it, but I can't get to it because my phone died. I know, but I loaned my charger to Jackie. I'm running late because I'm on the side of the road with a flat tire. Yes, I know, Mom. Can you give me the number?" She repeated the number aloud. "Thanks, Mom. Love you too. No, I'm okay. No, if I have to I'll call a tow truck I guess. Yes, well, this guy stopped to help. No, he seems okay." She glanced up at him and he gave her a slight smile. She went back to her conversation. "I'm on the Pac Coast highway a little south of Newport Beach. No, you better let me call since I can tell them where I am. I will. I promise. Okay. Love you too, oh, wait. Shoot, too late."

She sighed, rolled her eyes and glanced up at the guy, who was smiling at her. "Um, I forgot Jackie's number. I have to call her back."

He rattled off the number. Her eyes opened wide. "Wait. Say it again," she said as she punched in the numbers as he said them slowly. She turned away for a more private conversation.

"Jackie. Hey. I'm broken down on the side of the road and it looks like I'm gonna have to get a tow truck, so I don't think I'm gonna make it. Maybe you can find someone else to take. Wow, you replaced me pretty fast, I mean, right now I'm only fifteen minutes late. Okay, well, enjoy the show. Yep. Bye."

She handed the phone back to the guy. Then remembered she hadn't called the tow truck yet. When she asked for it back, he waved her off. He was texting someone. When he finished texting, he looked up at her. "I'll call roadside assistance. My phone can give them our exact location."

"Thank you." She frowned. "I guess this was a doomed evening."

He grinned. "Let's salvage it. Why don't you join me at the family party?"

"Um, no offense, but, well, I mean— "

"I know, I could be a serial killer. But I'm not. Let me introduce myself. I'm Eric Kino."

She frowned. "Kino? Any relation to the famous Kinos?"

"Well, my father and mother are famous."

"Yeah, right."

He grinned. "No, really. My father is Ricky Kino. My mother is Breanna Adams. *I* sort of stay out of the limelight, but I swear I'm not lying." He handed her his phone. "Here, Google me."

She took his phone and looked up 'Eric Kino.' "It says here you're a Grandmaster and Ricky Kino is your son."

He laughed. "Yeah, so that's my grandfather. Scroll down. You'll eventually see pics of me."

She did and her eyes got big. She held the phone up beside his face. "Oh my gosh, that IS you."

He nodded. "So, now that we have that settled, and you know I wouldn't hurt you, would you like to accompany me to the party?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, why? You don't know me."

"No, not yet anyway, but stopping to help you has made my day, so, let me repay you by bringing you to my family party. I mean, your original plans for the evening have obviously fallen through, right?"

She looked up at the guy and nodded. Now that she knew he wasn't a serial killer, she could relax enough to see that he was a total hottie. He actually looked a lot like his father. Athletic, dark hair, dark eyes, wide gorgeous smile. But he was in that world, the world of celebrities, who were rich and privileged and got whatever they wanted.

"What do you expect from me?" she asked.

He grinned and shook his head. "There are no strings attached. And I promise to be a complete gentleman. Look, I understand that you're not comfortable going somewhere with a stranger, but you'll be even less comfortable waiting on the side of the road for a tow truck, for what could be at least an hour, and then waiting at the service station for who knows how long. If you come with me, you'll be comfortable and fed and I'm pretty sure– entertained."

She sighed. "That's probably true."

It suddenly dawned on him that she looked very young and might be underage, but he didn't feel like he should just come out and ask her age, so instead he would ask her name. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what's your name?"

She held out her hand. "I'm Jordan Brooks. Nice to meet you."

He took her hand in his. "Very nice to meet you, Jordan. Cute name. Now then, are you coming with me or staying to wait for the tow truck?"

"Um, don't we have to stay to wait for the tow truck either way?"

"Nope. I'll put the keys in a lock box under the wheel well, the driver

will come get your car, replace both tires, the flat and the spare and then deliver your car to my grandparents' home, all washed and shined and ready for you when you leave the party."

"You're kidding."

He laughed. "I'm not kidding. We know a few really good people. Look, again, I get that you're nervous about going somewhere with a stranger, but I'm at the point now, that I really don't feel good about leaving you on the side of the road. And I don't want to be late for the party because it's for my mom and my sister and they've been through a really hard time lately."

"Your sister! Oh, that's right. Taylor, right? She's so adorable. And she's with Gabe Tanner. I follow them."

Eric nodded with a smile. "Me too."

"Will they be at the party?"

"Uh, yeah, it's *for* her, and yeah, Gabe is still in town."

"I would love to meet them."

He chuckled. "So, are you still in high school?"

"No, I'm on a softball scholarship at UCLA."

"Oh! Well, that's cool. So, are you in?"

"Yes, I guess I am."

"Great. Grab what you need out of your car, lock it up and hand me your keys."

He got on the phone to call the tow. Then went to his car, reached under the wheel well, pulled out the magnetized lock box, took her keys and put them in and placed the box inside the wheel well of her car. He then grabbed his jacket off the rear of her car and walked her to his car, opened the passenger door and helped her in. When he got into the driver's side of the M4, he immediately opened the center console, pulled out a small first aid kit, rummaged through and handed her a moist first aid wipe. "Here ya go. It's for your knee," he explained.

She smiled. "You really are very kind and considerate. Thank you."

He looked her over, smiled. She had eyes like his mother's and his sister's, a soft gray, maybe a little lighter. She also had long dark lashes, a little turned up nose, an adorable mouth. He started the engine and pulled away.

He touched a button on the dash. "Call JoJo," he said.

"What's up?" JoJo said, answering quickly. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I stopped to help a girl on the side of the road and before you say anything crazy, she's in the car with me."

JoJo laughed. "Good save. So, where are you headed? You're supposed to be here helping with the decorations."

"Tell Grandma I'm on the way, and that I'm bringing a guest."

"Will do. How far away are you?"

"About seven minutes."

"See ya then."

"Yep." He turned to his guest. "My brother goes to USC," Eric said as a conversation starter.

"You have a brother?"

"Well, he's not really my brother. He's my cousin. But we're close and we think of each other as brothers. His name is JoJo Adams."

"Oh! Like, JoJo, the quarterback? He's your brother? Wow!"

"You know him?"

"No, but everyone knows who the SC QB is. Well, I mean anyone who loves football and lives in Cali. Wow, it's like your whole family is famous."

"I guess they are."

"You sound like you don't like that."

He frowned. "Well, it makes it hard to find friends who just like you because you're you, instead of because they want to get in with famous people. I wouldn't have told you who I was at all if I could think of another way to convince you that I wasn't a dangerous serial killer."

She gave a soft laugh. "Okay, then, I'm gonna be honest with you. Meeting famous people *is* intriguing, so, yeah, I think this is gonna be very interesting meeting you and your family. You know, see how that part of the world lives and interacts. But if I don't like you guys, I won't pretend that I do just because you're famous."

Eric smiled. "Deal?"

She nodded. "Deal."

"So, what position do you play on the softball team?"

"I'm a pitcher."

He nodded. "Very cool."

"Thanks. I've played softball almost all my life, but I didn't get really serious about it until my junior year in high school. I had a few college recruiters approach me then, and so I realized it was my only chance to go to college if I could get a full ride as a pitcher. Other positions usually don't get a full ride, though sometimes they do. Anyway, I worked really hard, trained really hard and I made it."

"Impressive."

He didn't ask her why it was her only chance to go to college, because he figured it was probably a financial type problem, which was personal.

"So, what do *you* do?" she asked.

"Well, up until this year I was in school, working on the requirements to become a physicist and astronaut. But I switched directions for personal reasons and actually just finished shooting a movie."

"Really? What's it called?"

"It's called '*The Resurrection of Elijah Beck*,' though that could change. It won't be out until the end of the year."

"I'll keep an eye out for it."

"Thanks."

"So, you were gonna be a physicist astronaut? I guess that means that

you're a pretty smart guy."

He laughed. "Maybe. I have my moments."

"I'm guessing you're good with numbers?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because you remembered my friend's phone number after you heard me speak it one time."

"Oh, yeah, right. Yeah, numbers are kinda my thing."

"Very cool," she said as they pulled up to an iron gate. The man in a booth waved at Eric and the gate swung open. Jordan peered around. She was looking at a long driveway that curved around and led through a beautiful, lush, green lawn to a giant home. The drive split. They could go around a circle to the front door or take the right fork and head toward a garage. They took the right fork but didn't go into the garage. Instead they pulled the car off to the far side of the garage.

He opened her car door for her and started to help her out but she asked him to hold on. "I forgot that I put my hair up when I got out of my car to change the tire." She flipped the visor down in the car and was pleased to find a mirror there. She removed the band from her hair.

Young Eric was mesmerized as golden blond waves tumbled down around her face and over her shoulders. She used her fingers to comb through the shiny tresses to smooth them and then fluff them. She sighed. "How do I look?" she asked casually.

He smiled. "Beautiful," he said softly.

She blinked up at him, touched by the reverence in his voice.

She smiled. "Okay, I guess I'm ready to meet your family."

"Well, they're not all here yet. The guests of honor won't be here until four, so we have about thirty minutes."

She nodded. He took her hand and pulled her out of the car.

They went in through the kitchen door and were immediately greeted by Shelley.

"Well, hello there, young man," Shelley said as she gave Eric a hug.

"Hey, Grandma. So, I'd like you to meet, Jordan. Jordan Brooks, this is Shelley Kino, my grandmother."

Jordan held her hand out. Shelley shook it firmly. "Hello, Jordan, it's very nice to meet you. Welcome to our home."

"Thank you, and thanks for letting me crash the party."

"The more the merrier. My goodness you are tall."

"I'm about 5'9"."

"Jordan is an athlete," Eric said quickly. "She goes to UCLA on a softball scholarship."

"What position?"

Jordan smiled. "A pitcher. Left-handed pitcher, to be exact."

Young Eric smiled. "Oh, that makes her a hot commodity."

"I bet."

They all looked up as five more blondes came into the kitchen.

"Well, hey, there," they all said almost in unison.

Jordan's eyes opened wide. "Uh, hi! Are you like, quintuplets?"

Young Eric laughed. "No. They are two set of twins and then the oldest."

"Which is me," Heather said as she moved forward and took Jordan's hand. "I'm Heather."

"And I'm Violet and this is my twin, Rose," Violet said.

Rose smiled and shook Jordan's hand. "Hey."

Young Eric frowned, wondering what was wrong with Rose.

"And I'm Daisy, and this is my twin, Lily," Daisy said.

Jordan smiled. "Do I detect a theme here?"

The girls all giggled.

"Yes, we're all flowers," Lily replied. "And it's nice to meet you. We just came in to ask Miss Shelley if there's anything else that needs to be done."

"Nope. Young Eric timed it perfectly. Everything is done. I just need someone to track the birthday girls so we can all hide before they come in."

"I'll do it," Violet said.

"So, you said, 'Miss Shelley.' Is she not *your* grandmother?"

It was Shelley who answered. "As much as I'd love to claim these girls for my own, no. These are the Anderson girls. Though we claim their whole family as ours."

Young Eric leaned close. "They're Gabe Tanner's sisters."

"Oh," Jordan said. "But you said 'Anderson'."

"Same mother, different father. You're gonna meet a lot of people tonight. It'll get a little confusing."

Jordan grinned. "I guess I'll just nod my head and smile a lot."

Eric laughed. "Perfect."

"They're eight miles away," Violet said.

JoJo came into the kitchen. "Hey, Grandma, Granddad says if you have a preference where everyone is gonna hide, you'd better tell them now."

Shelley nodded. "Lily, will you run downstairs and tell Bella and Breez to bring the children up. And, Daisy, will you go tell Mark and Joey and Justin and Jason to come inside. They're on the deck out back."

"Yes, ma'am," they both said.

"Hello," JoJo said to Jordan, offering his hand. "I'm JoJo."

"Jo, this is Jordan Brooks. She actually attends UCLA."

JoJo smiled. "Really? Our enemies."

"Yes," she giggled. "It's very nice to meet you. Um, isn't it game day for you?"

He grinned. "Normally. Off week. Big game next week though."

"Jordan is at UCLA on a softball scholarship. She's a left-handed pitcher."

JoJo nodded. "Hot commodity."

Jordan laughed. "Same thing Eric said."

"Yeah, we're like brothers, 'cept different."

"Three miles away," Violet said.

"Okay, everyone. Go find a place to hide. They're gonna come in through the front door, so you can get behind sofas one and two, or stay in the kitchen or behind the dining room wall, or in the back hall. Go."

Eric took Jordan's hand. "Come on, we'll take the back hall."

He led her down toward his grandfather's study.

He leaned against the wall and slid down. She crouched next to him.

"So, you said the birthday party is for your mother and sister?"

"Yes. They had a birthday last week, three days apart, but no one even thought about it because we were all at the hospital praying for my grandfather and for Gabe to somehow pull through."

"I heard about that."

He nodded. "My mom and Taylor think that nobody even realizes that their birthdays have come and gone, so, that's why this particular party is pretty special."

She nodded.

"They're coming up the drive," Violet called out.

"Here we go," young Eric said softly.

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September 7th, Late Afternoon Saturday

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky glanced in the rearview mirror. In the backseat Gabe was sound asleep with his arm around Taylor as she snuggled close. Taylor's eyes were closed, but she wasn't asleep because Ricky could see her move her hand over Gabe's chest. He shook his head. His sweet daughter was head over heels in love and he surely hoped this wasn't gonna lead to a broken heart.

Bree reached over and put her hand on Ricky's thigh. "It'll all work out."

He smiled at her. "You're a smart lady," Ricky said.

"Yes dear, I know," she quipped.

He grinned at her. She may be smart but he was pretty sure that she didn't know she was about to attend her own surprise birthday party.

They drove through the gate and around the circle of the drive to the front door and pulled to a stop. He looked at the time. "Well, we're right on time. I wonder where everyone else is," he said.

Gabe yawned and sat up with a sly smile on his face. "Maybe we got the time wrong."

"No, I'm pretty sure Shelley said four," Ricky replied. "Anyway, let's go in and see our new siblings."

She smiled. "I get excited every time. They are so beautiful."

"I agree," Taylor said.

Gabe opened his door and climbed out and went around the car to open Taylor's door, but she got out before he could get there, so he just held the door and closed it after her.

Ricky grinned at him.

He rolled his eyes.

"You sure you're awake now, Gabe?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry I fell asleep."

Ricky frowned. "I'm thinking your body needs some rest. It's trying to tell you something."

"Yeah, I think you may be right."

The four walked up to the front door and headed in. They got as far as the foyer when everyone jumped out. "Surprise!"

Gabe watched Taylor. The smile that spread across her face was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

At the same time, Bree turned to Ricky and he kissed her soundly. "Happy birthday, baby," he said softly.

"Oh, it IS so happy. So, happy that we can have this party because Eric and Gabe are with us!"

Everyone moved forward to greet the birthday girls. Shelley and Eric, with their four new children in tow, Mark and Bella, holding Em, Joey and Breez, with Phia, Kellbell and Ledger, Keegan and Lizzy, with Iris, Heather and Nolan, Rose and Violet, Lily and Daisy, Jeff and Mickey with their sons, Daniel and Jeremy, Jason and Angel, Justin and Lori, Jeffy and Cam, Jensen and Kimmie, JoJo and Logan, Laynahbug and Jake, John and Jodi, and finally– young Eric and his new friend, Jordan Brooks.

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Matthew 5:16

"In the same way, let your light shine before people,
so they can see the good things you do and praise
your Father who is in heaven."

Chapter Three

Young Eric hugged his mother and sister and whispered "happy birthday," to each then stood back. "Mom, Dad, Tay, and Gabe, I want you to meet Jordan Brooks."

"Hello," Bree said smoothly, offering her hand.

"Nice to meet you," Ricky said, a big smile on his face.

"Well hello there," Taylor said brightly.

"Hey, nice to meet you," Gabe said, shaking her hand.

"So, where do you guys know each other from?" Taylor asked.

"She usually doesn't beat around the bush," young Eric said to Jordan.

"It saves time," Taylor said with a laugh.

"Actually, Taylor, Jordan and I just met on the side of the highway about an hour ago."

"You're kidding."

"No, not kidding," Jordan said. "I was having trouble changing my tire and Eric stopped to help."

"And her spare was flat and I talked her into coming here to wait for her car rather than on the side of the road for the tow truck."

Ricky nodded. "Good decision."

Jordan looked up at the man she'd seen many times in movies. He was even better looking in person, if that were possible. She looked back at Eric and realized why he was so darn hot. His father and mother were two of the most beautiful people she'd ever seen. She shifted her eyes to steal a glance at Gabe and Taylor.

Taylor, like her family, was gorgeous. And Gabe, well, the videos didn't do him justice. Everyone said he was hot. That was an understatement. Jordan's musings were broken up by Mrs. Shelley Kino telling everyone what was for dinner and to save room for the yummy birthday cake and ice cream, and then she turned the time over to her husband, Eric.

"Well, everyone, we just went over this yesterday, the miracle that has brought us all together. It was because of Gabe and me that these two lovely ladies, my stepdaughter who is also my daughter-in-law, and my granddaughter both missed the celebration of their birthdays. They didn't mention it to anyone. I'm sure they felt like a birthday celebration was not important on the grand scale of things, but we wanted to show them that

they are extremely important to all of us. They are special. They are meant to be. They are two of God's strong warriors and we all here are so very grateful that they were born, that they are part of this family, that we get to have them in our lives every day. And so, with that said, I'm gonna call on my son, Ricky, to bless the food and to bless these birthday ladies, his wife and daughter, that are so special to him and to us all."

Ricky looked up, surprised. He laughed. "My father just loves to call on me when I'm least expecting it. But I'm happy to pray." He bowed his head. "Father, here we are again, bowing our heads in gratitude for our many blessings. We're grateful for the opportunity to have this birthday celebration, for we know we probably wouldn't be having it if Gabe or Dad hadn't miraculously pulled through. We are still and will always be grateful for that miracle. So, Father, we are so grateful now for my amazing wife and daughter. Lord, I love them so much, and I am grateful every– single– day for them. And let me add Father that I'm also grateful for this young man, Gabriel Tanner, your warrior, who had the strength, and speed, and skills to save Taylor's life."

He stopped a moment as he choked down the emotions that surfaced. He cleared his throat. "Thank you, Father, for them all, and I ask Your blessing upon them for the year to come, that they will be healthy, and safe, that You will send your angels and Your Holy Spirit to lead them and guide them, and to let them know what Your will is for them. Touch their hearts, Father, bear witness to them, and do that for everyone here, everyone who is praying with us at this time. Fill them. Heal them. Touch them. We are grateful for the meal we are about to have and for the hands that prepared it, and we ask your blessing upon it. We love You, Father, and we are so very grateful for Your Son, and we say all these things in His name, in Jesus' name, Amen."

It took a few seconds for everyone to start moving because they had indeed been touched by the Spirit. Finally, though, people moved toward the kitchen. Bree and Taylor looked around at all the beautiful decorations, streamers and balloons, flowers and twinkling lights. It looked more like a wedding or prom night than a birthday party. The sofas and chairs had been pushed all the way back to the walls in the living room, creating a large space which meant only one thing. Music and dancing! Taylor thought she would jump for joy.

At the other side of the living room, just before the three steps that led to the giant dining room, there was a keyboard and guitar and amps and bongos. Currently everyone headed either up those steps or through the kitchen to the dining table, which was covered in every kind of comfort food one could think of. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, mac n'cheese, hamburger fixings, pizza slices, a big pot of spaghetti and meatballs, and much more, including cheesy potato casserole, and cheesy monkey bread, because there is never too much cheese.

Everyone loaded their plates and found a seat. The dining room chairs had been spread out all through the giant living room, which was now a ballroom, and into the large foyer. A big white sheet had been spread out picnic style and the four new two-year-old Kinos were sitting on it, along with two-year-olds Iris and Ledger, and three-year-olds Emily, usually called Em, and Kelstyn, sometimes called Kelbell or Kel. The eight munchkins were being carefully monitored by Mark and Joey, the fathers of Em, Kel, and Ledger, and the much older siblings of the four new Kinos. A few people had chosen to head out to the back deck to sit around several outdoor dining areas.

Young Eric and Jordan sat in two of the dining room chairs in the corner of the living room over near the front windows.

"This is delicious," Jordan said as she scooped another forkful of mac n' cheese.

Eric smiled. "I agree. This is special food. We usually don't get to eat like this. We're pretty health-oriented and pretty much follow Aunt Jeffy's protocols."

"Jeffy is Dr. June Flower Kino, right?"

"Oh, yeah, it's a nickname her brothers gave her."

"And her brothers are your father, and JoJo's father and Joey Adams, right?"

"Very good! I mean, I figured you'd remember my father and JoJo's father, but not my Uncle Joey."

"Well, he fights in the Kino Challenges and I'm a huge fan."

"Oh—well, that's cool that you're a fan. Yeah, Uncle Joey is a badass. Oops, sorry, I mean, he's tough. But he's getting older and I think he's getting ready to retire from the Challenges because they're pretty hard on a body."

"That's sad. Who's gonna fight in his place?"

"Actually, I have no idea. I've heard them tossing around a few names, but if they've made a decision they haven't told me. Maybe we can corner them and ask later."

"Awesome! So, who's that guy, I haven't met him."

Eric looked where she pointed. "That's my other brother who's not really my brother. His name is Logan. He's twenty. He IS JoJo's real brother, well, I mean, JoJo's real adopted brother. He's one you actually might run into because he's going to school at UCLA for his degree in music composition and in audio engineering. He's really good. A real pro, which we will see in just a little while. Back when we were teenagers, the three of us had a little band and we actually put out a video to help earn money for Aunt Jeffy's charity."

Jordan grinned. "A garage band! So, you can sing?"

He shrugged. "I can carry a tune. But Logan, now that kid can sing, and he plays like, eight instruments. I'm really proud of him."

She nodded with a smile. “I can tell.” She looked around. “So, where is Dr. Kino?”

Eric shook his head. “She’s around here somewhere. If you’re finished eating we can go find her and I’ll introduce you.”

“I would love to meet her. She is why I wanted to go to college in the first place.”

Eric raised his brows in surprise. “Really?”

“Yes, her protocols, that’s what I’m studying, or what I will be studying once I get all the preliminary stuff out of the way.”

“So, you wanna be a doctor?”

“No, I don’t think I’m smart enough for that. But I’m studying *Dr. June Flower Kino Protocols for Health and Wellness*, *and* majoring in business management. What I think I’m looking to do is maybe eventually open my own center for wellness using your aunt’s teachings and methods. It’s such a coincidence that I get a flat tire and of all the people who could have stopped to help me, it’s Dr. Kino’s nephew.”

Eric shook his head in wonder. “God is so amazing. *Now* I know why I felt so prompted to stop to help you, and bring you here to the party. I don’t know what God has in store for you, Jordan, but I do know that things don’t just happen. There is no such thing as a coincidence. God’s universe is not random. It’s ordered, and He has a plan for you.”

“Then you’re saying this, being here, is my destiny?”

“No. Destiny intimates that you have no choice, but you do. I like to say your plan is ordained of God. So, you could call it preordination but not destiny. You see, God’s universe is based in free will, meaning your ability to choose your path. Will you make good choices or bad ones? Will you find and follow the path God planned for you? I’ve discovered that as long as my choice is to do God’s will for me, it always turns out to be the best choice for myself and things seem to work out perfectly.”

Jordan nodded. “Well, that makes sense and that’s also rather deep. Hmm, I guess you really are pretty smart, Mr. physicist/astronaut. Except, I’m not sure what I think about this God thing.”

The statement didn’t bother him. Young Eric smiled. “I have a feeling you’ll soon be sure. Come on, let’s go find Jeffy.”

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The lights were low, couples were dancing, the little ones were holding hands in a big circle and imitating the adults. Jordan felt as if she were in a fantasy world. She’d never met such a warm, loving, beautiful and intelligent family. Her idol, Dr. Kino, had been so kind to her, offering her assistance in any way she could help. Jordan absolutely intended to take her up on that. Her other idol, Joey Adams, was currently dancing with his eldest daughter standing on his feet, which was so very sweet. Next to him, his beautiful wife was doing the same with their little boy.

Jordan herself had danced with Gabe Tanner and gotten a selfie with him, and with Logan Adams, the QB's brother, who also attended UCLA, and just now Jordan was very excited that she'd just danced with the USC quarterback! Her host and highway rescuer, Eric Kino, was currently dancing with one of the beautiful blond twins, though she had no idea which one. She looked around. Two of her favorite movie stars were barely moving as they swayed back and forth on the dance floor, and finally stopped moving altogether as *the* Ricky Kino bent his head and kissed *the* Breanna Adams long and slow. It was so sensual that she had to look away.

She swung her head around just in time to see the social media stars, Gabe and Taylor, do almost the same thing: slow to a stop and kiss. Whole lotta PDAs goin' on, she thought as the song ended then turned at the sound of Eric's voice.

"Will you dance with me?" young Eric asked her.

She smiled up at him. "I wondered if you were ever gonna ask me to dance."

He shrugged. "I had to stand in line. You're pretty popular."

She laughed. "Ya snooze ya lose."

"I'll remember that," he promised. He took her hand and moved out into the center of the room. He held her right hand in his left, and placed his right hand firmly on the small of her back.

Jordan had to force herself to breathe. This guy, he exuded confidence, and masculinity, and was very easy on the eyes. She herself being an athlete, wasn't easily impressed. It wasn't often that she was near a guy who made her feel small and what? Feminine? And tonight, she was surrounded by a large group of ultra-masculine men. It didn't feel toxic at all, like a lot of her teammates would say. It felt– comforting. Relaxing. Like she didn't have to be big and strong for once. She'd felt that same way when she danced with the others. Gabe, Logan, and JoJo, but now, with Eric, she felt a little different. She didn't know what to think.

"So, are you enjoying yourself?"

She smiled. "Actually, I really am. Your family is so welcoming. You're very lucky to have them."

"I know that all too well. I thank God for them every day. Tell me about your family. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have a ten-year-old little sister and an eight-year-old little brother. We live down, well, sort of near Laguna Beach, west of Laguna in Hillcrest."

She drew a sharp breath as he pressed his hand a little harder against her back and whirled her around in a fast circle. "Sorry if I startled you, but the music really called for a spin there," he explained.

She giggled.

He loosened his hold. "And your parents?" he asked. "What do they

do?"

"My father died when I was eight. My mother remarried, so, my brother and sister came from *him*."

Eric frowned. When she'd said "him," there was some animosity in her voice. He wasn't sure if he should ask her about it and decided he wouldn't ask about the animosity, but would ask leading questions. "I'm sorry about your father. You were only eight. That had to be rough. And then your mother remarried. What does your stepfather do?"

"I don't know and I don't care. He was in jail, but he's out now. I haven't seen him, and I hope I never do."

"Oh! Uh, okay. You wanna talk about it?"

"There's really nothing to talk about, except he was in jail because I put him in jail and I wish he was still there."

Young Eric got the feeling she actually did want to talk about it, so, he pressed a little. "What did he do?"

"Things a man shouldn't try to do to his stepdaughter."

"Oh. Sorry, Jordan." He slowed to a stop. Looked down into her eyes. "How old were you?" he asked softly.

"I was fourteen, a high school freshman. He tried, but he didn't succeed because I'm stronger than I look. I fought and I screamed and my mother came home earlier than he expected and came running in and stopped him. He'd beat me up pretty bad, and that was a good thing because it gave him another year and a half in prison.

"It took a year for it to go to court. I was a mess. I couldn't function, couldn't go to school. I couldn't do much of anything. It finally went to trial and he got four and a half years in prison, and only served three years. He's not allowed to come to see his children as long as I'm living at that home. So, I go home as much as possible to make it appear I live there, because I don't want him anywhere near my brother or sister. He does have permission for supervised visits, but that's only happened a few times because he doesn't really care about them. I believe he was only trying to see if he could get close to me, because I'm pretty sure he wants revenge for me testifying against him."

She stopped and shook her head. "I am so sorry. I shouldn't be going on about this. I don't know what made me start talking about it. I usually never talk about it."

"Um, I think I encouraged you to talk about it. You don't have to apologize." He reached up and touched her face by brushing the back of his knuckles against her cheek. "I'm sorry for being nosy. And I'm sorry that happened to you. Let's change the subject. So, how old are you?"

"I'm nineteen. I'm just a freshman because I graduated late from high school because– I missed that year."

He nodded. "But you went back to high school, you played softball, and you earned a scholarship. That is an amazing feat!"

She smiled. "Ya think so?"

"Absolutely."

"You're very kind."

They both looked up when the music stopped. Violet seated herself at the keyboard, and Logan picked up a mic. "Okay, everyone, we're gonna be singing happy birthday and cutting into some birthday cake soon, cuz, like that's what these little ones have been not-so-patiently waiting for."

Jordan whispered to Eric. "And so, that's Logan and he's not really related to JoJo except by adoption."

"Right."

"Weird, cuz they look so much alike."

"Right? We like to say it's because he was meant to be his brother."

Logan continued. "But before we light the candles, cuz that'll like, take forever," he joked. "Just kidding Aunt Bree," he said at her raised eyebrows. "We have a little number we'd like to do for the birthday girls."

Young Eric smiled at Jordan. "Excuse me a minute. That's my cue."

Surprised, she watched Eric walk to the front of the room and be joined by Gabe. They each picked up a mic. JoJo joined them with a chair. He pulled the chair up to a mic, sat down, and picked up a set of bongo drums. At the same time, Ricky picked up two of the dining room chairs, brought them to the center of the room and motioned for Bree and Taylor to have a seat.

Logan went on. "So, we had this planned a while now, but when we found Gabe could actually sing when he sang to us at the hospital, we knew we had to get him to join us. I mean, who knew that he could sing?"

"Uh, we did," Violet said. "I'm thinking he gets it honestly, since Mom sings like an angel. My question is, who knew young Eric could sing."

Eric laughed. "Right?"

"Gabe, you're looking a little nervous there," Lily said.

He grinned. "That's cuz I am."

The group laughed.

"With that being said, we have three little numbers to sing for you so, let's get on with it," Logan said as he picked up an acoustical guitar and lifted the strap over his head. He strummed to make sure it was in tune, twisted a few keys, strummed again and then nodded at Violet on the keyboard.

Young Eric put his mic to his lips. "Mom, Tay, this is for you." He drew a deep breath. "You are so beautiful..." he began singing the Joe Cocker song.

Jordan was mesmerized. Here was a gorgeous, masculine, young bachelor, singing to his mother and sister about how beautiful they are, and doing it well. She desperately wanted to record it, but her phone was dead. Though, looking around, there were several people recording. She'd

have to remember to get someone to send her the video.

Young Eric sang the first two lines of the song alone, and then JoJo and Logan and Gabe joined in on the last part of the song, breaking into harmony. That song led straight into a faster paced Jason Mraz song, "I'm Yours," with each of the guys taking a solo part. It was easy to hear that Logan was the pro. JoJo and young Eric held their own. Everyone waited excitedly for when Gabe would sing his part and he didn't disappoint the crowd, except for the fact it was too short of a solo. But that was about to be compensated for on the last song.

The pace slowed again, JoJo's drumming became sultry, and everyone recognized the song because it was very prominent on social media. Gabe stepped out front, began moving and dancing to the beat, and put the mic to his lips. "When your baby— leaves you all alone— and nobody— calls you on the phone— Don't you feel like cryin'? Oh, don't ya feel like cryin'. Well, here I am honey— c'mon— cry to me."

The room was going crazy. Taylor was laughing and crying at the same time. There was hootin' and hollerin' as Gabe put his mic down and went to Taylor while Logan sang with a little help from Eric and JoJo. Gabe held his hand out to Taylor, she rose and together they began to move to the very sensual beat. Gabe spun her and pulled her against him, dipped her, and suddenly it was like a scene from "Dirty Dancing."

Keegan sighed heavily, glancing in Ricky's direction to see if he was upset about how close Gabe was dancing with his daughter. Thankfully, he didn't seem upset. The song ended and there was a standing ovation.

Right on time, Mark and Bella entered the room carrying a giant sheet cake covered in candles. Logan and Violet started playing the song, and everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to the ladies. Mark and Bella lowered the cake in front of Taylor and Bree and waited for them to blow out the candles.

Shelley was gathering the children to go sit at the kitchen table to eat their cake and ice cream. Everyone else waited until the children were happily eating their treat before they too helped themselves.

Gabe grabbed Taylor by the hand to pull her off to be alone, but everyone converged on them, patting him on the back, ruffling his hair, and hugging Taylor. When they were finally left alone he pulled her close. "I have a birthday present for you, but I want to give it to you in private. Do you think we can find a place?"

"We could go to Granddad's study. No one would be in there right now."

"Let's go," Gabe said quickly, taking her hand. They went into the study and closed the door.

They didn't even get to start the conversation before both of their phones blew up. Taylor pulled out her phone and smiled. "Uh, Gabe, you're trending. Apparently, a couple of our family members went live on

your little performance."

"Good grief," Gabe muttered.

Taylor smiled. "Remember, it's for a good cause."

Gabe nodded, shook it off and focused on what he wanted to say. "Taylor, you know I love you, right?"

She nodded.

"And I know you have another year of high school, and I know your feelings for me might change. I mean, I get that."

She frowned. "They won't."

He smiled. "We'll see. But still, I wanted you to know, that I'm committed to you. Now, that doesn't mean that you have to be committed to me."

"You're starting to make me mad."

He chuckled. "Sorry, I'm not meaning to laugh at you, but you're so darn cute when you're mad." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I'm not gonna be around much during your senior year, and there's gonna be a lot of activities for you to participate in, and I want you to know that I expect you to go and have a good time, even if you go to some things with another guy. Just don't kiss him."

"You are being ridiculous."

"I'm being realistic. I have no right to put a claim on you when I'm not gonna be around much and you have lots of 'senior things' to be doing. So, I'm just saying, I want to give you something that shows my commitment to you, but I don't expect you to save yourself for me, no, that's not what I meant, cuz I DO expect you to save yourself for me, but like, you can do stuff and I won't get jealous."

When she looked like she might explode, he sighed. "Sorry, I'm not saying things right. Anyway," he said, reaching into his pants pocket and pulling out a small navy blue velvet box. He handed it to her.

She looked at the box and back up at him, her eyes tearing up.

"Open it," he said. "It's a promise ring."

She untied the tiny bow and opened the box. "Oh, Gabe. It's beautiful." She picked the ring up and looked closely at it. It had both their names engraved on the top with a small single diamond in between. And inside it was engraved with, "I Love You."

She looked up into his face. A week ago, she thought he was dead. Tonight, he sang to her, danced with her, and now this. She blinked and the tears overflowed.

"Ah, baby," he said. "Here, let me." He took the ring and placed it on her left ring finger. It fit perfectly, thanks to her brother.

She held her hand out, admiring the ring. "Oh, Gabe, I'm so happy."

He smiled. "Me too." He pulled her close and kissed her—several times. Finally, he pulled away. "Come on, I guess I'd better get the birthday girl back to the party."

"Right, Gabe, but I know you really just want to get your hand on some of that cake."

He grinned. "You know me too well."

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Keegan Tanner watched his usually happy, bright and animated daughter make her way up the stairs, looking about as sullen as a person could be. Thinking to go speak with her, he glanced over at his wife, who also wasn't looking too well, so he headed over to see her first.

"Lizzy? You okay, sweetheart?"

"I'm just tired I think, and my back is hurting."

"You need to get off your feet."

She nodded. "I will."

"Now," he commanded. He took her by the hand and led her to one of the sofas and sat her down. "What can I get you? Something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You're not, like, having any contractions are you?"

She smiled. "No, Keegan, I'm not due for four months."

He frowned. "Honey, when is your next appointment?"

"Tuesday."

"Good. Until we leave here on Monday morning, I don't want you to do anything."

"Honey, that's silly."

"It's precautionary." He sighed. "Listen, Rose is upset about something. I'm gonna go talk to her."

"What's she upset about?"

"Don't know yet. I promise to fill you in when I find out. For now, you don't worry yourself about it." He leaned down and kissed her forehead.

"Daisy," Keegan called the daughter nearest to him.

"Yes, sir?"

"Look after your mom and Iris, please. Your mom is not feeling well and Iris needs to go to bed soon. Get Lily to help with that. I have to go upstairs for a few minutes."

Daisy nodded. "Got it covered."

Keegan headed upstairs, went down the hall to the room where Rose and Violet had been staying and knocked.

"Go away, Vi," Rose said.

Keegan opened the door. "It's me."

Rose looked up. "Oh, sorry, Dad. Come in."

"Are you upset with your sister?"

"No, I just wanna be alone."

"Which is not like you. What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Rose looked down. "Nothing really. I mean, well, it's something but I don't know why I'm so upset. I knew there was a possibility that it

wouldn't work out."

Keegan thought a moment. "So, are we talking about Mike?"

Rose looked ashamed. "We talked earlier today. He said some things I didn't like, I said some things back, and I think it's over."

"You argued?"

"Hmm, I don't know that I would call it arguing. I mean, we had a difference of opinion."

"Opinions about what subject in particular?"

She sighed. "About God and guns."

He nodded thoughtfully. "He must've said something hurtful, because it's not like you to get all riled up about those issues. You usually allow others to make their choices, and then agree to disagree."

"Yeah, he said, believing in God was like believing in Santa Claus."

Keegan blew out a breath. "That was hurtful."

"Yeah, it was. The thing that was hurtful was the disrespect. He knows my faith. He knows how I feel. He could have simply said that he didn't believe what I believe. But it was like he went out of his way to be degrading. And for him to do it after the amazing miracle God gave us, and I had already told him about it all. It was like he simply discarded it out of hand, almost like he hadn't just been told every amazing miracle that had just taken place.

"And then, he added in the thing about how could I believe in God and also in owning guns, and then, he actually said I was the beauty and he was the brains and made me feel like I was just another pretty face with no intelligence, and he just couldn't see anything from my point of view, which would be fine with me I guess, but he didn't have to be so rude about it. And so I asked him when we would see each other again and he said we HAD to see each other because we had a contract to do two more ads for *Twin Wave* and he would get in touch and let me know when that would take place. And I don't even know why I'm so upset because I wasn't really even sure if I liked him enough to continue on."

Keegan nodded. "Okay, okay, sweetie. Those are a lot of conflicting emotions. So, let me ask you a question. What did you like about Mike? What drew you to him?"

She sat silently for a long time. Shook her head. "Gosh, Dad, I'm not sure. I mean, as shallow as it sounds, he's kinda cute."

"That's not shallow. A physical attraction is how a lot of relationships start. It's what first attracted me to your mother. Still, once you get past that, there has to be something more. Was there anything else that you liked about him?"

She shrugged. "I liked that he's made something of himself. I mean, with no father around, he figured out what he was good at, and he went for it, and he's succeeding. He has a nice car, and he bought his mother a house, so kudos to him, right?"

"That is certainly something admirable, but not necessarily the base of a good relationship."

"Well then, what *is* the base of a good relationship? I mean, really, like, for a female, isn't it that her mate can provide for her?"

"Why do you want your mate to provide for you?"

"You don't think he should?"

"Of course I think he should. I'm just asking YOU, why do you want him to provide for you?"

"Well, it's part of feeling safe and secure, right?"

"Let's zero in on safe. Does Mike make you feel safe?"

Rose thought. "Well, I think financially I feel like he'd always work hard and somehow make a living, so, like, I feel we would be safe from being homeless, but, hmmm– "

"Go on, but what?"

"But if someone came to the door and tried to break into the house, I guess defending us would be all up to me."

"So, what does that tell you?"

"Um, that I don't necessarily feel safe or protected."

"Do you think it's important that your mate can protect you physically as well as financially?"

"I suppose. Though it seems kind of unfair that he's expected to do all that."

"You think God got it wrong?"

"Of course not."

"To provide for one's family can be a difficult job. To protect one's family can be a difficult job. But it's one a real man accepts and does without complaint. And, there are things *you* can do too, that make it fair. First and foremost you're his companion. He's got your back and you have his. And of course, you can take care of him. There must be utter and complete loyalty and trust. By the way, that trust means no unfair arguments. No demeaning of your beliefs. I know your mom will always have my back, even when I'm wrong. She would never make fun of me or degrade my value. She loves me and cares for me, and if she needs me to step up and help her she knows I will. And if I need her to step in and help me, I know she will. And then there is the main thing you can do for your man that he can't, which is provide him the opportunity to have a child. This procreation is a gift, and a good man will understand that and be grateful for it."

"Well, unfortunately, there are no young men out there like *you*, Dad."

"Well, I think your brother would be offended by that remark. And so would JoJo, and young Eric and Logan and Jake."

"You know what I mean."

"Sweetie. What I mean is, the man for you is out there. And you

won't have to settle. He'll be someone you're attracted to, someone who works hard to provide for you and your children, someone who can protect you, someone you can respect and admire in all aspects of his life, and most importantly, someone who loves God."

Rose's eyes filled with tears. "I want that. I'm just not sure that someone that good even exists."

"Of course he does, honey. Trust God. And don't go looking for someone. The right one will just suddenly be there. You just concentrate on pursuing the things you want to pursue, the things you're interested in and let your life unfold organically."

"Dad, you don't think I'm dumb, do you?"

Keegan sighed. That Mike Moreland could make his brilliant daughter question her own intelligence made Keegan want to choke the guy. "Rose, you should have more confidence in yourself than that. You are a highly intelligent young lady. Don't let him get into your head."

"I'm trying not to. What is wrong with me?"

"Not one thing, baby girl. Ya know, it might help you to talk to your mom."

"Oh, Dad, I don't want to bother her with this. She's not been feeling too well."

"Yeah, I noticed. Maybe everything that's happened over this past week is catching up to her."

"Dad, she told me that they did an ultrasound last month to make sure it wasn't twins again and they said it wasn't. But Dad, she looks waaay more pregnant than Aunt Lisa."

"She says that's just because she's had two sets of twins and her body shows the pregnancy faster."

"Still, Aunt Lisa has been through four pregnancies to Mom's five. I think you should ask the doc to do another ultrasound. Or have Jeffy do an exam."

Keegan nodded. "That might be a good idea."

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All the children had been hugged, kissed, cleaned, put in their pajamas, prayed with and tucked into beds. Some of them for the night and others only until their parents were ready to leave.

Gifts had been opened and the kitchen had been cleaned.

Heather and her fiancé Nolan, Jeffy and Cam, Jake and Laynah and Kimmie and Jensen sat around in the living room talking. In the dining room, Eric, Ricky, Jeff, Justin, Jason, Keegan, Joey and Mark were having a serious discussion. Gabe and Taylor sat together on one of the sofas that had now been pushed back into place. Everyone else either sat at the kitchen table, or had gone out back for a walk on the beach.

Young Eric and Jordan sat together in the living room, chatting and enjoying getting to know one another.

"So, I noticed something, Eric."

"What's that?"

"Whenever anyone speaks to you, they call you young Eric."

He nodded. "That's because there are three of us. My grandfather is Eric. My father is also an Eric, but he's always had Ricky as a nickname. And I am Eric Kino the third, so they call me young Eric whenever the whole fam is together, so as not to have me and Granddad always turn at the mention of our name."

"Hmm, I see. Well, I think I'm gonna have to think of a better nickname for you."

He smiled. "Whaddya got in mind?"

"Let me think. I mean, the number thing comes to mind."

"What number thing?"

"You're a numbers kinda guy, right? That's what you said. And like, on my team, we call each other by the numbers a lot. Like, way to go, two-three, good pitch."

"Twenty-three—is that your number?"

"Yes. So, I mean, you're number three. Yep, I think I'm gonna call you 'Three.' Yeah, I think I like that. Or maybe 'Triple Ones.' Or 'Trip,' for short. But I think I like 'Three' the most."

He laughed as his phone buzzed. He pulled it out. Looked up at her with a frown. "Your car is here."

"Oh. Oh, well. It's been a fun evening."

"You wanna stick around a little longer?"

"Maybe a few more minutes. Then I probably need to get going."

They both looked up as the men came down the three wide steps from the dining room into the living room.

Ricky's eyes searched for his son and smiled at him. "So, young Eric, we have something we'd like to discuss with you."

"With me? Privately?"

"No, I don't think it has to be private," Ricky said.

Joey nodded at Jordan. "As a matter of fact, your new friend there might be interested in what we have to talk to you about."

Young Eric frowned, looking over at Jordan and back to his father. He shrugged. "Okay, shoot. But don't embarrass me."

The men chuckled.

"As you know," Joey began. "I've been talking about retiring from the Kino Challenge."

"Your Uncle Joey is tired," Ricky added.

"Yeah, I was just telling Jordan earlier that he was thinking of retiring."

Ricky nodded. "And after asking for nominations from everyone, for a new name to represent the family, one name kept coming up. Yours."

Young Eric swallowed. "Me?"

"We think it's time for you to take over. You have the time to train. The producers of the movie would be ecstatic to get the publicity of having their new star fight in the Kino Challenge."

"Unless I lose."

"What kind of talk is that?" Jason reprimanded.

"Just being realistic."

Jason shook his head. "Young Eric, this is something hard, something for you to work at that will make you much stronger."

"I'm not afraid of hard work, but ya know, I'm only a 3rd Dan."

"Only?" Mark said.

"Yes. When you guys all fought in the Challenge, you were 5th and 6th Dans."

"We were all much older than you," Mark said. "Well, except Joey, but still."

Grandmaster Kino stepped forward. "Eric."

Everyone was silent as they waited to hear what Eric's grandfather had to say.

"3rd Dan, 8th Dan, Grandmaster, none of that matters. That is how the outside world measures our achievements. Not how we measure our own. I wouldn't train you for this if I didn't think you could win. I would *not* set you up for failure. You must know that. When I trained your grandmother for the MART, she was over ten years older than the other competitors, and the only one with children. I know you've heard the stories, but with everything that happened that year, I trained her against great odds. But I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think she could win. And she did. And I wouldn't invite you to represent our family in the Challenge if I didn't think you could win. Now, I'm not trying to convince you. It's totally your decision. Either you're in or you're out. It's a hard thing to do. When I train, as you know, it will be all in or not at all. It will be the hardest thing you've ever done. So, you take the time you need to think about it."

Young Eric shook his head. "No, sir, I don't need to think about it. That might have been a little bit of fear talking at first, but there's no way I could turn down this 'invitation', as you put it, to represent our family. And considering that had things gone differently last week, you wouldn't be here to train me, I'm extremely honored to have this opportunity to train with you. I'm not sure about my confidence level yet, but I believe in you, Granddad, and your confidence in me, so, yeah, I'm in."

"And I believe in you, and you'll believe in yourself too by the time the Challenge comes around. We have ten weeks."

"Only ten weeks?" young Eric said.

"Your father only had three weeks to prepare for the first Challenge, and he had broken fingers and was barely recovered from his abduction ordeal, AND he fought all five competitors."

"Well, my father is special."

"He is, but Eric, you got this, son."

Young Eric nodded. "I got this."

He stood and turned to his grandfather and bowed.

Grandmaster Kino did the same.

Gabe stood. "You da man, Eric. Man, I'm so jacked. This is gonna be so good."

"And that brings us to you Gabriel Tanner," Grandmaster Kino said.

Gabe turned, his eyes wide.

"You are the current Mini-MART champion," Grandmaster Kino stated.

Gabe grinned. "I'm the *only* Mini-MART champion."

Eric chuckled. "I stand corrected. So then, what I'd like to see is if you can hold onto your title."

"But— "

"Hear me out, please."

"Oh, yes, sir, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be disrespectful."

"I didn't think you were being disrespectful. Now, I've spoken with your parents and I know you're gonna go home for a while. I think that's a good idea. I want you to go home and for the first three days— sleep. Sleep as long as you can, as much as you can. Sleep until you just cannot lie around in bed anymore. And then after three days, you are to rise early and start on a routine of fresh air, exercise, lots of protein and fats, and train. Train with Master Appel, train by yourself. Jake, while you're still around you could help him."

"For as long as I'm around, which may not be much longer," Jake responded.

"Noted," Eric went on. "So then Gabe, after three weeks, you get a doc to check you over, and if you're completely recovered, you come back here and we'll train you for another Mini-MART that will be held in November as a preliminary bout to the Kino Challenge. This is not to test your skills as much as a way to get you back into top shape before you start your Ameritech JETT training, which, I'm gonna warn you now, is gonna kick your butt."

The group chuckled.

"Don't give me your answer now. Wait until the doc clears you and then call me."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir." He bowed to Grandmaster Kino and then to the group of men at large, who were all masters or grandmasters.

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Ephesians 1:9-10

"Making known to us the mystery of his will,
according to his purpose, which he set forth
in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time,
to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

Chapter Four

"Your family is very weird. Nice, but weird," Jordan said as they walked down the front steps toward her little Honda.

"Why are they weird?" Eric asked.

"I mean, as I was saying 'goodbye' to all of them, they acted as if they didn't want me to leave. They acted as if we'd known each other a long time."

"I guess I understand how that seems weird to you, but my family has very open hearts and minds. If they like you, which they do, they'll get attached pretty fast."

"Well, it's a very nice weird," she said. She stopped, looked her car over. "Something looks different." She glanced down at her tires. "Oh my goodness, these are all new tires."

"I know. They all looked pretty bald, so I told them to take care of that."

"I cannot afford that."

"It's taken care of, Jordan."

"What are you trying to pull?"

He smiled. "I just wanted to help. No strings attached. I promise. It's just part of what a gentleman does. Please don't be angry."

She sighed, calmed herself and shook her head. "How could I be angry? I mean, that was totally thoughtful of you, I guess. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure, and really no big deal."

They walked around to the driver's side. "I know I just said 'no strings attached,' but I was wondering if I might get your phone number? I mean, really, the numbers add up."

"How so? What numbers?"

"Well, you're 5'9" and I'm 6'2", which converts in inches to a ratio of 74:69, but if we give ourselves some room to grow, that could be rounded up to 75:70 which is a ratio of 3:2, which is your number mirrored."

She laughed. "That's a stretch."

"A one-inch stretch. No, but really, I'm kidding. It's a ratio of 15:14. I was trying to get you to give me your number so that maybe I could call you and you could tell me when you have a game and I'll come cheer you on."

She smiled. "Well, we're only practicing right now. Season doesn't start until February."

"I can wait."

She smiled. "But maybe *I'll* catch *you* on TV in the Kino Challenge. That's in November, right?"

His eyes lit up. "Would you like to come? I'd love to have you there. You can come as my guest. Special seats with the fam. It'll be fun."

She frowned. "Good grief, how in the world can I turn that down? I've always wanted to see one in person."

He laughed. "Awesome. So, let me have your number and I'll call you and give you the details."

She spoke the digits out loud. "Hope you can remember."

He grinned and tapped the side of his head. "Got it." He opened her door for her. She got in and glanced to the other seat to see a new phone charger sitting there. "Another gift?"

He shrugged. "Just trying to be thoughtful."

"And it smells so nice in here, and it's all clean."

"The service we use is very thorough." He backed away. "Hey, thanks for coming to the party with me, Jordan. I had a great time."

"Thanks for asking me. I also had a great time. It was very nice to meet you and your whole big beautiful family."

"I'm glad you had a good time. Asking you to the party was definitely my pleasure." He stepped back, closed her door and waved as she pulled away. He stood in the driveway and watched her out the gate. Finally he turned and went back into the house.

JoJo, Logan and Gabe met him at the door. They were grinning at him.

He blushed. "What?"

"She was nice," JoJo said.

"Nice lookin'," Logan added.

"I think she was really into you," Gabe said.

Young Eric shook his head. "Not so sure about that cuz I practically had to beg for her phone number."

"Well, I see that as a good sign," JoJo said. "It means she's not all in just because your parents are famous."

Eric nodded. "Yeah, I think you're right about that."

"Anyway, you ARE interested, right?" Logan asked.

"Yeah, I'm definitely interested. We'll just see how it works out. I mean, I'm about to be completely unavailable for the foreseeable future."

"You'll find a way," Gabe said.

Eric smiled. "Yeah, Gabe, and it looks like you're gonna have to do the same for my little sister."

"I haven't committed yet."

"Oh come on, we all know you're gonna do it."

"How'd ya know?"

"There was never any doubt," JoJo said with a laugh.

"Wait," Logan said. "Are we talking about a commitment to fight in the Mini-MART or to Taylor?"

Young Eric laughed. "Yes."

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September 9th, Monday Morning
Approaching Atlanta

The change in speed and air pressure woke Gabe up from a deep sleep. He looked around, getting his bearings. He sat on an Ameritech jet with his entire family.

So much had happened in the past few weeks, he could barely grasp it. He'd left Pine Forest, Georgia on August twenty-third, intending to start a new phase of his life. He was gonna start training to be a JETT, which was like special forces, only not in the military and he was gonna start school at USC at the same time. But then, on the twenty-fourth, all hell broke loose.

Now he was headed back home for some recuperation time. And then, if he was cleared by a doctor, he'd go back to Cali and fight in another Mini-MART. His new brothers were right, there was never any question. Like everyone liked to say, when Grandmaster Kino invites you to participate with him, ya just don't turn it down.

He'd made the offer at Taylor's birthday party. Gabe's mind went to that night. He'd given Taylor a promise ring that night. He'd also sung and danced for Taylor and made another multi-million view hit video. And then on Sunday before church, Miss Caroline had called him and Taylor to see if they were still gonna be able to appear live on the *America Can Dance* show that was taped in Nashville. That would happen in three weeks, right before Gabe would head back out to California to train for the Mini-MART.

The next day they'd attended a large church in Los Angeles and both Gabe and Grandmaster Kino were asked to give their testimony and to tell about what they'd experienced when they'd died or nearly died. Gabe had been really nervous, but then it felt as if Jesus had tapped him on the shoulder and the words had just flowed. It was another one of those extraordinary days when everyone was brought to tears, touched by the Holy Spirit bearing witness that God is real, Jesus is real, and ya better get your life in order. It was an amazing day.

Gabe glanced over at his mom speaking softly to his father, who had his hand on her belly, Gabe guessed, feeling the babies kick. He smiled. After church his mom hadn't been feeling too well and Jeffy was asked to examine her to make sure she was healthy enough to fly home. Jeffy had merely placed her hand on his mom's stomach and had gasped and pulled back. "Oh my goodness, Mrs. Tanner, why didn't you tell me you were having twins?"

His mom had frowned and said, "I'm *not* having twins."

"Uh, you most definitely are," Jeffy had said softly.

Gabe smiled. Two more siblings. Jeffy immediately knew the sex of the twins, but his dad and mom didn't want to know yet. They said they needed time to adjust to the new information. Gabe didn't care what they were. Two more sisters would be cool. Two brothers would be awesome if he could stay nearby and help raise them. But since he couldn't, he was thinking either way, two more spirits were being given to his parents and Gabe couldn't imagine better parents than them. Jeffy told his mom that she could fly home and then this would be the last time she could fly until after the babies were born.

A few hours ago, Gabe had stood at the Ameritech airstrip, once again kissing Taylor goodbye. She cried. He tried to comfort her. He missed her already. He wished he could come home to her every night. Hopefully, one day he could. But Grandmaster Kino and Grandmaster Ricky Kino had both advised him to not live in the future. They'd said to be present in each moment and appreciate what was unfolding from moment to moment.

So, he drew a deep breath and looked around at his family. His six sisters, and one about-to-be brother-in-law. His mother and father. Also aboard were the Appels, all four of them, Master John, Aunt Jodi, Jake and Laynah. Everyone was stirring and Gabe realized they were descending. That meant he'd gotten on the plane, closed his eyes and woke up four hours later. And now, he was supposed to go home, grab something to eat and go back to bed. Just the thought was comforting, because he felt like he could sleep forever.

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September 10th, Tuesday Afternoon
Kino Estate Crystal Cove, California

Gasping for breath, young Eric Kino stumbled over toward a grassy dune and promptly threw up his guts. Once he finished retching, he dropped to his knees, fell over on his side and then rolled to his back in the sand, staring up at the sky, waiting for his equilibrium to come back.

His grandfather's face came into view as he peered down at the fallen warrior.

"Quittin' on me?"

Young Eric drew a breath, shook his head. "No, sir. Just need a minute."

Eric drew a few more deep breaths, then finally rolled onto his knees and stood up. "Oh, freak," he muttered as he once again leaned over and vomited.

"Your father told me that your last health exam was at the end of filming back in April. Maybe we need to schedule another one."

Eric stood straight, blew out a breath. "I'm in perfect health, Granddad. Just not in perfect shape."

"That much is evident. But don't worry. You will be in a few more weeks."

Eric nodded. "Lookin' forward to it."

"Drink some water and we'll take it easy and work on some fight sequences."

"Uh, that's not easy."

"We could run wind sprints."

"Fight sequences it is," Eric said with a smile. He grabbed a bottle of water, swished it around in his mouth and spat, took a long drink, and then poured some over his head.

He looked around at the others who were participating in his training today. Grandmaster Allen, and Master Lu from the Kino studio in Newport. His own father and uncles would be back tomorrow, and Thursday and Friday, and only a half day on Saturday, because JoJo had a game that they would all attend. Uncles Mark and Joey had to work today, and his father had a business meeting. However, his mother and grandmother were both here, cheering him on, though they were distracted because they were also playing with the new Kino children, which still blew him away every time he looked at them. It was kind of like seeing his father and mother as children.

Grandmaster Allen and Master Lu both stepped forward, demonstrating each sequence as Eric's grandfather called out the moves. This was necessary because his grandfather was not quite up to par, physically. Mentally, however, he was on his game and young Eric could tell that this was indeed gonna be the hardest thing he'd ever done.

The day was a difficult one, and when the training went later than usual, young Eric asked about dinner.

"Don't worry. I won't starve you, I promise," Eric said with a smile. "We were about to break. We went a little late because on Thursday we're only gonna go to two o'clock."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Your sister has a volleyball tournament. A round robin with two other teams."

"Oh! Cool. Yeah, definitely don't want to miss that." His mind jumped ahead. "What time does it start?"

"Starts at 5:00."

Eric nodded. As soon as the training ended for the day, he bowed to his teachers, gulped down some water, grabbed up his phone and headed down the beach for a private conversation.

"Hey, Three!" Jordan chirped the moment she answered the phone.

He chuckled at the nickname. "Hello there. What ya up to?"

"Still at 5'9". How 'bout you?"

"Still at 6'2". So, I just found out that Taylor has a volleyball tournament on Thursday and was wondering if you'd like to come watch."

"Hmm, I would love to come, but I have an afternoon practice. What time is the tournament?"

"Starts at five."

"Where is it?"

"Brookside High School, it's in South Newport Beach."

"Yep, I've actually been there during a softball tournament a few years ago. Fancy private school."

"If you say so. So, I could come pick you up from practice."

"No, that's okay. No need for you to come all the way up here and then turn around to go back to Brookside, and then have to bring me all the way back up here to my car and then I'll have to drive back down that way again."

"Why?"

"Because I have no classes or practice on Friday and I'm going home."

"Gotcha. Well, then, I'll see you at the game?"

"Sure. I might be a few minutes late depending on traffic."

"I'll keep a look out for you."

"You don't have to do that."

"Yeah— I do."

She sighed. "Okay. So, how's your training going?"

"So far I've survived, but it hasn't been pretty."

"I imagine it's pretty tough."

"Yeah, like, boxing is listed as the hardest sport to train for, and this is similar."

"I would love to watch you train."

"Well, we wouldn't let just anyone in to watch me train, but for you, Miss Jordan Brooks, I think we could make an exception."

She smiled. "Where do you train?"

"Usually at our big studio in Newport. They have a lot of high-tech equipment, ya know, measuring impact strength and the like. But I also train on the beach at my grandparents' home, and sometimes on location, like running hills in the canyon, or swimming at the Utennsa Aquatics Center."

"Interesting."

"I'll be training Friday at Kino Martial Arts in Newport Beach. Wanna come?"

"Ya know what? I think I do."

"Cool."

"What time should I come?"

"Anytime you want. I'll be there all day, from seven in the morning until five."

"It'll probably be a little later than seven AM."

"I understand. So, cool, I mean, this has been a fruitful conversation

for me. I get a two-fer."

"What does that mean?" Jordan asked.

"I made one phone call, and got two dates."

"Dates?" Jordan teased. "These aren't dates. These are sporting events."

"You can dress it down any way that makes you feel comfortable, Jordan, but all I see is, I get to spend time with a beautiful and intelligent girl, doing things we both enjoy, and that sounds to me like a date."

"That's fine for whatever special little imaginary world you live in. Well, Trip, I have some assignments that I need to get done. I'll see you Thursday."

"Looking forward to it."

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September 10th, Tuesday Afternoon

Brookside High School, Newport Beach, California

Taylor dove for the ball and was able to save it. The boys who'd come in from the field after football practice gave a big cheer for her effort. She heard things like, "Yeah, Kino, great dig, way to go, Taylor," and, "good effort!" She turned and smiled at the guys, acknowledging that she'd heard them.

She remembered Gabe saying that he knew so much about volleyball because he'd watched the girls practice after football practice. She also remembered why he said he watched, something about "little black shorts" and "he was a guy, after all."

They practiced for another fifteen minutes, working mostly on their serves, and again, Taylor got cheered for her powerful serve and her high vertical jump. Other girls also got cheered, like Jana for her spikes and Charla for her blocks and sets.

The coach dismissed the girls. Taylor grabbed up her water bottle, gulped down the water and then wiped her face with her towel.

"Hey, Taylor, that's a great serve you got."

Taylor smiled at her fellow classmate. "Thanks, Lance."

"You didn't play last year, did ya?"

"Nope. This is my first and only year playing. I thought I'd try it."

"So, like, do ya like it?"

"I LOVE it. It's so much fun. I really like being part of a team."

"Well, it looks like you're doing great for it being your first time playing. But hey, I mean you ARE a Kino."

"Hmm, what does that mean?"

"I mean, Kinos are like, super athletes, right? So anything you do, you're probably gonna do it well."

She giggled. "Well, not necessarily, but thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Looks like you're gonna play libero."

"I am. So, what position do you play on the football team?"

He laughed. "Uh, come on now, I'm the quarterback."

"Oh, well, sorry I didn't know. I haven't really been keeping up. Things at my house have been a little crazy, ya know."

"Yeah, it's okay. I heard about all the stuff that happened. Anyway, so, are you coming to the game Friday night?"

"I haven't actually thought about it."

"Why? Don't you have any school spirit?"

"Sure I do, I guess. But we're just really busy."

"What's making you so busy?"

"Well, I have a tournament Thursday night. And we're going to see my cousin's game on Saturday."

"Your cousin?"

"Yeah, he plays at SC."

"Really? What's his name?"

"JoJo Adams."

"You're freakin' kidding me."

She laughed. "Not kidding."

"Why didn't I know this?"

"Maybe because you've never taken the time to speak to me in four years."

He had the presence of mind to look ashamed. "My loss," he said softly.

She smiled to put him at ease.

He nodded with determination. "So, I tell ya what, I'll come see you play on Thursday, and you can come see me play on Friday. Whaddya think?"

"Well, I don't know if I can."

"Well, at least try."

"I guess I can try."

"What are you two talking about?"

Taylor turned to see one of her teammates approach. "Hey, Jana. Lance is trying to talk me into coming to the football game."

"Oh, yeah, Taylor. Come to the game. I'm gonna be there. Me and Charla always go. You should come with."

"I'll have to see."

"Is Gabe in town?" Jana asked.

Taylor shook her head. "No, he had to go back to Georgia for a little while for some rest and recuperation."

"Well, then you should *definitely* come," Lance put in. "Unless, like, he wants you to stay at home and just wait for him."

"No," she defended. "He doesn't want that. He wants me to go out and have fun."

"Well there ya go," Lance urged.

"Miss Taylor? We really need to get going."

Taylor turned and nodded at Agent Ward. "Oh, sorry. I'm ready." She looked back at Lance and Jana. "I'll ask and let you know. See ya tomorrow," she said with a smile.

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September 10th, Tuesday Evening

Cottage #8, Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

"There you are," Laynah said cheerfully as she put groceries away in the refrigerator. "What took you so long? I finished the horses over an hour ago, ran to the store and had a conversation with your mom."

Jake smiled at his wife. His wife. He couldn't stop thinking that. The gorgeous red-headed scamp known to him as Melaynah Stewart was now Melaynah Appel, his wife. And he was her husband. And it was incredible. He loved her more every day and he was about to make her cry. He sighed. "Hey, Bugs," he said softly. "Sorry, I had to do a few things."

"Well, my big strong, husband, your mom wants to know if we'd like to join them at the Inn for dinner."

He nodded. "It'll be up to you. Sit down, Bugs. We need to talk."

At his tone, she felt her heart lurch. She came into the room, moving slowly and sat down next to him on the small blue sofa. Her eyes were big, searching his, a look of dread in them.

He nodded in answer to her silent question. "Okay, so, I'm being deployed next week."

She blinked but kept her eyes on his. "Do you know where to?"

He nodded. "Yes. Kabul."

Her eyes opened wide. "That's a city in Afghanistan, right?"

He nodded.

"But why? I thought we got out of Afghanistan."

"Well, the troops did, yes, back 2021, but others had to stay to oversee the evacuations, and to recover some assets and some got, well, there are some people, both civilians and others who are stranded. And well, there are certain things I can't say, sweetheart."

She sighed. "Do you know how long you'll be gone?"

He sighed. "It could be only about six months. But— it could be as long as a year or more."

She nodded her head and offered a brave yet trembling smile, but when she blinked her eyes, the telltale tears ran down her cheeks.

Jake pulled her onto his lap and held her tight. They sat there together for a good long while, him holding her and rocking her. Finally, Laynah bravely pushed herself away and then stood up. She wiped her face. "So then, we have a week?"

He grimaced. "Well, Bugs, a little less than that. I leave early Monday morning. That gives us five days."

She sniffed and nodded. "Do your parents know?"

"Not yet. You're my wife. I told you first."

She offered a small smile. "Thanks for that. So, I guess we should have dinner with your parents and tell them."

"If that's what you want."

She frowned. "What I want is to be with you every day forever." She shrugged. "But I knew you were a Marine and I'm gonna be strong for you, and you can count on me to be here for you, keeping the home fires burning, until you get back. I'll stay strong for you, Jake, so YOU stay alive for me."

"Roger that," he said, offering a small salute.

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September 12th, 6:00 AM, Thursday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"You're up mighty early today," Keegan said as he entered the kitchen holding little Iris in his arms. He set her down in her booster seat.

Gabe put his dishes in the sink and smiled at his father and sister. "I was supposed to sleep for three days, which I did. It's day four and I was gonna sleep until about 8:00, but I couldn't stay in bed another minute."

Keegan glanced at the time. "Two hours early. I guess the three days of sleep actually helped."

"I guess. We'll see if I get a few hours in and fall asleep again." Gabe came forward and greeted Iris, kissing her cheek and patting her head.

Keegan nodded. "So, looks like you're headed off to shoot."

"Yes, sir. Jake and I are meeting up. Would you like to come?"

"I would love to come but I have some operations going down currently."

"Anything big deal?"

"Well, when lives are on the line it's always a big deal, but nothing too much out of the ordinary. One of our agents was hired on in North Carolina as a bodyguard for a young girl who was a victim of an attempted abduction. Her father is a wealthy and prominent businessman. Two guys went after her again this morning and our guy intervened. He was able to subdue one and put the other in the hospital. We're still trying to get information out of the perps."

"Wow. How old is the girl?"

"She's fifteen."

"Thank goodness our guy was able to succeed. Do I know him?"

"I don't think so."

"Is that all?"

"No, I have six more ongoing cases right now that need my supervision."

"Do you need me to stay here and help out, like take care of Mom?"

Keegan smiled. "No. Go shoot with Jake. It'll probably be the last or one of the last times until he comes back."

"Yeah." Gabe sighed. "So, isn't it kind of strange that he's being sent

to Afghanistan?"

Keegan frowned. "Well, there must be a lot of covert missions his unit will be seeing to. Someone has to do it. They send in the best."

"It'll be dangerous?"

"Always. The military is a dangerous life. Positive thoughts, Gabe."

He nodded. "Yes, sir." He gathered his gun bags and headed out. He didn't have his truck because he'd let Peyton have it, so he got permission to take his mother's minivan. He headed the short distance to the Stewart ranch. Jake was already there, working with Laynah on quick draw, shoot, and reload. She would be twenty-one in a few months and he wanted her trained and ready to conceal carry.

Gabe shook Jake's hand and kissed Laynah's cheek.

"How you guys doing?" Gabe asked.

They both knew he meant about the coming deployment in just a few more days.

"We're gonna be fine," Jake replied. "Laynah has all kinds of plans to start a horse stable and training facility. That's gonna keep her occupied."

"That sounds cool. Kinda wish I could stay around and help out, but I'm heading back to train for the Mini-MART in a few weeks."

"Aww, thanks, Gabe," Laynah said. "For the thought anyway. But actually Rose is gonna help me, and I'm gonna help her."

"Help her do what?"

"Oh, she didn't tell you?"

"No, she didn't tell me. What?"

"Sorry. Pretend I didn't say anything."

Jake chuckled. "Yeah, Gabe, pretend."

"Right. Let's shoot." Gabe started unpacking his guns.

"So, are ya feeling any better?" Jake asked.

"I think so. At least I don't feel like lying down on the ground and going to sleep, so, like, that's an improvement."

"Yep, bro, staying awake is always preferable."

Gabe nodded. "In the biblical sense for sure."

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September 12th, Thursday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"I want Daddy do my hair," Angelina Kino stated, her tiny mouth in a pout and her arms folded across her chest.

Shelley glanced at her husband with a smile. He looked up from helping little Noah get his shoes on the right feet. "Okay, I'll be right there," he said softly.

"It's been a long time since you've done a little girl's hair," Shelley reminded him.

He grinned. "I'm good with my hands. I think I can handle it."

Shelley nodded in agreement. "Okay. Trade places. You come do our

little Angel's hair and I'll finish helping the boys."

Eric agreed and scooped the two-year-old up and set her on the little stool in front of the little vanity on the princess side of the room.

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked at her in the mirror. "How do you want it? You want one ponytail, or two?"

"I don't want a ponytail. I want bwaids."

"Braids, huh? Okay. Two braids or one?"

"Two, one here, and one here," she cutely directed, pointing to each side of her head.

"You got it." He went to work. First he gently brushed all the tangles from her long, dark tresses. He was careful to be very gentle or she would never ask him to help her again. Next, he accomplished putting each side up into a ponytail.

"I don't want a ponytail, I want bwaids."

"I'm getting to that part," he said softly. "Be patient."

"That's not how Mommy does it."

Eric's eyebrows rose and he looked at her sternly in the mirror. "If you want it done like Mommy does it, then ask Mommy to do it." He said the words with just enough sternness and just enough sweetness to get the point across with no tears. "If you want *me* to do it, then *allow* me to do it. Whichever it is you choose, it's okay, but once you choose, there'll be no complaining."

Shelley smiled as she watched her daughter contemplate the choices given to her. The children weren't used to having a strong male figure in their lives. They were learning quickly from the calm assertive way her husband had about him. He'd always been a good father. He'd always taught with logic and firmness, and calmness. The children never felt threatened, however, they were learning respect and obedience very quickly. He had them choose and then live with the consequences of their choices, much like our Father in heaven did with us all, she thought.

"Are you gonna do my bwaids, Daddy?"

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Do you want me to? Is that your choice?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, you decided you want me to finish the braids for you, is that correct?"

She nodded her head. "Yes, sir."

He smiled. "Well, then, let's get it done, sweet girl."

The child smiled at him in the mirror at the endearment, and he went to work braiding the two ponytails. It didn't take him long to finish and then ask if she wanted ribbons, which, of course, she did. He let her choose the color, and then tied a ribbon around the top of each braid. He gave her hair a tug.

"How's that?"

"I wove it. Fank you, Daddy."

"You're welcome." He kissed her cheek. "I love you."

She threw her arms around his neck. "I wove you too."

All three boys approached then, asking him to comb their hair, which he did. Once he finished, he smiled at each of them.

"Do you all know that I love you?"

They each nodded.

"And do you know that your Mommy loves you too?"

They all smiled at Shelley and nodded.

"Good. Now, Daddy has to go to work today. Are you gonna be good children for your Mom?"

"Yes," they said.

"Wonderful. So, no arguing or complaining, and be obedient and say, 'yes 'ma'am' when she asks you to do something. And then, I'll be home a little early, and your Mommy and I are gonna take you to go see TayTay play volleyball. Would you like to see Taylor play volleyball?"

"Yaay," they cheered, jumping up and down.

"Okay, let's go downstairs to breakfast," Shelley said.

Out in the hall, Jeffy was just coming out of her room.

"Hola Jeffy!" they all said at the same time.

"Well hello there my little munchkin brothers and sister. What's the plan today?"

"We're gonna go see TayTay," they exclaimed.

Shelley smiled. They were already very attached to Taylor. It was weird to think that Taylor was actually their niece. The whole situation was odd and she and Eric had decided they would dribble the truth of the situation out to them in tiny doses.

"But Daddy has to go to work," Abe grumbled sadly. He turned his eyes up to his daddy. "Why do you gotta go work, Daddy?"

"Well, first, a man always has to work to take care of his family. And what I'm doing right now is very important because I'm teaching young Eric how to be a better fighter, so that he can win at the Kino Challenge."

"Are you gonna teach us some more?" Manny asked.

"Do you want to learn some more?"

"Yes. I saw a movie, I wanna be a good fighter wike da guy in da movie."

"Oh really? What movie was that?"

He scrunched up his nose. "I can't bemember. What was it, Mommy?"

Shelley smiled. "It was Kung Fu Panda."

Eric and Jeffy laughed. "Daddy can teach you to be even better than Po," Jeffy said.

"Weally?" Noah asked.

"Yes, but you have to listen and try very hard."

"I will," Abe said solemnly as Angelina, Manny and Noah nodded.

"Okay, everyone, let's head downstairs to breakfast," Eric directed.

While Shelley made breakfast, Eric kissed all five of the currently present children, and turned to his wife, taking her in his arms.

"How are you holding up, Shelley girl?"

"Me? I'm fine. How are YOU holding up?"

"I feel a little stronger every day. I started lifting some light weights yesterday, and there was no problem. It almost felt easy."

Shelley frowned. "But are the chest wall muscles and breastbone mended enough to actually start exercising?"

"Normally, the answer would be 'no,' but I think my healing has been somewhat accelerated, and I'm really grateful for that, because I don't do infirmity well."

Shelley gave a soft laugh. "No, I guess you don't. Just don't go too fast. Don't overdo it and set yourself back."

"I will listen to my body and listen to God. As for you, I know you're in great shape and excellent physical condition, still, taking care of four small children is difficult for even a young mother. We can talk about hiring someone to help you with things, even if it's only with the household type things like doing their laundry, or cooking their meals, something like that. What do you think?"

Shelley frowned. "I don't want to have to do that."

Eric brushed his hand over her hair. "Sweetheart, I know what you're thinking. Needing help doesn't make you a failure. Don't let pride get in your way. I mean, there might be some sweet woman out there needing employment, and working for you would be a cush job and would pay well. Just think about it. We might be able to bless someone, and save you some energy so that you can concentrate more on the teaching part of raising our children. Just think about it, and pray about it."

She nodded her head thoughtfully.

He smiled. "I love you Shelley girl. I thank God for you every single day."

He kissed her soundly and left for the studio in Newport. It was time to teach young Eric to be better than Po the panda, and considering that Po can kill with just the touch of one finger, and actually create wings and fly, Eric had his work cut out for him.

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Deuteronomy 6:7
"You shall teach them diligently to your children,
and shall talk of them when you sit in your house,
and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down,
and when you rise."

Chapter Five

September 12th, Thursday Afternoon
Brookside High School, Newport Beach, California

It was one of the first times the Kinos had been out together in public with the new little Kinos since their lives had been so drastically changed. Jason Lee had made the decision to send a few agents along to the volleyball game, just to maintain some order. He sent Agent Ward, the agent usually assigned to Taylor, and Agent Wyatt was also in attendance.

Ricky and Bree arrived early, so they could watch the teams warm up. There was definitely a bit of commotion when they walked in. Young Eric was next to arrive and found a seat in the bleachers just in front of his parents. Taylor glanced over and gave a small wave to her family. Jeffy and Cam came in next, causing another stir as people pointed out the doctor who'd won a Nobel prize and was changing the world. Finally, Eric and Shelley arrived, ushering in their four tiny new family members. This spectacle caused an even bigger stir than Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams being there.

The teams finished their warm up, and Taylor made a quick dash over to say hi to the little ones who were calling out to her. They were still getting used to the fact that the world was much larger than the daycare center they'd lived in for two years.

"TayTay," they yelled as she came to them and hugged them.

Just as she finished hugging the children and turned to run back to her team, a handsome, blond boy approached. He was tall, athletic and confident. He walked up and tapped Taylor on the shoulder.

She turned. "Lance! Hey!"

"Don't act so surprised. I told you I'd be here."

She glanced up at her parents. "Uh, Mom, Dad, this is Lance White. He's the quarterback on the football team."

Lance turned to her parents with a smile and extended his hand to Ricky. "Mr. Kino, nice to meet you."

Ricky nodded. "Lance."

The young man then offered his hand to Bree. "Mrs. Kino, nice to meet you. I told Taylor I'd come to her game if she'd come to mine tomorrow."

"Yes, we heard," Bree replied. "We'll see if we can make that happen."

"Awesome."

"I gotta go," Taylor said. She turned quickly and ran back to her team.

Lance smiled up at the Kinos. "I'm gonna go sit over in the student section. Nice to meet you!"

They nodded and watched him run off.

"So, whaddya think about that?" Ricky asked.

Bree sighed. "I think it's interesting, I guess. What do you think—first impressions?"

"I think he's—confident, on the verge of arrogant, but I'll stick with confident."

"Do you think Gabe is confident?"

"Gabe is honest and humble first, but yeah, he's also confident."

Bree nodded. "I agree."

Young Eric leaned over. "I'm a little wary of this guy. Got a strange vibe."

"Think maybe you're just being loyal to Gabe?" Bree asked.

Young Eric nodded. "Maybe. Nothing wrong with that, but I'll try to keep my mind open." He glanced at his phone, then looked toward the gym doors.

Ricky smiled. "A little anxious there, son?"

Eric shrugged. "She said she'd probably be late. I just want to catch her as she comes in so I can pay her way."

Ricky nodded.

"I'll text her and ask her to text me when she gets here," young Eric said.

The teams huddled up, gave a cheer and took their positions.

Ricky frowned and pointed. "Is that Isla from teenspotter.com?"

Bree smiled. "Yep. That's Gabe's doing. Apparently last Saturday he did a video and mentioned something about maybe livestreaming one of Taylor's games, and the internet has spoken. She called me and I gave her my blessing. Oh, and, by the way, she's gonna want a short interview."

Ricky shook his head.

"It'll be okay, honey," Bree said.

The game started. Brookside Tigers versus Newport Tridents. Being a libero, Taylor had plenty of opportunity to show out and she didn't disappoint. The student section was going crazy for her.

Young Eric glanced at his phone when it buzzed. He looked up. "Be right back. Jordan just drove up." He left out the gym doors, nodding at Agent Ward as he passed. Outside the gym he watched her walk up to the outer doors. He rushed forward and opened the door for her. He smiled. "Hey!"

She smiled back. "Three!"

He laughed, took her hand, pressed it between his own. "We're only about ten minutes into the first set." He paid the lady at the table and ushered Jordan toward the gym. She looked quite a bit different than the first time he'd seen her. No little black dress this time. She wore jeans and a pretty

little jade-colored textured sweater type top edged with lace, and darker green slouch boots. He had to admire her tall, trim, athletic body. His eyes moved up to her blond hair that fell around her face and shoulders, looking windblown. She was stunning.

"You look beautiful," he said.

She smiled. "Thanks. You don't look half bad yourself," she quipped. She looked him over. He was clearly dressed down. Blue jeans, athletic shoes, and a navy blue knit shirt that definitely showed off his muscular physique. His gorgeous smile radiated, and his longish dark hair fell over onto his forehead. He was ruggedly handsome.

"It's nice to see you again," he said as he opened the gym door and ushered her to sit just in front of his parents. Before she sat down she turned and greeted them, and then Jeffy and Cam, and then waved at the elder Kinos who sat just to the left of young Eric's parents. She smiled at the four little ones sitting in front of them.

Jordan turned and immediately looked for the score and then for Taylor. The score was currently 16-8, Brookside. Taylor dug a brutal serve.

"Yeah, good job, Taylor," Jordan yelled.

Young Eric smiled.

"What, Three? Don't you guys yell for your team?"

He laughed. "Yeah, we do, I'm just glad to see you're not shy."

She laughed. "Not even a little bit."

"Then you and my sister have a lot in common."

Brookside won the next three points, then lost the serve, making the score 19-9. They lost the next four points, then won the serve back and it was Taylor's serve, score 20-13.

"Come on, Tay," Ricky called. "Bring us home, baby."

She aced the first serve. The whole gym was 'oohing' over her tremendous serve.

"Say, yay, TayTay," Shelley directed the children. They started yelling and screaming at the top of their lungs.

"Oh, Lord, come on, baby girl," Bree muttered.

Jordan turned and smiled up at her. "My mom is the same way when I'm playing. She gets so nervous she can barely watch."

"Let's go, Tay," young Eric called.

She served again. Another ace.

"Yes," the Kino men all said fiercely.

She served again, and the other team returned, but Taylor dove to save the hit, Charla set and Jana killed it. 23-13.

The other team called a timeout to try to ice Taylor.

"Don't get in your head," young Eric yelled.

Taylor smiled and tapped her temple, showing she had this.

And sure enough, she did. She fired in two more serves that the other team just could not handle. Brookside won. 25-13.

The student body was going crazy. Ricky watched Lance, the QB, as he and a few other guys stood and cheered for the girls, calling their names and heaping praise on them. The second set of the game went almost the same way and Brookside won the first game. Now the Tridents would have to play team number three, the Bayside Bulldogs, while Brookside got to watch.

"Three, your sister is awesome," Jordan said. "She's an athlete."

Young Eric nodded. "Yeah, she is."

"Rick," the elder Eric said softly. Ricky turned immediately.

"Sir?"

"How about grabbing a couple of these guys for me and we'll head to the restroom."

Ricky stood. "Sure, hmm, let me see, who should I grab?"

"Me, me, me," all three boys yelled and stood jumping up and down.

Ricky frowned. "I'm pretty sure that's not how it works, is it?"

The three all quickly sat and got very still. Ricky scooped up Manny, whom he knew was having a bit of trouble adjusting to his new life and needed some extra attention. He shifted Manny over to his right arm and scooped up Abraham in his left, and stepped over the few seats to the floor.

Eric stood and lifted Noah carefully and stepped down to the floor. They headed out to the restroom.

Bree turned to Shelley. "How's Eric doing, Mom?"

"He's getting stronger every day. It's like his healing is accelerated. It's amazing and we are so blessed."

Bree nodded. "And how are *you* holding up?"

Shelley nodded. "I'm fine. Not sure why everyone seems so concerned about me. I'm healthy and fit and perfectly capable of taking care of my children."

Bree's brow furrowed. "Uh, did someone say you weren't?"

Shelley sighed. "Not in so many words."

"Well, I know you're capable. But if it was me who suddenly had four little ones to take care of, I'd be tearing my hair out. I'd definitely hire on some help."

Jordan turned and smiled at the two ladies and nodded her head. "Really, Mrs. Kino. I mean, even really young moms who have, say, twins, even they have a hard time. I'm in awe of you, Mrs. Kino."

Shelley smiled. "Thank you, Jordan."

"I agree," Jeffy said as she stood to stretch her legs. "I'm worried about how I'm gonna handle one, and here you are Mom, handling quads like a pro."

"I gotta go," Angelina said loudly.

Jordan smiled. "I'll take her," she volunteered.

Shelley nodded. "That's fine, but don't be alarmed. One of the agents will escort you," she said, pointing toward Agent Ward standing by the door.

Jordan lifted the small girl and stepped over two seats to get to the floor.

"Think I gotta go too," Jeffy said.

Cam rose and took her arm to help her down. Not that she needed help, but she was six months pregnant and in Cam's mind, was looking very delicate. But Jeffy suddenly gasped. She turned her head around trying to look behind her.

"What is it, baby?" Cam asked.

"I felt something," she said, her eyes scanning the bleachers and then turning to scan the people walking back and forth past the bleachers. "I'll tell you later."

Cam finished helping her down.

There was a roar coming from the student section and Bree looked over to see Isla and her cameraman getting live interviews from the kids. She definitely knew what she was doing.

Young Eric watched Jordan carrying his little aunt. Jordan already fit in as if she was part of the family. He liked what he was seeing, in more ways than one, he thought, as the girls left the gym.

"Nice view, huh?" Cam said.

Eric looked up smiling at his uncle by marriage. "Definitely."

"What was that name I heard her call you? Tree?"

Eric grinned. "Three. Cuz I'm a third. She alternates between that and Trip, which stands for triple ones."

Cam nodded. "I like this girl."

Young Eric chuckled. "Yep. Me too. And the cool thing is, she doesn't seem to be impressed by the Kino thing, ya know?"

"I get it."

"So, Uncle Cam, what about you? I mean, when you first met Aunt Jeffy, did the fact that she was a Kino play into your decision to stay with her?"

Cam laughed. "Well, when I first met her I didn't know she was a Kino. I learned pretty fast though, and if it did anything, it made me afraid to go near her."

Shelley and Bree laughed at his words.

"Yeah, Eric, your grandfather didn't make it easy on Cam at all," Shelley informed him.

"For that matter, neither did your father or your Uncle Joey or Uncle Mark," Bree said.

"Yeah, and don't forget Jeff," Cam added. "I think he saw himself as Jeffy's personal bodyguard. I was literally threatened by every single one of them. Like, threatened—I mean, with physical harm."

Young Eric made a face. "Harsh. I was only a little kid back then so I didn't realize all of that was goin' on."

Cam nodded. "So, anyway, it's different when the Kino is a guy. Still, Miss Jordan doesn't seem to be after fame or fortune."

"Yeah, but her thing is she doesn't trust people in the limelight. I tried

to tell her that's my parents. Not me."

"Except you're about to be very much in the limelight."

Eric sighed. "Hopefully not as the first Kino to lose a Challenge."

Cam shook his head. "Full disclosure, *Three*," Cam emphasized with a grin, "whatever you say to me that I think affects your ability to win, gets reported to Grandmaster Kino."

"Man, again, harsh."

"It's all for a good cause, and you'll thank me later."

"So, when are *you* gonna represent?"

"Probably never. When I fight, it's to kill, usually, and I always win, so, it's too hard to switch that on and off, and could be dangerous, to other people, or to me."

Young Eric nodded. "I can see that. You're an asset, let's not use a .44 Magnum Smith & Wesson when a .22 is sufficient."

Cam stood to help Jeffy back up into her seat. "I like that. You can call me 44, if you'd like."

Eric laughed and stood to lift little Angelina up to his grandmother. He grabbed her around the waist. "Ready to fly?"

"Fwy!" she said.

He lifted her high over his head and zoomed her around before coming to land on Shelley's lap.

"Wow," Jordan said. "I wanna fly too!" she joked.

Before she could protest, Eric put his hands on her hips and lifted her high in the air. She squealed as she went up. It looked like the lift in Dirty Dancing and it got the attention of the crowd at the gym. She didn't hold her body stiff enough and crumpled down against him, but to his credit, he didn't let her fall. He set her down to a large ovation.

Just a few seconds later, Eric senior and Ricky came back with the boys, and an arm full of concessions, popcorn, and cups of water.

Ricky smiled up at his son. "Puttin' on a show, son?"

"Didn't mean to, was just playin' around."

Ricky pointed at Isla and her cameraman who were walking toward them. "Well, it's gonna trend, I guarantee."

"Darn."

"Hello, Kino family!" Isla said brightly. She turned for the camera. "Okay, the moment you've all been waiting for. Let's talk to one of America's favorite families. Grandmaster Kino, we all prayed so hard for you, and now here you are, a living, breathing, miracle."

Eric nodded. "Indeed. God is good all the time."

"Mrs. Kino, how do you feel?" Isla held the microphone toward Shelley.

"I'm grateful every minute of the day and night."

"And busy, I imagine, with these beautiful new children. It's quite a story and I'm hoping we can sit down one day soon and do an interview to hear the whole story instead of the bits and pieces we've heard."

Shelley nodded. “Because I know you’ve been honest in your interviews and your editing process, I believe we can probably make that happen. Of course my husband will also be a part of that interview.”

Isla nodded excitedly. “Oh, *that* would be wonderful.” She glanced at the children. “May I ask them their names?”

Shelley glanced up at Eric. He nodded.

Isla spoke into the mic and looked at little Noah first because he was giving her eye contact. “Can you tell me your name?” She put the mic toward him.

He smiled and leaned toward the microphone. “I’m Noah Kino,” he said proudly.

“How about you?” Isla put the mic up to Abraham’s lips.

“I Abwaham Kino,” he said softly and then smiled up at his mother who patted him on the head.

She did the same with Manny, who was a little shyer, but got the words out. Finally, Isla asked for Angelina’s name and pointed the mic at her.

“I’m Angewina Kino, but Mommy calls me her wittle Angel, and dis is my weal mommy,” she patted Shelley’s cheek. “And dat’s my weal Daddy,” she said, pointing at Eric. “And we saw him get shot but God made him better, and we wove him and we wove our mommy and we wove evevyone in our famiwy and evevyone in da whole wod, even da bad guys, cuz Jesus says to wove da bad peoples too.”

“Wow,” Isla said with a laugh. “You are a very smart little girl.”

She smiled cutely. “I know. And Mommy says I not shy at all, and Daddy says dat I wemind him of Jeffy,” she pointed at Jeffy. “Dat’s Jeffy. She’s my sister and she’s gonna have a baby and I can’t wait.”

Isla moved down to speak with Jeffy and her husband since that was how little Angel directed it. After speaking a few minutes with Jeffy and Cam Wallace, she turned her attention to Ricky and Bree, who, being pros, gave her some warm family insights, and spoke about Taylor, since that’s whose game they were at, which brought Isla to ask about Gabe.

“He’s doing well,” Bree assured her. “But whatever questions you have about him personally, you’ll have to ask him.”

Isla smiled brightly. “Oh, I can assure you I will. And since I know he’s watching this livestream, do you hear that, Gabriel Tanner? I’m gonna be asking some personal questions soon.”

Bree watched her phone a moment and smiled at his very kind response in the comments. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“And here’s a member of the family that we don’t often get to see or speak with! Hello Eric Kino the Third!”

Young Eric looked up at the cameraman and then at Isla and smiled. “Hi.”

“So, tell me, Eric, are you shy or do you just try to keep a low profile?”

He grinned. “Well, I’m definitely not shy. I can run my mouth with the

best of them, but I've learned to let my actions speak for me."

Behind him, Ricky glowed with pride.

"But as I hear it, you're not gonna be able to keep a low profile soon, because you're gonna be fighting in the next Kino Challenge this November!"

"Yes, I am, and again, I'll let my actions speak for me."

Jordan chuckled at the tough talk, making Isla zero in on her. She smiled at her.

"And hello there! Are you a member of the family that I've never had the opportunity to meet?"

Eric took over. "Isla, this is Jordan, she's a good friend."

"A friend! Oh, I see!"

Young Eric rolled his eyes.

"She must be a very good friend to be sitting here with the family watching Taylor."

"Well, she's quite an athlete herself, and so was interested in seeing Taylor play."

"Oh, another athlete! Do you also play volleyball?"

Jordan shook her head. "I did when I was in high school. But my thing is softball. I pitch for UCLA."

"Nice! A college athlete! You wouldn't happen to still be a teenager, would you?"

"I'm nineteen, why?"

"Because at Teenspotter dot com we love to travel around and video exceptional teens doing their thing."

"Well, I'm not exceptional."

"Yes she is," Eric put in quickly. "She's exceptional enough to get a full-ride softball scholarship to UCLA as a pitcher."

Jordan shot him a look.

Isla turned to the camera. "Hey, everyone, drop a comment and let me know if you'd like me or one of my associates to cover one of Jordan's games!" She turned back. "We're growing and actually have a sports guy now, and a music girl too, because I can't be in so many places at once. I'm so busy cuz I have a new spot on the national news too, all thanks to you know who, our own beloved Gabe Tanner."

She turned and looked over her shoulder. "Hey, it looks like this game is about over, which means the Brookside Tigers are about to play again. Woo hoo, let's go, Taylor!" She smiled at the Kinos. "Well, we're gonna go get back in place to video the action. Kino family, you totally rock! Thank you so much for taking time to speak to our viewers." She turned back to the camera. "Don't forget to smash that like button, and if you haven't already—SUBSCRIBE! And if you'd like to hear from the Kinos again, like maybe at the Kino Challenge, drop a comment!"

She turned back. "Thanks again, guys. You honor me." She stood back

a little in front of the bleachers and bowed.

Jordan was surprised to see the Kino family all rise and bow. She smiled at this amazing spectacle. This family was pretty special. She looked up at Eric as he sat back down. "Well, that was cool."

Young Eric nodded. "Well, she's a good lady. A little pushy sometimes, but honest and she does her job with integrity. She also has a lot of power and pull, so it's a good thing she's on the side of light."

"Why do you say she has power and pull? I mean, she's just social media, right?"

"Well, that's how she began, and though she's been offered a spot on the national news, she keeps up her social media presence, because she knows on her own social media channels, she has the power to keep it honest. The cool thing is, her goal is not to get famous or get on TV. Her goal is to reach as many people as possible with positive messages. The teens she covers all across the country are inspirational. She covers great athletes, amazing performers, community workers, young business leaders, young speakers, smart kids—any kid doing something inspiring. She covers them and presents them and then listens to her audience. She reads the comments. Well, not all of them, because she has millions of viewers and hundreds of thousands of comments. Anyway, she has a lot of power because if she takes an interest in someone *and* her audience likes them, they become an instant star."

Jordan nodded. "Like Gabe Tanner."

"Exactly. And Gabe is a truly good guy who just wants to do good in the world. So, it's perfect that God brought him and Isla together."

"So, you think God is working through a social media influencer?"

Eric smiled. "He works in many ways we might not understand. In small-town preachers. In homeless people. In the average person on the street, and yes, He's blessed Isla to bring His light to millions. When she started a prayer chain for Gabe back last April when he'd been abducted, God blessed her with His Holy Spirit and many who prayed for Gabe wrote comments and posted their own videos about God moving in their lives. It was pretty amazing."

"Interesting," she said. Then nodded at the court. "Here we go. Come on, Tigers, let's do this," she yelled. She gave a loud whistle.

Surprised, young Eric looked at her with a huge grin. This girl just keeps getting better and better.

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September 12th, Thursday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

The den was packed full of people. Gabe's entire family was there, except for Heather and Nolan, who'd gone back to Tennessee. Jake, Laynah, and John Appel were there. Jodi couldn't make it because she had to cover for a sick employee. The rest of the Stewarts were in the den, while Lisa had

joined Lizzy in the kitchen, where both of them were sipping herbal tea.

They had the livestream playing on the large-screen TV and Gabe couldn't take his eyes from the screen. Like an overly proud parent, he was so proud of Taylor he could burst. First, she was adorable in the team uniform, especially those little black shorts that showed off her muscular thighs. Her gorgeous body compensated for the somewhat ugly orange jerseys. Her long thick hair was up in a braided ponytail. She was into it. Scowling, cheering, clapping, slapping hands with her teammates after every point won or lost.

Her skills had improved immensely. Her serve was freaking impressive. And she gave her all, sacrificed her body to go after balls that looked impossible for her to get to. How he wished he were there. The moment the game ended, he would lift her up, spin her around and kiss her right there. Lord he missed her.

They were about to win their second game. The first game they'd won, winning both sets. This second game was against a much better team. Brookside won the first set, 25-21. The second set they lost, 26-24. Taylor did great that first set. The second set she botched one of her serves, and messed up a few returns, but still did well overall. Now they were in the tiebreaker, which only went to fifteen instead of twenty-five, and the score was 13-9 Tigers and it was Taylor's serve. The whole room held their breath.

Gabe, pacing back and forth behind the sofa, stopped as she tossed the ball up, and watched as she slammed it over the net. It was a powerful serve, but the other team dove and got it. They set and spiked the ball. Taylor dove and got it, Charla set and Jana slammed it hard. Point won! 14-9. The other team called a timeout.

Gabe started pacing again. "Come on, baby," he said softly. "You can do this."

The camera turned to show the Kinos in the stands. Gabe smiled at their faces. The win was in Taylor's hands and they all knew it. Gabe also smiled, seeing that young Eric's new friend was there beside him. That was cool. Timeout over, the camera swung back to Taylor as she went back to serve again. She bounced the ball several times, ran, tossed it up and slammed it. The ball streaked, just barely clearing the net. The girl on the other team dove for it, but the ball was hit so hard, once she made contact it went out of bounds and almost to the ceiling. Point, set, game, Brookside wins!

Everyone in the Tanner living room jumped up and cheered. They watched as Taylor's team group hugged each other and then lined up and hit hands with the other team. Once that was finished, the girls all huddled again and cheered. People came running from out of the stands. Everyone watched as a handsome blond kid ran toward Taylor, lifted her up and spun her around. He set her down and leaned close to her, talking in her ear. Taylor laughed. The people in the Tanner den got quiet, everyone glancing over at Gabe.

He blinked up at the screen, his lips pressed tightly together. He'd told her to have fun, to do things with other people while he was gone, so, why did he feel like his heart was gonna break. He drew a deep breath, shook it off, and looked around. Most everyone had been looking at him and glanced away quickly. He smiled. "It's okay, guys. I told her to have fun, to go out with classmates and stuff. That's all it is. So, a guy hugged her. No big deal."

Jake nodded. "That's right, Gabester, it's no big deal. I mean, look," he pointed at the screen. "She's being hugged by a different guy now, and then by a girl, and now, there's her fam. No big deal. You just miss her, that's all."

Gabe nodded. "Truth. Who's hungry for some pizza? It'll be here any minute."

Keegan watched his son from across the room. He really hoped it was no big deal, because Gabe was totally in love with Taylor. They'd all known she was young. Him too. And there was a possibility that they could move on. Still, Keegan sincerely hoped they would be able to make it through this testing period intact. Gabe had been through so much this past year. A broken heart heaped on top would not be fun.

He watched as Gabe pulled out his phone, looked down and sent a text. Keegan really hoped Taylor would respond to Gabe quickly.

Back on the screen everyone watched as Taylor's family surrounded her, and then quieted as Isla August made her way to interview her.

"Taylor Kino, hello! It's so nice to see you again. Now that was a great game!"

Taylor smiled brightly. "Hey, Isla! Thanks. My teammates are really awesome, aren't they?"

Isla nodded. "And you were awesome! Of course, it doesn't surprise me, since the Kinos always reach for excellence. I don't know that much about volleyball, but I'm told that your serve is phenomenal."

Taylor smiled. "I work hard at it so that I can offer something of value to the team since I'm so much shorter than everyone."

As Taylor introduced Isla to a few members of her team, everyone noticed the cute guy who came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. It was the same blond-haired guy from earlier. Everyone noticed. Everyone standing around Taylor in the gym, and everyone in the Tanner den too.

Gabe immediately looked for Ricky, to see his expression. It wasn't anger, but Gabe could tell he wasn't pleased, and the fact that Ricky wasn't pleased, actually pleased Gabe. After all, he WAS human.

"And who do we have here?" Isla asked quickly, always the pro, and knowing there could be a drama unfolding.

Taylor turned to look at him. "This is one of my fellow classmates."

When that was all Taylor offered, the boy smiled charmingly. "I'm Lance White. I'm a senior. I'm here at Taylor's volleyball game because we

made a deal."

"Oh, really, what deal was that?" Isla asked.

"I promised to come to her volleyball game if she comes to see me play football tomorrow night."

Taylor smiled sweetly. "I made no such promise."

Gabe watched intently, his senses alert. Taylor's dad reached up and removed the guy's hands from Taylor's shoulders.

"So, you're a football player," Isla exclaimed. "How nice."

He grinned. "Yep, I'm the quarterback. Come on out to the game. It'll be a good one. We're undefeated so far."

"As tempting as that sounds, I have another appointment tomorrow night. But hey, if my audience wants to see it, they'll certainly let me know. Maybe we can send someone, and if not to this game, then maybe to one in the future."

"Cool. And remember, Taylor is gonna be there tomorrow, so you can like, sit with her and get her reactions," Lance said.

"I haven't said I would be there," Taylor put in quickly, glancing at her father, who up to that moment had been doing a good job of controlling himself.

Suddenly Ricky smiled, put his arm around the shoulders of the young man and ushered him away. Gabe watched as Lance tried to pull away, but was unable. Yeah, good luck, Gabe thought.

"What are your thoughts, Gabe?" Keegan asked.

"The kid in me wants to kick the guy's butt. The 'trying to be mature guy' in me, thinks that Lance dude is cocky and wants to use Taylor for some instant fame."

Keegan nodded. "So, your plan of action?"

Gabe shrugged. "Speak to Taylor, if she ever calls me back, and warn her off."

Jake laughed loudly. "Yeah, even I know that would be the worst thing you could do."

"Yep, I'm with Jake on that," Laynah put in.

"Why?" Gabe asked.

"Cuz she'll just think you're jealous, and she'll rebel and she'll do that by spending even more time with him," Laynah explained.

"Taylor isn't like that."

Jake nodded. "Okay then, Gabe. Go with your plan and we'll see." He looked around. "Anyone wanna bet?"

John Appel shook his head. "Never bet on matters of the heart."

The livestream ended and the pizza arrived. Gabe hoped he'd get that phone call soon. Once Taylor got back to the locker room and saw his text on her phone, she'll call him, he thought.

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September 12th, Thursday Evening

Brookside High School, Newport, California

"Let's go have a little chat," Ricky Kino said softly to the boy.

Lance tried to pull away, but was no match for Ricky.

"Did I do something wrong?" the kid asked, not in a humble way, but in a challenging way.

Ricky sighed. "Several things, but we're not gonna address those. Look, I don't know your agenda, I don't know your motives. But I think you need to know something about our family. We don't broadcast where a member of our family will be at any given time. Not ever. Especially not since what happened a few weeks ago. We never tell anyone, and certainly don't announce it on social media, that we will for sure be at this place or that place. So, first, I know Taylor didn't promise you she would be there. And now, more than likely she won't be there."

"Why?"

Ricky shook his head. "As I said, this year alone there have been two abduction attempts on my daughter."

"I get it. But like, for example, everyone knows you guys are gonna be at the Kino Challenge in November."

Ricky nodded. "Yeah, they do, but they also know we will be there with a heavy security detail."

"Wow, that's a sucky way to have to live."

"Yep. There is darkness in this world and we have to be awake and aware and do our best to not let the bad guys win, and one way we do that is by not broadcasting our every move. Being in the limelight isn't all it's cracked up to be. It comes with a responsibility."

"So, like, I think *I* would give anything, do anything, to be famous. Would you rather *not* be famous?"

Ricky shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I'd rather be. It is what it is. We do God's will. We are called to fight the darkness and stand up to do what's right."

Lance made a slight face. "So, that means that you're not gonna let Taylor come to my game tomorrow?"

"I'm gonna say 'no,' right now. But who knows, she may show. The point is, if anyone asks you, you've been told that she won't be there."

Lance nodded his head in understanding.

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Proverbs 24:27

"Prepare your work outside; get everything ready
for yourself in the field, and after that build your house."

Chapter Six

In the locker room, Taylor changed clothes quickly and grabbed her bag and her purse. She pulled out her phone and read Gabe's text.

~ Hey, Tay, great game. We had a big watch party at my house. I'm so proud of you. I know you're gonna go eat with the fam at the *Casa Latina* but can you give me a quick call first? Looking forward to hearing your voice. Love you.

She immediately texted back.

~~ Hey, Gabe. Yes, of course I'll call. Give me a sec, so I can find a private place for a minute. Love you too (blowing kiss emoji)

Deciding there was no private place once she left the locker room, and not wanting to wait until after dinner, she sat down on a bench and placed the call.

"Well, that was fast," Gabe said as he answered.

"I decided to call right now while I'm back here in the locker room, because I'm thinkin' once I go out there I'll be surrounded by people until I get home and I didn't want to wait that long."

"I'm glad you didn't, baby, cuz I really needed to hear your voice."

"Me too. I mean, I needed to hear *your* voice."

Gabe chuckled. "Tay, you were freakin' awesome today! I am so proud of you. No one would ever know that you just started playing volleyball a few months ago."

"Thanks, Gabe. Coming from you, that means a lot. I'm a fast learner though, so, it's really no big deal."

"It IS a big deal. You were the star of the team."

"Hardly. But I do have a good serve, huh?"

"You have an amazing serve. You were great, and your whole team was great. They played well, and they played hard, and I'm really proud of you all. Tell them I said so."

Taylor giggled. "I will. That will make them all happy, to know that THE Gabe Tanner thinks they played well."

"Whatever. Hold on a minute. Everyone here wants me to put you on speaker." He did and held the phone up. "Okay, go ahead."

"Great game, Taylor! Congratulations!"

Taylor laughed. "Thanks, everybody! I miss you guys!"

"We miss you too. Especially Gabe."

Everyone laughed. Gabe rolled his eyes and quickly took it off speaker.

"And that's enough of that."

"How are you feeling, Gabe?"

"Stronger every day. So, uh, who's the blond quarterback dude?"

"Oh, I guess you saw him on the livestream. He's a guy in my class. He started talking to me after practice the other day."

"That's cool. But he puts his hands on you a lot."

"Gabe Tanner, are you jealous?"

"I didn't think I would be, but when I saw him pick you up and spin you around, like, after the game, it kinda bothered me."

"Well, believe me, you have nothing to worry about. He and a bunch of guys on the football team came in after their practice on Wednesday and watched us, just like you said you used to do."

"Yep, and for the reason I said too."

She giggled. "Yep, I thought about that."

"So, you promised to go see his game?"

"No, I didn't promise. I told him I *might* come. And I actually might. Some of the girls on the team are going and want me to come along. They sort of hinted that it would show I have school spirit, so, I think I am gonna go, cuz I don't want people thinking I don't care about our school or thinking that I'm some kind of snob."

"Since when do you care what people think?"

"I guess I really don't, but I actually do want my school to do well, so I do have school spirit, and I'm interested in learning about football."

Gabe sighed. "Yeah, but *I* was supposed to be the one to take you to your first football game and explain things to you."

"Oh yeah. Well then, I won't go."

"No, I want you to go. So, like, pay close attention. Write down all your questions. It'll be fun to hear the game from your perspective. Maybe you can record it so we can go over it together."

"That'll be fun!"

"Listen, Tay, don't trust this guy. I got a bad feeling about him."

"Gabe, I love you and only you."

"I believe you. I'm not talkin' about that. The guy doesn't seem, uh, right, I guess. He's a little too pushy."

"Hey. I'm not as innocent as you think. I know he has ulterior motives. I mean, look at the way he hijacked the interview with Isla. Not that I care about that. If he needs his fifteen minutes of fame, so be it."

Gabe smiled. "You are so smart. Ah, Taylor, I miss you."

"I miss you too, Gabe. So much. Please hurry back. I really need you to be right here next to me."

"Me too. I mean, I need *you* to be next to *me*. Well, go have dinner. And call me late if you want."

"I just might do that. I love you, Gabriel Tanner."

"I love you, Taylor Kino."

Taylor ended the call and rushed out to her waiting family. Almost everyone in the gym was gone.

"It's about time," young Eric said as she finally emerged. "I was about to come looking for you."

"Sorry, guys. Gabe wanted me to call him," Taylor explained as she knelt down and held her arms open. "Hello, my kiddos," she said as the four little ones came running to her. She hugged them fiercely, kissed their cheeks, and tickled Manny. "Who's hungry?"

"I am," Manny said.

"Me too," Jordan said.

Taylor rose. "Hey, Jordan. It's nice to see you again."

"You too. Girl, you killed it out there today. Three told me you just started playing a few months ago. I couldn't believe it. You were solid."

"Aww, thanks, Jordan. Who is Three?"

"She calls me 'Three,' as in, the third," young Eric explained.

"Oh, Three. I like it."

"Okay, well, I've dismissed our security so let's get going," Eric said. "The children are hungry."

Taylor nodded at her grandfather.

They all started out, but once outside the gym, Taylor stopped. "I gotta go real quick. I'll be right back." She started toward the bathroom.

"I'll go with you," Jordan said.

"Eric and I are gonna go on ahead," Shelley said. "We'll see you there."

"Us too," Cam said, as he and Jeffy headed out.

"So, I can't wait to see one of *your* games, Jordan," Taylor said as she emerged from the stall and stood at the sink.

Jordan came out of her stall. "My season doesn't start until February. But you've won me over. I'm gonna come to all of your games from here on out, unless I have practice. You've made me a fan."

Taylor giggled. "Yay, I have a fan!"

"You have more than one fan, silly girl. You are extreme. You know you're absolutely gorgeous, right?"

Taylor shrugged. "You are too."

"I don't know about that, but," she moved behind Taylor as she started out. "I mean, just look at this hair. It's so beautiful."

Taylor's mind flashed. She gasped. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she passed out.

Jordan, realizing she was going down, grabbed her. "Help," she cried loudly as she lowered Taylor to the restroom floor, trying to keep her from hitting her head.

Young Eric and his father came bursting in.

"What happened?" Ricky asked as he knelt down and took his daughter in his arms.

"I don't know. She just passed out."

Ricky held her close. Taylor moaned, and her eyes blinked open.

"Hey, baby girl. I've got you. What happened, Taylor?"

She whimpered. "Daddy," she cried.

"I need you to calm down and tell me what happened. Are you sick?"

She shook her head. "No," she hiccuped. "No, Daddy, this is the place. The place, where the man put a needle in my neck. He was right behind me, and he said my hair was beautiful and Jordan was right behind me, and she said the same thing, and it just all came back in a rush and I guess I fainted."

Ricky nodded. "Okay, baby girl. I understand. I'm sorry. I didn't think about this being the place where it happened. I should've been more aware."

"I, I d-didn't think about it either," she said, her teeth chattering.

Ricky held her tight. Her entire body was trembling. He looked around, nodded at young Eric and then spoke in Korean, reminding him of all that had occurred in the restroom just a few weeks ago and telling him that obviously, she needed some counseling, and asked young Eric to help lay his hands on her.

Young Eric spoke back in Korean to his father and they immediately laid hands on her head and prayed over her, asking for healing and peace. Taylor's trembling slowed almost immediately, and her eyes closed and she relaxed.

He lifted her off the cold tile floor, carried her out and sat down on a bench, cradling her in his arms. Bree knelt in front of them, listening as Ricky gave her a coded and cursory explanation of the situation.

"Oh, sweetheart. That was scary, huh?" Bree said as she ran her hand softly over her daughter's face.

Taylor sighed. "I'm sorry. I had no idea I would react like that." She sat up, looking up into her father's calm eyes. "Thank you, Daddy, thank you Eric, for praying over me. I feel much better now."

He squeezed her hard. "I'm glad you feel better. Do you want to just go on home?"

She sat up straighter. "No. I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

Young Eric laughed. "I guess you really do feel better."

Taylor stood up, got her bearings, and smiled at Jordan. "Thank you, Jordan. I know you caught me and kept me from hitting my head on that hard floor."

"Shoot, *that* was no big deal," Jordan said. "I guess it was the least I could do, since apparently, it was my words that caused the problem in the first place."

"It wasn't your words," young Eric said quickly. "I'll fill you in on the drive. Come on, people, let's get to the restaurant."

Out in the parking lot, Eric took Jordan's hand. "The restaurant isn't far from here. Ride with me and I'll bring you back to your car afterward."

She agreed and Eric held the door open for her as she slipped into his car.

"So," Jordan began almost immediately. "I heard what your dad told your mom just now, but I didn't quite understand."

"Well, he was trying to not go into detail there in front of Taylor, but, you know there was an attempted kidnapping of my sister back a few weeks ago, when Gabe saved her and got shot."

"Yes. I was following, but I didn't realize it happened right here at her school."

"Yeah, they took her while she was in the restroom, that very restroom. They put a needle in her neck and knocked her out, put her in a wheelchair, with a gray wig and a blanket and rolled her right past the security agent. Gabe went in the restroom to see what was taking her so long, realized she'd been taken, chased down the van, killed the driver and front passenger, who, just so you know, were trying to kill him. He saved her. So, I guess she just had what Dad just called an enhanced memory. She's suffering from post-traumatic stress, obviously."

"Okay, and what language were you speaking with your father and why?"

"We were speaking Korean. He wanted to explain to me exactly what was wrong with her without her hearing what was being said, so she wouldn't have to relive it while he told me what was going on and make her feel any worse."

"So, you speak two languages, but Taylor doesn't?"

He smiled. "I speak five other languages. Taylor only speaks three: Spanish, French and English."

Jordan laughed. "Only? That's very cool to speak three languages. What languages do you speak?"

"Korean, Spanish, French, Hawaiian, Chinese, or actually, Mandarin, which is one of the Chinese languages."

"Wow. Impressive. And English, so you speak six."

"Well, not too impressive since my father's been teaching us since we were little, so, it's kinda second nature to us."

"Why didn't he teach Taylor Hawaiian, Korean and Mandarin?"

"He tried to, but she's headstrong and didn't want anything to do with it, so, he allowed her to make that decision."

Jordan shook her head. "Every time I speak to you, your family gets more and more interesting."

"My *family*?"

She smiled. "Oh, you too, Three. You are extremely interesting."

He grinned. "You are too, Jordan. And by the way, thanks, for catching Taylor. If you hadn't we might be heading to get stitches somewhere instead of heading to the best Mexican restaurant around."

"No prob. And, why are they the best?"

"Besides the food being awesome, it's all organic, non-GMO, all-natural, all healthy, so you can eat your fill and not feel guilty because

you've pigged out on junk food. Instead you pigged out on good-for-you food."

"That sounds great, cuz I'm hungry and intend to pig out."

"See, that's interesting. A beautiful girl who likes to eat."

Jordan grinned. "Gotta fuel up, right?"

"Right. And here we are."

They pulled up to the strip mall where the "Casa Latina" occupied at least a third of the space. Also in the mall was an ice cream parlor, a dance studio, a Thai food restaurant, a drugstore and a mattress store. Jordan was surprised because it seemed so regular, and these very famous billionaires liked to eat here.

Eric turned off the car and just sat there. He looked at Jordan and smiled. She smiled back.

When he didn't move, she asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No. I was just thinking. I guess I've missed you since last Saturday, because it's very nice to just be sitting here with you."

She smiled sweetly. "Well, Three, to be honest, I think I've missed you too, because I was very excited about seeing you today."

"You were?"

"Yep. I couldn't decide what to wear, or how to wear my hair, and usually I never even think about those things. My roommates had to step in and help."

"Jackie, right?"

She laughed. "Good memory. Yes, Jackie and Colton."

He frowned. "You have a guy roommate?"

"No, Colton is a girl. She also plays softball and she is a trip. Her name might sound tough, but she's like, ultra-feminine. Fancy hair styles, fancy nails, trendy clothes and shoes. These are her boots."

Eric smiled. "They're nice boots."

"I'll tell her you said so. And I'll tell Jackie you remembered her name. They were funny, really. They were all a-flutter about me meeting you and your family, ya know, because of the famous thing."

He nodded, sighed. "Yes, I know."

"At first they didn't even believe me. I had to show them pictures and videos that were posted on Gabe's website and on Teenspotter."

"You didn't have any pics on your own phone?"

"My phone was dead."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Well, anyway, you were right next to me during Isla's interview today, but let's take a pic on your phone as definite proof."

She laughed and pulled out her phone. He leaned across the console, put his arm around her and put his head against hers as she snapped the pic. He turned toward her, his eyes moving over her beautiful face. He was close enough that he could see that she had freckles, just a few, sprinkled over the bridge of her nose. His eyes lowered to her lips, which parted as she drew a

breath. He really wanted to kiss her, but his head told him it was waay too soon. A girl had never affected him like this. He realized he was breathing hard, probably because his heart was pounding. He quickly pulled away when he saw his parents and Taylor pull up beside them.

Eric got out of the car and ran around to open her door, but she opened it herself. He offered his hand and she took it. He pulled her to her feet. She looked into his eyes. He smiled. "Did I tell you that you look really nice today?"

"I think you did. I know you like the boots," she said with a giggle.

They waited for his parents and then followed them into the restaurant. "Senor Kino, senora," the owner said immediately, addressing Ricky and Bree. "They are all the way back, as usual."

Young Eric smiled and thanked the man as they passed him. They headed back to where his grandparents, and their little ones and Jeffy and Cam were already seated.

When Eric asked why it took them so long to get to the restaurant, Ricky explained in Chinese.

Jordan leaned close to young Eric. "So, everyone but Taylor speaks Korean?"

He smiled at her. "No. First, he's speaking Mandarin right now."

"Why?"

"We always go back and forth to switch it up just to practice. Only Taylor, my mom and grandmother don't understand what he's saying. But my mom knows what he's talking about of course, and my grandfather will fill my grandmother in when he gets a chance."

"Interesting. So, Cam and Jeffy speak all five of the languages?"

"Actually, Cam and Jeffy speak more than five. They speak Russian, Chinese, Korean, Hawaiian, Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, French, and several more. Actually I don't even know what all languages they speak. I think it's like, twelve. I know they both speak Luganda, because they were in Uganda for a while, and I think they speak some of the Scandinavian languages. Norwegian I think. Maybe Swedish."

"Wow."

"Yeah, Aunt Jeffy is just plain smart. High IQ genius. Cam is special ops. A JETT. Which is Ameritech's version of like, a Navy SEAL or a Green Beret. He is also really smart and totally hard-core lethal."

"Does he go off on missions and stuff?"

"Yes. He's actually usually gone a lot. But since Jeffy got pregnant Jason has allowed him to work closer to home."

Two servers came and brought water and began taking orders. Eric watched Jordan as she perused the menu and ordered a large meal. He watched her as she conversed with the others at the table, talking about some great plays Taylor made and answering questions about her softball career. He watched her as she laughed at jokes directed toward him and his training

so far. She interacted with his new little uncles and aunt, talking to them as if they were important. She seemed to fit into his life perfectly. Wow, he was getting way too far ahead and had to tell himself to let things unfold naturally and just enjoy each moment.

He was brought quickly to the present moment when he felt Jordan's hand touch his leg. His stomach jumped, his heart beat faster. He looked down at her as she patted his thigh, just above his knee.

"You okay?" she asked. "You're awfully quiet."

He smiled, covered her hand with his own, and gave a squeeze. "I'm great. Sometimes I like to just sit and watch."

"Watch what?"

He shrugged. "How people interact. The little nuances. For example, my dad just ran his knuckle over Taylor's cheek, probably letting her know he's right there beside her and she's safe. And my grandmother seems to be thoroughly enjoying trying to get the little ones to eat their food. And my grandfather is watching my grandmother with so much love in his eyes, it makes me emotional. It makes me want what they have and what my own father and mother have. And that thought made me look over at Jeffy and Cam and he has his hand on her belly, so I'm guessing the baby kicked. They are madly in love." He shrugged. "So, that's what I was doing."

Jordan looked up into his handsome face. "Wow, Three, you really are deep."

He laughed. "Sometimes."

"So, do Jeffy and Cam know what they're having?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so, what is it?"

"I don't know. They haven't told anyone yet."

"When did they find out?"

He smiled. "From the moment they conceived."

"Ah, yes, right. She has that intuition thing."

"What are you two whispering about?" Bree asked.

"Sorry, Mom, we didn't mean to be rude. We were talking about the baby and wondering if Jeffy was ever gonna tell us what they're having."

"Funny you should say that," Cam said. "Because Jeffy and I were just thinking about doing exactly that."

"Really?" everyone said at the same time.

Jeffy smiled. "Yes, I think we're ready to tell."

"But Mark and Joey and Breez and Bella aren't here," Shelley said.

"Neither are JoJo and Logan," young Eric put in. "After all, this is our cousin we're talking about."

"We can FaceTime real quick," Taylor offered.

"Okay, then," Jeffy said. "Everyone FaceTime whoever you want to hear the news and let me know when you're ready."

Phones were pulled and in about five minutes all the people mentioned

and more were on the phone. Taylor had the Tanners on her phone. Shelley had Angel and Jason, Eric had Justin and Lori, young Eric had JoJo and Logan. Cam had Jeff and Mickey, who promised to reveal their own baby's gender while everyone was on the call. Jeffy had Kimmie and Jensen on her phone who also said they would reveal their baby's gender. Bree had Joey and Breez, and Ricky had Mark and Bella.

"Okay, here we go," Jeffy said with a sweet smile. She turned to her husband. "Cam, will you do the honors?"

Cam smiled broadly. "Jeffy and I, we're gonna have a boy!" The place erupted. When everyone calmed down, Cam held his phone up. "Okay, everyone, now Jeff and Mickey have an announcement. Go ahead Jeff."

Jeff smiled. "Hey, everyone there at the restaurant and on the other calls. Mickey, you want to say it?"

"No, honey, you go ahead."

"Okay then, finally, Mickey and I are gonna have a girl!"

The place erupted again.

It took a while for everyone to calm down again. The women were so happy for Mickey finally getting a girl.

"Wait, everybody," Jeffy said. "I have Kimmie here and she's gonna tell us what they're gonna have. Go ahead, Kimmie."

"Hey, everyone. I guess I'll have my man give you the news too."

Jensen put his face in front of the camera. "We're gonna have," he paused dramatically. "A— boy!"

More cheers and applause.

"Okay," Jeffy said. "I guess that's it."

"No, wait," Taylor said. "Guess what. We have two people over at the Tanners' house who are gonna go ahead and tell us their good news." She held her phone up high.

"Hey, everyone," Lizzy Tanner said. "Keegan, you do the honors."

Keegan put his face next to Lizzy. "Well, some of you already know, Lizzy and I are having twins, and they are—not identical. And we are having one girl and one boy!"

The place erupted again. Gabe got on the phone. "I'm gonna have another brother!"

"Whaddya mean another?" Keegan asked.

"I already have Jake, JoJo, Logan and Eric. But now I'll have a younger brother. Now I just gotta figure out a way to stay close to him— ow— uh, and my new sister," he said, rubbing the top of his head. "That hurt, Rose."

Everyone laughed.

"And now, we have one more announcement," Gabe said, handing his phone over to Lisa Stewart.

"Hey, everyone. So you probably all know that it's been a difficult pregnancy for me. I'm forty-six years old. I've been worried that there might be something wrong with the baby, you know like Down syndrome or

something. And besides, I've been so sick. Well, six weeks ago we found out that there is something else that happens when the mother is older. When the ovaries age they are more likely to release more than one egg each month. So, like, that happened."

Everyone gasped.

"Yes, God has blessed this old woman and this older man with twins. Isn't it crazy that Lizzy and I are both gonna have twins? And now, I'll turn it over to Chaz to deliver the rest of the news."

Chaz smiled into the phone camera. "Hey, everyone. My news is similar to Keegan's because the twins are also fraternal, aaand, we also have a boy and a girl."

A cheer went up again. This time women were crying, even the men present seemed emotional. Young Eric looked around. He knew exactly what was happening. He glanced at his grandfather, who was smiling, his eyes looking heavenward. They were all being filled with the Holy Spirit, telling them that this was all part of God's plan.

"Eric?" his grandfather said softly. "Share your feelings with the group, please."

Young Eric's mouth opened in surprise. His grandfather loved using moments to teach and he nodded encouragingly at young Eric.

Eric cleared his throat. "Well, I feel the Holy Spirit pretty strong right now. I'm pretty sure we all do. All of these babies coming into the world, including these four, maybe five new Kinos, if we can find the other one, they're all coming here for a reason. They're all God's warriors being sent here for a purpose, for a grand calling. It almost feels like a grand finale. I'm really excited to see what is about to take place."

Eric nodded.

Ricky also nodded. "Well said, son."

Young Eric looked down at Jordan, who also seemed quite taken with all of the news. She smiled up at him. He gazed at her sweet face and took her hand and squeezed it. He had a feeling that Jordan was also a part of God's plan, and he hoped that meant she would remain in his life.

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Young Eric pulled into the school parking lot and right up next to Jordan's car. Again, he just sat there a moment, mostly because he didn't want to say goodbye. He glanced out the window at her car.

"How's the car running?" he asked.

Jordan smiled. "Better than it ever has. Your guys are good. I don't know what they did, but the check engine light is off."

He smiled. "How long had it been on?"

She laughed. "A long time. Maybe even a year."

"Well, now you don't have to look at the light and wonder when something major is gonna break."

"Thanks for that."

He turned toward her and smiled. "My pleasure. Really."

"Thanks for dinner. I had a great time and your family is a trip."

"Again, my pleasure. So, when do you think I might get to meet *your* family?"

"Why would you want to meet my family?"

"I'm curious to meet the people that made you who you are."

"Hmm, well, I'll see if I can make that happen sometime."

"Good. Well, I hate to say goodbye, but I have to be running on the beach at the butt-crack of dawn."

He got out of the car and made it to her side to open the door before she could, and only made it because she was gathering her purse and phone. He helped her out and walked her to her car.

"So, are you still coming to watch me train tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't miss it. I'm totally intrigued to see how Grandmaster Kino turns everyone he teaches into champions."

"Well, just a heads up, it's not pretty."

"Can't scare me off. Sounds like he's a tough coach."

"He's an inspired teacher. What time will you be there?"

"Not sure. Maybe about 10:00 I'm guessing." She unlocked her door and then turned and leaned against it.

He stood in front of her. His eyes traveled over her pretty face to her mouth, wandered farther down and then back up to her mouth. He wanted to kiss her. Wanted it badly. He knew, though, that it was too soon, probably way too soon, but he didn't know how much longer he could resist. He realized he was breathing hard and ordered himself to slow down, take a deep breath. He smiled. "Thank you so much for joining me today."

"I had a great time."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes you will."

His eyes lit up. "What are you doing Saturday?"

"Umm, well,— "

"Wait. Don't answer that. It's never fair to ask that question. Let me just ask you this. Would you like to accompany me to watch JoJo play at USC?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Wow. I mean, I would really love to see a game in person."

"Have you never been to a college football game?"

She shook her head. "Nope. What time is the game?"

"It's a 7:30 start time, but we'll get there earlier. It's a big home game against Utah. *GameDay* is coming. I have to train for half a day, but then I can come pick you up. I could meet the fam too! Whaddya say?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Let me check with my mother to make sure she doesn't have plans for me to help her on Saturday. What time would you come to pick me up?"

"You can choose any time after 3:00 and before 5:00."

"Can I let you know tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course. Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks for a great evening." He bent down and kissed her cheek before he could stop himself and then opened her door for her.

She got in the car, he shut the door and she rolled down her window.

"Drive safely," he said as she put the car in gear.

She giggled. "You are very cute, Eric Kino the third." She gunned the engine twice and then took off.

He grinned as she drove away. His heart was racing and he was very much looking forward to seeing her again.

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September 12th, Late Thursday Night

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Hey, Tay," Gabe said sleepily, as he rolled over onto his back. "I was kinda hoping you'd call."

"I guess it's like, midnight there," she said. "Sorry it's so late."

"No worries. I always want to talk to you. Call me anytime. You know that, right?"

"I know it for now, but I wonder how it will be when you're here training to be a JETT and going to school."

"I don't know. That's not until January anyway, and I guess we'll figure it out when the time comes."

She sighed. "I'm tired of telling you how much I miss you."

"I get it, baby. If all goes well with the doctor, and I'm pretty sure it will, I could be out there in about two weeks."

"That feels like forever."

"If you focus on the present, it will go faster. By the way, let me just tell you one more time, you were awesome today."

"Thanks."

"So, did you decide if you're going to the football game tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'm going, but I really wish you were coming."

"Who are you going with?"

"Agent Ward."

Gabe chuckled. "Hot date, huh?"

"Well, actually, he *is* cute."

Gabe snorted. "He's like eight years older than you."

"Yep. How much older than your mom is your dad?"

"Uh, seven years. Whaddya tryin' to say, Taylor?"

She giggled. "I'm just teasin' ya. Really though, my dad has to spar with Eric tomorrow afternoon, into the evening, and then he and my mom have an event they have to attend for some movie studio, so they can't go to the game. Young Eric is not gonna be in any shape to go, plus, he's supposed to be in bed by 9:00."

"Yep, I remember that."

"Right. And my grandparents have the kids, and Jeffy doesn't feel like doing too much, and I can't go alone, so Agent Ward is gonna take me and look after me."

"I'm sorry I can't be there. But you don't have to worry about recording the game. I did some searching and found out I can watch the game live on the NAHSS site."

"Nahass? What's that?"

"It's the National Association of High School Sports. Not every school is in it. But Brookside is, and so is the team you're playing. And by the way, this is an important game."

"How do you know?"

Gabe chuckled. "Well, I did a little research. Your team is 3 and 0, 1 and 0 in the conference. Bayside, the team you're playing, is in the same conference and is also 3 and 0 and 1 and 0 in the conference. All the other teams in the conference have at least one loss. Either Brookside or Bayside is gonna join them."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Gabe yawned. "I'm too sleepy to explain it right now."

"Fine," she said with a pout.

He laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You're just so cute when you're mad."

"I'm not mad. But you go to all this trouble to research the game and the teams and stuff and— "

"It's not a big deal. It wasn't trouble. It took me two minutes. I just clicked on the stats, that's all. It's always more interesting watching a game when you know the stats. So, did you enjoy your dinner? And wasn't it cool finding out what everyone is gonna have? I mean, I'm gonna have a kid brother."

Taylor smiled. "I bet you're stoked."

"I really am. Almost wish I didn't have to leave. I wish you could come here and live, and we could help Mom take care of the twins, and just be together. I'm tired of always having to leave people I love. But, I know a man has to do what he's gotta do to make a living and support his family. So, I'll do whatever I have to do. Sorry, I'm half asleep and sayin' stuff off the top of my head. Stuff I shouldn't say out loud."

"Gabe, I hope you know that you can say anything to me. I mean, anything at all. I'll never judge you."

"Thanks, Tay, you are the best. So, is that it? Is there anything else you wanna tell me about before we say goodnight?"

"Well, I had a little meltdown after the game today."

He became alert. "Meltdown?"

"I wasn't thinking, and I went into that bathroom, the one outside the gym, the one where they tried to get me, anyway, I passed out."

"Oh, Taylor. Who found you? What happened?"

"Jordan was with me, ya know, Eric's new friend. She caught me and called for help and my Dad and Eric came in and got me. I couldn't stop shaking. It took me a while to get under control. Dad and Eric laid hands on me and that helped. The weird thing is, I didn't know I'd be affected like that. It totally took me by surprise."

"We need to talk to Grandmaster Kino and see if some exposure therapy might help. You know what that is?"

"Yes."

"I could go with you into the restroom. We can walk around and talk about it. I think eventually, the fears will go away."

"I could do that, as long as you go with me."

"Okay, I will. We'll have to do a few bathroom dates once I get back out there."

She giggled. "A bathroom date it is."

He yawned. "We also need to FaceTime soon and work on our dance, cuz that's in two weeks, right before I come back out there."

"Okay. Let's get a practice in Saturday morning after volleyball practice. Then I have to go to JoJo's game."

"Oh, you're going?"

"Yes."

"You don't usually."

"I know, but I started dating this really cute guy and he turned me on to team sports and now I can't seem to get enough."

He chuckled. "I love you, Tay," he said as he yawned again.

"I love you too. Go to sleep. Goodnight."

"Night."

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September 13th, Friday Morning

Kino Martial Arts Studio, Newport, California

Jordan's eyes were wide open and her mouth formed an 'O'. What she had witnessed so far were truly feats of miracle strength and endurance. Currently young Eric had moved from over-the-top strength training, including deadlifts, burpees, squats, pushups, pullups and more, to some sick ab workout. He just finished his second set of two hundred and lay flat on his back, breathing hard.

Grandmaster Kino stood over him. "Get up, Eric, and I mean right now, or go run fifty wind sprints."

"Yes, sir." Eric rolled to his stomach, pushed himself up to his knees, and finally stood. His breath was coming in huge gasps and Jordan thought he might pass out, or have a heart attack.

"Good effort," Grandmaster Kino said. "Drink some lightning water, stretch out, and we'll work on kicks."

Young Eric gave a slight bow and ran to grab a bottle of water.

He came back with the water in one hand and a small towel in the other. He drank half the bottle of water, tossed it down, wiped his face on the towel, tossed it down, went to the center of the floor and bent himself in half. He wore loose-fitting shorts and a faded USC T-shirt that was currently completely soaking wet with sweat.

Jordan watched as he now stretched his body, arms and legs to impossible rubbery poses. Splits, backbends. Apparently flexibility for this big strong guy was not any kind of obstacle.

Grandmaster Kino walked forward with a man by his side who was holding a kicking pad in his hand. "Ready?" Grandmaster Kino said to Eric.

"Yes, sir."

"Master Foreman here will hold. Roundhouse. Right leg, twenty, go."

Eric's right leg struck out and hit the pad so hard it sounded like a gunshot. Jordan actually jumped in her seat. He finished twenty and then did twenty with the left leg. This went on with several other kicks. Side kick, back kick, hook kick and more. Finally Eric bent over, hands on knees, trying to catch his breath.

Grandmaster Kino stepped forward, nodded. "Master Foreman, put on your chest protector, please."

The man bowed and stepped aside to put it on.

"Eric," Grandmaster Kino continued. "We're gonna work on combination kicks." He touched the side of his head. "Listen. Double side kick. Side kick into back kick. Side kick into spinning hook, roundhouse into spinning back. In that order. Do you need me to repeat the sequence?"

Eric drew a deep breath. "No, sir, I got it."

"Master Foreman, when you're ready."

The man stepped forward, young Eric began and Jordan was mesmerized by the beautiful choreography. It was amazing, perfection, so she was surprised that Grandmaster Kino gave a heavy critique of the execution. She also was amazed at the stamina young Eric was displaying. He was sweating buckets. He was breathing hard. But he refused to quit.

"Go drink some water, Eric, and come back, we're gonna switch to kick/punch combos."

"Hello!"

Jordan turned to see Breanna Adams smiling and sitting down in the chair next to hers. "Hi, Mrs. Kino."

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Very much. I mean, these guys, they are amazing. Three is amazing. Did you come to watch?"

She smiled her beautiful smile that the whole world craved. "I brought lunch. And then, the next part of the day is gonna be fun, because they're gonna spar. And you're gonna like it too, because I hear you're a fan of my brother Joey."

"He's coming to spar?"

"Yes, and Mark, and Ricky. They're gonna take turns beating up my son, but hey, it's all for a good cause."

Jordan smiled. "Poor Three. I hope he survives."

Bree nodded. "My husband would say, that it's his survival at the Challenge that is uppermost in their minds." She touched Jordan's shoulder. "So, how would you like to help me get the lunch laid out on the table?"

Jordan rose. "Absolutely."

Together they spread a tablecloth over a large folding table and then went out to Bree's car and brought in two large boxes filled with deli sub-sandwiches, bags of organic, all-natural banana chips and also quinoa chips, tangerines, bananas, paper plates and napkins.

When they finished Jordan turned just in time to see Eric drop to his knees. Then to his hands and knees. He stayed like that for a minute and then stood quickly and rushed to the restroom.

"Is he okay?" Jordan whispered to Bree.

"Yeah, bless his heart. He's probably gonna go throw up his guts. It happens a lot in the first stages of training. It gets better as his stamina improves."

"Seems harsh."

"I used to think that. But if Eric, I mean, the older one, if he can push young Eric through to survive the harsh training, then there's probably nothing anyone can bring at the Challenge that young Eric can't handle."

Jordan nodded. "Ya know, I thought I was in good shape from all the training and running we do for softball, but it's nothing compared to what's going on here. It makes me want to look into taking up martial arts."

Bree smiled. "Eric, I mean young Eric, I'm sure would be happy to teach you."

Young Eric came back and presented himself to his grandfather. "Sorry, sir."

Eric nodded. "Put on a dry shirt and take an hour for lunch."

Young Eric bowed. "Yes, sir." He turned and went to his bag over next to the far wall and pulled out a dry shirt.

Jordan watched him as he pulled the wet t-shirt off and almost gasped at the sight of him without a shirt on. She'd been able to tell that he had a good physique with his clothes on, but had no idea he was as ripped as he was. He quickly pulled the dry shirt over his head. It was an old faded Kino Martial Arts t-shirt. Jordan sighed.

Young Eric looked over at her, smiled and came to her. "Hey, Jordan. Sorry I couldn't come speak to you earlier. Once I'm training I don't dare give my attention to anything other than my grandfather until he dismisses me."

"I understand."

"So, whaddya think so far?"

"I have to say, I am totally impressed. I think you are amazing."

He smiled. "Wow. I didn't expect that."

"What did you expect?"

"I guess some kind of sarcastic remark."

She giggled. "I tried to think of one, but you were too impressive. Your strength, your flexibility, your knowledge, even just your memory of doing a sequence as Grandmaster Kino called it out. I am blown away."

Young Eric blew out a breath. "Well, don't want to burst your bubble, but I have a long way to go. But thanks for the ego boost."

"Are you gonna eat?"

"Yes. Just need a few more minutes to let my stomach settle."

Young Eric went to thank his mother for the lunch and Jordan looked up to see Grandmaster Kino headed her way. She'd only spoken to him briefly two times, at the party last week and at the game last night. She admitted, he was a little bit intimidating. Right now though, he was smiling at her very kindly.

"Hello, Jordan," he said. "Nice to see you again."

She held her hand out to him and he grasped it. "Hello, sir, nice to see you too."

"I hope my teaching methods haven't scared you away."

"They are scary," she admitted with a smile. "But I'm really intrigued, and impressed. No wonder everyone you teach becomes a champion."

Eric nodded. "I've been blessed. I just came by to tell you that you are welcome to come to any and all training sessions for young Eric. I've never seen him work so hard, and I think that may have something to do with you being here."

Jordan laughed. "Well, if he was trying to impress me, he succeeded. And thank you for the invitation. I just may take you up on that because all of this is very interesting to me."

"Have you ever taken martial arts classes?"

"I did, like way back when I was like six years old. Then my father got sick and life changed. But I've always been interested. I've watched the Kino Challenges every year and the MART every two years, and this year that Mini-MART was really fun to watch. That Gabe Tanner, he's such a good guy."

Eric nodded. "That he is." He looked into her eyes. "So, your father is sick?"

"He passed away from lung cancer when I was eight."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. That was almost eleven years ago, but it's weird because sometimes it feels like it just happened."

"I understand. Losing a loved one is the hardest thing we ever go through. Still, there are things that we can take comfort in, but this is not the time and place to discuss those things. Maybe one day we can sit and talk about it."

"That's very kind, sir. Thank you."

She watched him move away toward the lunch table. He took a minute to bless the food and dug in. Young Eric motioned her to his side. "This food is for you too. Eat with me."

She conceded and they filled their plates and sat down on the floor to eat lunch. While they ate and chatted, other people began to arrive at the studio. Many of the ones coming in were students who'd been invited to learn from the sparring that was about to take place. Others were Masters from different Kino Martial Arts locations. There was a big stir as Mark, Joey and Ricky arrived.

Jordan watched as the trio walked around shaking hands and chatting with other Masters and students alike. She and Three finished their lunch and leaned back against the wall to digest. Eric closed his eyes briefly.

"Tired?"

He opened them. "A little."

"I guess you don't get an afternoon nap break."

He chuckled. "Yeah, that's not on the agenda. I thought I might close my eyes though, try to gather some strength."

"You do that. I think I'm gonna go help your mom clean up the lunch mess."

"That's very nice. Thanks." He immediately closed his eyes.

Jordan smiled at him. He was just too cute.

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2 Thessalonians 3:13
"And as for you, brothers and sisters,
never tire of doing what is good."

Chapter Seven

Thirty minutes later, the lunch all cleaned up and put away, the students and Masters all sat cross-legged around the outer edges of the large class area. Jordan, Bree and a few other wives or girlfriends were provided chairs along the wall. Jordan couldn't take her eyes off Three, who was now bare-chested. He was magnificent. His hands were taped. He was stretching.

Standing near Grandmaster Kino was THE Joey Adams. He too was bare-chested and he too was ripped with muscle and he too was folded in half, stretching his body. Grandmaster Kino spoke.

"Master Foreman will ref. What he says goes. Joey, don't hold back."

Joey nodded, bowed. "Yes, sir."

"But don't kill him," Grandmaster Kino added.

Everyone laughed except young Eric, whose lips pressed tightly together. Jordan looked at him closely to see if he was scared or nervous. He didn't seem scared. He did have a look of determination on his face.

Grandmaster Kino went on. "I'm gonna coach Eric. If I miss something, I'd like the other instructors in this room to bring it to my attention."

A murmur of 'yes, sir' moved through the room.

Jordan realized she *was* very nervous. She watched Three draw several deep breaths. She knew he'd already been through an extremely hard workout and wondered what reserves he had left.

The sparring began. Eric and Joey were moving so fast that Jordan could barely see what was happening. She caught that Eric had blocked several punches and kicks. He actually landed a punch right in the center of Joey's chest, but the victory was short-lived when Joey spun and kicked Eric so hard he went down. It took him a minute to find his bearings and get up.

Grandmaster Kino was calling out directions that Jordan didn't understand, like, "double back," and "you're off. You need to counterbalance." And also ones she did understand, like, "he's open." At the end of three minutes, Joey bounced away and Eric rose off the mat and limped toward his grandfather.

Jordan felt like she was dreaming. The whole thing was surreal. First, Joey Adams was absolutely remarkable. Watching on TV you just don't get the realness of his speed and the realness of his power. Jordan thought with Eric being so young and so strong, he'd at least hold his own with Joey. But Joey was pulverizing him.

She watched as Eric drew a few deep breaths and came out for a second

round with Joey. He fared no better, but he also fared no worse. He was given five minutes to rest and then came out and faced Mark Adams. Again, poor Eric took quite a beating. After that fight, Grandmaster Kino gave a long tutorial to Eric and to all those present of the things Eric did right and the things he could do to improve.

Fifteen minutes later, Eric faced off against his own father, the original Kino Challenge champion. Jordan felt sure that Mr. Kino would go a little easier on his own son, but it was just the opposite. He put him down three times in the first round. By the second round, Eric was too tired to mount any offense. All he could do was protect his head and face. He finally sank down to his knees and his father had mercy. Everyone present, students, Masters, and spectators stood and clapped long and hard for young Eric.

His father and his uncles all had to help him up and steady him before they stepped away to see if he could balance on his own two feet. Moving gingerly, young Eric bowed slowly to his opponents and to his grandfather and to the other Masters and then to everyone else.

Grandmaster Kino spoke again about what Eric did wrong and what he did right. He then assured everyone that by the end of the training period, young Eric would be putting his father and two uncles down on their backs.

There was laughter and a few people trying to take bets on that.

Grandmaster Kino thanked everyone for their help and for their input, of which there was plenty. He dismissed the group. Young Eric came to Jordan immediately.

"Hey," he said softly. "So, I need to go take a shower and then my grandfather wants a word with me, and then I'm free. Will you wait for me?"

Jordan was glad he wanted her to wait, because she definitely wanted to speak with him. She smiled sweetly up at his battered, tired face. "Yep, Three, I'll wait."

He nodded. "Thanks." He started away.

"Three?"

He turned back. "Yes, ma'am?"

"You were amazing."

He smiled. "Not yet. But I will be."

"I believe you."

She watched him as he turned and walked away, limping slightly. He was a mess. Totally soaking wet with sweat. His thick dark hair wet and matted. His cheek was bruised and there was blood on his upper lip coming from his nose. He was definitely battle-weary.

There was something about him working so hard all day, giving his all before the sparring match and then giving it again during the match, accepting his defeat good-naturedly, and then asking her to wait, something that brought out the nurturing instincts in her. She found herself wanting to take care of him, even though it was obvious, this tough guy didn't need anyone to take care of him.

While Jordan waited, a pretty brunette approached.

"Hello, I'm Darcy. I don't think I've seen you around."

Jordan smiled. "Hello. Yeah, you haven't seen me around because I'm not a student here. Are you?"

"Yes. I love coming here. I've been taking classes here for four years now and I just made red belt. Master Foreman is my instructor, but sometimes Eric comes in and teaches and I love when that happens."

Jordan smiled. "I bet."

"Eric and I have known each other since high school. We're really good friends, if ya know what I mean."

"No, I'm not sure that I do."

"I mean, like, we used to date."

"Really? That's interesting. How long ago?"

"Not too long ago. We went to a charity drive last October for the homeless."

Jordan thought. Hmm, that was almost a year ago. She turned her attention back to the girl who was still talking.

"He's always doing nice things for people. Of course, I thought the charity drive was gonna be like a big, fancy dinner, ya know where you pay like a thousand dollars a plate, but it turned out, we were feeding the homeless. I can laugh about it now, but I wasn't happy at the time, all dressed up in an AshleyKort design, scooping mashed potatoes onto a plate for a bunch of really smelly people."

Jordan had to blink to make sure she was hearing what she was hearing. "Well, ya know, so, homeless people don't have access to a bathroom where they can shower and they don't have access to clean clothes."

"Yes, that's the same thing Eric said. We really haven't had time to see each other since then." She sighed, then looked at Jordan. "But maybe I can change that. So, anyway, if you're not a student, who let you in? I mean, the Kinos are usually pretty particular about security."

Jordan smiled. "It's okay, I was invited to come and watch."

"Oh, by who? I mean, maybe I know them."

"You do. Eric invited me."

Darcy's face fell. "Oh, well, that's interesting. How do you know each other?"

"We met one day when he stopped to help me change a tire on the highway."

"That sounds just like my Eric, always willing to stop and help someone. So, he changed your tire and then invited you to come see him train?"

Jordan laughed. "Not right away." She could tell her the story, but Jordan felt like the girl didn't deserve an explanation. Jordan and Eric's relationship, whatever it was, was nobody's business. "Well, Darcy, it was nice meeting you. I'm just gonna see if Mrs. Kino needs any help."

Jordan didn't wait for a response but quickly scooted away and when she

got to Bree's side she whispered, "Help."

Bree nodded. "Yeah, that Darcy is something else. But you got away. Good job."

"Thanks, but don't leave my side until Eric comes out."

"Funny Jordan, but you don't strike me as the type who cowers."

"I'm not, but like, I really don't wanna have to kick some girl's butt right here in front of everyone."

Bree laughed out loud, then put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, girl, you so fit right in."

Jordan smiled, because for some reason, that offhanded comment made her feel really good.

Twenty minutes later, pretty much everyone had taken their leave. Joey and Mark, Ricky and Bree, and even Master Foreman. Jordan sat alone, scanning her phone when Eric and his grandfather finally emerged.

"Sorry it took so long," young Eric said. "And thanks for waiting."

"No problem."

Grandmaster Kino approached. "You guys have all your stuff, because I need to lock up and get home. Shelley and the kids are waiting dinner for me."

"I'm ready," Jordan said.

Young Eric pulled the strap to his bag over his shoulder and nodded at her and escorted her out. He then insisted they stay right next to his grandfather while he locked the doors, and then went to his car. Once his grandfather had pulled away, Eric walked Jordan to her car.

"So, it's only 5:30. Are you hungry?"

"I am."

"There's a place not too far, called *The Bayside Grill*. Can I treat you to dinner?"

Jordan leaned against her car, looked up at him. "You sure you feel like it?"

"Of course I do. What do you mean?"

"I mean, after what you went through today, I'd think you'd want to go crawl into bed and sleep."

"I'll do that soon enough."

She drew a breath. He'd showered and he smelled really good. He looked a thousand times better. He wore jeans and a plain soft white t-shirt tucked in, with a short-sleeved, black, unbuttoned shirt over it. No more sweat. No more blood. She reached up and touched his cheek. "Just look at this bruise. I think it's getting darker by the minute."

He swallowed hard. Her soft hand on his face, it did things to his insides. He reached up and pressed his hand over hers. "I'm okay, really. Though I truly appreciate the concern."

"Truly, Three, what you did today, it was like, superhero amazing."

He gave a soft laugh and moved closer to her. "Gettin' my butt handed to me, which superhero are we talkin' about?"

She reached out and placed her hands on his chest, running them over the ridged muscles. He drew a sharp breath.

"Well, you have the body of Superman, and the mind of Iron Man, and— "

"Different comics," he uttered softly as he reached out and traced his finger over her cheek.

She giggled. "Oh. Whatever. You interrupted me."

He ran his hand over her hair. "Sorry, what were you gonna say?"

"I was gonna say, the body of Superman, the mind of Iron Man and the quickness of Spider-Man."

He gave a soft laugh and then moved his other hand up and cupped her face. "Sorry, Jordan, but I have to do this right now." He lowered his head and touched his lips softly to hers, lingered, kissed her lightly, once, twice, then pulled away slightly. He stood there looking into her eyes. She blinked up at him, waiting, and he leaned back down and kissed her thoroughly.

She moaned in the back of her throat, making him take the kiss even deeper. When he finally pulled away they both simply stood there staring into each other's eyes. It was Jordan who finally spoke, but then only one word.

"Wow."

He stood there, breathing hard.

When he didn't say anything, Jordan asked, "What are you thinkin', Three?"

He shook his head. "I don't really want to share that right now." What he was thinking was R-rated. What he was doing was trying to get himself under control. He drew a deep breath. Smiled. "What are *you* thinking?" he asked.

"I'm thinkin' I'd like you to do that again."

He obliged immediately. This time she lifted her hands up to circle his neck. The impassioned kiss went on and on. They would pull away for just a second and then dive right back in as if they couldn't bear the separation. Many minutes had gone by when Eric finally pushed back and held her at arm's length.

She smiled at him, knowing he was having a hard time getting control. She reached out and ran her fingers lightly over his jaw, to his lips, to his chin, to his chest and then hooked her fingers in the waistband of his jeans.

He grunted, grabbed her hand, pulled it away and cleared his throat. "We'd, uh, better go get some dinner before it gets too late." He didn't wait for a response, but simply pulled her away from her car and opened her car door.

She slipped in.

"Follow me," he said. "But in case we get separated, it's the *Bayside Grill* on Bayside Boulevard."

She giggled. "Go figure."

He smiled, turned and got in his car.

While he was driving his phone rang. “Accept,” he said, and then, “You okay, Jordan?” He heard her laugh.

“Yes, but I was just calling to say ya don’t have to drive like a grandma, trust me, I can keep up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered and took off.

She gunned her little car. Ten minutes later, after a road race that made them lucky they didn’t pass any cops, they pulled up to the restaurant. She got out of her car and came running up to him, her face aglow, her eyes dancing.

“That was fun,” she said.

He shook his head.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m thinkin’ about what my father would say if he’d seen us.”

“Well, let’s make sure he doesn’t find out.”

“Agreed.”

Inside the restaurant the hostess shrieked and hugged Eric. “Eric Kino, it’s so good to see you! Why didn’t you tell us you were coming, we would’ve had a table ready for you.”

Eric looked around at the people who heard her and were now pulling out phones and snapping off pics.

“Oh, sorry about that hon. Me and my big mouth.”

Eric smiled. “No worries. And you’re right, I guess I should have called. It was a last-minute decision.”

The woman looked at Jordan. “Hello!” She turned back to Eric. “We’ll get you two seated in just a few.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Vaughn.”

“I’d invite you to relax at the bar, but you’re not twenty-one yet, right?”

“Right. Not ‘til December.”

“Oh, you must come by to see us on your birthday.”

A man approached. “Ellie, don’t pressure the poor kid.” He held his hand out to Eric. “Good to see you, son. How’s your family?”

“They are great.”

“I heard all about it. Ellie and I prayed hard for Eric, and that young Gabe. Please give them our best wishes.”

“Thank you, sir, I will.”

“And who is this gorgeous young lady?”

Eric smiled. “This is Jordan. Jordan, this is Cal and Ellie Vaughn, owners of this fine establishment.”

“Well, it’s very nice to meet you, Jordan.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile. “You too.”

“Okay,” Ellie said. “Follow me.”

They followed her through the restaurant to a back table by a large picture window that overlooked the bay. It was dark outside but there were

twinkling lights outside all around the outdoor dining area and down toward the dock. It was lovely.

"This is really nice," Jordan said.

"Yeah, it is. Great food. Great atmosphere, not stuffy, gets pretty rowdy in the summer. We come here a lot."

"Apparently."

They perused the menu. Jordan looked up. "So, tell me, is this restaurant like the one yesterday?"

"How so?"

"All natural, all organic, stuff like that."

He grinned. "Yes. All natural, grass-fed beef, no hormones, wild-caught seafood."

"Cool. What are you gonna get?"

"I'm gonna do a giant steak because I need the protein. What about you?"

"I can't decide, so I think I'm gonna do the surf and turf platter."

Eric nodded. "That's a lot of food."

She grinned. "I think I can handle it."

The server came and they gave their order. Eric looked at the lovely girl sitting across from him. Today she'd dressed even more casually than yesterday at the game. She wore jeans, athletic shoes, and a bright turquoise T-shirt with white ribbing and a big white daisy on the front. She looked tough and feminine at the same time. Which, Eric realized, really described her. He reached across the table and held his hand out. She placed her hand in his and smiled at him, her eyes shining.

"This is nice," she said, looking down at his hand holding hers.

He squeezed her hand. "Thank you for waiting for me while I spoke to Granddad. I know it was a long time."

"No prob, Three. I wanted to wait. I wanted time to talk to you too. It was only like, thirty minutes."

"Well, thirty minutes is a long time to ask someone to wait. My grandfather's little talk with me went a little longer than I expected."

"Can I ask what he wanted to talk about?"

"Sure. When he teaches, he doesn't just train the body. He also works with the mind, with our emotions, and for members of his family, with us spiritually. He wanted to know how I was feeling, like my confidence level, my commitment level, that type of thing."

"And how is your confidence level?"

"Well, I thought it was fine, but he thought I was suffering in that area, so we did a little talk therapy session. And I guess he was right. Gettin' my ass beat, oh, sorry, gettin' my butt kicked by men a lot older than me, it's a little embarrassing and hard on the ego."

"But those men are all champions."

"Still, they're older. But as my grandfather said, also wiser when it

comes to experience under pressure, and how to counter punches and kicks to their advantage. They have a lot more years of training under their belts than I do, and they don't feel the need to try to prove themselves so there was no pressure for them. In other words, they were just having fun kicking my butt, while I was frustrated, humbled, and maybe a little angry."

"Wow. Your grandfather came up with all that?"

"Well, he helped me to come up with it."

"He's very wise, huh?"

"Very."

"So, did you work through your feelings of inadequacy?"

He smiled at her wording and nodded his head. "Well put, and yeah, at least I think I did. There'll be many more sessions before the Challenge to make sure my head is where it should be."

She nodded. "You gotta have the mind of a champion in order to be a champion."

"Exactly." He rubbed his thumb over her wrist. "So, Miss Jordan Brooks, did you make a decision about tomorrow?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes. Come pick me up at 4:00, and meet my family."

He grinned. "Awesome."

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September 13th, Friday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose Anderson pulled out her phone and walked out of the kitchen to find a private place to talk. She ended up taking a seat in the stairwell that led down to the basement. "Well, hello there Mike. How are you?"

"I'm well, thanks, Rose."

"I didn't expect to hear from you before the shoot tomorrow."

"Yes, well, I thought we might need to clear the air. The last time we spoke, I think we both were in a strange place. Your brother had almost died, and I was in Denver dealing with things and I think we ended that conversation in a bad place."

"Well, Mike, that's pretty obvious since I haven't heard from you since, and we *had* been talking every day."

"Exactly," Mike agreed. "And I admit, I kind of miss your gorgeous self."

Rose frowned.

"Have you missed me at all?" he asked.

"Sure. Though I wasn't happy with you when we last spoke."

"I know. I was wondering if maybe we can meet, like, maybe at Joe's, ya know, talk things out, clear the air before the shoot."

"When? Tonight?"

"Yes, since the shoot is tomorrow."

"Where are you staying? Aunt Jodi said you weren't staying at the Inn."

"Well, should I feel honored that you took the time to check on that?"

Rose laughed. "You can feel however you want about that. I was just curious."

"So, whaddya say?"

"I guess I could meet you at Joe's."

"Great! Say, in about an hour?"

"An hour it is. See you then."

Rose hung up and stared at her phone. She didn't know what to think. She wondered if she was doing the right thing. She probably should tell him to go jump in a lake. But, for some reason, she felt compelled to see this through. Her father would probably not agree. And so, she would not tell him where she was going. She quickly ran upstairs to take a shower and get dressed.

Once she left the stairwell, Gabe came up the stairs from where he'd been working out. He'd heard half the conversation. It was really none of his business. But he knew she was gonna see Mike Moreland, and he knew how things ended between him and Rose a week earlier, not pleasantly, with him insulting her faith. Gabe wondered if she intended to tell their parents where she was headed. He certainly couldn't snitch on her, but he guessed he could go to Joe's himself to keep an eye on his sister, if she left covertly.

"Gabe?"

He turned quickly at his father's voice.

"Yes, sir?"

"How ya feelin' son?"

"Feeling great."

"Feel like coming out to Joe's with me? We're gonna go drink to Jake."

"Can I drink?"

"Sure. Just no alcohol."

Gabe sighed. "Yeah, I'll come with ya. Mom's not coming?"

"No."

"Is she okay?"

"Yep."

"What about dinner?"

"She's taking a break. I told her we'd eat at Joe's. Iris just had some mac n cheese and Daisy is taking care of putting her to bed. Vi is out with CJ. Lily is with some friends at the high school football game, and Rose just texted me and said she was gonna do some reading and go to bed early."

Gabe frowned, shook his head.

"What?"

Gabe looked up, opened his mouth and then stopped. "Nothing. So, like, do I have time to shower?"

"Sure. Let's leave in thirty."

"Got it." He ran up the stairs.

A little over thirty minutes later Gabe and his father arrived at *Joe's Bar*

and Grill. The place was crazy busy on a Friday night. All the pool tables were occupied. The jukebox was loud, and the small dance floor in front of it was full. There were only a few empty seats at the bar. Keegan and Gabe found their party sitting way off at a table toward the front corner of the place where a few seats had been saved for them.

"There's the man," Jake said as Gabe approached.

"You're the man," Gabe responded, smiling at Jake who already seemed to be very intoxicated.

Keegan went to Jake, patted him on the back.

Jake stood and hugged him hard. Keegan smiled at the young man.

"Jake, you're gonna be okay, son."

Jake nodded. "Yes, sir, I am sir."

Keegan glanced down at Jake's dad. "Hey, John, soooo, how long have you guys been here?"

John chuckled. "A while. It started out we were just gonna stop and grab a beer, but it turned into a 'guys' night to get wasted' type deal."

"Looks like I got some catchin' up to do," Keegan said as he leaned over to shake Chaz' hand. He took a seat. "How's Laynah takin' him being here without her?"

"She seems to understand," Chaz said as he glanced at Jake to make sure he wasn't listening. "I explained to her that Jake is facing more than just a separation. It takes a minute to face your own mortality and get that fear under control."

Keegan nodded.

Gabe found a seat against the back corner by the window so he could see if and when Rose drove up.

He ordered a soft drink and a pizza and some chili cheese fries. He was hungry, though as busy as they were it looked like it would be a while before the food would arrive. He sat listening to Jake talk about what he knew so far about the place he was headed. Gabe knew the area was on the outskirts of the Tora Bora region. Gabe's father had filled him on that much. They had an outpost, a base from which they operated to gather information and rescue MIA soldiers, agents, and "others".

Gabe sat up straight as he saw Mike Moreland come in the door. He came in, stopped, looked around, and his eyes met Gabe's. Immediately the man's expression changed to what Gabe thought of as 'annoyed.' Obviously he didn't think he'd run into the Tanner men when he asked Rose to meet him at Joe's. Gabe watched as Mike immediately pulled out his phone, hit some buttons and put the phone to his ear.

As he spoke he made his way to the only open seat at the bar and ordered a drink. Gabe glanced out the window to see Rose drive up. He watched Mike toss his drink back in one gulp, slap a bill down on the bar and head outside.

Gabe decided he was gonna be privy to that conversation. Rising slowly,

he made his way outside. The place was so crowded, he knew he could stay in between a few cars and be close enough to hear.

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September 13th, Friday Evening
Joe's Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Mike Moreland walked into Joe's and was surprised at how many people were there. He wondered if the town was having some kind of Southern hick celebration of sorts. He glanced around the large room and his eyes met those of Gabe Tanner. Damn. This won't work. He'd been sure the Tanners would be at the high school football game. Friday night lights. Isn't that what all hicks did on a Friday night? His eyes shifted to see Agent Tanner chatting with the good-lookin' Appel kid. Nope, this won't work.

Mike pulled out his phone and called Rose.

"Hey, Mike."

"Hello. Where are you?"

"I'm just about to pull in. Why?"

"I'm thinkin' we might go somewhere else."

"Why?"

"Well, first, this place is crazy busy. I didn't expect that. And second your father and brother are here."

"They are?"

"Yes. And I don't want them hangin' over us while we have a serious conversation."

"Well, they wouldn't hang over us. They're not like that."

"Aren't they?"

"Anyway, I'm here."

He blew out a breath. "Okay, just stay out in the parking lot. I'll meet you out there and we'll figure this out."

"Okay."

Mike gulped down a drink, slapped a twenty on the bar and headed out. He saw Rose standing next to her car looking about as good and as sexy as a woman could look. He found his pulse racing. He'd forgotten just how gorgeous she was. She smiled at him as he approached. He smiled back.

"Hello gorgeous," he said, moving forward and giving her a casual hug.

"Hey, handsome," she returned.

"Thanks for agreeing to talk."

"No problem."

He looked her over. Her blond hair was parted on the side and sleek and straight, just barely touching the tops of her shoulders. Her bright blue eyes appeared so innocent. Her top matched her eyes and had the cold-shoulder thing. Her jeans were tight, and he stopped his thoughts and sighed at the sight of her sidearm tucked into a waistband holster. "You look really good, Rose, except that. Can you just lose the gun for the night?"

She smiled. "Does it really make you that nervous?"

"It does."

Sighing, she unclipped the holster from her waistband, opened her car door, placed the holstered gun on her seat and closed the door. "There. Is that better?"

"Much."

"So," Rose began. "Where do you want to go to talk?"

"I was thinking, Rose, why don't you just come back to my motel room with me? It will be quiet there and we won't have to worry about someone interrupting us. Then we can make up properly, like adults do, and maybe finally consummating our relationship."

Rose frowned. She had no intention of going to his motel room and consummate anything, and she now realized that this meeting was not gonna go how she'd hoped. "So, you wanna apologize to me for what you said and then have sex with me?"

"Apologize to you? I don't know about that. But I thought we could talk it out, come to an understanding. I feel like what we had is too good to simply throw away because we differ in opinion on a few things."

"On a few *important* things," she amended. "Though I can get past that. What I can't get past was how you belittled my beliefs, and that was what I thought you might apologize for."

"How did I belittle your beliefs?"

"You compared them to believing in Santa Claus."

He blew out a breath. "Well, Rose, you believe in honesty, right? That's what your *God* preaches, right? So, honestly, that's how I feel."

She blinked back the tears that immediately formed. No way was she gonna let him see how those words hurt her. He was being so degrading. "Well, then, there's no more to say. How can you think we can work this out when the thing that is most important to me, you degrade without a thought for my feelings. It's very pompous and very condescending of you."

"Look, I don't mean to hurt your feelings. I still believe that you and me together, we would be unstoppable. Like I said, with your incredible beauty and my brains, we could literally conquer the world together."

"I have brains too, Mike."

"I know you do. I didn't mean it like that."

"Right. Look, Mike, I care for you. I really do. And I appreciate what you do and what you've made of yourself. It's incredible. But I don't think this is gonna work out between the two of us."

"Rose, you just said you care for me and appreciate me."

"Yes, so?"

"So, come to my motel room, show me how much you care for me, show me how much you appreciate me, and not only will I make you feel really good, I will make you a star. You will be a millionaire within one year. I have the power to do that."

Her eyes opened wide, her jaw dropped. "You want me to prostitute

myself?"

"That's not a very nice way to put it."

"Well, that's because there's not a nice way to put it. First, I don't do casual sex. You know that. We've talked about it enough for you to know that. Next, I don't care about money or fame. Not even a little bit."

"Well maybe you should, Rose, cuz money and fame, equate to power, and that is what makes the world go 'round."

She shook her head and blew out a slow breath. She understood with great clarity that she was being confronted by evil. "You know you're playing the part of Satan, right? Where in the Bible it says he offered the kingdoms of the world to Jesus, and all Jesus had to do was worship him."

"The Bible. Right." He laughed.

"And– we're done," Rose said as she started to open her car door.

He grabbed her wrist. "Wait. You can't just leave. We have things to talk about, Rose. Don't just run away."

"Take your hand off me," she ordered.

"Or what? You're not wearing your gun."

"I don't need it to handle you. Take your hand off me."

He released her. "Fine. It's not like I was trying to hurt you anyway. I just want you to understand. I don't think you understand what you're missing."

"What am I missing?"

"Maybe you don't realize how many women throw themselves at me every day. They do that because they know that I can make or break them. Do you know how many women do that?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"Merrill Mitchell, the woman I just did a shoot with in Denver, is nothing compared to your beauty, but she gave herself to me, and I have made her almost an instant celebrity. She's a fitness trainer and already, within a few weeks, has been signed on to help two Oscar winning actresses to get in shape for upcoming movies. She skyrocketed to the top, Rose, and *I* did that. That's the power I have." He stopped only long enough to draw a breath.

"And don't *you* already have people begging you for your beauty regimen secrets? I know you do, because I follow you on social media. You don't even have a skill, you're just drop-dead gorgeous. Just think where you could go?"

"Wow. I don't even have a skill? Wow." She drew a patient breath. "Mike, you're not listening. First, how can you brag about having sex with another woman just last week and then come to me and ask me to go to bed with you? That's disgusting. Second, I– don't– care about being rich or famous. And when I give myself to someone, it will be because we love each other, and it will be under the covenant of marriage."

"Rose, wake up out of your religious coma."

"It's *you* who needs to wake up. There is so much more in this world than what you can see or touch or hear, or feel. We are not here alone, and we are not here to get rich, to have an easy life, or to be entertained. We are here to do good works, to help people find their way back to their heavenly home, to protect the innocent, to be tested, and to grow strong because of those tests. This life doesn't last very long in the scheme of things, Mike, and when you die, you're gonna wish you knew the way back home. Don't sell your soul to worship fame and fortune, which is the same as worshiping Satan."

"Worshiping Satan? Do you realize how ridiculous you sound?"

She shook her head. "There are signs all around you, Mike, of God's existence. The ridiculousness comes in denying those obvious signs. Look, we'll agree to disagree. My sisters and I will be there at the shoot tomorrow. We'll fulfill our contract. And then, I wish you well. And I'll pray for you."

He took her by the shoulders, pulled her close and kissed her. She struggled to get away and he finally released her. "Tell me you don't want that."

She laughed. "I don't want that."

He grabbed her shoulders, gave her a shake. "Rose, you are throwing away a fortune. People would actually kill for what I'm offering you and would gladly spend a night in bed to get it."

"Take your hands off me, Mike."

He pulled her close. "I am trying to shake some sense into you."

"You're hurting me, now let go."

"Not so brave without your gun, huh?"

"Let her go."

Both Rose and Mike turned to see Gabe standing there.

Mike sighed. "Go away, little boy trying to act like a man. This conversation doesn't involve you. This is between your sister and me."

"It involved me the minute you grabbed her and refused to let her go. Now, this *little boy* is more of a man than you ever thought about being, and this *little boy* is about to hand you your ass."

"Gabe," Rose began.

He held his hand out. "No, Rose, I'll handle this."

She smiled, and conceded. He had a role to fulfill.

"You don't really think you can beat me up, do you?" Mike said.

Rose snorted.

Gabe smiled. "I actually know I can. You wanna find out, keep your hand on her for one more second."

Mike threw his hands in the air. "Fine. You Tanners are all so violent."

"We're violent? You're the one trying to rough up my sister. We don't start stuff, but we'll sure as heck finish it."

Mike glared at Gabe and then turned to Rose. "Rose, I'll expect to see you at the shoot in the morning."

"I already said I'd be there."

"And think about things tonight. You might change your mind."

"I absolutely won't."

He turned away, moved cautiously around Gabe and headed to his car. Gabe watched him go, then turned back to his sister. She had tears in her eyes. Gabe held out his arms and she went to him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight while the older sister cried on her little brother's shoulder.

When Rose finally pulled away, she smiled up at her brother. "My little Gabe, you are so grown up. Thank you, sweetie."

"I heard almost the entire conversation, Rose, and you were awesome. You even got in some preachin'."

She giggled through her tears. "Not that it will do any good."

"Ya never know. You might have planted some seeds."

"Maybe."

"Come on, let me buy my sis a drink."

"Hmm, guys night out?"

"Impromptu, yeah, and you've always thought of yourself as one of us, right?"

She laughed. "Yep, cuz I can ride and shoot with the best of you."

"Well, not with the best, but you can ride and shoot."

She laughed, linked her arm in his and he escorted her inside.

Keegan smiled with relief as he gazed out the window at his son and daughter. He was so blessed.

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Hebrews 13:4

"Let marriage be held in honor among all,
and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God
will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous."

Chapter Eight

September 13th, Friday Night
Brookside High School, Newport, California

Taylor screamed at the top of her lungs as the receiver jumped high to catch the pass and ran across the goal line. She threw her hands in the air and jumped around in a circle with Jana and Charla, Krissy, Rodney and Wes. They were about to win the game. There was only a minute and a half left, and the score was 38-35 Brookside. She turned and grinned up at Agent Ward and ran up the two steps to speak with him.

"Isn't it awesome? We're gonna win!"

"Maybe," he answered cautiously.

"We're ahead and there is only like ninety seconds left in the game, right?"

"Yes. But that's actually a lot of time. Too much time, really."

"I don't understand."

"Well, we're about to kick off, right? And then the other team will throw several passes to get down field quickly and stop the clock, and they'll also play the side so they can get out of bounds."

"What does that mean, play the side, and why in the world would they want to go out of bounds?"

He smiled. "When I say, 'play the side,' I mean they'll pass the ball to a guy standing ten yards downfield near the sideline to get a first down and step out of bounds. They want to go out of bounds with the ball to stop the clock so they'll have more time to run another play. Then they'll do it again. And again. If they get close enough to the goal, they can tie the game by kicking a field goal and then we'd go into overtime. Or, they might score and actually win, so, let's just hold our breath and see what happens."

She ran back to stand with her friends. They hadn't sat down almost the whole game. They were in the student section in front of the cheerleaders and Taylor was having a blast.

She watched to see if Agent Ward knew what he was talking about. At the kickoff, Bayside ran it all the way back to their forty yard line. "Somebody get him!" Taylor screamed.

On the next play the QB threw a short pass ten yards toward the sideline and the receiver caught it and stepped out of bounds. She looked at the clock. She turned and looked at Agent Ward. He smiled at her and shrugged. Only eighteen seconds had passed. She began to bite her nails.

They did it again but, thank goodness, the receiver dropped the pass. But then, they did it again to the other side, and gained another twelve yards. Taylor watched in horror as what Agent Ward predicted unfolded right before her eyes. It came down to four seconds left. It was fourth down and they were at the Brookside thirty eight yard line. Taylor held her breath as Bayside kicked to try to tie the game. Everyone started screaming and jumping and Taylor couldn't tell what happened.

"Did they make it?" Taylor yelled at Jana.

"No. The kick was no good! We won!"

They jumped together and hugged each other and clapped to the fight song and celebrated with the crowd as the team celebrated on the field.

Taylor was having so much fun, and the only thing keeping her from the time of her life was that Gabe wasn't here. Oh how she wished he was here. The crowd started to dissipate and Taylor began gathering her purse and the blanket she'd sat on.

"Hold on, Taylor, don't go," Krissy said.

"Why? What are you gonna do?"

"We always wait for the guys on the team. They go in and change clothes and meet us back up here in the stands."

"The whole team?"

Jana laughed. "No. Just our guys."

"Oh, well, I don't have a guy here."

"Yeah, stop bragging about Gabe. We all wish he was our guy."

"Not me," Krissy said quickly.

Jana laughed. "Yeah, Krissy's in love."

Taylor smiled. She knew how that felt.

"Hey, Taylor," Charla began. "Even though you don't have a guy here, Lance would probably be really happy to see that you actually did come to the game. Why don't you wait for him and tell him what a great game he played?"

Taylor shrugged. "I could do that." She turned and ran up the steps to Agent Ward and explained the reason she was waiting.

He nodded. "No problem. I'm here for you, to protect you, not to keep you from having a good time. I'm willing to wait as long as you need."

She smiled and gave him a quick hug. "Thanks, Agent Ward, you're the best."

He shook his head. He watched her as she waited and interacted with the others. In some ways, Taylor Kino was very sophisticated, and in other ways, she seemed very innocent and naive. Right now, Taylor knew full well that they were all taking selfies with her and posting them on social media to get their few seconds of fame. Her innocence was that she didn't care that they were using her. She allowed it. If she didn't she wouldn't have any friends at all. Though people would argue, it was actually tough being a Kino.

About that time a few men came up from below and headed toward the

group of girls. Agent Ward stepped down a few steps and stood in the aisle, watching and ready. The men came right up to the girls. Agent Ward stepped in front of them. “Can I help you?”

They seemed surprised by his intrusion. “Oh! Yes, sorry. It’s just that we heard that Taylor Kino might be here and we have a sick daughter who just loves Taylor and Gabe and we were hoping to get her to sign this football program for her.”

“You both have a sick daughter?”

“Well, she’s my daughter and this is her grandfather.”

Agent Ward nodded. Stood back. “Go ahead Taylor.”

Taylor smiled at the men. “What is she sick with?” Taylor asked kindly.

“She has a metastatic brain tumor.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Taylor said softly, her eyes tearing up. “How old is she?”

“She’s fifteen.”

“What’s her name?”

“Sara Peterson,” her father answered. He offered the program and a black marker.

Taylor accepted the marker and smiled kindly at the man. “Well, sir, I don’t know what’s being done for your daughter, but may I put you in touch with my Aunt to see if she can help in any way?”

“Are you talking about Dr. Kino?”

Taylor nodded.

“That would be great,” the man said. He pulled out his wallet and handed her a business card.

Taylor took the card and tucked it in her jeans, then bent her head to write on the program and finally handed it back to him.

The father looked down and read what she wrote. His eyes filled with tears as he read:

To Sara Peterson,

Gabe and I will hereafter remember you in our prayers every night. God loves you. His will be done in all things.

We love you too,

Taylor Kino and Gabe Tanner

(He won’t mind that I signed his name for him!)

She drew a heart.

“Thank you,” Mr. Peterson said. “She’s gonna treasure this.”

Taylor smiled. “She is the treasure.”

The men shook her hand and took their leave.

“Wow, Taylor, that was awesome, and it just got posted on TikTok,” Krissy said with a laugh.

Taylor sighed and nodded. About that time the guys came running up the steps. The girls all cheered for them. Some of the guys hugged or kissed their girlfriends.

Lance came straight to Taylor with a smile. "Hey! I'm glad you came. So, what did you think?"

"It was awesome!" Taylor gushed. "And you were awesome! The game was so much fun! I'm so happy we won!"

He smiled. "I am too! I told you it was gonna be a good game."

"I was so scared there at the end."

He laughed and took her hand. "Do I at least get a hug?"

She smiled and gave him a hug. He put his hands on her tiny waist and pushed her back, then took her hand. "We have to do one more after game tradition."

"What?"

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"We always get a pic underneath the stands."

Taylor frowned. She looked back at Agent Ward. He had a strange look on his face and he seemed to be glaring at the boy.

"If you two are going down there, then I'm going down with you. But I'll give you a little time for privacy, just to take the picture, but that's it."

Taylor smiled. "Okay, thanks."

"Great. Let's go," Lance said. He tugged on her hand and they took off at a run.

Agent Ward shook his head as he trotted after them.

Lance pulled Taylor behind him as he ran down the stadium ramp turned right, went to the edge of the stadium and headed up under the stands. Agent Ward kept his eye on them as he followed at a discreet distance. His job was to keep Taylor safe from danger, not from making social mistakes, for example, cheating on her boyfriend. Though, he had to admit, this little thing surprised him.

He stayed at the edge of the stadium while they went up under the stands supposedly for a picture.

Lance pulled Taylor farther and farther under the stands and she was relieved when he finally came to a halt.

"This is an odd place to take a selfie."

He grinned. "Oh, yeah, I guess, but we all do it after a game." He pulled out his phone and held it up. "Come here. Get close."

Sighing, she put her head right next to his. "Then how come no one else is here?"

He didn't answer, but just took the picture and as he did, he turned his head and kissed her on the mouth.

She gasped and pulled away. "What are you doing?"

He laughed. "I kissed you."

"Well, I didn't say you could kiss me."

"Aw, come on, it's no big deal. It's just a kiss."

"A kiss *is* a big deal," she yelled. "At least it is to me."

As if he didn't even hear what she said, he grabbed her cheeks in his one hand and kissed her again, harder, holding her face still as he took another pic. She pushed him away.

"Have you lost your mind?" She rubbed her cheek where his thumb had pressed into it. "And that hurt."

"Sorry, didn't mean to hurt you."

She blew out a breath and turned to leave, but he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back. "Wait, please, just a few more pics."

She tried to pull her wrist free. "No. You lost that privilege when you kissed me."

"Don't be so salty." He held up his phone but she jerked away.

He grabbed her again and this time pushed her up against the concrete column behind her and held her there.

"Let me go, Lance. I'm not kidding."

"I will, just let me get another couple of pics."

Tears welled in Taylor's eyes, mostly because she was so angry. She sniffed them back. "Please, Lance, don't make me have to hurt you," she warned.

He laughed. "For real? You actually think you can hurt me?"

She didn't bother to answer his question. She thought briefly she could simply yell and Agent Ward would come running, but then that puts him in a bad position. "Lance, let go of me. I'm leaving."

Ignoring her, he placed his hand on her shoulder to hold her there and raised the phone up.

She punched to the throat and then kicked to the groin and he dropped to his knees. She ran.

"Taylor?" Agent Ward called as she came running out from under the stands.

She ran straight to him and buried her face against his chest. He held her. "Okay, hon, are you okay? What happened? Did he hurt you?"

She sniffed. Shook her head. "He kissed me, and I didn't want him to and he wouldn't let me go."

He blew out a breath. "So, you're saying you didn't realize that was what he had planned all along?"

She shook her head and looked up. "Did you?"

He nodded.

Her eyes filled. "Oh wow, I am so dumb," she said.

"Naw, sweetie, just innocent. Come on, let's get you home."

"Okay, but I wanna sit in the front seat. I don't like being alone in the back."

He nodded. "That's fine."

Once they were on the road, Taylor pulled her phone out and called the one person who could make her feel better.

"Hey, Tay," Gabe said sleepily as he glanced at the time. It was 1:30

a.m. his time, which meant she was just getting out of the game.

She sniffed. "Hi, Gabe. Sorry to wake you."

He sat up. "What's wrong?"

She was silent a moment.

"Did you go to the game?"

"Yes."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes. I loved the game. It was so much fun. I sat with a bunch of kids in the student section and we cheered and screamed and yelled and we won."

"Awesome. So, what's wrong?"

"How do you know something is wrong?"

"I can just tell."

"After the game we all waited for some of the team to join us and Lance, ya know, the quarterback— "

"Yes, I know."

He came up and asked for a hug which I gave him and then he said it was a tradition to get a selfie up under the stands."

Gabe heaved a heavy sigh.

"So, I agreed to go do the selfie, but once we got there, under the stands, he kissed me. I'm sorry. I didn't give him permission, he just did it and when I told him to stop he did it again, and he took pictures while he did it and I told him to let me go but he wouldn't let me go and I tried to get away but he pushed me up against the support column there and he held me there and I told him I would hurt him, but he didn't believe me, and then he still wouldn't let me go and so I hurt him."

"How did you hurt him?"

"Throat and groin."

He blew out a breath. "Good job. Where was Agent Ward?"

"Agent Ward was right at the edge of the stadium because he was trying not to invade my privacy."

"Why didn't you yell for him?"

"Because that puts him in a bad position, ya know, dealing with minors, he has to be very careful, and besides, I wasn't really in any danger, except maybe gettin' my feelings hurt. If I thought something worse was gonna happen, I would have yelled for him."

Agent Ward shook his head as he drove. The innocent young girl had actually been protecting *him*. He blew out a breath. He was gonna have to sit down with Jason and her father and have a talk about her not calling for him. Because, after this, he was sure there would be no more privacy allotted to her at all.

"Taylor, I wish I was there, to hug you. Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yes. Just talking to you has made me feel so much better."

"Good. Sweetie, listen, if a guy wants to get you somewhere alone, it's usually not for a good reason, do you understand?"

"I do now. But that seems a little judgey, ya know? I mean, not all guys are like that, right?"

"The guys who aren't like that wouldn't be trying to get you all alone. If they seem intent on getting you alone, then they probably have an agenda, get it?"

"Yes. But maybe they just want to have a personal conversation."

"The word 'intent' is important. If they seem intent. Or no, maybe desperate is a better word. If they seem *desperate* to get you alone."

"Okay. I think I understand. But I don't like having a jaded view of the world."

"It's not jaded to understand where guys are coming from. There are good guys with good intentions, and there are bad guys with bad intentions, but all guys, especially our age, are hyper aware in like, a sexual way. They think about being intimate with a girl a lot of the time if not all the time. It's part of growing up, part of, uh, puberty. Maybe you can talk to Jeffy and get her to explain it to you."

"Okay."

"I mean, *I'm* not a bad guy, but I think about being with you a lot, and so do a lot of other guys, because you're so famous."

"You think about being with me because I'm famous?"

"Silly, no, that's why so many other guys think about being with you, because you're famous, and beautiful, and hot. But I promise, I think about being with you because I love you."

She sighed. "Okay, thanks, Gabe."

"Yep. So, what are your plans for tomorrow?"

"My family and I are gonna go watch JoJo play football."

"Good. I don't want this one bad experience to ruin you on football. It's a fun sport and it mirrors life."

"Mirrors life? How?"

"Well, these young guys are learning to be warriors in a way. I mean, each guy is trying to be the fastest, or the strongest, or the most skilled, the smartest, the fastest thinker. And they're learning about loyalty and trust and working together as a team. They're learning about good sportsmanship, and bad sportsmanship too. And they're learning, at least some of them, to use their position of strength and power to help others and to bring joy or hope to others. So, it's not just some futile, silly, macho, mindless activity like some people think. It's a training ground and a proving ground for young men."

"Wow, Gabe. That's deep."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I had to write a paper on it last year. It was a good exercise."

She sighed. "I miss you, Gabe."

"Miss you too, Tay. Just a few more weeks, and we're gonna dance on live TV."

"Yeah, and we're gonna have to do some rehearsals," Taylor said.

"Time spent with you, even long distance, is always a good time."

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September 14th, Saturday Morning

Country Inn Cottage #8, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jake finished throwing up his guts, brushed his teeth, took a shower and went moaning into the kitchen, his head pounding.

Laynah turned with an understanding smile, and a cup of tea in her hand. "Sit," she ordered.

He obeyed and she lovingly placed the cup in front of him. "Your mom says this will do the trick."

Jake nodded and sipped the herbal concoction. He looked up sheepishly. "I'm so sorry, Bugs."

"It's okay. I know that a guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do. And I guess you're currently paying for it."

He nodded and took a sip. "Yeah I am. I don't even remember getting home."

She shrugged. "Your father brought you in."

He groaned. "Well now, that's a little emasculating."

Laynah giggled. "There's nothing you could do that makes you less masculine." She sat down across from him at the small table. "So, new subject. Tell me, Jake, are you— " She stopped.

"Am I what?"

"Never mind. I probably shouldn't ask the question I was about to ask." She started to rise.

He grabbed her hand. "Sit down, sweetheart. Ask. Go ahead. You can ask me anything. I hope you know that."

She swallowed. Sighed. "I was gonna ask if you're afraid."

He looked down. Nodded. "It's a fair question. The answer is not clear. It's a yes and no type deal. I'm not really afraid. I'm highly trained and I know what to do and I understand what I'm facing. So, I concentrate on doing my job. I don't allow myself to see anything other than doing my job and coming back to you. Then again— "

When he didn't finish, she looked into his eyes. "Go on."

"Then again, I realize that there's always a possibility that something could happen, that injury or death could occur. What scares me is how you'll handle it, how it would affect you, Bugs, because I love you more than I can say and I don't want you to suffer heartache or loss. So that's what scares me. I'm not afraid to die because I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is real and my life will go on in another realm. But knowing how you would suffer, that terrifies me."

"So, if I were to tell you that I too know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God and Jesus are real and that life goes on, and that I would be strong and brave, would that make you feel better or would that make you less

careful?"

His brow wrinkled at her question as he tried to decipher what she really meant. "I think I get what you're asking," he said with a smile. "It's not an either/or thing, babe. If I know that you'll be strong in the wake of my demise, that gives me some comfort, but I won't relax my guard or be careless ever, because my goal is to come home to you and start a family with you and be together with you, so that we can experience heaven right here on this Earth."

She sighed. "Jake, I *will* be strong and brave for you. No matter what. I know what I signed up for."

She reached her hand across the table and he took it in his, brought it to his lips and kissed it gently. "Thank you, Laynahbug. You are the best thing that ever happened to me and I cannot put into words just how much I love you."

She rose with an impish smile on her face and tugged on his hand. "Then don't use words. Show me."

He smiled up at the tall, beautiful redhead, her curls splaying across her shoulders and hanging almost to her waist. She wore only some baggy pajama bottoms with little hearts all over them and a short tank top that exposed her navel. She was sexy. She was beautiful. She was strong. She was resilient. She was intelligent. And she was his wife. And he was the luckiest man in the world.

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September 14th, Saturday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe came running down the stairs to the kitchen. He'd overslept probably because of the late night phone call. If he hurried, he could still get his workout in before his training with Master Appel.

He smiled at everyone in the kitchen as he came in and headed straight to make a protein smoothie. Realizing everyone was pretty quiet, he stopped and turned around. They were all looking at him.

"What?" He smoothed down his hair. "I'm running late and I didn't take time to comb my hair."

Rose smiled kindly.

Gabe ran over and greeted and kissed little Iris as she sat in her booster chair. "There, is that better?" he asked looking around the room.

When they didn't answer, he went to his mom and kissed her cheek. "Good morning, Mom, Dad, everyone. Why's everyone so quiet? What's wrong?"

"Honey," Lily began. "Have you been on social media this morning?"

"No. So, what's happening now? Did someone video me blowing my nose and now it's gone viral?" he joked as he pulled his phone from his pocket and pulled up one of his accounts. His face fell. He closed his eyes, shook his head. He thumbed down, farther and farther. There were hundreds

of pics of #QBLance kissing #TaylorKino and tagging #GabeTanner. Two different kisses, one of them with him squeezing her cheeks. Gabe knew he was holding her there against her will. "Oh no, poor Taylor."

"Poor Taylor?"

Gabe frowned. "Oh, come on, you guys, you should all know how media can be twisted around. Taylor called me last night after this happened. He tricked her the first time, and the one with his hand on her face, he completely forced her. She ended up having to take him down in order to get away."

"How did she take him down," his father asked.

"Throat and groin shots."

"Where was her agent?"

"Agent Ward was nearby. She'd asked him for some privacy and he gave it. She could have called for him, but she didn't think she needed help." Gabe sighed and went on to explain the entire situation.

Rose glanced at the time. "Well, it's only 4:30 in the morning there so you can't call her yet, like, to warn her."

Gabe nodded. "I knew there was something about that guy that put me off. I guess I'll have to do a video with Taylor for damage control."

"Yes, you will definitely have to. People are already calling her some very ugly names for cheating on you, the 'ultimate male' and what a terrible person she is to cheat on you after you got shot trying to save her life. On the other hand, some people have commented that she saw the light and made a better choice."

Gabe shook his head.

"But the majority of people are in your corner," Violet said quickly in an effort to make him feel better.

Gabe nodded. "Mr. Kino gets up pretty early. I might give him a call and let him know so he can be there for her when she finds out."

"Unless she didn't tell her parents," Rose offered.

Gabe raised his eyebrows at her and then looked at his father, thinking that Rose herself snuck off last night to meet with Mike Moreland.

Rose smiled. "Don't worry, I told him. I told everyone what I did, what Mike said, and what my hero little brother did."

Gabe nodded. "I'm no hero but I'm glad you cleared the air."

"Me too, but actually, us girls have to get out of here and go to the shoot for Twin Wave."

"Alone?" Gabe asked. "Would you like me to come with you?"

"Aww, how sweet," Lily said. "But no, Dad is coming."

Gabe looked at his father who nodded. "I can't sit idly by and let him think he can speak to my daughter that way and not even have to face me. Besides, I need to get a grip on what I missed, how I could misjudge someone so completely."

Lizzy shrugged. "He's a wheeler dealer salesman and he's good at what

he does. You told him to do his homework and he did. He played you to get what he wanted, but now is showing his true colors. He's like a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Actually, that's kind of the same thing with 'QB Lance'," Gabe said. "He was all smiles and politeness with Taylor and her dad, but then last night he showed his true colors."

"Ya know," Keegan said. "Most people know that you don't cross the Kinos and get away with it. This is gonna be interesting as to how Ricky handles this."

Gabe nodded. "I think it's gonna be interesting as to how you handle Mike Moreland."

Keegan nodded. "It probably won't be too interesting. Lizzy and I prayed about it this morning, and we feel like he needs to be confronted about the evil he presented to my daughter, but also, maybe needs the input of a man, since he had no male role model in his life. So, I'll do my best to enlighten him a bit."

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September 14th, Early Saturday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Who are you talking to so early in the morning?" Bree asked as she came out of the bathroom.

Ricky frowned as he scrolled through his phone. He looked up, sighing heavily. "That was Gabe."

"Is everything okay?"

"Well, not so much, but it will be. Here, take a look." He handed her his phone.

Bree's eyes opened wide in surprise. She took time to read some of the comments. "I know good and well that either this has been edited or this was against her will. Taylor would never do this."

"You're absolutely right, my smart wife. It was against her will. She called Gabe last night after it happened."

He went on to tell her the whole story.

Afterward, they sat together on the bed, each deep in thought, trying to think of the best way to handle things.

Finally Bree looked up with a sigh. "I guess before we do anything else we need to pray together."

"Again, Bree, you are absolutely right."

They turned and knelt together, facing each other, holding hands. They prayed for guidance, for wisdom, for peace, for calm, and for the best possible outcome, and then as usual they gave it up to God in Jesus' name.

They looked up at each other, both smiling.

"I just had a word and a scripture pop into my head," Bree said.

"I did too," Ricky said. "Let's say the word at the same time to see if we got the same message."

Bree smiled and nodded.

"On the count of three," Ricky said.

"One, two, three—opportunity."

Bree giggled. "Oh, that is so cool." She raised her eyes heavenward. "Thank you, Father."

Ricky smiled. "So, I'm thinking the Lord is telling us that this is an opportunity to not only teach Taylor about applying our beliefs to our daily lives, but an opportunity to show all those watching for our next move, to see how to practice what we preach?"

"That sounds right," Bree agreed. "And it's an opportunity for us to grow and learn as well."

Ricky nodded. "Absolutely." He reached out and touched her gorgeous face. "Have I told you today how much I love you?"

She smiled. "Not yet, but I have faith in you."

He chuckled, and then leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. "I am so in love with you Breanna Kino."

"I am so in love with you, Ricky Kino."

"What about your scripture?" Ricky asked.

"Matthew 18:21-22."

"My scripture was Matthew 5:40." He rose, grabbed his Bible from his nightstand and read both scriptures aloud.

"Yours is, 'Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Okay, now let's see what mine is." He flipped a few pages back and read, "'And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.'" He smiled. "So, let's talk about how we can apply them."

Together they figured out a plan of action and then, dreading the next part, they bravely went to wake Taylor.

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September 14th, Saturday Morning

Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose lifted her chin and smiled up at the sun from where she sat in the tall grass. The tinkling sound of water as the brook ran past the giant old mill on the outskirts of Pine Forest was sweeter than any wind chimes. Violet moved toward her and reached her hand out to her and pulled her up. As Rose stood, she and Violet, with serene countenances, leaned their foreheads together, while the camera zoomed in to catch their silhouettes in center frame.

"And cut."

"That was perfect," Mike said to the cameraman. "Absolutely perfect. *Twin Wave Beauty* is about to go over the top. What's the next shot?"

"That one," the cameraman said, pointing at Daisy, "walking along that dirt path, and the other jumping out from behind a tree, and they laugh and

hug each other."

Mike nodded. "And we already have the shots of them putting on moisturizer and makeup, and perfume, so we're almost done."

"With them, yeah. And then my real job begins. Oh, and, we still have the Ring Around the Rosie shot with all four ladies. Then we'll be done."

"You're doing a great job and I know you're gonna become a big-time director one day. Stick with me and you'll go far."

Mike's eyes shifted over to the man who stood stoically, his arms crossed, his stance casual, his eyes watching carefully. Mike knew he was angry. Though surely the man knew and understood the way the world works. Mike had tried to deny him access to watch the shoot, but almost lost his models that way. And after the shoot, Agent Tanner was going to have a word with him. Fun times. He guessed he deserved it. Mike had been a little rough with his little girl last night.

Mike and the director went about setting up the next shot, fixing the lighting, deciding on camera angles. Mike walked over to the girls and closely examined their faces. Rose glared at him as he moved close. He ignored her and motioned at the makeup girl and had her touch up their noses.

It took over an hour to get the last two shots, but finally, the director announced it was a wrap. The girls immediately closed ranks around Rose and walked her toward their father's vehicle.

Mike walked toward Keegan. He was tired and a little annoyed that he now had to justify his actions to this man. Mike had merely taken a shot at what he wanted, what he desired, and he'd been turned down, and that was that. No big deal.

He nodded, offered his hand. "Agent Tanner."

Keegan nodded, but did not take his hand. "Mike."

"So, you wanted to speak with me?"

"Of course I did. Did you think that you could solicit my daughter as if she was a common whore and not have to answer to me?"

"Hmm, yes, I guess I actually did. I mean, she's a grown woman, and she's perfectly able to make her own decisions."

"She definitely is, and she made the correct decision last night. Yet, she isn't some girl living on her own in a big city where she has no protector and you have no one to answer to. When there is no father around, men feel free to treat women with little to no respect. However, Mike, I *am* around. I'm her protector. Ya see, that's the way it's supposed to work. That's why the family dynamic is so important.

"Now, I realize that you didn't have a father around as you grew up, so you don't really understand your role as a man or how things are supposed to be. Especially in this modern, dark world, where traditional values are thrown out the window. Men, real men, are supposed to take care of women. They are supposed to protect them, support them, and cherish them."

Mike gave a soft laugh. "You have to be kidding."

"No, I'm not kidding."

"Listen, most women don't want that. What they want is to be equal to men in every way."

Keegan shook his head. "That's just the noisy minority."

"Even Rose herself wants to be equal," Mike argued.

Keegan sighed. "You've spent all this time with Rose and you don't even know her. Rose doesn't want to be equal to a man, she wants equal opportunities, so she can do, or try to do, whatever she wants or whatever she enjoys. And I'm all for that. Still, Rose knows that men and women are different, and she has no desire to be like a man. Men are stronger than women physically, that's just science and there's no getting around it. So men are able to protect women better than women can protect themselves. Yet that doesn't mean women shouldn't learn self-defense so that they can be strong too. Women ARE equal to men in importance, but men and women are not the same. Period. They shouldn't be the same. They SHOULD have equal opportunities. And to say that women are not equal to men intimates that they are less. They are not less. To say that men are not equal to women intimates that they are less. They are not.

"Mike, I know this is difficult for you to understand. I can tell by the confused look on your face. Just keep in mind that men need women and women need men. Good, strong men, like their women to also be strong. Strong men are not threatened by strong women. Rose is a strong woman. I believe you're threatened by that strength and tried to put her in her place by soliciting her for your deviant lifestyle, thereby reducing her to nothing more than a sex object. I can see that you might not have known that was what you were doing. Mike, let me see if I can help you to understand. Who takes care of your mother?"

Mike shook his head. "Takes care of her? She takes care of herself."

"Does she? Didn't you buy her a house?"

"Well, yes. We struggled all of our lives and so when I got enough money, I bought her a home. So what?"

"You instinctively took care of your mother once you had the means to do so. And Mike, that was well-done. If her refrigerator went out, what would she do?"

"She would let me know."

"And you would take care of it for her, correct?"

"Yes."

"What would you do if, let's say, she met a new man, and he saw that she had a nice new home and a nice car, and he decided he wanted that for himself. Say, he decided he could say all the right things and make her fall in love with him and get her to let him move in and live with her and drive her car free of charge. How would you feel about that?"

"I'd try to make her see the light. I'd try to show her that he was just

using her."

"Why?"

"Well, to protect— "

Keegan smiled. "Right. *To protect her*. It's a natural instinct for a man to protect a woman. Now, you don't have any children, or sisters, so you can't understand the need to protect them, but it's a very strong instinct. These are natural instincts, survival instincts actually to perpetuate the human race, because we need women for that. And these instincts were placed there by God. If and when you marry, and have children, and I hope you do, because that's what life is all about, but when you do have children, be a man and take care of them, not just financially, but physically, emotionally, and yes, even spiritually.

"Now, I'm not gonna start preaching at you. I just want you to open your eyes to the possibilities that things are not like you perceive them to be. There is a lot more going on. And I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that wholesomeness, morality, integrity, honesty, these things woven into the fabric of your life are the things that will bring you real happiness, real joy. Not money. Not sex. Not power."

Mike sighed. "So, is that all you wanted to say?"

Keegan smiled at Mike's attempt to dismiss him. He wanted to play hardball, so be it. "Nope. One more thing. We'll be watching you. We'll be watching the way you treat other women. Remember when you told me you built your business on honesty and integrity? Once it's been revealed that you've crossed a line, and those things are no longer the basis of your business, then your business and then your world, will crumble."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you realize that I am a multimillionaire and have the power to take you down?" Mike snarled.

Keegan smiled. "Wanna compare portfolios?"

"Huh?"

"Rose told you she didn't care about your money. There's a reason for that, other than the fact that she has her priorities straight. Let's just say that all of my children are pretty much set for life, and each of their holdings far surpasses yours. But it's not my money, it's my personal contacts that give me power. The power to squash you like a bug. But Mike, that's not my intention. I'm trying to help you get YOUR priorities straight. When you first started to make something of yourself, you had a good goal, a good start and I commend you. Then somewhere along the road, you lost yourself, you lost your integrity. You need to find it. Before it's too late.

"You might think you are free and clear, but you are not. All my daughters have to do is let someone know, like on social media, how they see you have sexually harassed Rose, and it will be over for you. So, keep your nose clean. Go back to honesty and integrity, and treat women the way you'd

want someone to treat your own mother. Do that, and you'll go far."

Keegan didn't wait for a reply. He simply turned and made his way to his vehicle where his daughters waited. He got in and smiled at Rose in the passenger seat, who had tears in her eyes. They'd been listening to the feed and were touched by their father's words.

"You okay, Rosie?" he asked.

She nodded, wiped her tears. "Daddy, what you said, that was so perfect. You are the best."

The girls in the back seat all agreed.

Keegan smiled. "I love you girls and I hope I'll always be able to keep you safe, or, turn you over to someone I trust to do that."

"Uh, yeah, we hope so too," Lily said with a giggle.

Violet smiled and sighed.

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Proverbs 3:11-12

"My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights."

Chapter Nine

September 14th, Saturday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

It'd taken the good part of fifteen minutes, but Taylor was finally down to small hiccups and hitched breaths as she cried against her father's chest.

Ricky sighed. "All is not lost, sweetheart. Gabe is with you one hundred percent. And so is your family. Now, this can all be fixed, but right now I need you to pull yourself together, because you have to be at volleyball practice in a few hours."

"All those people are saying such horrible things about me."

Bree sighed. "Sweetheart, you know better than most to not pay attention to what people say on social media or on mainstream media for that matter. The public is fickle. You know that. And as soon as we have the interview with Isla, they'll all change their minds."

"I don't want to go to volleyball practice," she whispered.

"Taylor, we do not run and hide," Ricky said firmly. "We stand up and take it. We do not cower. You will go into practice with your head held high."

"Taylor," Bree began. "*You* are not the one in the wrong here. Lance took advantage of you."

"But why? Why did he do that?"

"Think about it and you tell me," Ricky said.

Taylor drew a deep breath and sat up. "For the publicity?"

"Right. It had probably been his intention the whole time. He even told me at your game that he'd do anything to be famous."

Taylor sniffed. "He'd do anything, and now he is. He's famous for being the guy who broke up me and Gabe."

Bree touched her daughter's face. "Only he didn't break you up, sweetie, and everyone will know that by the end of the day. A lot of people will know even before you get to practice, because Isla is waiting on you to pull yourself together, get dressed, do your hair and do a remote interview with her."

"So, here's what your mother and I really want to know," Ricky began. "This is the important thing. You see, we have the power to really crush this kid. He actually assaulted you. We could get him suspended for at least one of his games, maybe all of them, we could make it where his life is in total shambles. Take away his last year of playing football, destroy his reputation

completely. Or, we could play it another way. We could do what our Savior has asked us to do, and that is to forgive him. Forgive him and urge him to do better. I mean, he's just a kid. He made a mistake. He made a series of selfish, harmful choices and as soon as we set the record straight in the interview he's gonna realize it's him who looks bad. That will be punishment enough. But baby, that's up to you. Which path would you like us to pursue? There's only one thing that we won't do."

"What's that?"

"Nothing. We won't sit idly by and do nothing. That's not how we operate. We're not cowards and we're not lazy. So, let me ask you, baby girl, which way are you leaning?"

It didn't seem like a very hard choice to Taylor. She nodded her head. "Well, of course, I'll follow the Savior and take the choice to forgive him." She smiled. "As a matter of fact, as I just now said those words, I had a feeling of peace come over me. I actually feel like a huge weight just lifted off my shoulders."

Ricky smiled and nodded his approval. He knew that feeling. It was real. That feeling of peace that comes over you when you take the higher road and follow the teachings of Jesus. Thirty minutes later Taylor signed into a Zoom meeting with Isla August at Teenspotter.com.

"Good morning, Taylor Kino," Isla beamed. "Let me just say thank you right now, for taking the time to speak with me and our followers so early this morning."

"Thank *you*," Taylor said softly.

"So, everyone knows why we're so interested in speaking with you this morning. We all woke up to pictures of you and #QBLance all over YouTube and TikTok and Instagram, and I think we all suspected instantly that something wasn't quite right, so, I'm so grateful that I was able to come straight to the source and find out what really happened at the big Brookside High School football game last night."

Taylor smiled and nodded. "It seems to be the topic of the day."

"Well, we're gonna cut right to the chase. We all know that you have strong feelings for our beloved Gabriel Tanner, and he has them for you, and of course, we just love a good love story, so, you can imagine how it shocked people to see you kissing another guy."

Taylor nodded. "Well, let me set it straight right now. I wasn't kissing him. He was kissing me. I barely know him. He asked me to come out to the football game because he came to see our volleyball game."

Taylor went on to tell exactly what happened, ending with, "and I had to fight a little to get him to back off and then I ran away from him and that was that."

"What did you do after that?" Isla asked.

"I called Gabe. I hated to wake him up, but I was upset."

"What did he do?"

"Well, he calmed me down and helped me to understand why it happened. He's always so calm and so strong, just talking to him always makes me feel better."

"I bet. He's such a good guy."

"Yeah, he is."

"So, what now? What are you gonna do about Lance?"

"There's really nothing to do."

Isla pressed. "I mean, are you angry with him?"

"No, not anymore. I mean, I understand. He wanted some free publicity and he got it. He went about it all wrong, but I forgive him. Funny thing is, he didn't really need to try to steal a kiss from me to get publicity. I mean, he is the starting quarterback for our high school and that's not just by chance. He earned that spot and he's actually a good quarterback."

"How do you know he's good?"

"Well, my cousin, JoJo Adams, is a Heisman candidate, and my family knows a good ballplayer when they see one, and they tell me that Lance is really good, and that all he has to do is keep on playing like he is and he'll probably get a scholarship, probably even to a D1 school. He didn't have to do what he did to get noticed. Anyway, that's what my father says."

"So you truly forgive him for taking advantage of you?"

"Sure. Though I'm not sure how Gabe feels about that," she said with a laugh.

"Well now, why don't we just ask him," Isla said as she hit a button and Gabe joined the meeting.

"Hey, Taylor," Gabe said softly.

"Gabe! I didn't know you were gonna be on this call!"

He chuckled. "Surprise."

"Well, good morning Gabe Tanner," Isla said. "So, answer the question for us. We were wondering if you will be just as forgiving toward #QBLance as Taylor."

"Well, I can forgive him, because I think he must not have been thinking very clearly. He made a mistake. What he did was very close to assault, though let's not let it get all blown out of proportion. What he did was force a kiss from the sweetest girl in the world. But what he also did was steal a kiss from MY girl. I can forgive him, but I'm also gonna have to make sure he understands that there are always consequences for our actions, and from this point forward, he needs to keep his hands off my girl. But really, I'm sure he's sorry for what he did. It certainly wasn't the actions of a D1 QB, and he's probably gonna wanna make amends in some way, if only through an apology."

"Those are wise words," Isla said.

"They're not my words. Jesus teaches us to forgive, because we sure as heck aren't perfect ourselves. I'm sure not. I make lots of mistakes. Like, my first thought was to go find this Lance guy and wipe that smile from his face.

I mean, he's still a minor but he'll be eighteen soon enough. Then, I had to stop, think, pray, and do what Jesus would have me do. Forgive. Lance wanted a little fame. Fine, here it is. I watched the game. You're a talented athlete, dude. Go out and do something with that. Work hard, train tirelessly, practice, you've already got what it takes. Do it with integrity."

Isla sighed. "Again, Gabe, you never cease to amaze me. Is there anything else either one of you want to tell our audience before you go?"

"Just thanks for giving me this opportunity to tell what really happened," Taylor said. "And to say publicly that I would never disrespect Gabe in any way."

"And I would say the exact same thing," Gabe added. "Thanks for the chance to set things straight, and that I totally trust and believe in Taylor. She is nothing but a blessing in my life and I'm so grateful for her."

"Okay, well, what an awesome way to begin our Saturday with all these warm fuzzies. Gabe and Taylor, you are both such wonderful examples of our nation's youth. Keep up the good work. And goodbye to my awesome loyal followers. If you haven't subscribed yet, please do, hit that button right now, and hit the like button too, and we'll let you know the next time we have an exclusive. For now, I'm Isla August with Teenspotter.com. Have a great day."

Isla ended the meeting, said goodbye to Taylor and Gabe and ended her call.

Gabe immediately placed a call to Taylor.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey, Tay. So, whaddya think?"

"You're on speaker Gabe."

"I think you both were brilliant," Bree said.

"I concur," Ricky said. "Good job you two."

Gabe blew out a breath. "So, Taylor, you feel better?"

"Much."

"And you're gonna go to volleyball practice?"

"Yes. According to my dad, I was gonna go no matter what, but I feel much better about it now."

Gabe smiled. "Good. Take me off speaker."

"Okay, we're off."

"Just want to say I love you before I hang up."

Taylor smiled. "Me too."

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September 14th, Early Saturday Afternoon
Perez Home, Hillcrest, California

Young Eric pulled up in front of the tiny, single-story, sand-colored home in the small suburb of Hillcrest, about five miles east of Laguna Beach, which was five miles south of his home in Crystal Cove. He parked on the street in front of the house because there were already two cars in the small

driveway.

Most of the other homes in the cramped neighborhood were the same sandy brown color, with a few green or white homes interspersed. The tiny yard was neatly trimmed. It couldn't be any more than a 12-by-12-foot expanse of green, with an additional four-foot-wide strip between a sidewalk and the street.

Eric spotted Jordan's Honda in the driveway and next to it was an older model faded red PT Cruiser. He glanced at some children playing in the yard across the street. They looked at him as he got out of his car. He smiled. A little girl waved at him. He waved back.

He headed to the front door, which had white iron burglar bars on it, though the front picture window to the left of the front door did not. He knocked on the outer barred door, twice, before the door opened and beautiful Jordan smiled up at him.

"Three!" she said, as if she hadn't expected him.

He smiled. "Hello, Jordan."

She stepped back. "Come on in." He stepped through the door into a small living room that contained a sofa, a chair and two small tables at either end of the sofa, holding matching lamps. The floors were some kind of laminate tile and on top of that in the living room there was a worn, gray area rug.

Jordan looked up at him. For some reason he looked larger. It was probably in comparison to her tiny home. "Did you grow?"

He grinned. "Nope, still 6'2". You?"

"No, I'm still 5'9"," she said with a giggle. She turned away and called, "Mom, he's here."

Young Eric looked past Jordan into a small dining room. From there he could see the entryway to a tiny kitchen. The woman who emerged from there was of average height and build, with short, light brown hair and smiling hazel-colored eyes.

"Hello," she said softly.

Eric immediately realized she was a little shy. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs., oh, I guess it's not Brooks, huh?"

"Oh, no, it's Perez," Jordan said. "Jewell Perez."

Eric held his hand out. "Mrs. Perez, it's nice to meet you."

She smiled sweetly as he shook her hand. "You too, Mr. Kino."

He laughed. "Um, I'm just Eric, or as Jordan prefers to call me, Three."

She nodded. "Okay, I'll call you Eric. Will you have a seat? I've made some lemonade and some of my famous oatmeal cookies. Would you like some?"

"I would love some," he said with a smile.

He sat down at one end of the sofa and smiled up at Jordan. "Are you gonna sit with me?"

"In a minute. I'm gonna go get my brother and sister. I told them to stay

in their rooms until I get them, otherwise we wouldn't be able to get a word in edgewise."

He grabbed her hand before she could walk away. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I guess I feel a little nervous, or awkward or something."

"Well don't be. I promise not to cause any trouble," he joked.

"Hmm, it's not you I'm worried about," she said as she turned and headed down a short hall.

He watched her disappear behind a closed door. A few seconds later a boy ran into the living room with a girl and Jordan right behind. He remembered Jordan had said her brother was eight. He seemed small for his age, and had dark brown hair and large brown eyes.

Eric stood. "Well, hello there. I'm Eric." He held out his hand.

The boy shook his hand. "Hi. I'm Jamie. Is Ricky Kino really your dad?"

Eric laughed. "He is. Why? Have you seen some of his movies?"

"Sure. I've seen lots. I really like *Ninja Battle*. It's my favorite."

Eric nodded. "Yeah, that's an old one from when he was really young, maybe just a little older than you."

"Yeah, he's totally cool."

"I'll tell him you said so." He turned to smile at the girl and held his hand out to her. "Hello. I'm Eric."

She shook his hand very gently. "Hi."

"This is Josie," Jordan supplied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Josie," Eric said. He looked her over. She also seemed small for her ten years, and she too had dark brown hair and brown eyes. Eric looked from face to face. "Jamie, Josie, Jordan, Jewell, I think I detect a theme here."

Jordan smiled. "Yes, we all have 'J' names."

"But not my father," Jamie said. "His name is Peter."

"I see," Eric said, noticing Jordan's worried look.

Mrs. Perez came in with a plate full of cookies and lemonade in a glass that had pictures of lemons on it.

"Thank you, ma'am, this looks delicious."

"Jamie, Josie, go grab a glass for yourselves please," Mrs. Perez commanded. "Jordan, I'll go get yours."

"Mom, sit down please," Jordan said firmly as she went to get lemonade for herself and her mother.

Eric picked up one of the large cookies and took a bite. "Umm, Mrs. Perez, this is delicious, um, so good," he said as he spoke with a mouthful. He took a few swallows of lemonade as the kids and Jordan came back in, grabbed a cookie and sat down. Jordan handed her mother a glass of lemonade.

Eric immediately noticed that the kids both had plastic cups that came from the convenience store, Jordan had a quart-sized Mason jar, and her

mother had a glass that matched his own, with pictures of lemons on the glass. “Mind if I have a second cookie?” he asked. “They are so good!”

Jewell Perez grinned. That was everyone’s usual reaction to her cooking, whether it was baked goods or a three-course meal. “I’m so happy you like them. I love to cook. It’s my bliss.”

“Are you a chef?”

She laughed along with Jordan. “No, I’m a receptionist at a dental office. But I really love to cook. Sometimes I pick up an extra job cooking for someone’s party, or a quinceañera, and one time, for a wedding.”

“Really? Maybe I can finagle a dinner invitation one day. You love to cook. I love to eat. It’s a match made in heaven.”

Jewell’s face glowed with light. “You just let me know when, I’d love to cook for you Eric Kino.”

Jordan smiled at him. He glanced at her and winked then looked back at Mrs. Perez. “I’ll check my schedule, but let’s make it happen soon.” He then turned to Jordan’s brother. “So, Jamie, you like my father’s movies, huh?”

“I like them a lot. So much.”

“Does that mean you like martial arts?”

“Oh, yeah. One day I want to be like Ricky Kino.”

“Really? Do you take lessons?”

“Naw,” he said sadly. “But I try to do some karate stuff, like, when I watch it in movies and stuff.”

Eric nodded. “Well, karate is a Japanese style of martial arts. We, I mean, my family, we do something called Zendo Ryu, which is a mixed martial art, like karate and Muay Thai, and taekwondo and several other styles all mixed into one.” He stood and nodded with a smile. “Come stand in front of me.”

Wide-eyed, the boy stood, put his glass down and moved to stand in front of Eric.

“Now, attention. Put your feet like this, hands by your side.”

He did as shown.

“Bow.”

Jamie bowed and Eric bowed to him.

“Good. Now step back with your right foot. Hands up like this, fists closed. Good. That is your first fighting stance.”

Jordan watched him with such pride. Though his jeans were loose-fitting, one could tell he had muscular thighs and backside. His stomach was flat. He wore a USC team shirt that showed his broad shoulders.

Eric knelt in front of him. “Now, I want you to try to punch me right in the eye, right here,” he said pointing at his left eye. “Use your right fist. Ready?”

Jamie nodded.

“Whenever you’re ready. Try to trick me. Don’t let me know when

you're gonna do it. Just punch me."

"I don't wanna hurt you."

Eric and Jordan both chuckled.

"You won't. Whenever you're ready."

A few seconds later Jamie swung and Eric waved his arm and blocked and Jamie grinned widely.

"Try again," Eric commanded. "Either eye, either fist, try to trick me."

Jamie swung several more times as Eric softly blocked each punch, making silly Bruce Lee sounds as he did. Then Eric stood. "Attention."

Jamie straightened.

"Bow."

They both bowed. Eric smiled at the boy. "And that is your first lesson with *Kino Martial Arts.*"

Jamie grinned up at Eric. Jordan also smiled at him. Her little brother was in desperate need of a male role model and seeing Jamie respond to him so easily was making her happy.

Eric sat back down. "One more cookie?" he asked.

Jewell nodded. "Of course, take as many as you like!"

Eric chewed and looked at Josie, who was very quiet. "So, tell me, Miss Josie, what kind of things do you like?"

She shrugged and then looked down.

"You don't like anything? Do you like to play softball like your sister?"

She looked up. "Yes."

"And she's good at it too," Jordan added. "She's just not as aggressive as me."

Eric smiled at Jordan. She was looking delectable in her jeans, athletic shoes, and a gold t-shirt. Her hand rested on her sister's shoulder in a protective gesture. His heart was taking a tumble. He shook it off. "So, like, do you girls go out and play catch together sometimes?"

"All the time," Jamie said.

Eric nodded, pulled out his phone, glanced at the time. "We have time for a little game of catch. A few minutes anyway. Where do you play?"

"In the backyard," Jordan said.

"Well?"

Jordan nodded. "Let's go."

The kids went to grab gloves and balls while Jordan headed to her car and pulled her glove and a few more balls out of the trunk. The back yard was as narrow as the front yard, but longer. Eric noticed a tattered-looking practice net pushed up under the back of the house. Eric walked to the very back of the yard and positioned himself near the small chain-link fence, so that no balls would get by into the neighbor's backyard. Jordan joined him.

While Jewell Perez watched, Jordan and young Eric tossed softballs back and forth to Josie and Jamie. Eric had no glove with him and had to make sure he didn't get hit in the face, but more importantly, he made sure

to watch Josie and compliment her on her throwing motion. He finally got a smile out of her. After about ten minutes, Eric stopped and glanced at Jordan. "Well, I guess we'd better get going, but next time we'll plan for a longer visit, maybe go to a park or something."

"Yes! That would be awesome," Jamie said.

"But before we go, do you guys know that I have never seen Jordan pitch. Whaddya say, Two-Three? Will you pitch me a few?"

She laughed. "I don't know if you can handle it."

Eric nodded. "Maybe not, but we'll never know until I try. Come on, I used to play baseball in high school. If anything I'll be able to knock the ball down."

She sighed. "Okay." She motioned at her sister. "Josie, will you let him borrow your glove?"

Josie nodded and took the glove to Eric. It was an adult glove, but still too small for him, but he shoved his hand in the best he could.

Eric watched Jordan walk to a worn area in the grass. Her siblings gathered all the balls and laid them at her feet as if they'd done that many times before. Eric knelt, hit his glove a few times with his fist and made a target for her. She fired it in.

"Whoa," he said, his eyes wide with surprise. "Almost knocked me over."

Her family giggled.

She threw again. A little wide, but he got it. She fired in several more, impressing Eric with each pitch. Finally one went over his head and into the neighbor's yard. He quickly hopped the fence, ran across the neighbor's yard, grabbed the ball, ran back and easily hopped over the fence again.

Jamie's mouth opened wide. "Wow."

Eric smiled at him. Jordan came forward. "I think that's enough."

Eric nodded and began saying goodbye, smiling and shaking hands with each one. "Well, it was so nice to meet you all."

"Please come again," Mrs. Perez said as Eric took her hand.

"I will," he promised.

He shook hands with Josie and Jamie. "It was nice to meet you guys."

The kids nodded. Jordan instructed the kids to gather up all the balls and put their gloves away. She carried a few balls and her own glove out to her car and put them away as young Eric went to his car. Jordan ran back in to quickly say her goodbyes to her family. He watched her as she came back out to his car. Her eyes were scanning the street, both ways, making him look to see if a car was coming, but there was none.

Eric held the car door open for Jordan as she climbed in. He smiled at her. "Your family is great."

She nodded. "Thanks. I love them so much."

"I can see that," he said as he closed the door.

He got in the car and immediately reached into the back seat. "I brought

this for you. I figured since you went to UCLA you probably wouldn't be caught owning Trojan colors."

She smiled. "You're right about that." She opened a small bag and pulled out a Trojan jersey and turned and smiled at him. "Thanks. This is awesome."

"You don't have to wear it. Your gold shirt is close enough."

"I'm happy to wear it to support your, uh, brother."

Eric started the car and pulled away from the curb but almost wrecked when she pulled her gold shirt over her head. She had on a small tank-top. He swallowed hard. Her arms were well-muscled. He watched her pull the Trojan jersey over her head and then turn and smile at him.

"How do I look?"

He shook his head. "Beautiful."

She pulled the visor down and glanced in the mirror, then peered behind her.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "Not really. Jamie told me that his father stopped by yesterday when I was watching you train. It's the first time in a long time."

"Was your mother home?"

"No. And he's really not supposed to do that. It's supposed to be supervised visits only and he knows it. Not that I want my mother dealing with him either. It's just a precarious situation at best."

Eric nodded. "I don't like it. And I think your family needs some legal advice. Would you mind if I talk to my Uncle Mark about the situation to see if anything can be done?"

Jordan looked down and chewed on her lip. "No, I guess I don't mind. I mean, I feel powerless to help my family, so I guess I'll accept any help offered."

"Good. Then, while we're at it, did you know that there is a *Kino Martial Arts* at that pavilion shopping center about a mile from your house?"

She nodded. "Sure. But it won't do Jamie any good, because, to put it bluntly, we can't afford to pay for martial arts lessons."

Eric nodded. "I get that. But what if Jamie does a little audition and gets a full scholarship to the school?"

"An audition?"

"Yes. I'll teach him some basics, he practices really hard to show that he's willing to learn and work hard, and then he auditions. If the Master at that studio sees potential, he can offer him a scholarship."

"You would do that for Jamie?"

"Of course, and not just because he's your brother. God puts certain people in our path. We can ignore the situation or act on it. I try to always act on what God shows me, and I think He's showing me your brother."

Jordan gazed over at this guy who so quickly seems to be becoming a major part of her life. He'd kissed her yesterday. Kissed her in a way she'd

never been kissed before. She'd felt it all the way to her toes, or more importantly, all the way to her heart. She wasn't sure if she wanted this to happen. Was she just setting herself up for disappointment or even heartbreak? After all, he was a big, important, celebrity type deal. He was a much sought-after bachelor. He was ultra-good-looking. Ultra-masculine. And ultra-rich. He had power oozing from every part of his being. She didn't have some kind of inferiority complex where she didn't think she was good enough for him, at least she didn't think she did. Still, she was a realist, and realistically, how could he be interested in someone like her?

Eric stole glances at the beautiful girl beside him as they rode. She was apparently deep in thought. Was she thinking about him? He hoped so. She was perfect for him. Perfect in every way. And he'd just fallen in love with her family. And her protectiveness toward them made him fall even further. She came from humble beginnings. That much was evident. He found he wanted to change that, for her, for her family. And he knew he had the power to do just that. Though, not by giving them a handout. They wouldn't accept a handout anyway, but he knew he could open their eyes to their own potential and maybe give them a hand *up*.

She glanced back at him. "So, I saw this morning that there was some drama going on with Taylor."

He smiled. "Yeah, she was pretty upset when she first woke up this morning. She cried for a long time. And then with the help of my parents and some prayer, she bucked up. I couldn't stick around to help because I had an appointment on the beach with my grandfather."

"Oh yeah. So, how did your training go today?"

He laughed. "Not quite as hard as yesterday. I only threw up once."

She giggled. "I don't know how you do it."

"I just make it from one minute to the next. I don't look beyond the next request of my trainer. Eventually, we'll get past the stamina problem and move into the reaction times and fight sequences. But right now, I just keep my eyes on whatever exercise I'm being told to do."

"I'm so in awe of you."

He gave a soft laugh. "Well, my ego likes that, but it makes me afraid of disappointing you later."

"Hmm, I don't think that's possible."

He smiled. He hoped not.

They continued to chat as they drove. They talked about conditioning and practice for softball. They talked about her coming back to a few of his training sessions. They talked about her wanting to see Taylor's volleyball games every Tuesday and Thursday. They talked about her siblings and that led to talking about his new aunt and uncles and he explained in more detail exactly how that came about, which totally blew her away.

"It's funny how much they look alike," Jordan said.

Eric nodded. "If you look at my baby pictures, they look almost exactly

like me and Taylor, and Jeffy."

"They are so freakin' cute," she said. "This morning I saw a video of this kid who lives up like, somewhere I think in northern California. He reminds me of your Aunt Jeffy, because he's really smart, and he looks almost exactly like your new uncles, and also like you."

Eric looked at her sharply. "Do you think you can find that video again?"

"Yes, because I subscribed, why?"

"Because there is a fifth child, a boy, that was given away, when he was a baby. There is no record of who he was given to, and no one admits to having any information about him. We're all sick over thinking we have a member of our family out there somewhere and we have no idea what's happening to him. My grandmother is extremely distraught over it. It's like a dark shadow always hanging over her head, making her feel sad whenever her mind isn't occupied."

Jordan sighed. "I can see that." She pulled out her phone and pulled up the video. "Here it is. So, in the video you can hear someone calling out math problems to the little boy and he's giving the answers correctly which is amazing because he looks about the same age as your uncles. I mean, some of the questions I don't even know."

Eric's heart was racing. He couldn't get to their destination fast enough. When he finally pulled into the parking lot at the LA Memorial Coliseum, he swung into his usual spot, turned the car off and took her phone. His eyes filled with tears. The child did look exactly like his new uncles. He shared the video to himself and then pulled it up on his own encrypted phone and sent it to his father, his grandfather, and to Jason with the message;

~~Whaddya think?

The reply came from Jason.

~We'll know soon enough. Good find. Way to go.

~~Wasn't my find. It was Jordan.

~Let's keep this to ourselves until we track the child down and get DNA samples. No need to get Shelley's hopes up until we know for certain.

~~ If he's ours then there's gonna be a fight, because this is a monetized channel and they have a bunch of subscribers. This lady is probably making a boatload of money on this kid.

Jason replied this time with only a "thumbs up."

Young Eric looked over at Jordan who'd been sitting patiently while he was texting. "Sorry. This is a big deal."

"I totally get it."

"Of course you do," he said with a smile. He got out of the car, circled around to open her door, and pulled her to her feet.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean you totally get it, because, Jordan, you are perfect in every way."

Her sudden laugh came out as a snort, which made her laugh even harder.

"So, Jason says to not tell anyone about the boy in the video until we know for sure, just to save Grandma from any more heartache."

Jordan nodded. "My lips are sealed. Your grandmother is the sweetest."

"Yeah, she is." He stopped and leaned her against his car. Moved close. Touched a lock of her hair. "Are you ready to go in and cheat on your school by cheering for their biggest rival?"

She laughed. "Yes I am."

"Well, before we go in, I need to do one more thing so that I can concentrate on the game."

"What's that?"

"This," he murmured as he leaned down and kissed her.

The moment his lips touched hers, she felt so much warmth and contentment, like she'd been craving something and she didn't know what until this moment. She made a soft sighing sound in the back of her throat, which made him pull away.

He smiled at her.

"What?" she asked, wondering why he stopped.

"That sound you made. It's intoxicating. I had to stop to get back a little control."

"You like being in control?"

"In control of myself, yes. Being master over oneself, it's something we strive for. But with you, I'm losing ground," he said as he took her hands and placed them up around his neck, then wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close and kissed her thoroughly. He lifted her up and placed her on the fender of his car as she gave a little squeal.

Their lips came together and Jordan felt like she could stay like this forever, which she suddenly realized, frightened her. She was in school, working hard to make something of herself, to open a wellness clinic to help people like her father, people dying of cancer. Using Dr. Kino's methods, she could really help people. Mainly though, she wanted to be successful so that she could give her mother and siblings a better life. So she didn't want to get distracted from her goals. Yet, Eric Kino the Third, was definitely a force to be reckoned with. She didn't know how to deal with her own heart that couldn't stop yearning to be close to this guy.

"Get a room!" someone yelled as they drove by, horn blaring and people laughing.

Eric pulled away with a laugh. "I guess we'd better head inside."

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Psalm 115:1-18

"Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness! Why should the nations say "Where is their God?" Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them. O Israel,[a] trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. The Lord has remembered us; he will bless us; he will bless the house of Israel; he will bless the house of Aaron; he will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great. May the Lord give you increase, you and your children! May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth! The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord!"

Chapter Ten

September 14th, Late Saturday Afternoon
Los Angeles Coliseum, Los Angeles, California

Jordan looked up as they approached their seats, about eight rows up from the fifty-yard line. The whole family was there, all sporting the Trojan colors. On the sixth row up, Jordan was greeted by Cam and Jeffy, and Kim and Jensen. Kim, who Jordan remembered was the daughter of Jason and Angel Lee, was also pregnant, but still stood and hugged Jordan and exclaimed how nice it was to see her again.

The seventh row was occupied by Jeff Davis, his sons Daniel and Jeremy, Grandmaster Kino, Shelley, Angel and Jason Lee, and Justin Lee. Jordan again was hugged, and when she asked where the little ones were she was told they stayed at the house with Jeff's wife Mickey, who was also pregnant and not feeling up to the big game. She and Justin's wife Lori were taking care of not only the four little Kinos, but also Emily, Mark's and Bella's little girl, and Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger, Joey and Breez' babies.

On the eighth row, young Eric and Jordan had to scooch to their seats past Joey, Mark, Breez, Bella, and Logan who all stood and hugged her and greeted young Eric. On the other side of Jordan was Taylor, Bree and Ricky. After being hugged by Three's family, Jordan and young Eric finally settled into their seats.

Jordan looked around wide-eyed. "Three, this place is gigantic," she exclaimed.

"I know, right? I love coming here."

"I guess you come here a lot."

"Ever since JoJo was a freshman."

"Did he red-shirt?"

"No. He started as a true freshman, and now he's a senior and a Heisman candidate and I'm so freakin' proud of him." He shook his head. "A few weeks ago he almost stopped playing, when Granddad got shot. He didn't feel like he could go on. But we talked him into it. We told him that Granddad wouldn't be happy about him quitting.

"*College GameDay* is doing a little piece today about him and almost quitting, and about what happened with Granddad and how and why he was shot. I'm not sure if they'll talk at all about the miracle that occurred, but I hope they do."

"Why?"

"Because it's planting seeds. People need to wake up and realize that God is real and stop denying the signs and wonders that He gives us on almost a daily basis."

Jordan thought about that for a moment and then smiled. "Tell me about a sign and wonder."

Young Eric smiled back at her, glad that she asked. "Meeting you for one. I don't always stop to help everyone I see. I may not have stopped to help you if you hadn't tried to jump on the wrench to try to get that lug nut loose. I turned my head and my eyes at just the right time to see you jump and fall. If I'd been running on time I would've already passed that stretch of road before your tire went flat. But I was running late and I saw you. Still, I intended to keep on going because I was late. But I've learned to listen to God's voice and He yelled at me to stop and help you. And then, I know of a certainty that I was meant to meet you when you told me what you're studying in school."

Jordan made a face.

Eric chuckled. "Most people just ignore things like that or chalk them up to weird coincidences. But Jordan, there are no such things as coincidences. God's universe is not random. It is not chaos. It is ordered. There is a plan. So, if *GameDay* covers the miracle part of the story, even partially, it's a good thing, because it helps people to wake up. It plants seeds. It gets them thinking and talking about the possibilities."

"Just like we are right now."

He grinned. "Exactly."

Just then they looked up as Megan Morell, the pretty sideline reporter, made her way up, a cameraman by her side.

"Hello! Okay, so we're gonna go live in a few minutes. Where are JoJo's parents?"

Mark and Bella stood.

"Great!" She shook their hands. "So nice to meet you and to see the whole family here!" She pointed at Ricky and Bree and spoke to the cameraman. "Make sure you get a shot of them."

The man nodded.

She smiled at Grandmaster Kino. "Sir, if you'd rather not stand, we can interview you from your seat."

He smiled warmly. "I can stand, but thank you for your kind consideration."

Young Eric leaned over and whispered to Jordan. "I think that means they're gonna say something about the miracle."

Jordan smiled. "Sounds like it."

"Okay," Megan went on. "We're gonna pan the camera as I call your names, so let me practice and make sure I get it right."

She moved down two steps. "Dr. June Flower Kino and her husband." She moved up one step. "Grandmaster Kino and his wife Shelley, a former

MART champion." She moved up one more step. "Kino Challenge champion Joey Adams and his wife; Former Kino Challenge Champion and film star Ricky Kino, and his wife, three-time Oscar winner, Breanna Adams. Social media icon, half of the Gabe and Taylor phenomena, Taylor Kino." She frowned and pointed at young Eric. "You're the one about to fight in the Kino Challenge this year, right?"

He smiled at her and nodded. He hadn't realized he'd be mentioned.

"Okay, so, Eric Kino the Third, about to fight for the first time in the Kino Challenge and your wife?"

Jordan's eyes opened wide. "Uh, nope."

Eric laughed. "She's a good friend."

Megan nodded. "Got it. And you're JoJo's brother, Logan, correct?" she asked pointing at Logan.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered brightly.

"Okay, we're gonna go in that order and save the parents for last. We'll interview Grandmaster Kino and the parents only." She put her hand to her earpiece. "They're running the piece now. It'll be our turn in just a few minutes. Logan, you stand right behind your parents and Mr. and Mrs. Adams, come stand here on the steps please. And Grandmaster Kino, are you able to come stand next to them?"

Eric smiled and rose to do her bidding.

Only a minute later they went live.

"Hello, Rece! We are so excited to have all of JoJo's family right here ready to cheer him on today. Just look who we have! Nobel Prize winner, Dr. June Flower Kino and her husband. Grandmaster Kino, who we're gonna come back and talk to in just a second. His lovely wife Shelley Kino, a former MART champion. Current Kino Challenge Champion, the hunky Joey Adams and his wife. Former and original Kino Challenge Champion, and film star, the studly Ricky Kino, and his beautiful and talented wife, three-time Oscar winner, Breanna Adams. Next we have the social media icon, half of the Gabe and Taylor phenomena, Taylor Kino. And here we have the next Kino Challenge competitor, Eric Kino the Third and his girlfriend. And this is Logan, JoJo's not so little brother and JoJo's proud parents, Mark and Bella Adams. Mark Adams, you're a former Heisman candidate, I know you must be very proud of your son?"

He nodded. "We are extremely proud of him and all the hard work he puts in."

"What does it mean to him to get a win here today?"

The rest of the family had to try very hard to not roll their eyes at the stupid question. They'd had many conversations about the dumb questions asked on the sideline of a football field.

Mark chuckled. "It means his team is one step closer to their goal of making it to the CFP. That is his main concern, his team."

Megan nodded in agreement. "Absolutely." She nodded at Bella. "Mrs.

Adams, we heard that JoJo almost stopped playing when his grandfather was in the hospital fighting for his life. What made him change his mind?"

Bella smiled sweetly. "It was two things. His brothers convinced him that his grandfather would want him to keep playing, keep fighting the good fight. And he didn't want to let his team down."

"That is a beautiful thing." Megan turned to smile at Grandmaster Kino. "Sir, I know you must be proud of your grandson and I know he's extremely grateful to have you standing here at his game. What can you tell us about your recent experience?"

"I can tell you that there are no coincidences and God has a plan. It wasn't my time to go—yet. And in my hour of need, millions of people came together in love, and kindness and prayer and fellowship for a common goal. Really, that's a little bit of what's happening here today. Both teams and their supporters are coming together today to try to make something good happen. As long as it's done in honor and love, it's a marvelous thing."

Megan turned to the camera. "Well there ya go, Rece, those are some great words to live by."

"They are indeed. Wonderful to see the Adams and Kino families. Thank you, Megan."

Megan nodded and the camera light went off.

"Hey, you guys are awesome. Thanks so much. And by the way, I'm a huge fan of your family!"

She shook hands with Mark, Bella and Logan and left.

They all looked up as the teams came onto the field to warm up.

Everyone stood and cheered including Jordan, who put her fingers to her mouth and whistled.

Eric grinned at her. Perfect.

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"So, Jordan, whaddya think so far?" young Eric asked as they sat across from the ladies' restroom at halftime on a concrete divider between the next level.

Jordan beamed. "I think it's awesome! I mean, now this is the way to watch a game. So much fun."

"Yeah, as long as you have good seats. If you get seats way up in the nosebleeds, it's better to watch it on TV."

"Have you ever sat up in the nosebleeds?"

"Not at a home game, but when we travel to away games, ya get what you can get. So tell me, what's your favorite part so far?"

"Well, my favorite part of the *game* was when JoJo scrambled away on the blitz, threw across his body all the way to the opposite side of the field and that wide receiver actually came down with it to tie the game."

Eric smiled and nodded her on.

"And my favorite part of everything else is split between sitting next to your sister and us answering her questions about the game, and hearing the

roar of the crowd. It's deafening, and you just don't get that on TV."

He smiled at her. "No, ya don't."

They looked up as Taylor and Logan approached.

"We're gonna go get some goodies. You or your *'girlfriend'* want anything," Taylor asked with a giggle, making reference to the reporter assuming Jordan was Eric's girlfriend.

Young Eric frowned. "Haha. Jordan? Want anything?"

"Yeah, I'll take one of those footlongs, and some fries."

Eric nodded. "Make it two. And thanks, guys."

Logan smiled. "You got it, bro."

They watched them walk off, then Eric turned back to Jordan. "So, like, I'm sorry about that, Jordan."

"About what?"

"About the reporter calling you my girlfriend in front of the world."

She shrugged. "It's okay. It doesn't bother me."

"It doesn't?"

"No, of course not. I could be called much worse things."

He chuckled. "I guess that's true. So, well, if it doesn't bother you, what would you think about making it official?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Um, I'm not sure what you're trying to say."

He reached out and took her hand. "I'm trying to ask if we should make it real? You and me, exclusively?"

Her mouth opened. "I, uh, I don't want you to be forced to ask me to be your girlfriend because of some reporter's blunder."

He nodded. "Understood and that's not why I'm asking. She just gave me the opening to broach the subject. And surely you know me well enough to know that no one can force me to do anything I don't want to do."

She nodded. "Yeah, I get that about you."

"Whaddya say, Miss Jordan Brooks? I really like you. I think you like me. Let's see where this goes."

She smiled sweetly and nodded. "Okay, let's see where this goes. You and me."

"You and me," he said softly as he reached out and touched her cheek reverently with the back of his knuckles.

She took his hand and kissed it softly.

The moment was intruded upon when someone screamed.

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Ricky started to the restroom at halftime, but had been stopped numerous times by autograph seekers and selfie takers. He finally made his way down the ramp and noticed his son and Jordan sitting on a concrete barrier. They seemed rather cozy, Ricky thought, as he stopped to watch them for a minute. Young Eric reached out and stroked his knuckles down her cheek and she took that same hand, brought it to her lips and kissed it.

Ricky smiled. He could see this girl becoming a big part of their lives.

A scream ripped through the air.

"Let go," a woman screamed.

Ricky looked over the crowd, trying to see what was taking place.

"Stop him! He took my purse," the woman yelled.

Even faster than he could react, Ricky looked over to see his son jump up and trip the guy as he tried to run past him. Young Eric went to him and a couple of seconds later, the guy lay unconscious. Jordan joined Eric and scooped up the purse that had been tossed aside before anyone else could grab it.

Security arrived and took over and thanked young Eric. The woman retrieved her purse from Jordan and thanked her profusely. Ricky glanced around at all the cell phones out and recording and sighed. His son usually tried to keep a low profile. It wasn't gonna be possible this time. Rick hurried to the restroom before he himself was accosted again. He was used to being famous, used to people asking for his autograph. It'd been happening since he was a kid starring in his first ninja movie. But the world was changing exponentially, and it was getting more and more difficult to maintain any modicum of privacy.

Coming out of the restroom, Ricky spotted Jason, who was on his phone as he watched over his wife, Angel, at the concession stand. Jason spotted Ricky and waved him forward.

"What ya got?" Ricky asked as he approached.

Jason held up his hand, spoke another command into the phone, ended the call and looked to make sure Angel was okay. "We've located the child in that video. He lives in Modesto. Preliminary info is he lives with an aunt. Her name is Sandra Norton. She's single and partially disabled. We don't yet know the extent of her disability. The child's parents divorced. The father left, the mother turned to drugs and gave the child to the aunt. Don't know her whereabouts yet. The child is two years old, born May 27th."

"Same time frame as the others."

"Correct. We're going after trash DNA, instead of waiting for a court order on Monday. If we're able to get something, we'll send it to one of Jeffy's labs and by Monday, we should know a preliminary profile."

"Instincts?"

"I'm only hopeful. Jeffy wasn't able to sense this child, so, I'm skeptical."

"Maybe we should bring her into our confidence and see what she feels now."

"We may have to since I want her to put a rush on the labs." Jason sighed. "I'll send her the video."

Ricky headed back to the seats. Young Eric and Jordan were already sitting in their seats, chowing down on junk food. Taylor too. He only shook his head. He patted his son on the shoulder. "Good job on tripping that guy. Great reaction time."

Young Eric grinned. “Taught by the best.”

“Yes you were, if you’re talking about your grandfather.”

“No, Dad, I was talking about you. You trained me.”

Ricky sighed. “Okay, I accept the compliment.” He looked out at the field to see JoJo warming up. “Think we can pull this off?”

“Yes I do,” young Eric stated firmly. “We’re only down by three and we get the ball. We’re a second-half kinda team, so here we go.”

“That’s right, Eric,” Mark said. “We got this. Just no turnovers.”

The rest of the family barely made it to their seats for the kickoff. It was a fantastic possession. The O-line was making holes, the running backs were eating up six to seven yards per carry. Then someone jumped and they got backed up. They found themselves in a third and fifteen. The blitz was coming, but JoJo sprinted out. At first he thought he’d try to run for the first himself, but at the last moment saw his tight end turn and get clear. JoJo fired it. Touchdown!

The crowd went crazy, and so did JoJo’s family. Mark smiled with pride. Young Eric and Logan were screaming and high-fiving each other, Jordan’s whistle was so loud it hurt everyone’s ears. Jeff and his boys were jumping up and down. Everyone was jumping up and down. Jeffy had to sit down quickly, holding her belly as the little boy inside started to kick. Extra point good, the score was now 42-38.

“Alright, defense,” Jordan yelled. “Come on now, get your freakin’ act together!”

Young Eric smiled as everyone turned to grin at his girlfriend for her assessment.

She smiled with a shrug. “Well, Three,” she said softly. “It’s the truth.”

He chuckled. “Yep, some decent defense would be great right about now.”

The defense must have heard her because they offered up a three and out. Or, it might have been a halftime adjustment, but young Eric was willing to chalk it up to Jordan’s sideline coaching.

The Trojans’ next possession took up most of the third quarter and ended in another score. They went into the fourth quarter 49-38.

“Run, clock, run,” Jordan murmured.

Taylor turned to her. “Why?”

Jordan took time to explain that the other team was down by two scores and if we could maintain our lead they wouldn’t have time to come back. She explained about the time outs remaining and how they would probably be used.

Taylor smiled at her. “You rock, ya know that?”

Jordan laughed. “Why do you say that?”

Taylor shrugged. “You’re so smart about football, you’re easy going, you’re not snobby. You rock.”

“Aww, thanks, Taylor. You’re pretty cool yourself. And, by the way, I

love what you said on that interview this morning with Isla. You were so kind. That guy didn't deserve you being so nice to him."

Taylor shrugged. "Yeah, maybe not, but it's okay. And I learned a good lesson about guys wanting to get you alone."

Jordan nodded. "Yeah, guys can be creeps," she said, thinking of her stepfather.

"But not all guys," Taylor said, looking over at her brother.

Jordan smiled. "Yeah, not all guys for sure."

The defense was struggling again. They had Utah twice in a third and long situation, but Utah converted both times. That was the bad news. The good news was they were eating up the clock. They moved it down the field, but at least the Trojan defense held the Utes to a field goal. Score now, 49-41.

Trojans got the ball on the twenty-five yard line. JoJo threw a couple of ten yard passes. They were first and ten at the fifty yard line. The next play however, ended with the Trojan center down. There was a long timeout. His knee was badly injured and they had to come and get him off the field in an injury cart.

First play with the new center, the snap went high and JoJo had to leap high into the air to grab it, which he did. He sprinted left looking for receivers and found everyone covered, so he took off and slid down a yard short of the first down. Second play, he sneaked it.

He made the first down, but on the bottom of the pile someone got in a few knees and elbows, and JoJo was slow to get up.

The family was on their feet, but quiet.

JoJo limped back to the huddle.

"Okay, guys. Let's get this done."

He called the play. They lined up. He looked to the sideline. Clapped his hands once, twice, the center snapped the ball and it went flying over JoJo's head. He leaped for it but it was too high. He took off after it, was able to scoop it up. He was being blitzed. He couldn't see down field to pass. He tucked and ran. He dodged a few incoming, but they were everywhere. He got chopped in half and brought down by three big guys, and then a fourth piled on.

Yellow flags flew from everywhere. Trojan linemen went to pull JoJo out from under the pile, pulling Utes off the pile, which started a shoving match, which started an all-out-brawl. Coaches were trying to keep the sideline players off the field. Refs were trying to stop the fighting and finally, when it all cleared, all anyone could see was JoJo still lying on the field, flat on his face, not moving.

Help was at his side in seconds. The family, all on their feet stood silently. They watched the Jumbotron replay to see if they could tell how badly he might be hurt. It showed the replay three different times, different angles, and then, suddenly their own images were on the big screen, as TV

cameras zeroed in on JoJo's family and the worry on their faces.

Mark watched the field silently and then breathed a sigh of relief as JoJo slowly sat up. The crowd applauded. A minute later, JoJo was helped to his feet. The trainers and docs walked attentively beside him as he slowly exited the field to thundering cheers and applause.

Mark watched him on the sideline. JoJo was nodding to whatever question the coach was asking him, which was probably something like, "can you see straight?"

Back on the field it was first and ten because of the penalties.

The backup QB handed the ball off a few times, but they got nothing. It was third and long and the Trojans needed one more first down to keep the Utes from getting the ball again.

JoJo put on his helmet and went back in. In the huddle he put a hand on the center's shoulder. "Settle down, Wade. No nerves. Just do what you know you can do. Concentrate. You got this."

The guy nodded. "Sorry, Jo."

"No worries. We're good. They're gonna come after me again. You guys ready?"

They broke, went to the line. The center snapped the ball right into JoJo's hands, he stepped back and fired a shot into the tight end's numbers. First down.

The crowd went bonkers while Jordan explained to Taylor why the team could simply take a knee on every down for the last minute of the game.

When time ran out, Taylor, Jordan, young Eric and Logan all threw their arms around each other and jumped in a circle, then turned toward the field and yelled for JoJo and watched the crowd run onto the field. Good times.

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September 15th, Sunday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose closed her eyes as she listened to the beautiful music floating through the house. It'd been quite a while since Violet had played the piano. Really almost never, since the fiasco at Juilliard. After that, Rose had come home from the University of West Florida where she'd been studying marine biology, and Vi had come home from New York, and they'd both started classes at local Gordon College.

Everyone thought that Rose was being loving and protective of her sister and set aside her dream of working with dolphins, but she knew that wasn't true. Oh, she was worried about Vi, but the marine biologist thing had been a passing fancy and a slight form of rebellion, trying to be very different from her sister, which was just silly.

Smiling, she made her way downstairs to the front living room where before today, the piano had been sitting, gathering dust. She stood in the doorway and listened as Violet played an absolutely beautiful rendition of "How Great Thou Art." It was so well done it brought tears to Rose's eyes.

She waited for her to finish and then moved forward and put her arms around her sister's neck and kissed her cheek.

"Lord, Vi, that was really beautiful."

Violet patted Rose's arm. "Thanks, hon. It feels good to play again."

"What has inspired you? If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't mind. I guess it was Logan asking me to play for Taylor and Miss Bree's birthday. I almost automatically turned them down, but I didn't want to go into a big explanation of why I don't play anymore, of what happened up in New York. So, I agreed to play and I realized how much I miss it. And I realized that Dad was right. I'd been allowing Professor Popov to continue to hurt me and it was time to get my life back."

Rose's eyebrows rose. "Are you going back to New York?"

"Oh, no. Never. I truly hate New York. How anyone can live in a city so full of darkness and hatred is beyond me. It's Babylon. Or a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. No thanks."

"Well, in fairness, sis, New York is not the only place like that. And there are also a lot of good people there too."

Violet smiled. "Agreed."

"So, do you have some plans?" Rose probed.

"Career-wise? I might get my teaching certificate and teach music locally. I don't want to leave Pine Forest, if that's the real question."

Rose smiled. "It was, and good. So, how do you feel about helping out teaching music at the community center?"

"If it ever gets opened I could help. Why do you ask? Are you gonna help out?"

Rose grinned and shook her head. "Actually, I'm— gonna run it. We're gonna have a grand opening soon."

"You're gonna run it? Wow! And like, how soon is your grand opening?"

"Maybe next month if it all comes together like I want it to. Even after the big opening, there's gonna be a lot left to do as far as the renovations, but I just wanna get it up and running asap."

"You're kidding! Why haven't you said anything?"

"I wanted to make sure it's what I really want to do. But, like you, Vi, I've decided I don't want to leave Pine Forest."

Violet stood, turned and hugged her sister. "Oh this just makes me so happy. We'll be here together. And we can work together, and we can be here for Mom when she has the babies."

They hugged again, but turned when their mother and little Iris came in, all dressed up for church.

"Iris wants to know why you stopped playing the pretty music and will you play 'Jesus Loves Me.'"

"For you, my sweet girl, I'll play anything," Violet said.

"You'd better not tell her that or we'll be hearing w-h-e-e-l-s on the b-u-

s until we're brain dead," Lizzy laughed.

Smiling, Violet sat back down and played "Jesus Loves Me" for her baby sister. Then she had to go finish getting ready for church. And then after church there would be a big farewell luncheon for Jake over at the Inn. And then finally, sometime this evening, after he got off his shift, CJ was gonna stop by. She sighed. Life was good.

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September 15th, Sunday Afternoon

Pine Forest Country Inn, *Pine Forest, Georgia*

Jake looked around at the people he loved most in this world. His mother and father, his in-laws and neighbors, the Stewarts and the Tanners, Kurt and Landon, his best friends from high school, and Bugs, his wife. His wife.

What a whirlwind this homecoming had been. The day he arrived, he had an altercation with a guy who, only a week later, would beat and rape Laynah. Jake had known her all his life and had no idea he would fall head over heels in love with her. Then Jake would fly to Cali to watch his little bro Gabe become an instant martial arts phenomenon. Gabe would then be abducted from the side of the road and eventually, Jake would help to rescue him. Jake and Laynah realized their love and got engaged out of the blue. A month later, they were married. Then they lost Miss Maddie, who went home to be in heaven with her husband. Finally, Jake and Laynah would fly back to Cali, thinking to see Gabe as he passed from this world after being shot and stabbed and developed a blood infection. And then the miracle. Gabe and Grandmaster Kino both had an NDE, or maybe a DE, and God heals them.

Now, Jake was getting ready to leave for Kabul, apparently to handle some covert ops in getting certain VIPs out of Afghanistan. He was not afraid. Though he had been for a minute. But after prayer and meditation, he received peace and a knowing that he was gonna make it back home with no problem. He'd actually always known he would be a Marine Raider, and he'd always known it was his calling and he'd always known he would make it back home. He'd tried to convey that feeling to these people who were here to bid him farewell, because some of them, not all, but some, were acting like this was a final farewell.

The main person he'd tried to convince was currently cuddled up next to him on one of the loveseats in the lobby of the Inn. His Laynahbug. They'd now been married three and a half months. He hated to have to leave her, but they both knew he would from the beginning. She was not clinging. She was being brave. And that's one of the reasons he'd fallen in love with her. They were young. He was twenty-one. She would turn twenty-one in November. Some people thought they were way too young to marry. But he knew it was the right thing to do.

He looked down at her as she turned her head up toward him and smiled. He placed a soft kiss on her lips.

"All these people love you so much," Laynah said softly.

He nodded. "I love them too."

She sighed. "Tell me again how everything is gonna be okay."

He tilted her face up so he could look directly into her eyes. "Everything really is gonna be okay, Bugs. I know. And you have so much to do to keep you occupied that you won't even have time to think about me. You have the land to buy, the house plans to search out, the stable to build, the horses to procure and to take care of, and Rose to help. I'm not sure how you're gonna do it all."

She grinned. "Just watch me."

"What's the first thing you're gonna do?"

"First I have to coordinate with Rose, then I'll plan a calendar and start doing research and making appointments. My dad is gonna be a huge help. I'm not gonna rush. I'm gonna take things slow and steady and let the business build slowly."

He squeezed her hard. "I am so proud of you. I am the luckiest man in the world."

She giggled. "Yes, you are."

He laughed.

"Jake, once you leave in the morning, will I be able to call you at all?"

"Yeah, at first, cuz you know I gotta train at Lejeune for two weeks, and then head to Pendleton for a few weeks. After that though, communications will be spotty. But there will be communications, I just don't know how often."

"Okay, you lovebirds," Rose interrupted. "Lunch is ready. All of Jake's favorite foods, so come and get it."

"Good, cuz I'm starved," Laynah replied. "It's a good thing Jake has such good taste."

John Appel smiled at his son and daughter-in-law. "He does indeed."

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1 Samuel 16:18

"One of the young men answered, "Behold,
I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite,
who is skillful in playing, a man of valor,
a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man
of good presence, and the Lord is with him."

Chapter Eleven

Still September 15th, Sunday Afternoon
Perez/Brooks Residence, Hillcrest, California

Jordan sat at the small dining room table helping her ten-year-old sister with some math homework. Also sitting at the table was Jamie, watching another one of Ricky Kino's martial arts movies on Jordan's old laptop from high school.

Her mother was busy in the kitchen preparing a simple Sunday meal of tacos. It was an inexpensive meal that, luckily, Jamie and Josie both loved. Jordan glanced at her phone to check the time. Right after the late lunch/early dinner, Jordan needed to get back to the tiny apartment she shared with her roommates because she had an early practice at 8:00 in the morning and it was too hard to drive such a long way on a Monday morning with all the traffic.

She smiled as her thoughts went to her new boyfriend. He too had to train in the morning, though his training would begin at 7:00 a.m. at the Newport martial arts studio. Tomorrow would mark the beginning of his second week of training. After that, only eight more weeks to go. Eight weeks of hell. A tough battle for Three, but it would turn him into a hardened warrior for the Kino Challenge. She was so proud of him. She was roused from her thoughts when someone knocked on the door. She smiled, as in the back of her mind she pictured a surprise visit from Three.

She opened the door and gasped. Her eyes narrowing, she glanced down immediately to make sure the outer burglar door was locked.

"What are you doing here?" she said fiercely.

Peter Perez' eyebrows shot up and he scowled. "You better watch how you speak to me."

She laughed. "Whatever. You're not supposed to be here."

"Peter?" Jewell Perez said from behind Jordan. "Peter, you're two hours early."

Jordan whirled to look at her mother, who was frowning and nervously twisting her hands together.

"I'm sorry, Jordan. He called me this morning and asked to see the children. I told him not to come until four."

Jordan frowned. She knew good and well he didn't suddenly want to see his children. He came early because he wanted to get to her, provoke her, rile her, make her feel uncomfortable. She turned back to him. "Go away, Peter.

You can't come in here while I'm home and you know it. Now, go away."

He grabbed the door handle and rattled the door. "Open this effing door."

"No. Go away. You'll have to wait until I leave. Go away and come back later."

He cursed, using God's name and violently rattled the door. "Open this door!"

She drew a deep breath and spoke calmly. "You know good and well you are not allowed to be here when I'm here. So, get back in your car and go away. I'll be leaving soon and then you can come back and see your children. That's what you want, right? Go, or, do I need to call the cops?"

He stood there glaring at her for several seconds. "I'll go, but I swear Jordan, I'll make you pay for this."

"Are you really threatening me? Do you want to go back to prison? You are making a big mistake, Peter. And remember, I'm the one making YOU pay for what YOU did, you filthy pervert." She closed the door in his face. She went to the window and peeked out, making sure he went to his car and drove away.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry," Jewell said softly. "I didn't think he would do this or I wouldn't have given him permission. I'm so sorry."

Jordan drew a deep breath and smiled. "It's okay, Mom. Really, but I'm gonna go ahead and grab my stuff and get out of here."

"Oh, honey, you haven't even eaten yet."

"I'm not really hungry anymore."

Jordan went to her siblings and hugged them goodbye and kissed them and told them how much she loved them and that she'd come back sometime during the week to see them. She hated leaving them. She gathered her things and then glanced out front once more to make sure her stepfather had actually left. His car was still gone, thank goodness. He threatened her. Surely that was against the parole orders. She would ask Three's Uncle Mark and see if that could get Peter Perez put back in prison for violating parole. Wouldn't hurt to try.

She kissed her mom and headed out to her car and opened her trunk. She threw her bag in next to her mound of softballs, shut the trunk and drew a sharp breath. Her eyes opened wide, her heart pounded. Her stepfather grinned at her from the other side of her car.

She rushed toward the driver's side and pulled open the door, but he caught her, grabbing her by the arm before she could get in.

"Scared ya, huh?" he said.

"Let go of my arm," she forced out between gritted teeth.

He let go and stepped back. She started to get in the car but he grabbed her again, jerked her out and shut the car door.

Jordan's body began to tremble. She breathed deeply, trying to contain the fear she felt rising.

"I bet you think you're all high and mighty since you been dating that rich kid."

She swallowed hard.

"Oh, yeah, I saw you on TV last night, sitting up all close to that Kino kid. How'd you manage that, huh? You puttin' out for him?"

"Take your hand off me and step back, or I swear, I'll call the cops right now." Using her free hand, she pulled her phone from her pocket and looked up at him.

He only smiled at her. "Ya, know, Jordan, I'm to the point where I really don't care anymore. You do what you gotta do, and I'll do what I gotta do."

She couldn't help it. The fear overtook her. A tear ran down her cheek. She fought to get control, but her body wouldn't stop shaking. She was definitely gonna report this. "I'm telling you now to step back," she said as forcefully as she could.

"I don't know where you get off talking to me like you do. Didn't anybody teach you how to be respectful?"

"You didn't teach me anything of any worth."

His eyes narrowed and he squeezed her wrist until she winced. "Now, little girl, ask me politely."

She sniffed. "Let go. Please," she added.

He smiled, let go of her arm and took a step back from her, his hands out to his sides. "See now. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

She didn't answer but quickly slipped into the driver's seat, pulled the door closed and pressed the lock button to make sure all doors were locked.

He patted the hood of her car. "See you later, Jordan. Have a nice day."

To Jordan, it sounded like a threat. She immediately threw the car into reverse, backed out and pulled away. Noting his car parked on the street about four houses down, she put down her window, took a picture of the car, then took off.

Once she was out of her neighborhood, she couldn't hold back any longer. The tears came. She'd just decided to give into a good hard cry when her phone buzzed. She hit "accept," and sniffed. "Hello," she said softly.

"Jordan?"

She sat up straighter, wiped her face with her hand and sniffed again. "Oh, uh, yes. Hi, Eric."

"What's wrong?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

"Uh, because you didn't call me 'Three,' and because you sound like you're crying. What's wrong?"

She sniffed again. "Nothing. Listen, I don't wanna talk right now."

"Wait. Don't hang up. Please, Jordan. Honey, what's wrong? What's happened?"

The tears started anew. She sniffed loudly. "My stepfather came by the house."

Eric's blood pressure rose. "Did he hurt you?"

"Not really, but I thought he was going to."

"I thought he's not supposed to come near you."

"He's not supposed to, but he doesn't seem to care about that. When he grabbed me I threatened to call the police but he said he just really didn't care anymore."

"When he grabbed you?"

She was silent.

"Jordan?"

"Yes," she whimpered.

He sighed. "Okay, hon, uh, where are you?"

"I'm driving, on my way back to school. I have an early practice tomorrow."

"Have you passed my grandparents' turnoff yet?"

She sniffed. "No."

"Come to my grandparents' house. I'm here. We need to talk and to figure this out. My Uncle Mark is here too. We're gonna get this taken care of, okay?"

"I don't feel much like talking to anyone right now."

"Okay, that's fine. But I'm not just anyone. Don't you trust me?"

She was silent as she thought. "Yes, I trust you."

"Come to me, sweetheart."

"Okay. But I have an early practice."

"I'll make sure you get there on time."

She drew a ragged breath. "Okay. See you in about fifteen minutes."

He hung up, stared at his phone and shook his head.

"What's up, big brother?" Taylor asked as she came into the kitchen to get cookies for her little aunt and uncles.

He frowned. "Where's Dad?"

"He's with Granddad and the rest of the men in the study trying to decide on the next form of torture for you."

Eric nodded. "Thanks. Hey, Tay, Jordan should be driving up in about fifteen minutes. Let her in for me. And be sweet, she's having a hard day."

"Uh, when am I not sweet?"

Eric smiled, headed to the study and knocked.

"Come in," his grandfather said.

Young Eric opened the door and stepped in.

"Speak of the devil and he walks through the door," Joey remarked. When young Eric didn't smile they all came to attention.

"Granddad, will you call the gate and tell them to let Jordan in?"

Eric nodded and quickly did as asked.

"What's up?" Ricky asked his son.

Young Eric looked from face to face. His grandfather, father, Uncle Joey, Uncle Mark, Uncle Cam, JoJo and Logan.

"I don't have a lot of time before Jordan gets here, but quickly let me explain." He went on to tell how Jordan's stepfather had tried to rape her when she was fourteen, that he'd gone to prison with a very light sentence, and that he'd just accosted her.

"I need to help her. She can't live like this. I need you to tell me what can be done, or what I can do, or what *we* can do."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "We can do that but we're gonna need more information. Will she talk to us? Or at least, to me with maybe you present?"

"I don't know but she'll be here any minute and we can ask her. I mean, I had to beg her to stop here. She was on her way back to UCLA, crying as she drove when I just happened to call her. I got her to come here, that's a start." He turned to Mark. "Uncle Mark, I mean, if he violated his parole, he goes back to prison, right?"

"Yes, depending on what the conditions of his parole were in particular. Of course, it's always up to the judge's discretion. You say he accosted her. What does that mean exactly? Did he speak to her? Did he touch her? Did he hurt her? Was it premeditated?"

Eric nodded. "Well, I know he actually grabbed her. How exactly it all went down we'll have to ask."

"And if he goes back to prison, what then?" Mark added. "If his sentence was as light as you say, it might only be for another year. And then what? He gets out and comes after her again?" He sighed. "It sounds to me like the DA didn't do a very good job in the first place. He should have been charged with more than attempted rape."

"Like what?"

"Like child endangerment, assault with intent to commit criminal sexual conduct, assault, child sex abuse, and most importantly, incest?"

"Incest? But he's not her actual father."

"It doesn't matter. If he was married to or even living with the mother of the victim, it's incest."

"Well, that's all like, after the fact, right?"

"Yes, unfortunately. Let's hear what she has to say first, and then we'll decide if we can bring additional charges."

Young Eric nodded. "I'm gonna go see if she's here yet."

He turned and left the room. Out in the foyer he saw Taylor with Jordan, who was kneeling down and talking to little Noah. Jordan rose as young Eric came toward her. Her smile faded. Suddenly, with him standing right in front of her, it all came back. She moved forward to greet him and he put his arms around her and hugged her close. As soon as she laid her head on his chest, the emotional dam broke.

"Oh, honey, okay," he said softly as he escorted her into the living room and sank down with her onto the loveseat.

He held her until she quieted.

"I am so sorry. It's like, when he grabbed me, I was like fourteen again.

I mean, I was suddenly so scared. It all came back. I thought he was gonna, well, do something really bad."

"Like what?"

She gave a short laugh. "I dunno, maybe like finish the job. But he wouldn't do it right there in front of the house, which meant he might take me, stuff me in his car and no one would ever see me again. I tried so hard to be strong. I demanded he back off and he finally did."

She reached up to wipe some tears away and Eric noticed her hands were shaking. He took them in his hands. "Okay, babe, but that didn't happen. You're right here with me and you're okay. But please tell me you'll let me help you."

"Of course, I'll take any help I can get, but I don't know that there's anything you can do."

"Maybe nothing I can personally do, but like I said, I have a huge support group that is very powerful. The problem is, they need more information. They need you to come and speak with them."

"Speak with them? Them who?"

He sighed. "My grandfather who specializes in overcoming trauma, my uncle who is an attorney, my other uncle who specializes in protecting people, and my father who knows everyone in the world. They're waiting for you in the study to come and talk to them."

"I just don't feel like talking to anyone right now."

He sighed. "Okay, I get that. You're not in the mood to talk to anyone. You're upset. But Jordan, please don't let a mood keep you from getting the results you want. Can you dig deep and come with me? I'll stay right by your side, unless you'd rather I not be there at all."

She sighed. "I'd rather you not leave my side ever."

He nodded. "That may change, but for now, I won't."

He stood and held his hand out to her. "Follow me."

They walked together back to Grandmaster Kino's study. She walked in and was surprised to see so many there. Logan and JoJo stood immediately.

"Hey," Logan said quickly. "Nice to see you, Jordan. I'll just make myself scarce." He kissed her cheek and left.

"Jordan," JoJo said softly.

She smiled at him. "You were awesome last night."

"Thanks. And thanks for coming and cheering for the enemy."

"It was my pleasure."

"Well, I too am gonna disappear," he said, then also kissed her cheek and left.

Cam then stood and came to her, took both her hands in his. "Things will get better," he said as he kissed her cheek and left.

Jordan looked up at young Eric. "Do they all know what happened?"

"Yes, and there's nothing to be embarrassed about. It won't go any

further. The things those guys could tell you, the experiences they've had, there's nothing that would shock them."

"I doubt that, at least about JoJo and Logan."

"Logan's biological father was about to rape and murder his own mother and Logan shot and killed the man."

Her mouth fell open. "What? How old was he?"

"He was eleven."

Jordan's eyes filled with tears. "Okay then." She looked around the room into the eyes of Grandmaster Kino, Ricky Kino, and Mark and Joey Adams. They all seemed so kind and gentle and caring. "Hey, everyone," she said softly.

Young Eric moved two chairs up in front of his grandfather's desk, and offered her a seat in one, then sat down next to her.

Grandmaster Kino smiled kindly at her. "I can see that you're shaken by what's happened to you today, literally." He nodded at her hands as she tried to still them. "We always like to begin our sessions with a prayer. Young Eric? Would you please do us the honor?"

"Yes, sir," young Eric said and bowed his head. "Father, we come before You at this time to try to figure out the best way to help Jordan, who we believe is one of Your choice daughters. She has dark forces trying to do her harm, Father, and we pray for her protection both physically and emotionally. We ask You to wrap her in Your loving arms and give her peace and comfort. And we ask You to guide us in what we do that it may always be Your will. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

He looked up and smiled at her. She looked into his dark eyes and felt immediately comforted. She blew out a breath and looked up at Grandmaster Kino.

"Jordan, so that we don't have to carefully tiptoe around the happenings of that day back when you were fourteen, it will actually help you to tell me the entire story, everything that happened. Everyone present has only your best interest at heart, and together we will devise a plan so that you won't have to constantly look over your shoulder in fear. If there are personal details that would be embarrassing, leave those out for now, unless you'd rather tell it all."

She nodded.

"So, I understand your stepfather attempted to rape you when you were a young teenager. Was that the first attempt?"

Young Eric knew the question was meant to just get her started talking and then he would only say enough to keep her going.

She bit down on her lip. "I think it was the first attempt, though I don't think it was the first time he'd thought about it."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "You're right about that. Go on. What made you realize he'd thought about it before?"

"He'd make comments about my clothing. Like tell me my jeans are too

tight and I was just asking for it. Stuff like that. Or he'd make comments about me growing up, ya know, like, um, developing into a woman. He stared at me a lot."

"Was he *ever* kind to you? Ya know, like a father is supposed to be?"

She sighed. "Well, maybe in the beginning. I mean, maybe when he and my mom were first getting together."

"Your father died of cancer when you were eight?"

"Yes, sir."

"How soon after that did your stepfather come into your life?"

"I don't exactly remember but it seems like it was right after. Like, maybe just a few months. They got married really fast. I know that sounds like my mother didn't really love my father, but I think she just felt vulnerable or scared. I didn't think that back then, but I think I've come to understand that now."

"What was she afraid of?"

Jordan gave a slight shrug. "Well, I mean, she was all alone and she had to support a child. I think maybe she didn't know how she could handle it all alone. Ya know, like pay bills and feed me."

"What did your stepfather do for work?"

"He was a plumber. He worked on new construction, but right after my brother was born, he lost his job with the company he was working for. Or, the company went under, or something like that. My mom got a second job to help. It was supposed to only be until Peter got another job or started a plumbing business of his own, but he never went back to work."

Grandmaster Kino sighed. "Did his personality change after that?"

"Yes, but I think it was because he started drinking. He drank every day, and when he did, he was mean."

"Did he ever hit you or your mother?"

"No. He just yelled a lot, complained a lot. He *did* pop my little brother in the mouth once when he was really little, like, still a baby."

Even though the vision of that was disturbing, Eric kept his features neutral and moved on. "And so, he was drinking at home, feeling sorry for himself, and had his eye on you as you grew into womanhood."

"Yes. And on that day in August, I was home from school. I had the flu and was really sick. My mom was at work and was gonna bring some medicine for me on her way home. But she was able to get off work early and so she came in about two hours earlier than Peter thought she would."

"And what happened before she got home?"

"Peter came in my room. He asked me if I was faking being sick to get out of school. I smarted off and told him that was a stupid thing to think since school had just started and I liked going to school because at least there I had some food to eat."

She shrugged. "I guess I shouldn't have spoken to him like that. He knew I was insinuating that he wasn't providing any help to the household.

The words just sort of slipped out of my mouth. But honestly, I was tired of him always pointing out what everyone else was doing wrong, and never doing anything himself to help. I told him he was a lazy POS." She looked up, her eyes wide. "Oh, Grandmaster Kino, I'm so sorry for the bad language."

Grandmaster Kino brushed it away. "How did it go from that to rape?"

Jordan swallowed. "He told me to come to him, I thought, it was so he could hit me for smartin' off. I was only wearing my underwear and a t-shirt. I told him I wasn't dressed and he said when he tells me to do something I'd better do it. So, I pushed back the covers and got out of bed. I was running a fever and so when the cool air hit me I started to shiver. He thought that was funny and said I was scared of him. I told him I wasn't scared of anything, especially not him."

She stopped for a moment when she blinked, and two tears escaped, one from each eye. They ran down her cheeks. Young Eric watched her and his heart broke at her pain. Before he could grab some tissues for her, she wiped them away with her hands, sniffed, and continued.

"He grabbed me by the arm and put his hand on– on– ," she looked around, shrugged, "—on my breast. I punched him in the stomach and tried to run, but he caught me and beat me up really bad. I screamed. I scratched. I even bit him and that's when he hit me in the face and I got real dizzy. He pulled my t-shirt off me and threw me down on the bed. I saw him undo his pants. I was terrified. I screamed, I cried, I was trying so hard to get away, but he was too heavy. And then my mother came in. She jumped on him, and he seemed to come to his senses. He got off me and left the house. Mom called the police. That was it."

Young Eric took her hand and squeezed it. The others in the room were so quiet you wouldn't even know they were there. Grandmaster Kino nodded. "Jordan, thanks for sharing that. I know it was a hard thing to do, but talking about things usually helps. You may not feel like it's helping right now, but I promise you, it is helping."

She nodded. "Actually, I guess maybe I do feel a little bit, um, lighter."

Young Eric smiled. "Shared burdens are lighter."

"Now, if you feel up to it," Grandmaster Kino went on. "Tell us what happened today, and if there have been other times similar to today."

Jordan bravely went on to tell what happened earlier that day. When she finished the telling, she shook her head. "It was so weird. I mean, when he grabbed my arm, I was suddenly fourteen years old again, and I was terrified. I started shaking and I couldn't control it, and this time it wasn't from a fever."

"Jordan," Grandmaster Kino said softly, "when all of this happened back when you were a child, did you get any counseling?"

"No, sir. They took me to a hospital, doctored me up and sent me home."

"And did you handle it okay back then or did you struggle?"

She gave a short laugh. "Oh, I didn't handle it well at all. I became a hermit. I couldn't go to school. First, just because I was sick with the flu and it took me about a week to get well from that. And then I was ashamed to go to school with my face all bashed in, so I waited a few more weeks. But when my mom talked about me going back to school, I had a meltdown. She tried to get me to go just to see the school counselor. But I was extremely hard to handle back in the day." She smiled, glanced at young Eric.

"I guess I was finally able to get past all the trauma, but it took me a year. So I missed a whole year of school, which is why I'm nineteen and just a freshman in college. But I got my act together. At least I thought I did, until today."

Grandmaster Kino smiled at her. "Jordan, a moment ago you said you were finally able to get past all the trauma. I'm gonna tell you that you actually did not get past it. You only buried it, which is why it came back to you so quickly today. You only learned how to function again. And if you don't do the work to actually heal from the trauma, it is always going to be there, ready to take over when you least expect it. And now that it's been brought to the surface, I'm guessing you would prefer that it not take you another whole year to get it all pushed down again?"

"No, of course not."

"You know I'm a psychologist?"

"Yes, sir, Three told me."

"I can help you heal from this trauma, and all you have to do is come and talk to me a few times a week."

She frowned and hung her head.

"Does that sound like a difficult thing to do?"

She sighed. "It does, for some reason."

Eric nodded. "Okay, so, tell me, Jordan, what things do you have scheduled to do this week?"

She shrugged. "Well, I have softball practice and conditioning Monday through Thursday. I have classes Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. I promised I'd come spend time with my brother and sister sometime this week. I told Taylor I'd like to come to her games, and I told Three I'd like to come see him train again."

Eric nodded. "And how do you feel about doing those things?"

She sat quietly, thinking for a few moments. "It's strange, but I usually have a packed schedule and think nothing of it. I'm ready to get at it. But right now, except for watching Taylor play volleyball, or watching Three train, I don't want to do any of it. I wish I could just take a long vacation."

"For about a year?"

She looked up. "What do you mean?"

He smiled kindly. "It took you a year to muscle your trauma under the surface so that you could function. And you did it well, which shows

incredible strength. But you didn't heal from it. You only pushed it deep. Now, it's come back to the surface, and you're showing some classic signs of emotional trauma and depression. You withdraw. You don't want to do much of anything, except for the few things that don't require effort on your part. Let me help you, sweetie."

She slowly nodded her head, and the tears welled up again. She quickly wiped them away.

"Tell ya what, we can kill two birds with one stone. You come to young Eric's training, and we'll talk then. And come to Taylor's games and we'll go for a short walk or sit in a car and talk. Just talk. We'll work through it, and it won't be long before you're feeling ready to take on the world again."

"I, uh, I can't pay you for your services."

He smiled. "Don't be silly. God placed you in front of me for a reason. He loves you, He's proud of you, and He wants you to do the work required to heal."

"Can't He just wave His magic wand and heal me quickly?" Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be disrespectful. Sometimes I don't think before I speak."

Eric smiled. "Don't worry, God has a sense of humor. Still, let me answer that question for you. Though He doesn't need a magic wand, He absolutely *could* just wave His arm and heal you without you having to do a thing. But, Jordan, what good would that do you? What would you have learned? What new strength would that give you?" He turned to young Eric. "Eric, tell Jordan why we don't help a little chick trying to peck its way out of the shell?"

"Because he gets strong with the effort of breaking through that shell," young Eric answered quickly.

Grandmaster Kino looked back at Jordan. "But actually, Jordan, God *did* wave His arm. There are no coincidences. Your tire went flat, young Eric saw you and stopped. He thought he was stopping to help you change a tire, or maybe to talk to a pretty girl," he added with a smile. "But God was waving His arm and bringing you the help you need, and bringing young Eric a new friend. He works in ways we can't understand sometimes, but we still need to realize, that He *is* still working, just like He did back in biblical days. We're just so busy with life and all its distractions, we don't even see it or acknowledge it." He paused. "Okay, I'm done preaching. I hope you understand, I, we, just want to help you. Will you let us?"

She sighed and nodded. "It would be silly for me to turn you down, so yes, I accept your help."

"Wonderful!"

"So, I have a few questions," Joey said.

Jordan turned, surprise on her face. "Oh my goodness, I forgot there were other people in the room."

They chuckled. The conversation then opened up to a big question-and-

answer session with everyone in the room.

Finally, Mark asked, "Jordan, do you know the exact charges brought against him?"

"Umm, it was attempted sexual assault, I think."

"That's it?"

"Um, maybe battery?"

He nodded. "Okay, I'll find out exactly what they were when I get into the office tomorrow. And I'll find out the conditions of his parole."

"Can we send him back to prison?" she asked.

"Possibly. Probably."

"Until then," Joey said. "We have to protect you."

"You keep saying that but I don't see how," Jordan said wistfully.

"Uh, you're talking to the second-in-command at Ameritech. "We'll assign an agent to you," Joey answered. "Maybe two for around-the-clock protection. I'll need to get your schedule and we'll need to check out where you stay up at school and maybe install a camera, and also we'll cover your mom's place."

"Again, I have no way to pay you."

Ricky spoke up then. "Please, don't worry about that. I'll take care of any expense."

"But why? I mean, you hardly know me."

"Because," Ricky said with a smile, "God waved His hand."

Young Eric smiled. Lord, how he loved his family.

"So, Jordan," Joey continued. "What that means is Peter Perez will not be able to get near you."

"And that sounds too good to be true," Jordan said softly.

"The only thing too good to be true, is you, sweetheart," young Eric said with a completely straight face.

Jordan laughed along with everyone else.

"What?" young Eric asked.

"Oh, come on, kiddo, ya gotta know how cheesy that was," Joey said.

Young Eric grinned and shrugged. "Jordan, are you hungry? I mean, I know you didn't get to eat, and we're about to have a big family dinner. Please join us, and then I'll see you home."

✞✞✞

Psalm 121:7

"The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life;"

Chapter Twelve

Still September 15th, Sunday Evening
En Route to UCLA

Jordan glanced up in the rearview mirror at Three as he followed behind her. At least she *thought* it was him. The sun had gone down and all she could see was headlights. She'd told him she could certainly make it back to her apartment with no problem, but he'd insisted that he follow her, and hinted that he would stay until her new bodyguard arrived, which may not be until morning.

Jordan had reminded him that he had to be at his training very early in the morning, but Grandmaster Kino had immediately jumped in and said that priorities are essential and some things are more important.

She shook her head as she thought of Three's family. They didn't seem real. They had a way about them. They were all so loving, so giving, so kind. They were also hard, powerful and strong. It seemed like the two ways shouldn't be compatible, but somehow, they made it so. They were an amazing phenomenon. Had God placed her in front of them on purpose like they kept saying?

And what about Three? They definitely had a chemical reaction to each other, or at least she did to him. How could she not? He was beautiful to look at, with his handsome face, his dark hair and large brown eyes and his bright, wide smile. And his body. If she hadn't seen him in real life standing in front of her on Friday, with nothing on but some shorts, she would think it was CGI. No one actually looked that good, that fit, that defined. Of course, seeing how he was being trained, it would make sense. The cool thing was, he wasn't doing it to look good. He was doing it to be the strongest and the fastest and the best.

She sighed. Furthermore, she liked him. She liked him a lot. He's sober-minded. He's fun. He's spiritual. He's not snobby or all into himself. He seems humble. And he's like the rest of his family. So kind. So caring. He'd spoken to her mother with such kindness and respect, and to her siblings like he thought of them as real people. He has a great sense of humor. He sings. He dances. He used to play baseball. He's an extreme martial artist. And he is freaking smart. She smiled. She liked being in his presence. When he isn't around she thinks of him constantly. Just like she was doing right now. If she didn't know better she'd think she was falling in love with him. But that couldn't be. She'd only known him a week and a day. Still, if she isn't in love with him, it would be pretty easy to fall, if she let herself.

However, what kind of disappointment was she setting herself up for, if he didn't feel the same way? He acted like he liked her too, but she wondered if that was changing now that she'd shown her weaknesses, her

vulnerabilities. She'd been pathetic earlier, her hands shaking, tears dripping down her face. The thing with Peter happened a long time ago. Five years. How pathetic was that? She should be over it. Yet Grandmaster Kino said she wasn't over it because she'd never dealt with it in the first place. She kind of dreaded facing whatever therapy Grandmaster Kino had planned for her. She already wanted to renege.

She glanced at the time. It was only 6:00. She'd left her mother's house around 3:00. Was at the Kinos' by 3:30. They'd sat down to an early dinner by 5:00. She'd barely eaten. She hoped that didn't insult Mrs. Kino. Usually, she was always hungry. Which shows just how much of an effect the altercation with Peter Perez had on her.

Right before she'd left, Joey Adams had shown her Peter's mugshot and asked her if he still looked like that and she'd told him he pretty much did, except his hair was thinner, and his body was heavier. Suddenly, a wave of nausea washed over her and she pushed the image of Peter Perez out of her mind.

She pulled into a small drive that curved around in front of a small apartment building that looked like it was once a large home. The short driveway had been widened, and also lengthened as it stretched around to the back of the building to offer more parking. They found two empty spaces, one really just a patch of dirt.

Three locked his car and came to meet her as she was getting her things out of the trunk of her car.

"Let me get that for you," he said softly.

She didn't argue. Didn't feel like arguing. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Jordan?"

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

"Sure."

"Are you upset that I asked you to talk to my grandfather?"

"No, not really."

"Well, you don't seem yourself."

"I know. I feel weird."

"Okay. Well, if you want to talk, I'm willing."

She smiled at him. "I believe you." She turned to go.

He frowned. "Jordan wait."

She stopped and came back to him.

He smiled down at her. "I want you to know that all the things you spoke about today, about what happened to you, it doesn't change how I feel about you. I still see you as the most beautiful, strong, level-headed, smart, talented girl I've ever met. You are perfect."

"I am *not* perfect." She turned and walked away again.

"You're perfect for me."

She stopped, turned back toward him and looked into his gorgeous,

warm, kind eyes. She ran at him. He dropped the bag he was carrying, held his arms out and she jumped into them. He grabbed her long legs and wrapped them around his waist as their mouths came together. He turned, walked the few steps back to the car and leaned her against the side window. He kissed her passionately, he kissed her fervently, he kissed her thoroughly.

It was a while before he pulled back and set her down.

"Don't stop," she whispered.

"I have to," he said, his breath labored. He shook his head. "You make me forget who I am, forget what I believe, forget my vow to live by God's laws. If I don't stop now, I'm gonna open that car door, put you in the back seat and act out the images that are running through my head."

She giggled. "Tell me about those images."

He sighed. "You and me, making love and that's about all the details I'm gonna give you right now."

She frowned. "Have you made love to a lot of girls?"

"What? No. I'm a virgin. And I'm actually trying to remain so until I'm married."

"Really? That's a little old-fashioned, don't ya think?"

He shrugged. "Well, it may seem that way in this world of everyone just doing whatever they want, whatever immediate pleasure they crave, whenever they feel like it. God asks us to have sexual relations only within the sanctity of marriage."

She thought about what he said. "Hmm, that sounds harsh, or like, difficult. I mean, everyone has sex, like, whenever they want."

"Well, God's laws are not there to make life harder or make things difficult. They are given to us to lead and guide us to find true joy. Real joy. Not just a moment of physical pleasure. Living His laws, as hard as it may seem, brings a true satisfaction. And when you wait to have sex, wait to have it with the one you marry, it makes that wedding night the most joyful and the most pleasurable night of your life. It turns from what would have been just a moment of pleasure outside of God's law, to an unforgettable experience, with God's blessing added to it."

"Since you're a virgin, how do you know that?"

He smiled. Shrugged. "Well, that's what those who have waited say. And that's what Jake says. He says it bonds you together with your spouse in a way that is far more important than what some legal piece of paper does. The trust between you is totally solid. That shared experience, and knowing your union is blessed by God, that has to be profound."

"Wow, Three. You are so different than most guys. And I remember now, something your friend Gabe said, when he was kidnapped and he told that lady he was a virgin. He said something like, being in control of your sexual urges is a lot more manly, and a lot harder, than having indiscriminate sex whenever you feel like it."

Young Eric smiled. "Yeah, that Gabe, he's like my brother, and he has

a way with words and he's right. It's a lot harder to stay in control, and then have to explain to my girl why I want to stay in control, instead of simply putting you in that car and having at it. Oh, it would feel really good, I have no doubt. But then what? The consequences of ruining our perfect relationship are not worth it. Because you, Miss Jordan Brooks, are worth so much more than a quick bout of sex. Because I think I'm..."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Too soon. So, tell me, and it's okay if you have, but have you ever been with a guy?"

"I've been in some intimate situations, but I've never gone through with it. I've never been like, kissing a guy and felt so close to him that I want to give myself to him, except with..."

"Except with?"

She smiled. "Nothing. Too soon." She took his hand. "Come on, let's go in. I'm sure my roommates are wondering if we're ever coming in."

"They know I'm coming?"

"Yeah, I texted and let them know we were on the way so that they would put some clothes on."

He smiled. "I wouldn't have minded."

"That's a contradiction to what we just talked about."

"Uh, I'm a guy and seeing a naked girl is always interesting. I didn't say I'd have sex with them."

Jordan chuckled. He picked up her bag and they walked into the apartment building and up some steps to the second floor. Jordan used her keys to open the door.

She peeked around. Thank goodness they'd cleaned up.

Eric took in the scene. The front room was open to a kitchen with a breakfast bar dividing the two areas. There was a sofa, a floor lamp and a table with a small TV on it. Everything was neat and tidy and he had a feeling it wasn't always. A door down a short hall opened, and a pretty blonde walked out. She was tall, like Jordan, a little thicker. She smiled and offered her hand to Eric.

"Hi, I'm Colton."

"Nice to meet you, Colton," Eric said kindly.

"My, you are pretty," she said.

"Stop," Jordan said quickly. "Where's Jackie?"

"She's in her room, probably waiting to make her grand entrance."

On cue, another door opened and a killer brunette walked out, her hand extended. "Well, here he is, the gorgeous Eric Kino the Third," she said brightly. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

Eric smiled and took her hand. "You must be the famous Jackie?"

"Gorgeous and smart too."

Jordan rolled her eyes.

Eric looked the girl over. He could tell this girl was a little instigator. If

he recalled, she was the one who replaced Jordan at the show she was headed to within fifteen minutes when Jordan was stranded on the side of the road. She was dressed in tight jeans, leather boots and a very low cut blouse. Dangly earrings, three gold chains around her neck, perfectly made up with dark red lipstick. Long, black, curly hair. She wasn't as tall as Jordan or Colton, but she was slim. She grabbed young Eric's arm and ushered him to the couch.

"Come sit next to me and tell me what it's like to be you."

His eyebrows rose, but he sat on the sofa with her.

Jordan shook her head. "Play nice, Jackie. Three, would you like something to drink?"

"A bottle of water would be great," Eric said.

"Water?" Jackie said. "No! We have to celebrate. Get him a beer."

"I don't drink."

"You're kidding?"

He smiled. "Not kidding. First I'm underage. Aren't you?"

She grinned. "So?"

Meanwhile, Jordan brought him a cold bottle of water. He winked at her as he accepted the bottle.

"So, tell us, Eric, what's it like to live with two of the most famous people in the world, three if you count Taylor."

He sighed. "Well, it's like living with a mother and a father who ask me to clean my room, do my own laundry, take turns doing dishes, clean my bedroom and bathroom, and currently train for the Kino Challenge for ten hours a day."

"Oh my God, you do all your own cleaning and laundry?"

"Of course."

"Can't you just hire someone to do it? I mean, you're like a billionaire."

Mortified, Jordan closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Well, first, I'm not a billionaire, my parents are. And yeah, I could hire someone, but what good would that do me?"

"It would keep you from having to do mundane things."

"Why should I be kept from doing mundane things? Hard work is good for the soul. Not that cleaning is hard. Doing mundane things is also good for the soul. What kind of pride could I have in myself if I didn't know how to clean up after myself?"

Jordan smiled. It was Eric who was perfect.

"Well," Jackie went on. "If I were rich I'd hire someone to do all those things for me." She placed her hand on his forearm. "What else. Tell me how your life goes. Does your father use his martial arts stuff on you?"

Eric chuckled. "When we train together, yes."

"Who wins?"

"Usually he does."

"But you're so young and so strong," she said, moving her hand up to

his bicep and giving it a squeeze.

"He's been training a lot longer than I have. He's a Grandmaster. I'm only a 3rd dan, well, getting ready to move up to 4th dan."

"Oh, really? That's awesome, Three," Jordan put in, hoping to change the subject, but Jackie was not gonna be deterred.

Eric's eyes twinkled up at her.

"Tell me about your mother. She is so beautiful."

"Yes, she is."

"Is she really mean, like in real life?"

He frowned. "No, of course not. She's a great mom. She's loving and kind, and smart, and she's strong."

"Hmm, do your parents really love each other or is it just an act?"

"Jackie!" Jordan warned.

"My parents are totally in love."

"Any PDAs?"

Eric chuckled. "Constantly."

Jordan and Colton smiled.

"Yeah, that's what Jordy said," Jackie replied. "And you guys live in a big mansion?"

"We live in a nice home on the beach."

"I would love to see your home."

"I'll see if we can make that happen. Jordan has never been to my home, so, she's first."

"You're kidding, Jordy? What gives?"

"Uh, I've only known him a week. There hasn't been time. I'm sure we'll eventually get to it."

He smiled. "We will."

Jackie looked up at Jordan where she sat on one of the barstools. "You're looking pretty shabby there Jordy. Why don't you go change clothes? I'll look after Eric while you're gone."

Eric frowned. "You look perfect, Jordan," he said softly.

Jordan rose. "Actually, I think I will go change."

He watched her as she slid off the stool and went into the same room that Colton had come from.

"So, I understand you're gonna stay the night here," Jackie said.

"I'll just stay on the couch if that's okay with you and Colton."

Colton nodded. "It's fine with us. Or I can stay on the couch if you want to stay in the room with Jordan."

"So, you and Jordan share a room?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wouldn't feel right about kicking you out of your own room. The couch is fine."

"Suit yourself," Jackie put in.

"So, tell us about this bodyguard situation," Colton said.

"Nothing much to tell. He'll stay outside the building during the night, making sure no one comes lurking around, and he'll shadow Jordan by day to make sure her stepfather doesn't get to her again."

Colton nodded. "He's such a creep."

"Do you know him?"

"No. Just from what Jordan told me."

"What kind of things do you like to do?" Jackie suddenly asked.

"Well, that's a loaded question. I love sports. I love the martial arts. I love dance. I love music. I love swimming in the ocean and surfing. I really enjoy making movies. I love my family and spending time with them. I love going to church. I love God. And currently, I really love spending time with Jordan."

"Why?" Jackie asked.

"Because she's sweet, and beautiful, and talented, and smart, and down to earth."

Colton smiled. "That's sweet."

Jordan came back out, now dressed in some pajama bottoms and a white UCLA t-shirt, her feet bare, her hair brushed.

Eric smiled up at her, then patted the space beside him. She came to him and he pulled her down to sit beside him. "You look lovely."

She smiled. "You like the pumpkins on my pajamas?"

"I do. They are very chic," he said with a laugh. "Comfy?"

"Yes, much better. Did you bring something to change into?"

"No, remember I was at my grandparents' house. But I'm good. I can get comfortable. I'm so tired from training that I sleep like a log anyway."

Jordan glanced at the time. "I guess it's about your bedtime."

"Almost."

"What time do you go to bed?" Jackie asked.

"In bed and asleep by nine when I'm in training. Which I am."

"And he's up by like, five in the morning," Jordan added.

"Well then, come on, Jackie. Let's let them have some privacy before Eric has to get some sleep."

Jackie frowned. She'd been hoping to spend a little more time with the celebrity. She rose. "It was very nice meeting you, Eric. Maybe you and I can get together sometime. I have a million questions."

Eric frowned, not sure what to say to that. It was very rude of her and showed just what kind of friend she was to Jordan. He nodded. "Maybe I'll come by again sometime."

Jordan watched her roommates take their leave. "Sorry about that," she finally said when they were alone.

"I'm sorry about that," he replied. "I mean, what Jackie said."

Jordan smiled. "Don't let it worry you. I'm used to her. She's a little abrasive, but I overlook it, mostly because it's her apartment. With Colton and me paying two-thirds of the rent, it helps her out and us too."

Eric frowned. "You and Colton share a room, so shouldn't you only pay half the rent?"

Jordan shrugged. "It is what it is. It's her apartment. She set the price. We agreed. It was the best arrangement we'd been able to find."

He nodded. Leaned back, pulled her to nestle under his arm. "This is nice."

She snuggled in. "Yes it is."

"Are you feeling better?"

"I guess. It feels good just being here with you."

"It does for me too. Funny how close I feel to you, and we've only known each other a week."

"A week and a day," she corrected.

"So, what are your plans again, I mean, for the week?"

"Well, I have morning practices this week. I have classes. And I'm gonna come to Taylor's game on Tuesday. But I can't come on Thursday because I have a late class."

"Okay, well, I am only allowed to go to one game, so I'll make that one Tuesday this week."

"Good. And then, I can come see you train on Friday again. Grandmaster Kino said I was welcome to come watch you every day."

"He did?"

She laughed. "Yep. He said it made you train harder."

"Hmm, I wonder if that's true."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. But I'm happy to come and be your inspiration."

"Cool. So, maybe I could come see one of your practices?"

"You can. Some of the team's boyfriends come and watch sometimes."

"I'll see if I can get some time off."

"Or maybe wait until after the Challenge, because we'll still be going strong. Right now, we're doing a lot of conditioning."

"Okay, that may be better, because I also want some time off to spend with your family. You know, maybe come to dinner and maybe take the kids to the park."

"You'd actually want to do that?"

"Yes, of course. I really like your mom. She's so sweet. And your brother and sister are cool. And I kinda promised them."

"Well then, if you can get time off, how about next Saturday? Or I guess JoJo has another game?"

"Yeah, he does, but it's not a home game. I usually would go to all of his games, home or away, but, since I'm training, that's out. So, maybe I can get off half a day on Saturday. If my grandfather is okay with it, I can probably be there by one."

"I'll talk to my mom and let you know."

Eric pulled out his phone as it vibrated. He read the text. "Agent Trout

is assigned to you. He'll be here by seven in the morning. He'll want to come in and look the place over, install a camera outside the door."

"Hmm, I'm not sure if the landlord will allow that."

He smiled. "They'll never know. It's very tiny."

"Oh. Okay. And then Agent Trout will like, follow me to practice?"

"Yes. He knows what your stepfather looks like. He won't let him near you. Actually, he'll detain him and have him arrested for breaking the rules of his parole."

"And after practice tomorrow, he'll then follow me to class?"

"Yes. And he'll probably wait outside the classroom."

"Hmm, does he carry a gun?"

"Yes. All agents are armed."

"I don't think the college will allow people on campus with guns."

"Jason has a working relationship with most entities. And there are celebs who attend college here who all have armed security. If the college doesn't want a big ruckus, they won't have anything to say."

"Okay then. I guess I'm all set to go. Seems like a lot of bother to just follow little old me around."

"Jordan, protecting you is not a bother."

Sighing, she closed her eyes. Her life was changing so quickly. Was it too good to be true? Was Three too good to be true? How could someone like him be so interested in someone like her? Who would have thought that a nobody like her would run into a national heartthrob and they would end up dating? And the thing is, he didn't act like he thought he was someone special. He freakin' did his own laundry. He didn't talk to people in public like he thought he was above them, or better than them. He actually seemed to be a truly good guy.

She cuddled closer and let her hand run over his hard chest. She smiled when he took her hand in his, and then sighed with pleasure.

When she opened her eyes again, she realized she'd fallen asleep. It was the middle of the night. She now lay on the sofa next to Three, facing him, her head tucked under his. Feeling the length of his strong body next to hers was the most wonderful feeling ever. She felt warm. Safe. Cared for. Secure. Loved. Her heart sped up. She felt loved. Yet, he'd never spoken that word to her. Still, she was sure he'd almost said it earlier. How can this be? She closed her eyes again, having no intention of rising and going to her own bed.

Jordan turned slowly to change positions, trying not to wake him. She turned, placing her back against him. He moaned, and his arm slid across her hip and around her waist. He pulled her in harder against him and snuggled his face up to her neck. This was heaven. And she realized she wanted to stay like this forever. What in the heck was she supposed to do about that?

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September 16th, Early Monday Morning
Cottage #8 Pine Forest Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

"And Father, keep my sweet Laynah safe, and give her peace and comfort and strength, to fill the gap until I get back. And Father, if for some reason, it's your will that I not come home, wrap her in Your loving arms and comfort her and heal her heart. But Father, even as I say those words, I feel a peace and comfort that I will be home. Help me too, to be strong, and to make wise decisions, so that I might be able to go out and do some good and bring some light to Your children. We love You, Father, and we are so grateful for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ and we pray in His Holy name, Amen."

Laynah sniffed. "Amen."

Jake opened his eyes and stared into the beautiful eyes of his young wife. They stayed on their knees, simply gazing at each other. Finally, he reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek.

"I gotta go, Bugs." He stood, reached his hand down to her and pulled her up. "I love you. Thank you for bringing me more happiness in a few months' time than I've ever had in my entire life."

"Thank you for finally seeing the light," she joked with a smile.

He smiled back. "Well, better late than never."

He took her in his arms one more time. "Make me proud."

"Ditto."

He lowered his head and kissed her again, then slowly pulled away.

Her lips trembled. "This is really happening, isn't it?"

He laughed. "I hoped that miraculously the time to leave would never come. But let's be brave and face this. See ya soon, my love."

"See ya soon." She sniffed, wiped at the tears.

He kissed her one more time, grabbed his bag and walked out the door.

Laynah stepped out on the small little porch and watched him strap the large bag to the back of his bike. He then put on his helmet, started the ignition, turned and smiled. She waved. He nodded his head and pulled away.

Laynah immediately took out her phone and texted.

~~OK, he's off. Make sure you take video.

Gabe texted back.

~Lots. Everyone is, we'll edit it together for you.

Jake made his way up the cottage drive, turned right toward the main drive that would exit from the Inn. He looked up toward the large porch to see if his parents were out on the porch to wave goodbye, and was disappointed. Well, they had said a long goodbye last night.

He drove through the large gate, turned right onto the dirt road that led to and ended at the Stewarts' ranch. Once he got there, he turned right again to head toward town and the main highway, but before he ever got there, he noticed someone on the side of the road in the early morning light. It looked like they were waving a large American flag.

He slowed down. It was Gabe. He pulled over, took Gabe's hand. Gabe

smiled. “Semper fi, bro. Love you.”

He pulled away, riding slowly, because there was someone else a little ways down, and someone else and someone else. He saw his mom, and dad, all of the Tanners and Stewarts, neighbors, friends, several of his old school teachers, dozens of people from the church, townspeople, Joe and Shirley, Megan and her husband and kid, the people from the gas station, then, as he got closer to the main road, he saw fire trucks suspending a flag across the highway, and the EMTs, and then a row of the Pine Forest Sheriff department, and the new Pine Forest Police department, then there was just a crowd of people, people he didn’t know, people waving flags, old men standing at attention, it went on for miles. He didn’t know what it took to organize something like this, but, what a send-off!

He’d had to be strong for Melaynah and not shed tears in front of her, but now, he couldn’t help it. This touched him. The effort touched him. He was proud to be a Marine. He was proud to serve his country. And he was proud to serve these people who so kindly came out to send him off with their love and well wishes. How cool was this. He would never forget it. He wondered if his wife was involved in organizing this. And also Gabe. It definitely had a Gabe flare to it.

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September 16th, Monday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

“Okay, Jason, I have Shelley with me. I’ve explained to her the possibility that we may have found our missing boy. Go ahead, whaddya got?’

“We were able to get some trash DNA from Sandra Norton’s home. Preliminary DNA tests show there is someone in that residence that is related to you.”

Shelley gasped as tears came immediately to her eyes. “Oh, Eric, I thought it would take a long time, but we’ve found our child?”

“It sounds that way, but hold on. Go ahead, Jason.”

“The complexities of the situation are enormous. There is no precedent. I have Justin on it. He is filing a petition for child custody in Superior Court. I’ll let him fill you in on what all that entails. Hold on, because this might be a battle.

“We’ve already done a deep dive into this woman’s life. She’s disabled because of a drug overdose as a teenager, which left her with brain injuries. She doesn’t work. She’s on disability. However, she’s making money off of her YouTube account because she has your child, who appears to be very much like Jeffy.”

Eric shook his head. “So, Dr. Black was trying to create another genius, and actually gave away the one who actually is a genius.”

“He could be a genius. He could also be on the spectrum, meaning the autism spectrum.”

Shelley and Eric both nodded.

"So, getting him out of her hands might be a fight. He's making her a great deal of money. I'm thinking she's not gonna just let him go."

"But she probably doesn't even have legal custody, right?" Shelley asked hopefully.

"Right. That brings me to the next point. The mother, well, the woman he was originally given to, the sister of Sandra Norton, her name is Steffie Allen. She was married to Max Allen at the time the child was given to her. Max, however, left Steffie for another woman. Apparently that was when she gave the boy to her sister."

Shelley shook her head. "Most people wouldn't even treat a dog like that and here they are giving a child away like he was nothing, and now he's being used to support some drug addict. I'm sorry, that was not nice of me."

Jason nodded. "I understand your frustration, Shelley. However, Ms. Norton is no longer an addict, which will play well for her. Judges like reformed addicts."

"How long has the child been with her?" Eric asked.

"A year now. So that means she might be the only caretaker he would know or remember."

"But he's our child. Ours. He belongs with us!" Shelley cried.

"We *will* get him, Shelley," Jason assured her. "I'm just saying that it might take some time."

"What about the child's disability listed in the records, the club foot. Is there any information about that?" Eric asked.

"Nothing, but there is the video of him moving about the room and he appears to be walking with no problem."

"Yes, we saw the videos," Shelley said. "Jason, I want my baby."

"What's his name?" Eric asked.

"He goes by Nate Norton."

"Nate." Eric nodded his head. "Okay, Nate, we're coming for ya buddy. Hold on."

"Give Justin a call. He knows most of the family court judges. It may be difficult, or it may be very easy. He might be able to at least get him taken away from her and put into foster care. Though, that could be worse emotionally for little Nate."

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September 16th, Monday Evening

UCLA Off Campus Housing, Los Angeles, California

Jordan sat at the breakfast bar and sucked down her bowl of ramen noodles as Colton made her own dinner of hotdogs cut up into a bowl of canned baked beans.

"You want one of my hotdogs?" Colton asked.

"Sure, thanks," Jordan said.

"Ladies, how can you eat that garbage?" Jackie said as she opened her

bag of frozen pasta primavera into a pan and stirred it around.

Colton laughed. “They say when you’re hungry enough, people will eat just about anything. Even bugs.”

“Yep,” Jordan added. “Even other people, so watch it.”

Jackie snorted. “Anyone who snacked on me would get a delicacy.”

“Or a bellyache,” Jordan said as she and Colton both laughed.

“So, Jordy, tell us more about your new man,” Jackie said as she held her steaming plate of pasta in one hand and a can of Sprite in the other. She strode out to sit on the sofa.

“You already know pretty much everything about him. Especially now, since you put him through the third degree.”

“He’s a total hottie,” Jackie said dreamily. “Don’t think I didn’t know you slept with him on the couch.”

Jordan smiled. Sighed. “Yeah, I couldn’t resist.”

“So, what’s he like in bed?”

“He’s cuddly.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Jordan shook her head. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh, come on. The two of you haven’t done it?”

“Uh, no. Actually, we’re both virgins.”

Jackie choked on her Sprite. “You’re kidding.”

Jordan smiled and shrugged.

“I mean, I believe that about *you*, but I don’t believe it about him.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter what you believe, Jackie. He’s a very strong Christian and he tries to follow God’s rules, and one of those is to not have sexual relations outside of marriage.”

Jackie shook her head. “So silly. It’ll be years before he’s married. He’s gonna be celibate all that time? Besides, how are you gonna know if you’re compatible if you don’t have sex before you get married?”

Jordan shrugged. “Well, I don’t have all the answers, but like, maybe it’s more about the love and respect than it is about sex, and the sex would be good if you have the other stuff.”

“When are you gonna see him again?” Colton asked.

“Tomorrow. I’m gonna go to Taylor’s volleyball game. I’ll meet him there, and then we’ll all go out to eat together.”

“All?”

“The family. Three, his parents, his grandparents, etcetera.”

“What kind of fancy restaurant will you go to?” Jackie asked.

Jordan laughed. “Not fancy at all. It’s in a little strip mall and it’s called the Casa Latina and it’s close to Taylor’s school, and they like to eat there after games and the food is actually really good.”

Jackie shook her head. “So, tell me Jordy, what do you think Mr. Billionaire sees in *you*?”

Jordan frowned.

Colton shook her head. "Give it a rest, Jackie."

"I mean, really, Jordy. I'm being serious. You have to know he's not gonna marry you. First you guys are way too young to get married, and second, I mean, you come from two very different worlds. You can barely afford to buy your ramen noodles there," she said pointing to the now empty bowl. "And he could buy the whole grocery store."

Jordan was silent. Mostly because she couldn't argue because she'd thought the same thing from time to time.

"He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and Jordy, your mother worked two jobs and still could barely pay the rent, and your drunk ass stepfather lay around doing nothing until he tried to get into your pants."

"That's enough," Colton said loudly.

"Sorry, that was crude. You guys know I'm crude sometimes. But still, you Jordan, are just a passing fancy. He's the kind of guy that likes rescuing a damsel in distress. That's what you were out on the highway that Saturday, and really, that's what you are now. He arranged for an agent to protect you. Eric is playing the hero. That's where his interest lies."

Jordan took her bowl into the kitchen, washed it, and laid it out to dry.

"Don't you have anything to say to that?"

Jordan shrugged. "I guess not."

"That's because you know I'm right."

Colton took her bowl around the counter and stood at the sink next to Jordan as she quickly washed it and laid it out to dry. "Well, I think he's an awesome guy, and I think he genuinely likes you, Jordan, so don't listen to Jackie. She's just jealous."

Jackie laughed. "Absolutely. Jealous as hell. But hey, that agent dude that's following you, he's kinda cute. What do you know about him?"

Jordan shook her head. "I don't know much about him at all except he's a lead agent. He works for Ameritech Security, which is run by a Korean guy named Jason Lee and by Three's uncle, Joey Adams. I know he's lethal. He carries a gun. And Three told me he was Gabe Tanner's bodyguard when Gabe was here in Cali before they caught the bad guys that were trying to kill him." Her words were said precisely and in a monotone. "I'm going to bed."

"Aw, come on. Don't be mad. I didn't mean to upset you," Jackie said, slightly giggling as she said it.

"Right. I'm not mad. I'm tired. Goodnight."

Agent Trout shook his head from his place outside the apartment building. The doors to this place must be paper thin, because the little camera outside the door of the girl's apartment picked up the entire conversation. He would tell Jordan in the morning to inform the girls and maybe suggest they keep their voices down.

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Proverbs 10:22

"The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich,

and he addeth no sorrow with it."

Chapter Thirteen

September 17th, Tuesday Morning
Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Laynah Stewart Appel smiled as the cool September morning air hit her face. She pulled back on the reins and brought Santana to a halt at the back fence where she and Jake would build a home and also where she would build a stable for horses. Horses she would train, horses she would raise and sell, horses she would use to take the Inn's patrons on trail rides, and eventually incorporate into some equine therapy. Eventually, she would build an arena with seating to have horse shows. And she also wanted to figure out a way to incorporate her riding and shooting skills together and teach others the same thing.

She climbed over the fence, realizing it was the same place that Brett had pulled her over and tried to take her. Jake had intervened. She sighed. Jake. She loved him with a powerful love, and she missed him so much. It could be six months or longer before he came home, so she knew she had to focus on her present life. And she would. It hurt too much to do otherwise.

She walked the path she and Jake had tied off through the trees. Branching off from the path that would lead to their home, she turned and followed the second path that would eventually lead to her own stables. This land currently belonged to her parents, but she and Jake would eventually buy it and make it their own. The land was wooded and parts of it would have to be cleared, but they would leave as much of the natural surroundings as possible. One thing they would do though, is cut a drive onto their portion of the property from the state road behind it, so that they wouldn't have to drive through the ranch every time they came and went.

She took a few pictures with her phone, got a few ideas in her head and headed back to Santana, waiting patiently for her at the fence. She rode him at a fast pace across the meadow and headed to her father's stables. Dismounting, she took the next hour to feed and water and brush the scheduled horses, then headed into her parents' home to have breakfast.

"Hey, Mom," Laynah greeted brightly as she came in the kitchen door.

"Hey, sweetheart. How ya doing, baby?"

Laynah knew her mother really wanted to know if she was pining away for her husband. She smiled. "I'm dealing with it. It might take me a while to get used to it. I rode Santana this morning. He might miss his daddy more than me."

Lisa Stewart laughed. “I doubt that.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

“I’m making cheese eggs with onions and mushrooms, and biscuits and ham.”

“Wow, that sounds delicious. What’s the special occasion?”

Lisa smiled. “Comfort food for my baby girl.”

Laynah giggled. “Hmm, I wonder how long I can milk this?”

“Well, now that you said that, not long at all.”

Chaz came through the door with a big smile. “Hey, Bugs. How ya doin’ honey?”

“Doing fine,” she assured him as he kissed her cheek in passing.

“Good. Been out running fences and teaching a new hand, and I’m in a hurry.” He went through the kitchen and to the base of the stairs. “Charlie, Matt, Aralyn,” he yelled. “You need to be down here dressed and ready for school in five minutes. Move it!” He then turned and went down the hall to the office.

Laynah smiled as she heard the stomping of feet as her siblings scurried to do her father’s bidding. Charlie was the first to appear.

“Bugs! Hey!”

“Hey, squirt,” she said.

He kissed his big sister’s cheek and went straight to his mom and did the same. “Need help, Mom?”

“Yep, grab that plate of eggs and that basket of biscuits and set them on the table.”

Matt and Aralyn came down then, kissed and hugged Laynah, kissed their mother’s cheek and sat just as Chaz came back in.

He waited for Lisa to take her seat, and then called on Matt to say the blessing and they all dug in.

“Umm, Mom, this is so good,” Laynah said. “You know, you’re gonna have to help me get better at cookin’ before Jake gets back. I’d like to surprise him by cooking something good like this for him.”

“I’ll be happy to teach you, honey. After all, I had the best teacher in the world.”

“Grams?”

“Of course. I sure do miss her.”

“Me too,” Charlie said.

Laynah nodded. “Isn’t it cool though, that Gabe spoke to her?”

“Very cool,” Lisa said softly.

“Kids, eat up. We leave for school in fifteen minutes.”

Laynah smiled. Oh how she loved her family. Just the normal talk, the normal clicking of the forks against plates. The little barbs issued between her brothers. Family was where it’s at.

Breakfast was over and everyone cleared their plates as Lisa started cleaning the kitchen. But Lisa suddenly stopped, put her hand to her

abdomen, lifting up on her very swollen belly.

"Honey? You okay?" Chaz asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I think it was just a hard kick."

"Oooh, let me feel," Aralyn said as she ran and put her hand firmly on her mother's abdomen.

"Right there," Lisa said breathlessly, as she repositioned her daughter's hand.

"Wow, I felt it!" Aralyn exclaimed.

Chaz smiled and came up to nuzzle on his wife's cheek.

Lisa stiffened, and grabbed her belly again.

"He's being rough, huh?"

Lisa smiled. "How do you know it's the boy?"

"Just a hunch," he chuckled, but stopped when Lisa jerked.

"Ow," she said gripping her abdomen. "Oh, Chaz," she said, breathing hard.

"What is it, baby?"

She was panting. "I don't know. Oh, it hurts. Oh, no, Chaz, something's wrong."

"I'm gonna get you to the hospital."

"That might be a good idea," she said as tears came to her eyes.

"Oh, sweetheart. Don't cry. It's gonna be alright." He looked at his kids, all wide-eyed. "Laynah?"

She nodded. "I got this. You go."

"Okay, and tell Dad, and call John, and Lizzy will want to know," he called over his shoulder as he supported Lisa and rushed her out to the car.

Laynah looked around at her siblings. "Hey, guys, she's gonna be okay. I'm sure Dad will call us in a little while and let us know how she's doing."

"But what's wrong with her," Aralyn asked, her little mouth quivering.

"Well, probably the babies are trying to be born early."

"What happens to them if they're born early," Charlie asked.

"Well, they may have a hard time and have to stay in the hospital. But the doctors can make it so they stop trying to come early. So, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's wait to hear from Dad."

Charlie nodded.

"So," Laynah continued. "You guys don't have to go to school if you don't want to. I understand."

"I wanna go," Aralyn said.

Laynah smiled. "Of course you do." She looked at her younger brother. "Matt?"

He shook his head.

"Charlie?"

He shook his head.

"Okay, let me run Aralyn to school and I'll be right back. You guys stay here, unless you wanna ride along."

"We'll stay."

"Good, and call Granddaddy Charles and Granddaddy Joe for me and I'll call the Appels while I'm on my way to the school. Thanks, Charlie."

Her fourteen-year-old brother nodded solemnly.

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It'd been three hours since Chaz had left the house with Lisa. Charlie and Matt were up in their room and Laynah went up to check on them. She peeked in the door and what she saw touched her to the core. Her brothers were kneeling and praying together. She silently closed the door and went back down the stairs. Her grandparents on her mother's side were in the kitchen. Shirley was doing up the breakfast dishes that Laynah hadn't yet gotten to.

"I'm sorry. I meant to do those earlier," Laynah said.

"Don't you worry about it, sweetie. I needed something to do. Are you okay?"

Laynah nodded. She just wanted to talk to her husband and pray with him and have him tell her everything was gonna be okay, because when Jake said it, she believed it.

If only her dad would call. The moment she had the thought, her phone buzzed. She answered immediately. "Dad?"

"Hey, hon, everything is okay. Sorry it took so long, but we had to wait on a specialist, but everything is gonna be okay. Your mom is fine, the babies are fine."

"Are they born?"

"No. Your mom went into premature labor. Her body is worn out. But they put her on some medicine, and prescribed bed rest and they think she can go another couple of months."

"Good, because if they'd been born, they wouldn't make it, would they?"

"Well, odds would be against them, but I don't ever doubt that God can work miracles anymore, not since Eric's and Gabe's experience. Still, if she can hold on, it would be much better."

"Will she have to stay in the hospital for two months?"

"No. She'll come home. But she'll have to stay in bed. No going up and down the stairs. No housework. She can sit up in a chair for a few hours a day. And we can help her with some movement therapy. She's not due until the end of December, but they want her to hold on at least until the beginning of November. That would put her at thirty-two weeks."

"I'll move back in, Dad. I'll take care of her. I'll take care of everything."

"Well, you won't have to take care of everything, but I will definitely need you, if I'm gonna take care of the ranch too."

"Whatever you need, I'll take care of it and more. I'm just so grateful that Mom's gonna be okay. The boys have been upstairs praying. I'm gonna

add my prayer to theirs, thank You, Jesus."

"Indeed."

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September 17th, Tuesday Afternoon

Newport High School, Newport Beach, California

Jordan almost couldn't contain herself as she walked toward the school. The game today wasn't at Brookside, but at Newport High School, a neighboring school, making it a rival. Jordan had borrowed a cute orange and white shirt from Jackie, an attempt to wear Taylor's school colors.

She looked up to see Three holding the door open for her. She smiled at him. It was always such an overwhelming pleasure to see him again. He had a power about him, an aura of light maybe, something that drew her to him like a magnet. But she wondered if Jackie was right. Even though Jackie, in her very rude way, was just speaking out of envy, and she couldn't blame her for that, she may actually have a few good points.

"Hey, Three!"

He smiled. "Hey, Jordan." He hugged her hard. "So good to see you. I missed you."

"I missed you too. Though it's only been thirty-two hours since I last saw you on Monday morning. But who's counting?"

He laughed. "I am. But I always am. Did Agent Trout follow you?"

"Yes."

Young Eric pulled out his phone and called him.

"Trout."

"Hey, this is Eric."

"Yes, I know. You okay?"

He smiled. "Yes, I'm really good, but I was wondering if you'd like to come in, see the game with us."

"I'd love to, as long as you don't feel like I'm intruding."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Just sayin'."

"Ameritech is part of our family. All forty thousand of you."

Agent Trout laughed. "That's a big family."

"Yes it is."

"Be right in."

Jordan smiled up at him. "That was sweet."

He laughed. "Yep, that's me, I'm just sweet." He gently touched her cheek. "Are you feeling better since Sunday?" he asked as he bought her and Agent Trout's tickets.

She nodded. "Yes. Calmer. Safer. And I'm glad that I fell apart on Sunday."

"Why?"

"Because you came to the apartment and slept on the couch with me."

He smiled, nodded. "Though I'm not supposed to wish you any

discomfort, I agree, I'm glad you fell apart too. Because sleeping with you in my arms is something I'll never forget."

Her heart leapt. Agent Trout joined them and Three opened the gym door for her and pointed to where his family was sitting, though, in Jordan's opinion, they were pretty easy to spot.

Again, everyone stood, hugged and greeted her as if she were an important part of their family. Grandmaster Kino took her hand and looked into her eyes. "After the game, let's go for a walk?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir." She wanted to get out of it, but she promised she would let him help her and she saw no polite way out.

Jordan took a minute to shake hands with each little Kino and then sat down with Jeffy on one side and Three on the other. Agent Trout shook hands with everyone and sat on the other side of young Eric. The game was about to start and Jordan stood, whistled and yelled, "Go Tigers!"

Young Eric grinned. He was definitely falling for this girl. As the game went on, he didn't know if he was enjoying the game as much as he was enjoying watching Jordan cheer heart and soul for his sister. Brookside lost the first set. Won the second set and struggled to win the tie-breaker, but finally pulled it out. Taylor was a big part of that win because of her quickness and her powerful serve.

Jordan jumped for joy when they won and turned to Three. "I'm so proud of Taylor. What an athlete!"

He smiled. Everything she said, everything she did, was perfect.

Taylor came running over. Hugged everyone. "Dad, I don't have to go back on the bus if you'll come let the coach know I'm with you."

Ricky nodded. "On my way."

Jordan grabbed Taylor and complimented her on her play, and Taylor hugged her a second time. Grandmaster Kino rose and stepped down to the floor and waited for Jordan to join him. She nodded at Three. "Guess that's my cue."

"He doesn't bite. Stop worrying."

She nodded and walked out the door with Grandmaster Kino.

Agent Trout followed behind at a discreet distance.

Taylor and young Eric watched them go.

"I just love her," Taylor said brightly.

Eric nodded. "Yeah, I think I do too," he said softly. He looked down at his sister. "But don't go blabbing that around."

She giggled. "Who? Me? Of course not."

Outside, Jordan and Grandmaster Kino walked slowly, side by side.

"What are your thoughts about young Eric?" he asked her.

Her mouth opened in surprise. "Um, I thought we were gonna talk about my stepfather and like, what happened when I was fourteen."

He smiled kindly and nodded at her. "We are talking about that. That event in your life colors everything you do, every relationship you have,

every deep feeling you feel."

"Oh. Okay."

"So, what do you think about young Eric?"

"I, uh, think he's wonderful. I think he's too good to be true."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "Good. That's an honest answer. What makes him too good to be true?"

"Um, I mean, he's kind, he's smart, he's very good looking, he's honorable, he's like— the perfect guy."

"So, why is all that too good to be true? Which means, if I were to rephrase what you said, you think it's unbelievable."

She blew out a breath. "Well, um, I don't mean to insult him at all. I do believe he is what he is. I guess, I just don't believe that someone as wonderful as him could be interested in me."

"And there we have it."

She sighed.

"So, you don't feel worthy of his attention?"

She stopped, looked up into his kind face. Blinked. "I guess not," she said softly.

"What do you think makes you unworthy?"

"If you're thinking I think I'm not worthy because of what my stepfather did to me when I was just a kid, then you're wrong. I'm sorry, I mean no disrespect when I say that, but you're wrong."

"What made your stepfather think he could even get away with what he tried to do to you?"

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say. It was nothing I did that made him think it was okay. I fought. I fought really hard, but I was a kid, and he was a big, strong man. I fought so hard, with every ounce of strength I had."

"Your stepfather didn't work and support your family like a man should, did he?"

"No."

"Your whole family struggled financially because he didn't even try to support you, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"Your sweet mother has worn herself out trying to make ends meet, hasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Which of those things makes you unworthy?"

"None of them," she said forcefully. "It makes me more worthy, because I've struggled, I've worked hard, I've tried to make something of myself so that I will be able to help my whole family. So, I'm completely worthy."

Grandmaster Kino stopped, smiled. "That's correct, Jordan."

She looked up at him. Tears welled in her eyes. He reached out and pulled her into a hug.

"It's okay to cry. It's cleansing for the mind, body and spirit," he said

softly. “There now, sweet girl. Listen to me,” he said as he patted her back and she cried against his chest. “I am so proud of you, Jordan, for your strength. For your persistence. For not giving up. For not giving in. For keeping your head held high. You have nothing to be ashamed of. He tried to touch your body. But you didn’t let him touch your mind. Yes, he was stronger than you. But his mind was weak. Your mind was and is powerful. You are a special young lady, and I’m proud to know you. And I know young Eric feels the same way.”

She pulled away. “Really?”

“Yes. Really. He’s probably afraid to tell you how he feels, because of his own insecurities. You know, us guys do that kind of thing. We find it hard to be vulnerable enough to share our feelings, but we eventually do. Be patient.” He took her by her arms and set her back from him. “Feeling okay?”

She nodded. “Actually, I feel surprisingly good.”

He smiled. “Let’s head back. I’m sure everyone is hungry.”

“Thank you, Grandmaster Kino.”

“Thank you, Jordan. Thanks for trusting me. We’ll talk again on Friday.”

She nodded. “I look forward to it,” she said, surprised that she meant it.

They turned and headed back to where everyone stood by the cars waiting. Well, not everyone. Ricky, Bree, Taylor, Jeffy and Cam had gone on ahead to the restaurant.

Young Eric looked into Jordan’s eyes as she neared. She’d been crying, he could tell that. He reached out and touched some moisture under her eye. “Were those good tears or hard ones?”

She sighed. “Both I guess. Your grandfather said they were good for my soul.”

Young Eric nodded. “Are you hungry?”

She smiled, glad he didn’t want to ask about what was said. “Starved.”

“Well, we are going to a different restaurant tonight. Grandma wanted a little bit of a change.”

“Oh.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“Well, I really liked Casa Latina.”

“I think you’ll like this one too. It’s a southern style place.”

“Southern as in south Cali, or southern US?”

“U.S. My mother and grandmother, and uncles grew up in Georgia.”

“Really? Ya know, I thought I heard a slight southern accent from your grandmother. And a very strong one from Mrs. Lee. Is she like an old friend of your grandma from Georgia?”

He laughed. “More like an old enemy. Which is a long story. But Aunt Angel is from Alabama. She never lost her accent.”

"I think it's cute."

"I do too. I think Uncle Jason really likes it too. Anyway, wanna ride with me? It's not far and I'll bring you back to your car."

"Sure."

He opened the car door and ushered her into the car. He sighed as they pulled out of the school parking lot. There was just such a pleasant feeling whenever they were alone together. He glanced over at her.

She smiled up at him. "So, I'm a little surprised you guys would frequent a southern style restaurant."

"Well, it's not authentic. It's a healthy version. Like, they have fried chicken, but it's not really fried. It's coated with almond flour and baked in a convection oven. The spices they use make it really tasty. The chickens are free range, organically raised. The mashed potatoes, and other veggies, like collard greens, turnip greens, corn, butter beans, green beans, they're all organically grown, non-GMO, and like, the butter used to flavor them is made locally from a raw milk dairy, no hormones, no antibiotics. It's really healthy food."

"Sounds good but like, what's a butter bean?"

He chuckled. "I asked the same thing. They're actually lima beans. But when allowed to mature they lose their green tint and turn a creamy color. I think that's why they call them butter beans in the south. But really they're just lima beans."

"Interesting. I've grown up in southern Cal and never been anywhere else. I'm used to Cal-Mex kind of food. Especially since my stepfather was from Brazil. So we ate a lot of Latina type food."

Eric nodded. "You've really never been anywhere else in the country?"

"Nope. The farthest I've gone from here is Mt. Shasta."

"Oh, well, then, maybe the next time we go visit Georgia you could come along."

She frowned.

"You don't want to?"

"Oh, it's not that. I'm just thinking how I could work that out. But it would be fun to see other parts of the country."

"Rural Georgia is very different than Cali, but very cool. I love it there. My parents are gonna buy a second home there, in Pine Forest, where the Tanners and Appels and Stewarts live."

"Really? They must really like it there too. So, how is it so different?"

"Well, first, it's very green. Everything is so green. There are trees everywhere. When you fly in, you almost can't see Atlanta because there are so many trees. Then you drive along the interstate to head south to Pine Forest, and it's just woods and large swaths of green median, sometimes with wildflowers growing rampant. It's more like northern Cali, except no mountains, well, actually there are the Appalachians when you get up into northern Georgia. It's really a beautiful state. Just no desert. Trees, flowers,

grass, lots of rivers and lakes, and the air is humid. Kind of heavy. And they have these thunderstorms that make you feel like it's the end of the world. Oh, and sometimes they're accompanied by tornados. Or from what I've seen, most of the time."

"Um, I'm not sure if I wanna go there or not."

He laughed. "I guess I'm not painting a very good picture of it. You'll have to come with me. We could go all over the state, see all the things that make it so charming. Go north to the mountains, go south to the Okefenokee swamp, hit up Savannah on the coast."

"That sounds like a lot of fun."

"Let's make it happen."

She nodded. "I'd like that."

They pulled up to the restaurant.

Jordan looked at the sign and read aloud, "All the Fixin's." She giggled. "That's a cute name."

Eric smiled as he rounded the car, but Jordan beat him to opening the car door, so she offered her hand and he pulled her out. Like at the Casa Latina, the restaurant owner greeted them as they came in the door and sent them back to their regular spot in the rear of the place at a giant table.

As they found their seat, Jordan noticed that little Manny was crying and Grandmaster Kino lifted him from the booster seat and carried him out.

Young Eric stood back up. "Granddad, would you like me to take him?"

Eric smiled. "Thanks, but I have it. The two of us are gonna have a little talk."

"Uh oh," young Eric said, winking at Manny, who suddenly quieted and laid his head on his father's shoulder. The sight was heartwarming. This child didn't know it yet, but he'd gotten very lucky to have been found and brought home to be fathered by Eric Kino, a strong, loving, and gentle man. There may be some rough times ahead, as the children get settled into their new home, and get used to being loved and cared for by a new mother, and a father, whom they were not used to having around. Young Eric thought it would be very interesting to see these children in a year or two, note the changes, and watch them bloom to their full potential.

Two servers came and took everyone's order. The family, as usual, chatted about Taylor's game and other family news. Eric came back to the table holding Manny's hand. The child was smiling and calm. Eric lifted him into his chair and touched his nose, then bent and kissed his cheek and patted his head. Shelley smiled up at her husband and closed her eyes.

"Are you sleepy, Mom?" Jeffy asked.

She opened her eyes. "No. I'm just thanking God again that your father is here with us to help me raise these little monsters."

"We're not monsters," Noah argued. "We're munchkins."

Everyone laughed. "We're not munchkins either," Angelina argued. "We're angels from heaven. Mommy says so."

"Mommy said we're monsters," Abraham said.

"I was just teasing you," Shelley said. "You are all my little angels and I love you so much, I could just eat you up."

"You can eat me up," Manny said, offering his arm.

Shelley took it and pretended to take large bites from his arm. "Ummm, this is so good, yum, yum, yum. Give me more."

Manny giggled.

Taylor took his other arm and pretended to take a bite. "Eew. What is that? It tastes like worms. Yuk."

Manny looked closely at his arm. "It does not taste wike worms. It tastes wike sugar. Mommy says so."

Eric's phone buzzed and he took it out and read the text. He looked up, his eyes moist.

"Dad?" Ricky said softly. "Everything okay?"

Eric nodded. "It seems our prayers have been answered. This is a text from Justin. He says that after having met with a judge this morning and given him the indisputable DNA evidence from the trash sample that Nate is our child, the judge has issued a court order to collect clean DNA from Nate, and also another court order awarding us temporary custody of our son."

"Why temporary?" Shelley asked.

"Because Sandra Norton must be given the opportunity to present her side of things in court. However, Justin has actually spoken with Sandra Norton, and she may not even dispute our claim. Which means, we might be able to have another child with us much sooner than we thought."

Shelley gasped.

"I don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves. There has to be some arrangements made to help this woman get on her feet and get the help she needs."

"You're gonna have to pay her off?" Cam asked.

Eric shook his head. "We would never do that. We won't exchange money for Nate. That would be like paying a ransom, and we absolutely cannot do that. Paying a ransom would actually put every single member of our family in jeopardy. We will not ever pay a ransom, not ever, and everyone knows it. However, I left it up to Justin's discretion to see how the woman needed help. When God places someone in front of us, we don't simply turn our backs.

"This woman, Sandra, she made a mistake as a teenager. She almost died from a drug overdose. She now has a brain disability. Supposedly. We'll check into that. She'll need some counseling, and some guidance and direction on where to take her life, rather than using my child as a circus act to make her money on YouTube.

"Justin has received a court order to have the child removed from the home and turned over to us. He's spoken with the woman. He's let her know that we won't leave her to fend for herself. We will help her to get on her feet

and become self-sufficient. We'll just have to see if she is willing to do the work to help herself."

"But we won't wait for her to get her life together in order to get our child," Shelley asked. "Right?"

Eric smiled at his wife. Took her hand. "No, Shelley girl, we won't wait. We may have him in our custody as early as tomorrow, or maybe the next day." Eric looked up at Jordan. "And all this is possible because Jordan happened to see a video of Nate and was aware enough to realize how much he looked like these guys. Thank you, Jordan, for being so in tune that you thought to mention it to young Eric."

"It was really just an accident," she said softly.

Eric shook his head. "No, it was no accident. We can't just dismiss God's work in our lives as an accident or a coincidence. If we do, He may stop showing up. Therefore, we acknowledge it, and we give gratitude, to both Him, and to the person He's working through, and that was you, Jordan. You're a special young lady. Thank you, for helping us to find our lost child."

She smiled. "Glad I could help."

Ricky shook his head. He had concerns. "Dad, I'm thinking that as soon as this woman gets a lawyer, they'll advise her to fight for custody or if not for custody then for a big settlement. They'll see dollar signs. They might ask you to maybe, ya know, pay for her time raising the boy, for her time invested with him, something like that."

Eric nodded. "Yes, that's a possibility. Let them bring suit. At least it will be a legal 'ransom'. But, I have to say, with Justin and your brother Mark on our side in court, it won't be a fair fight. They would have as much to lose as to win. And Justin will explain that to Sandra Norton and her legal counsel and then we'll see just how it turns out. Either way, we get immediate custody of my son."

Ricky nodded.

"Mom, do you have a bed for Nate?" Bree asked.

"Oh! No, I need to get a bed. Hmm, five children in one room. That may be a little much. Maybe we should move Angelina to—"

"I don't wanna move. I wanna stay wif my bwovers," Angelina suddenly cried.

Shelley turned to Eric. "What do we do?"

He sighed. "It's too traumatic for her right now to be separated from her brothers, so we will make do. We'll do two sets of bunk beds and let her keep her princess bed. We'll make it work, and then, maybe in a year or so, she'll feel more secure and want her own room. I'm sure you and Bree can find just the right bunk beds to make the boys happy."

"I'm gonna get a new brother?" Noah asked.

Shelley nodded. "Remember how we told you that the monster took you from us when you were very, very tiny?"

"Yes."

"Well, we found out that you four weren't the only ones the monster took. There was another, his name was Nate, but the monster didn't like Nate and sent him away to live with someone else. But Nate is your brother and we finally found him and hopefully we'll be able to bring him home soon. And he probably is gonna feel very out of place at first. Remember when you finally came home to live with us, at first, you felt weird. Remember?"

"Yes. Cuz we didn't know you bery much, but now we know you are our weal mommy," Angelina said.

"That's right. And so, when Nate comes home, he's gonna feel extra weird, because he will be in a new place, and he doesn't know me, or daddy, or any of you. But I know you can help him by being very kind to him and welcoming to him."

Noah nodded. "I can."

"Me too," Manny said.

"Me too," Abraham said.

"I will wove him," Angelina said.

Jordan looked up at Three with a smile.

He took her hand and squeezed it.

"Mom," Jeffy began. "I've watched the videos. This kid is definitely genius level. Hopefully, I can help him adjust. I'm just saying there is a possibility that he may be resistant to this change, because of his intellect, and I may have to do a little mind probing to help him adjust."

Shelley nodded. "Of course, whatever you can do to help him adjust will be much appreciated. If he's like you, even close to you, he's gonna need a lot of help."

"Um, I'm gonna take that as a compliment."

Everyone laughed.

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Psalm 127:3-5

"Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD.
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate."

Chapter Fourteen

September 18th, Wednesday Afternoon
UCLA Off Campus Housing, Los Angeles, California

Jackie came into the apartment, threw her purse down on the bar and headed to the refrigerator. She turned and glared at Jordan, who was sitting on the sofa, a laptop on her legs, as she worked on an assignment.

"So, there you are," Jackie said.

Jordan looked up, smiled. "Hi, Jackie. Yes, here I am. I had an early practice and then a class and I just got in. How's it goin'?"

"Don't sit there smiling at me like you didn't do anything. I'm mad at you."

Jordan frowned. "Why? What did I do?"

"You lied to me."

"I did no such thing. What are you talking about?"

"Ya know, Jordan, if you don't want me around, just tell me."

Jordan closed her laptop and gave Jackie all of her attention. "I have no idea what you're talking about. How did I lie to you?"

"You told me you were gonna go eat with the Kinos at the *Casa Latina* near Brookside High School. So, I decided to surprise you and join you, and I went there and you never showed."

Jordan's brows knitted together. "Oh, so you just decided to invite yourself to dinner with the Kinos?"

"I decided to surprise *you*. I thought it would be fun. But you Jordan, you didn't even show."

"Well, Jackie, I couldn't have known that Mrs. Kino was tired of Mexican food and wanted something different. They decided to go to another restaurant, and I didn't know that you intended to join *me*. And Jackie, let's just be honest, you didn't care about joining me. You just wanted to have dinner with the Kinos."

"Maybe. And you would deny me that?"

"Well, it's not up to me to give permission or to deny. It's their family and their privacy. They are a very private family, and with good reason."

"Yes, they are, which is why I said that Eric Kino numero tres isn't really interested in you, not to marry you anyway. He just wants to play the knight in shining armor and make himself look good and feel good."

"I don't think that's true."

Jackie shrugged. "You can think what you like, Jordy, but you're so

innocent. You just see what you want to see. And now, just because he's kissed you a few times, you think he's what, in love with you or something? Wake up, Jordy. You are just way too easy to fool. And now, because you think he's all into you, you feel like you can dis your friends."

"I'm not meaning to dis you, Jackie. I didn't know the Kinos would go to a different restaurant and I didn't know you intended to join us. If you had told me, I would have asked them if you could join us and then, when I found they were going to a different place, I would have texted you and told you where we were going."

"Oh, right. Like you would have asked. You think you're all high and mighty now that the Kinos have befriended you. But believe me, when Eric moves on to another project, he'll drop you fast. He's a do-gooder. That's all."

Jordan thought about what Jackie was saying. In honesty, the whole family could be called, "do-gooders." Because that's what they did. They did good. They helped people. Like this new woman who is using a Kino kid to live off of, instead of prosecuting her, they intend to help her. They're talking about turning her life around. And in a way, Three was doing the same thing with her. He'd had her entire car serviced and repaired, all of her tires replaced, he was helping her with past trauma, he was having her protected. He wanted to come and spend time with her family. Was he trying to just fix her life? He was talking about maybe getting her brother into the Kino school down the street from where they live. And what would he want to do for her sister?

"You're finally thinking about it, aren't you?" Jackie said.

Jordan blinked up at her. She shrugged. "If Three doesn't want me then that's fine, but he acts like and talks like he does."

"Cuz he's a guy. A rich, hot guy who's used to speaking flattering words and getting what he wants."

Jordan shook her head, at the same time wondering if Jackie could possibly be right. She sighed.

"Hey, I'm sorry, Jordy. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm just trying to save you from some heartache down the road."

Jordan sighed. "Well, I'm sorry you felt like I was acting all high and mighty. I certainly don't feel that way."

Jackie smiled. "Good. Tell ya what. You can make it up to me."

"How?"

"I'm goin' to a party tonight. Come with."

Jordan sighed. "I don't know, Jackie. I'm really tired and I have a practice early in the morning."

"So, I'm not worth your time?"

"Of course you are, that's not what I said."

"Then come with me."

"Where's the party?"

"It's at the Delta Sigma Phi house."

"Hmm, don't they have the really crazy parties?"

"No crazier than all the others. It's Allen Cooper's birthday, and his frat brothers are throwing him a big party. They invited me and I don't want to go alone. Please come with me. It's my big chance to hopefully get to meet Allen."

"What? You like him or something?"

She laughed. "Or something."

Jordan shook her head at her roommate. "Is Colton going?"

"No. First she says she has to study for some big mid-term exam and then after that, she has a date."

"Really? Cool. Where is she now?"

"She had a class."

"What time?"

"What time what?"

"What time is the party?"

"Seven. Does that mean you're coming with me?"

Jordan smiled. "I guess so."

Jackie hugged her. "This is just gonna be so awesome! Thanks, Jordy."

Jordan nodded. "Well, if I'm gonna go party, I need to get this assignment done and take a nap."

"Okay. I'll leave you alone. But make sure you're ready by 6:30."

Jordan nodded. "Got it."

She looked down when her phone buzzed.

"Hello, Agent Trout."

"Hello, Miss Brooks. If you're going to a frat house tonight, I'd like you to wear an earpiece so that I can monitor your safety without having to crash your party."

"Oh, I forgot you told me you can hear our conversations."

"Yeah, I figured you forgot. Did you tell your roommates?"

"Yes, but they probably don't ever think about it either."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you. Now, about the earpiece, it will allow you to merely speak, even very quietly, and I'll be able to hear you. If you need help, you'll be able to let me know immediately. So, I need to know if you will consent, and if so, see me before you head out."

"So, like, are you gonna be around for the whole time or will your shift replacement be here?"

"I'll see you through the party until midnight," Trout said. "And after that, Agent Wyatt will take over."

"Okay, so, I'll look for you out back before we leave for the party," Jordan said.

"Good. See you then."

"Agent Trout?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for watching out for me."

He laughed. "Well, it's my job, but you're welcome."

"Agent Trout?"

"Yes."

They're still trying to find my stepfather and arrest him?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why do you think it's taking so long?"

"Well, he knew he'd stepped over the line when he confronted you. He figured you'd probably have him arrested, so, he's hiding out somewhere. That's the consensus anyway."

"So, like, what if he sneaks up behind you and like, hits you over the head and then comes after me."

He gave a soft laugh. "Well, now, that wouldn't make me very much of a professional, would it? I guarantee you, that won't happen."

"Sorry if I insulted you. I'm just a little bit jumpy."

"No worries. Now get your assignment done and get that nap."

She giggled. "Yes, sir." She hung up.

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"You are not wearing that," Jackie said firmly.

"What's wrong with this?" Jordan asked.

"It looks like you're goin' on a picnic. It's way too casual. Shoot, I can barely tell that you're a girl. No wonder you're a virgin."

Jordan made a face. "What do you think I should wear?"

Jackie looked her over. "Well, you can keep the jeans, they're good, or at least, not terrible, but the shoes have got to go." She turned and started rummaging through her closet and came out with a pair of tan, suede, heeled, open-toed shoes. "Try these."

Jordan put them on. "Lord, I'm already so tall, I never wear heels. How do you walk in these things?"

"You don't have to walk. You just have to look good. Now, let me see what top you can wear." She turned again, sliding hangers quickly to find the perfect top.

She turned back with a black, silk/poly blend top, low-cut v-neck with the cold-shoulder deals. It wasn't pure black. It had tiny, very shiny gold stripes. Jordan sighed and tried it on.

"Oh wow, girl. You look fantastic," Jackie said. "Just a few more things." She went through her jewelry and found a couple of gold chains. "Perfect. Look at you, well, almost perfect, but you gotta take your hair down."

"Ya know, I'm not trying to impress anyone. I have a boyfriend."

"Yeah, right, so you say, but Jordy, you're going out with me and I have certain standards to maintain."

Jordan snorted and shook her head. "Whatever. Let's do this."

Outside as they headed to Jackie's car, Jordan remembered to see Agent

Trout. She walked to where he stood by his car.

Agent Trout looked her over. He shook his head. It's not like she's gonna be able to walk into that frat house and go unnoticed. He didn't like it. He smiled at her as she approached. "Hello, Miss Brooks."

Jackie smiled at the man and held out her hand. "I'm Jackie."

He smiled, shook her hand. "Yes, I know."

All business, he held out a small bud to Jordan. "Here. Just place this in your ear. If you need me, just say the word NOW, and I'll be at your side. Go ahead and test it."

"Test, test."

He nodded. "Loud and clear."

She jumped at his voice. "Oh! Yeah, you too," she laughed.

He smiled at her. "Have a good time ladies. And try not to get into trouble."

"Who me?" Jackie chortled.

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September 18th, Still Wednesday

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky, Eric, Shelley and Bree looked around the room.

"This will work," Shelley said.

"It's perfect," Bree agreed. "Let's get the kids and show them."

"I'll go get them," Ricky volunteered. He went out in the hall and called, "Who wants to see their new beds?"

Four adorable children left young Eric and Taylor in the living room and ran up the stairs as fast as they could. The stomping of their feet would make you think they were teens instead of tiny little two-and-a-half-year-olds. They got to the door and came into the room slowly.

"Wow," Noah uttered almost reverently, then smiled excitedly. "Who gets ta be up dere?"

"Who wants to be on top?" Eric asked.

"I do, I do," both Noah and Abraham said.

"Manny?" Eric asked. "You wanna stick on the bottom for now?"

Manny nodded his head.

"That's fine. And if you change your mind, your brothers will give you a turn of sleeping on top too. Right boys?"

They nodded but frowned.

"And they'll do that for you Manny, because they love you, and want to share their happiness with you."

Noah smiled. "I do."

"I'm happy to hear that, Noah," Eric said.

"Manny, if ya wanna come up here and sleep with me, you can," Noah said.

Eric smiled and nodded his head. Teaching love and compassion was important between young siblings.

Angelina went to sit on her bed, apparently happy that her princess bed had stayed the same. "When is Nate gonna come live with us."

"Soon, sweetie," Shelley said. "Maybe tomorrow."

"I can't wait."

"I feel the same way."

On cue, Eric's phone went off.

"Yeah, Jason, whaddya got? You're on speaker so don't say anything ugly about Ricky."

"Well, good news and bad news. Bad news is Sandra Norton tried to take Nate and make a run for it. The police and lab personnel showed up with the court order for DNA. The police also told her that Child Services would be coming to collect the child and she was not to take him anywhere. Once the police left, she packed a couple of suitcases, threw them and Nate in the car and took off."

"I'm assuming you were monitoring the place."

"Of course."

"How far did she get?"

"We allowed her to cross the state line into Nevada to make sure it was a felony."

"Okay. And what now?"

"She was arrested. And a little boy is currently in an Ameritech vehicle with a police officer. They're about three hours away."

Eric smiled. "So, he'll be arriving tonight?"

"Congratulations, Eric. It's a boy."

Eric laughed. "This is wonderful."

The group listening was elated.

"On another note. We have located Stephanie Allen, the sister, the one who was given Nate as a baby. She too has been arrested, but listen to this; she lives in Bayside with her fiancé and he has a daughter who plays on the high school volleyball team."

"We just played Bayside," Taylor said. "Last Thursday."

Eric nodded. "Interesting. When we were there at that game, Jeffy made a comment that she felt something or someone important."

"The main thing is, we're getting our baby tonight!" Shelley said.

"It feels like Christmas morning," Bree said softly.

"When is he coming?" Angelina asked.

"Sometime tonight, sweetheart," Shelley answered. "Unfortunately, you guys will all be asleep before he gets here. But first thing in the morning, you'll get to meet him."

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September 18th, Still Wednesday Evening

Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity House, UCLA, Los Angeles, California

Agent Trout was getting more and more uneasy. Jackie was the first one to talk Jordan into "just one drink." After that, it was some guy who said she

had to be the most beautiful girl in attendance. He'd talked her into a shot and a beer. And she was obviously not used to drinking. She was already not making much sense. Sighing, he spoke to her.

"Jordan."

She giggled. "Yes, sir, Mr. Agent, sir. You scared me."

"Maybe you should lay off the booze."

"It's a party, Mr. Agent."

"May I remind you that you're underage?"

"I know how old I'm not." She laughed loudly. "How old I'm not, now that was funny."

"Do you know how many drinks you've had?"

"Uh uh, I stopped counting a long time ago."

"Where's Jackie?"

"She disappeared with the birthday boy."

He sighed. "Jordan, I think you need to come on out here and I'll see you home."

"Wait a minute. My newest friend wants me to try to a new drink. It's really very pretty."

Agent Trout was silent as he tried to hear what the new friend was saying.

"It's what they call a lemon drop. You'll love it."

Then he heard another male voice.

"Come on, little girl. Dance with me."

"Gotta go, Mr. Agent man. They're playing my song."

Trout cursed. Normally he wouldn't care. But something didn't seem right. And he'd grown to care about this young lady. He was supposed to be keeping her safe from her stepfather, but that wasn't the danger she was facing tonight. He's not supposed to interfere with personal type decisions. Unless she was about to jump off a bridge or something comparable. Isn't that sort of what she was doing? She seems to be in self-destruct mode and that was probably because of the garbage her so-called friend, Jackie was feeding her. Sighing, he made a decision. He muted his mic and called young Eric.

"Hey, Agent Trout. Everything okay?"

"Well, Eric. I'm not really sure. Your girl got talked into going to a frat party, and I'm not feeling comfortable about what's going on. I think you need to get up here. Get on the road and I'll fill you in."

"Hold on." Young Eric motioned to his father. "Dad, I need to go see about Jordan. Apparently she's in some trouble at a frat party."

Ricky nodded. "Go. And be careful. You want some backup?"

"No, I don't think I'll need it."

"Okay, well, keep us posted."

"Yes, sir," he said as he ran out the door.

"Okay, I'm on the road. What's goin' on."

"Jackie talked Jordan into goin' to a birthday party at Delta Sigma Phi. She laid some guilt trip on her and convinced her to go."

"What would Jordan have to feel guilty about?"

Agent Trout went on to tell him all the conversations he'd heard since Monday morning. How Jackie had been working her over pretty good. Trout told him he couldn't figure out if it was just out of jealousy, or if there was something more nefarious at hand. He told him how Jordan kept trying to tell Jackie that young Eric was a good guy and did actually care about her and how Jackie had Jordan second guessing herself.

Then he told him how completely inebriated she was and how she'd been dancing with a slew of guys and drinking so much she couldn't remember how many drinks she'd had.

Young Eric sighed as he drove.

"Listen, I'll go in if you want me to, but I called you because it would probably cause less of a ruckus to have you go in and pull her out rather than have an agent with a gun go in after her."

"No, I agree. I'll go in and get her."

"Hold on, she's talking to me."

"Come in, Mr. Agent man sir."

"I'm here Jordan. Do you need me to come in there and escort you out? I'll be there in two seconds."

She laughed. "No, I don't need that. I was gonna see if you wanted one of these lemon droop drinks. They are very yummy."

"No more drinking, Jordan."

"Ha, I'm just getting started. Oooh, and here comes my new friend again."

"Hey, little girl. Here's another lemon drop just for you."

"Oooh yes, thank you. But why oh why do you keep calling me 'little girl'? Do I look like a little girl?"

"No sweetheart. You look all grown up in just the right places."

Jordan giggled.

The boy went on. "Ya know, I think we're gonna have to rename this drink from lemon drop to the virgin lemon drop."

Jordan looked up, surprised. "Why?"

"Well, that's what you are, right honey?"

"How could you know that?" she asked, her speech slurred.

"It's just a guess. But I did hear that you're in love with some guy and he doesn't really want you."

She nodded. "It's probably true," she muttered. "I'm just a poor girl, from a poor family. He doesn't want me. How could he?"

"It's okay, little girl, cuz I sure as hell want you."

Trout muted his mic again. "Eric, how far away are you?"

"I'm getting close. GPS says I'm a few minutes away, why?"

"Because some guy she's talking to just pretty much intimated that

they're getting her drunk on purpose, because they know or believe she's a virgin."

Eric shook his head. "Dear God, keep her safe," he pleaded as he gunned it.

"Jordan," Trout said firmly. "Where are you?"

She sniffed. "I'm in the house of course. Why? Mr. Agent man, did you know that Eric doesn't want me?"

"Yes he does. Where's your self-esteem? Eric wants you. He's on his way in to get you right now. Where are you? What floor?"

"Um, I think I'm on the second floor, on a couch right next to the stairs."

"Eric," Trout began, "if you're not here in one minute I'm going in."

"I'm here. I'm here."

He flew into a space and jumped from his car.

Trout met him near the door. "I'm here if you need me. Jordan has an earpiece. Talk to me through it. Sofa near the stairs, second floor."

Eric went inside. The house was packed full of very drunk college kids. He pushed his way through, found the stairs and took them three at a time. He got to the stair landing. Nothing. There was nothing there. No sofa. No Jordan. He looked around and saw that there was a second set of steps and he started toward them, but a guy stepped in front of him.

"Sorry, no one allowed up to this part of the house."

Eric raised his eyebrows. "My girlfriend is up there and I'm going up."

"I don't think so, buddy."

"Hey, aren't you, Eric Kino?" another guy said from behind.

He turned. "Yes, and you'd better fill in your friend before I break his face."

The guy nodded at his friend. "This guy could kill you in a second. You'd better let him up there."

Face pale, he stepped aside. Young Eric charged up the stairs. Jordan sat on a red couch next to the stairwell. A guy sat next to her with his arm around her. Eric stepped toward him. "Move it."

"Get your own girl."

"That *is* my girl and you'd better move away before I lose it."

The guy rose, stood in front of Eric, measured him with his eyes, and backed down. He walked away and headed down the stairs.

Eric sat down next to Jordan. She looked up at him. "Three? Is that you?"

"Yes, Jordan, it's me."

She reached out and touched his face. "Is it really you, cuz I think I might be hallucin..halluchin, dreaming."

Eric smiled. "No baby, you're not hallucinating. It's really me."

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to take you home."

"Oh, that's so sweet of you."

He shook his head. "Can you stand?"

She pouted and shook her head. "I don wanna stand. Three, Jackie says you don't really care about me."

"Well, Jackie doesn't even know me."

"Yeah, but she's known lots of guys."

"Yep, I bet. Come on, let's get out of here."

"But Three," she whined as tears welled in her eyes. "Jackie says you just like helping out poor little people and that's the only reason you're interested in me."

"Stop paying attention to what Jackie says and listen to me. Now will you stand up, sweetie?"

"So, you do care about me. Because I really care about you. I mean, really, I really love you, I mean, like a whole lot," she blubbered. "But I can't say it to you yet cuz Jackie said you could never love me, and you'll never marry someone like me cuz you waaaay outclass me." She buried her face against his shoulder.

Eric realized he was not gonna get her to leave until he comforted her troubled mind. He took her face in his hands. "Listen to me, Jordan. Jackie has had one conversation with me. One. She doesn't know anything about me, but you do. You know my heart, but just in case you don't, let me just tell you, my heart is yours. Totally. And I'm glad you love me because I love you too, Jordan. What have I told you over and over? That you're perfect for me. Perfect. And I *would* marry you. And I *will* marry you if you'll have me. But I don't want to propose yet, especially not here while you're totally wasted. Now are you gonna stand or do I need to carry you?"

"You love me? I knew it," she cried as the tears came again. "I told Jackie she was just jealous."

"Yep." He stood bent over and lifted her into his arms.

She gave a little squeal.

"Don't worry, I got you." He looked down. "Is that your purse?"

"Yes."

Eric grabbed it and turned and headed down the first flight of stairs. When he got to the empty landing he came to a halt. Six guys stood there. One was the guy who didn't want to let him come up the stairs. Another was the one that had been sitting next to Jordan.

Eric sighed heavily. "Okay, honey. I'm gonna set you down right here on the floor for just a moment. You stay put. Don't move. Just lean back against the wall and rest and I'll be right back."

He turned to face the six, and noticed there was one more, the one who'd recognized him. He had his phone out, videoing. Eric shook his head. "Guys, this is not a good idea."

"You think you can come into *our* house, muscle your way up to *our* private floor and take *our* girl? We can't let this pass."

Eric nodded. “Well, first, she’s *my* girl. She had no idea what you had planned for her on your little private floor, which, by the way, is criminal, so, you can thank me now for keeping you out of jail. Now step out of the way.”

“You think that just because Ricky Kino is your dad, I mean, you seriously think you can take us all on?”

“You just think about those words a second,” Eric said.

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“Of course you don’t,” Eric said. “This fraternity is not known for your IQ, but focus and try to follow along. Ricky Kino is my father. So you really think he hasn’t gone through the last twenty years teaching me everything he knows?”

“So, you *do* think you can take on all of us.”

“Yeah, I do, I can, and I will if I have to, but I’m advising you to *not* do this, because one of you is gonna get seriously hurt. Probably the first one that comes at me. Because I’ll want to hurt him bad enough to make sure he doesn’t get back up. So, I’ll break his nose, maybe an arm. He’s gonna get hurt.”

“I can’t believe you think you can take on six guys.”

“Well, if he can’t, he has me,” Agent Trout said.

“And me,” Cam said softly.

Young Eric smiled in relief.

The boys turned and looked at Agent Trout. He wore a suit and was obviously some kind of security agent.

The boy videoing looked closely at Cam. “Uh, guys, I’m pretty sure that’s Dr. Kino’s husband.”

Cam smiled. “Very good. And just in case you guys don’t know what that means, I’m special forces. And my main problem when I get into little confrontations like this is trying to NOT kill my opponent.”

“And there’s that,” Eric said quickly. He turned, lifted Jordan from the floor and walked out of the frat house, Cam and Agent Trout following close behind.

Eric set Jordan in the passenger seat of his car and turned to speak with the two men. “Thanks, guys. I sure didn’t want to have to fight in there.”

“You could’ve taken them out easily. But what a mess,” Cam said.

Eric nodded. “And you being here is a surprise. I’m guessing my dad was worried about me and sent you?”

Cam shrugged. “Your dad said you could definitely take care of yourself, but he wanted to make sure you didn’t go breaking an arm or something where you couldn’t fight in the Challenge.”

Eric grinned. “Oh, I see, he was worried about the Challenge. Well, thanks again, guys,” he said as he shook their hands.

“Hey,” Trout said. “Don’t be too hard on her. I’ll play you the recordings of the conversations between Jordan and Jackie. That Jackie is manipulative and conniving. I can’t even understand why she seemed to be

trying to destroy Jordan. She broke her down pretty good. She's pretty convincing. Jordan is so innocent, comparatively. She didn't stand a chance against Jackie."

"I'd like to hear those conversations," young Eric said.

"I'll have to get clearance, and then I'll get them for you by tomorrow. Are you headed back to the apartment?" Trout asked.

"Only for a minute while I gather her things. I don't want her there until she's sober and until I have a chance to set her straight on a few things. Why?"

"Because I go where she goes, and because my replacement is coming in a few hours."

"Well. She's gonna be with me for the night, so you guys take the night off. And probably half the morning."

Trout nodded. "Got it. I'm outta here."

"Me too," Cam said.

Eric drove back to Jordan's apartment. He turned to her. "We're gonna go in and get a few things for you to spend the night at my house."

"I gotta pee."

He chuckled. "Okay. Let's go."

He helped her into her apartment and into the bathroom. When she came back out she was swaying, so he grabbed her and led her into her bedroom and set her down on her bed. "What do you need? Just tell me and I'll get it."

"Need for what?"

"For you to spend the night at my house."

"Oh, that's nice. I need stuff." She lay back on the bed.

Stuff, he thought. He'd try his best. He looked through drawers and gathered Pjs, a T-shirt and some jeans, underwear, shoes and socks.

She sat up slowly. "I need my practice clothes, cuz I got practice early in the morning."

Eric sighed. "I doubt you'll make that."

"I can't miss it."

"Well, Jordan, you should've thought about that before you accepted that first drink."

She sniffed. "Are you mad at me?"

He drew a deep breath. "No, baby. Just being logical. Sorry." He went around gathering what she needed, asked her what color her toothbrush was, and stuffed everything into her canvas softball bag. "Okay, let's go," he said, reaching his hand out to her.

She looked up at him. Her face was very pale.

"Jordan?"

"Uh, I'm not feelin' too good."

He grabbed her hand, quickly pulled her into the bathroom and held her hair out of the way while she puked up her guts, as her body tried to rid itself of the poison she'd been pouring down her throat.

He helped her get cleaned up. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t go.”

“Why not?”

“I gotta give Jackie back her stuff.” She slowly stumbled into Jackie’s room, kicked off the shoes, then pulled Jackie’s pretty little black top over her head, followed by the gold chains and laid them on the bed.

Eric quickly turned, went back to Jordan’s bedroom, grabbed a T-shirt out of her dresser and brought it to her. When she just looked at it, he put it over her head and got her to put her hands through the sleeves. He breathed a sigh of relief when he had her covered again, because the sight of her standing there in a lacy black bra, took his breath away.

“Where’s Colton?” Eric asked.

“I dunno. I think she had a date.”

Eric looked around, saw a notepad on the bar and wrote a note letting Jordan’s roommates know where she was. “Okay, let’s go.”

He took her to his car, and drove toward his home. “Call Mom,” he said as he drove.

“Hey, honey, you okay?”

“Hey, Mom, yeah I’m okay, but I have Jordan with me. What room do you want me to put her in?”

“Cam told me you were coming with her and I’ve prepared the room right next to Taylor.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“How’s she doing?” Bree asked.

“She’s already thrown up once. She’s pretty out of it. It almost seems like she’s drugged. I’m wondering if someone put something in her drink. She’s pretty wasted. She’s gonna feel bad in the morning.”

“Bless her heart.”

Eric smiled at his mother’s southern saying. Except she actually meant it. “I love you, Mom,” he said softly.

“Oh, sweetie, I love you too.”

He looked down as Jordan suddenly grabbed his arm, her eyes wild.

“Uh, Mom, gotta go. I’ll be there soon.” He hung up and looked at Jordan. “What’s wrong?”

“I think I’m gonna be sick again.”

He immediately pulled off the road. Ran around, opened her door. She swung her legs out and that was as far as she got before she bent over and threw up. She started crying as she retched. She was so pitiful and his heart broke at the turmoil she was going through. He realized he was angry, though not at her, but at Jackie.

This was evidence of how a few well-placed words can do so much harm. We have to build up our defenses, put on the armor of God, develop self-esteem, so that we don’t take to heart the poison that others spew. He sighed and shook his head.

Once he got to the house, which took fifteen minutes longer than getting to his grandparents' house, she was almost non-responsive. He lifted her and carried her inside. His mother opened doors for him and helped him get her to the room.

"You go on. I'll help her get undressed," she said.

Young Eric obeyed. "Thanks, Mom," he said as he left the room. He went downstairs to the kitchen to make himself something to eat.

"Late snack?"

Young Eric turned at his father's voice. "Hey, Dad. Yeah, I guess."

"She's pretty messed up?"

"Yeah, she is. Mom's getting her undressed. She's a limp noodle. I hope Mom can handle it."

Ricky smiled. "Your mom can handle anything. Have you called Granddad?"

Eric sighed. "It's too late, don't ya think?"

"He'd want to know that you won't be there in the morning. Call him."

"Yes, sir." He immediately pulled out his phone.

"I was wondering when you would call," Eric said when he answered.

"Sorry, Granddad. I thought you'd already be asleep."

"I was waiting to hear from you. How's she doing?"

"She's a mess. Physically and emotionally."

"Your dad knows what to give her in the morning. And keep her hydrated."

"Yes, sir."

"And don't be angry about her doing a self-destruct thing. Sometimes our minds are fragile. Be gentle but firm. But no self-pity allowed. No victimhood."

"She thought I didn't care about her. Thought I didn't love her."

"And do you?"

"Yes, sir, I believe I do, though I hadn't told her how I felt, until tonight, that is."

"You told her tonight?"

"Yeah, but she may not remember it."

"You've only known her a few weeks."

"I know. Actually a little less than two, which is why I didn't tell her my feelings. I mean, how is it possible to feel so strongly about someone I just met?"

"Sometimes it just happens. Still, try to take things slow. You're both very young. However, I have to admit, I was only eighteen when I married your grandmother Ann. We were extremely happy together. But somehow, it seems my eighteen back then was so much older than your twenty now."

"Um, gee, thanks, Granddad."

Eric chuckled. "Well, I'm really just reminding myself to step back and let you be a man. Because you are, young Eric. You're mature and strong,

and loving and I couldn't be prouder of you."

"Thank you, sir. So, you know I called to say that I need to be late to training tomorrow."

"Yes, I know. Let me know how she's doing in the morning and we'll figure out what time to get together."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Good night, Granddad. Oh! And by the way, did Nate get there?"

"Yes he did, and it's gonna be a trial. So, us taking the morning off tomorrow, is a good thing."

"So, is he a genius, like Aunt Jeffy?"

"It appears he is. We'll do some tests. Jeffy wants to read him several times a day. We'll see how it goes."

"Well, I can't wait to meet him."

"Let's make that happen tomorrow. Taylor has a home game at five. If you come around one you'll have time to meet him and we can still make the game."

"Okay, goodnight, sir."

"Good night, young Eric."

Young Eric hit 'end' and looked at his father. "By the way, Dad, thanks for sending Cam to look out for me. He was very helpful."

Ricky nodded. "I heard. I'm glad you didn't have to fight."

"Me too. Not because I was afraid, but just because it's a hassle to fight someone while trying not to hurt them."

Ricky smiled. "I hear ya. And you don't have to tell me you weren't afraid. You've always been pretty much fearless."

"Yeah, except for, ya know, that one thing."

Ricky nodded. "No shame there."

Bree came into the kitchen. "Well, she woke up for a bit and was able to help get herself dressed for bed. She asked for you, Eric. I think she's starting to sober up a little, or enough to realize that she probably made a fool of herself. She's feeling pretty embarrassed that her boyfriend's mother is helping her undress through a drunken stupor."

"I'd better go up and see her. Thanks, Mom." He grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

"You're very welcome. She's a sweet girl. I really like her."

Young Eric smiled. "Me too."

Ricky and Bree watched their eldest child run up the stairs.

Bree smiled at her husband. "He's in love with her."

Ricky nodded. "He's so young, but you know what? I was twenty-one when I knew I was in love with you."

Bree frowned. "I'm sorry, Ricky. I mean, for all those wasted years we could have been together."

"I didn't say that to make you feel bad. I was just sayin' that I knew my mind back then, and Eric probably knows his. And ya know, having Jordan

for a daughter-in-law would not be a bad thing."

"A daughter-in-law. Wow, I suddenly feel so old."

"Well, babe, you don't look it. You're as hot as the day I met you."

Bree smiled. "You just wanna take me to bed right now."

"Yep, and that should prove my point."

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Romans 12:2

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Chapter Fifteen

September 18th, Late Wednesday Night
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric came into the room silently and stood by the bed staring down at the beautiful blonde lying there. Her cheeks were rosy from sleep mixed with alcohol. He shook his head. She really tied one on, and she was gonna pay for it for a while. She stirred, turned over onto her back, opened her eyes and gasped.

"Three!"

He smiled. "Hey. How ya feelin'?"

"Not so good." She sat up. "Ugh, I'm dizzy."

He nodded. "Bed spins. I'm sorry."

"What are *you* sorry about?"

He shrugged. "I guess that you chose to do this to yourself."

She sighed. "Will you sit with me for a bit?"

He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Eric, I am so sorry."

"You don't have to apologize to me, Jordan. We all make bad decisions every once in a while. I sure have. We usually end up paying for them in one way or another. I guess you're paying right now."

"I don't even know what happened. I mean, I've had drinks before and they never affected me like this. I still feel a little buzzed, but mostly dizzy and nauseated. And usually that part doesn't come until later and it never feels this bad."

He nodded. "Yeah, well, I'm thinking maybe someone put a little something extra in your drink."

"You mean like, date rape stuff?"

"Yep."

"Why? Or who?"

"I have my theories but I'll share them with you when you're completely sober."

She sighed. "So, um, Eric, um, Three, I think I said some things to you, things like, I shouldn't have said."

He smiled. "You mean like when you said you loved me?"

She moaned. "Did I say that?"

"Yes, you did."

"Oh no, Eric, I'm so sorry."

"Well, I'm not."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"Didn't you mean it?"

She was silent.

"Hello?"

She sniffed. "If I meant it, would that just totally mess up the good thing we had going?"

"We have a good thing going *because* of our feelings for each other. You expressed how you felt, and I hope you meant it, because I am totally falling in love with you, Jordan. So tell me, does that make *you* want to run away from the good thing we have going?"

She shook her head, and wiped tears away. "Well, no, but I mean, how can you still feel that way after having to come rescue me tonight? I'm so ashamed."

He sighed. "I get it, but please believe me, Jordan, coming to take you away from that party has no bearing on what I feel, other than feeling protective of my girl. Besides, I really wasn't the one to rescue you. It was Trout. He had a bad feeling from the start. He said it was because he heard the things Jackie said to you. So, I'm just grateful that he was on alert and that he cared enough to call me."

"What would have happened if he couldn't reach you?"

"Then he would have gone in that house, probably put some kids in the hospital, and saved you from who knows what."

Jordan put her hand to her head. Blew out a breath. "I am so dizzy."

"Lie down. Sleep."

"But I don't want you to leave. Not yet."

He nodded. "I'll sit with you for a while."

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September 19th, Early Thursday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky Kino smiled as he spoke on the phone. "Yes, ma'am, I'd love to meet the team and speak to them about hard work and discipline. Absolutely, yes, let's make it happen. Okay. Thank you. Yes, my sister is taking good care of her. She's evaluated her and she says Jordan should be good to go by Monday's practice. Thanks. I'll tell her. Yep. Bye now." He ended the call.

Young Eric smiled up at his father in admiration. "Thanks, Dad, you're the best."

Ricky laughed. "Well, since I called Jordan's coach and explained that Jeffy believes someone put something in her drink, and I got her off the hook, you're gonna tag along with me when I have to speak to their team, and, by the way, I volunteered you to speak too."

"But, I don't..."

"Oh, you speak. You just don't know it yet."

Eric nodded. "Okay."

"You're not shy, so why wouldn't you want to speak to a group of girls who would hang on your every word?"

Young Eric nodded. "Because of those last words you just said."

Ricky chuckled. "It's true. Young girls can be scary sometimes. All the sighs, and oohs, and giggles and trying to get eye contact, or, uh, other contact."

Young Eric shivered.

"Ricky Kino are you bragging about your younger years," Bree said as she came up the stairs from the fitness room."

Ricky smiled as he kissed his wife. "Not bragging. Preparing our son."

Bree nodded. "Might as well be prepared, Eric, cuz once you win the Challenge, and then your movie comes out, you're not gonna be able to walk around freely like you do now."

Young Eric frowned as he thought about it and heaved a sigh.

"So, how's she doing this morning?" Bree asked.

"She's still asleep. She threw up again in the middle of the night. I heard her and went to check on her. She's miserable."

"Well, Jeffy says to make her some of your grandfather's tea, and keep her hydrated. She also said to add the herbal pain reliever and give her a massage to release the toxins. And do something to get her to sweat."

Young Eric nodded. "That sounds like a good time," he said with a smile.

Ricky chuckled.

Taylor came running into the kitchen. "Good morning, everyone. I'm running late. Gotta go."

"Eat something," Ricky commanded.

"Dad, Agent Ward is waiting."

"He works for us, not the reverse. Eat something or take it with you and eat in the car. Either way, you are gonna eat."

She grabbed an apple. "How's this?"

Bree added a snack bag of almonds. "And this."

Ricky frowned. "It was a rough night last night, so I'm gonna let this slip, but I will see each of you down on the beach at six tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir," Taylor called as she ran out the door.

Bree smiled. "She's a whirlwind. And I have to go get dressed and leave for a meeting with my manager. He's trying to get me to do a movie he swears will be the next big thing."

"Are you thinking about taking it, Mom?"

She shrugged. "Thinking about it. But I'm being very picky about what I do anymore. Yes, it's fulfilling, but so is taking care of my family. And one is much more important."

"Which one?" Ricky asked.

She smiled. "Silly question, my love." She turned and headed to their bedroom.

Ricky turned back to his son and looked him over. "So, kiddo, I get the feeling you wanna talk."

Young Eric nodded. "You're good, Dad."

"Even a blind hog," he said.

They sat down at the kitchen table. "Talk to me," Ricky urged.

"It's about Jordan."

Ricky nodded. "You have pretty strong feelings for her?"

"Yes, sir. I, well, I think I'm in love with her."

"Okay. That's pretty evident. So, what's the problem?"

"Well, I know I'm too young to get married, but—"

"What makes you think you're too young?"

Young Eric looked up at his father, surprised by his words. "Oh, well, I mean, I know people used to get married really young a long time ago. But then, like, don't they say that fifty percent of all marriages in the U.S. end in divorce? Which is really crazy if you think about it."

Ricky nodded. "They do say that, though I think that statistic has changed a little. Still go on, what were you going to say about that?"

Young Eric went on. "So, I mean, because of that, they started advising people to wait, to take a long time to make that decision, to take it slow. And then people were waiting until their thirties."

"Before we go any further, who is the 'they' you're talking about?"

"Um, I guess the experts, the doctors or whatever."

"The establishment," Ricky provided.

Young Eric thought, and finally nodded.

Ricky continued. "The same establishment who says women simply cannot be fulfilled unless they have a career outside the home? Or that you should only have 1.5 children? Or even worse, that you shouldn't have any children? The same one that says you should have multiple sexual partners and experiences before you marry? That men and women are the same? That masculinity is toxic? That women should look for a man who is well off financially and can provide them with jewelry and shoes and fancy, well, fancy everything? That women can run the world and don't need men, that it's okay to break your marriage vows, because why not, everyone is doing it. Who, really is this establishment that is spewing these lies? Think about it, son and tell me what are we really talking about?"

Young Eric sat quietly for a few seconds and the light went on. "This is Satan's plan, a plan to destroy the family unit."

Ricky nodded. "Correct. So, never go along with what the crowd is currently saying. Always think for yourself, and mostly, pray and listen and God will tell you what is truth and what are lies. It's Satan's plan to destroy the family by destroying the relationship between men and women, by destroying the home, by taking away morals and honor. By telling you to wait until you're older. By telling you to party hearty and have a good time while you're young. He is a liar. And people believe his lies all too readily,

because he has the world in his hands. He is the prince of this world. For now. And we warriors have to battle him at every front and one way we do that is by not falling for the lies."

"So, you're saying I should marry her?"

Ricky smiled. "Not necessarily. You can't blindly follow the establishment, but you can't go blindly the other way either. If you were to marry Jordan, how would you support her?"

"Exactly, Dad. I mean, I'm too young to marry because I don't even know what career path I want to follow. I didn't even finish college."

"You're wording that wrong, son. You're not too young to marry. You're just not ready to marry. Work hard. Figure out what you want to do. You don't have to already be a success to marry, you just need to have a plan. A good plan. A solid plan. And when you figure out how you will do everything, including supporting your wife, and your kids which will certainly come along, then you can marry, whether you are twenty or forty."

"But you were like thirty when you and Mom married, right?"

"Yes, and that was only because I couldn't convince your mother to stop seeing us as brother and sister. We were grown when we met. We were not blood related. It took me nine years to finally accomplish that."

Young Eric nodded, remembering all the stories, mostly told with humor. Their parents were dating and therefore convention dictated that Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams could not date.

Ricky smiled. "You can wait, Eric, if you're more comfortable. Just stay in control of your body. I didn't."

"Tell me about that, Dad. You've never gone into detail."

Ricky shook his head. "I've never gone into detail because it's not a pretty story. But I guess you're now a man and need to know the truth. I tried to live without your mom. She wouldn't have me. But beautiful women were constantly offering themselves to me. It was difficult. I was lonely. I'm a man. I finally took one up on her offer. It was a good release. But that's all it was. I tried again. And again. One morning, I realized I had nothing but disdain for the latest young woman I'd just been with, and she only wanted to brag to her friends that she'd been with *"the'* Ricky Kino."

He sighed, shook his head. "She asked me if I would confirm it if her friends didn't believe her, and I told her I never lie. That woke me up. I had a reputation of being honest. What other kind of reputation was I making for myself? People knew I was a Christian. What kind of damage was I doing? I had to do a lot of public repenting. And private too, but, I had to let people know that I had not been representing the believers in Christ and that I had changed my ways, and that thankfully, through the grace of Jesus Christ, I was forgiven."

Young Eric nodded, his emotions near the surface. "Thank you, Dad, for sharing that. I know it had to be hard for you and, well, I want you to know that I don't think any less of you."

Ricky smiled. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. But if you did, it would be okay, because you see, that's my cross to bear. There are consequences for every action. I knew better. My father taught me and set a perfect example for me. I did not do that for you, albeit, my fall happened long before you were born."

"So, maybe, if mom had agreed to marry you earlier, you wouldn't have fallen?"

"Maybe. But I can't blame your mom. She had her own problems to work through. Satan was telling her lies too. She was confused and afraid."

"What finally made her realize it was okay for the two of you to be together?"

"My impending death."

"Huh?"

"Sometimes when we're faced with real life and death situations, we suddenly get clarity. I was abducted. You know about that."

"Yes, though again, very little detail."

"Well, again, it wasn't pretty. I was gone three days."

"Huh, three days. It seems to be one of God's themes."

Ricky chuckled. "Yep. In my case, it was three days of darkness, meaning pain, so much pain," he said as his body shivered. "While I was being tortured and beaten half to death, your mom had her own 'come to Jesus' moment. Her torture, our family's torture, was the waiting, the searching for me, the not knowing, and then my body was found behind a diner in LA. The clarity came to Bree, with my father's help and also through prayer and she vowed she would not waste another moment not loving me. She has kept that vow."

Young Eric smiled. "That's a beautiful ending anyway."

"Yep, and it's not over. We have a long way to go."

"So, Dad, if I love Jordan, and she loves me, and I, or I guess we, figure out a plan, we could get married with your blessing?"

"Absolutely. I feel good about her. I've prayed about her. I really like her. But take it slow, Eric. Do it right. Don't let your hormones rush you. Let it develop naturally. She needs to be healthy mentally and emotionally. Let her recover from her trauma from when she was fourteen. And you have something right now that you have to focus on that is important. It can literally make or break you. You've been given much. So you must do much. You must give everything you've got in you."

He nodded. "I will give it my all. But Dad, that reminds me of something else. Yes, I've been given much and Jordan's roommate told her that I'm a little rich boy, pampered and spoiled. Is this true? I mean, I don't see myself that way, but, maybe I have a distorted view of myself."

Ricky nodded. "You have money. Or you will. And you *were* born into it. My father will turn Kino Martial Arts over to me, a multi-billion dollar business, over to me, and one day, if it's where your heart is, I'll turn it over

to you as I've already told you. So yes, you have money. Your richness though, is your family and friends. In that, we are all very rich. Are you spoiled? I don't think so, because you don't take these things for granted and you use what God has given to you to help others. Could you do that on a larger scale? Probably. Are you pampered?" Ricky shook his head. "A pampered person lies in bed half the day, has someone wait on their personal needs, and doesn't give two figs about much of anyone but themselves. He certainly doesn't wake up at five, and work hard all day at so many things, including tirelessly serving others, be it family, friends or strangers, paying attention to their needs or problems, and then fall into bed exhausted and do it again the next day, without fail."

Young Eric nodded. "Even as you say that, it feels like I could do more, or like I should do more."

Ricky nodded. "Then do it."

"Thanks, Dad. I'm gonna run up and check on Jordan."

"You do that. I'll make the tea. And don't forget, we have to speak to her team next Monday morning, so I'll let Dad know, and you be ready."

"Yes, sir."

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Young Eric knocked on Jordan's door. When she didn't answer he peeked in. She wasn't in bed, but then he heard the now familiar retching. He went to the bathroom. She was kneeling in front of the toilet, her head bent, softly moaning.

"Still feeling pretty bad, huh?"

She looked up and groaned. "Please go away."

He sighed. "I can't do that."

"I don't want you to see me this way."

"Too late for that. People get sick, baby, it's okay."

"I didn't get sick, I made myself sick."

He shrugged. "A minor technicality."

She put a hand to her head. "My head feels like it's gonna explode."

"Listen, you're gonna feel much better as soon as you drink my grandfather's special tea, made for just this reason. It'll fix you right up."

"Okay. But do you mind if I try to take a quick shower, and brush my teeth. I feel so yucky."

"Yucky. I understand," he said with smile. "Okay, I'll leave. But I'll be back in fifteen minutes, because I'd like you to get the tea down before the next round of nausea comes back."

"Fifteen minutes. Got it."

He closed the bathroom door. Went downstairs, gathered the tea his father had prepared, some herbal pain meds, another bottle of water, some dry toast and from his parents' room, some massage oil. Fifteen minutes later he knocked on her door again.

"Come in."

He peeked in and smiled at her. She looked better. Freshly scrubbed, she actually looked better than better. She looked adorable, sitting on the side of the bed, combing out her long wet hair. She had on the jeans and t-shirt he'd packed for her. Her feet were bare. He smiled at her as he came in and set the tray on the end of the bed.

He immediately picked up the mug of tea and handed it to her. "Here, Jordan, drink this."

She put the comb down and accepted the cup, bent and sniffed. She wrinkled up her nose. "Is it sweet?"

"Dad put some raw honey in it. It helps."

She sipped and made a face.

He smiled. "I know, but you gotta get it down. I swear it will help you. Or, you can keep puking up your guts."

She nodded. "I'll drink it." She took a big swallow. Grimaced, and took another. "Ugh, it tastes terrible."

"Sometimes ya gotta take your medicine," he said softly.

She nodded, turned the cup up and drank it down, handed it to him, shook her head and shuddered.

He laughed. "You are so very cute, did you know that?"

She smiled. "If you think that's cute you really should have seen me try to eat oysters."

He pictured the scene and chuckled, then shook two capsules from a bottle and handed them to her with the bottle of water. "Take these, and drink lots of water."

She sighed, but did as she was told then recapped the bottle. "You know you're being awfully bossy."

He laughed. "That's because I too am following orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Dr. June Flower Kino."

"Oh. Well, then, I guess I can't argue with that."

"No you really can't. So now, the next thing I need you to do is take your shirt off and lie down on the bed."

"Excuse me?"

"Hmm, that's not gonna work, huh?" he said with a smile.

"I'm not sure what you're going after, but, no, that's not gonna work."

He laughed. "Okay, just sit there on the bed. I'm gonna get behind you and massage your neck and shoulders, and your arms. I guess that's all the body parts I can reach right now."

She smiled. "Maybe."

He picked up the massage oil, got on his knees behind her, put some oil in his hand and asked her to hold the bottle.

The minute he started on her neck, she started to moan with pleasure. He worked a long time, and then slid his hands just inside the neck of her t-shirt to get her shoulders and upper back. Finally, her eyes closed and she slumped

back against him. So, he took the opportunity to slide his hands to her throat and upper chest.

She sighed. And he found himself breathing very hard. She was so tempting. And she was so relaxed. And she completely trusted him. He focused very hard on the task at hand. When he couldn't trust himself anymore, he pulled his hands from her shirt and went to work on her arms. He took about thirty minutes in all, and finally took the bottle from her, closed it, put it on the tray and moved the tray to the dresser.

"Now," he said, "how do you feel?"

She sighed, keeping her eyes closed. "I feel— surprisingly better. I think the nausea has subsided. The headache has definitely dulled. I'm just sleepy."

"Okay, well, take a nap. This afternoon we're gonna go to my grandparents' house and meet the new Kino."

"Oh! Nate already came home?"

"Yes. I'll tell you all about it later."

She sighed, and then her eyes opened wide. "Oh no, I totally forgot about my practice this morning."

"My dad called your coach and explained that you were ill because someone had put something in your drink. In exchange, your coach roped him into coming on Monday to speak to the team about hard work and dedication."

"Oh wow. So sorry. But ya know, the girls are gonna love that."

"Yeah, and my dad says I have to speak too."

Her eyes sparkled. "Really? This should be interesting."

"Yeah, well, hope I don't disappoint you. For now, babe, lie down and sleep a little while."

"Will you lie down with me?"

He swallowed. "I'm not sure that—"

"Please. The very best sleep I've ever had in my whole life was the night I slept with you on the couch."

"Your whole life, huh?" He was a weak man. Sighing, he kicked his shoes off and scooted onto the middle of the bed. She turned her back to him and scooted close so he could put his arm around her.

Jordan nestled back against him, sighed in pleasure, and fell immediately asleep.

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September 19th, Thursday Morning

South Hillcrest Family Dentistry, Hillcrest, California

Jewell Perez glanced at her phone again. It was the fifth time it buzzed in the past ten minutes. She shoved the phone back in her pocket.

"Jewell, go ahead and take it. It must be important. I'll cover for you. Go ahead."

Jewell smiled at her co-worker. "Thanks. I'll make it fast." She took out

her phone and walked out of the glass doors of the dental office to have privacy, and called back the number that she didn't recognize.

"Well, it's about time," Peter Perez barked.

"I, uh, didn't recognize the number. You shouldn't call me when I'm at work."

"Don't tell me what I should or shouldn't do. And you don't recognize the number because I had to get a burner phone, because of that brat you call a daughter."

"Jordan?"

"Yes, Jordan."

"Peter, you can't blame her for not wanting to be around when you visit the children. Not after what you did to her. But how does her telling you to come back later make you get a burner phone?"

"She didn't tell you anything else?"

"No. What else is there to tell?"

"Maybe she's smarter than I think."

"What are you talking about?"

"I want to come see my kids today."

"Peter, why do you do this? You know you're supposed to give me twenty-four hours notice."

"Ya know, as my wife, you should be willing to work with me. And you know what, as my wife you should've supported me back when all that happened. You should have given me the benefit of the doubt. It wasn't what it looked like. She just didn't like having me around as an authority figure and she figured out a way to get rid of me."

"Peter, first, I'm not your wife, we're divorced. And second, when I came in you were on top of my child with your pants halfway down. There is no mistaking what you were trying to do. But you know what? I'd like to know why. Why would you even think about doing something like that to your own child?"

"She's not my child."

"Well, I thought we were a family. But okay, she's not your child. Still, how could you do that to *any* child?"

"Jewell, she egged me on. She tried to get me to do it and then when it happened, she just freaked out. I don't understand why you won't believe me."

"I saw what I saw, Peter. And if I was gonna take anyone's side, it would be my own child and not the word of a drunken shadow of a man I used to love."

"You're coming close to pissin' me off."

"Peter, I'm at work. I have to go."

"I want to see my children, dammit."

"Why? You haven't even tried to see them the past six months. Why now? Why is it so urgent?"

"Stop questioning me. I'll be by this evening. Why don't you be a good girl and invite me to dinner?"

She sighed. "Fine. Come have dinner with your children. But they have to be in bed by nine."

He hung up. She stared at the phone. She couldn't figure out what he was thinking. Why was it suddenly so important for him to see the children? And why did he have to change his phone number? Sighing, she turned and went back to work.

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September 19th, Thursday Afternoon

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric and Jordan arrived at his grandparents' house a little after 1:00. Jordan was hugged and fussed over. Grandmaster Kino immediately asked her to speak with him before they left for Taylor's game.

The children were all in the living room. All five of them. When Jordan and young Eric entered the room Angelina and Noah ran to them immediately.

"I want to f-wy," Angelina said, reaching her arms up to Eric.

"Oh you do, do ya," young Eric said as he scooped her up and held her high above his head and flew her around.

"Me too," Noah said.

Young Eric took time to give them all a ride, except for the newcomer, who was very quiet and somberly watching all the interaction.

Jordan sat down and Angelina immediately crawled up next to her and cuddled up on her lap.

"Well, hello there, little Angel," Jordan said sweetly.

"Okay," Grandmaster Kino said softly. "Who is gonna introduce your new brother to his nephew?"

"I will," Noah said.

"Do you remember how to do it?"

"Yes, sir." He looked at young Eric. "Um, Ewic pweeze meet my new bwother, his name is Nate, but it's weally Na-taniel."

Young Eric crouched down in front of Nate and smiled at him. The child looked at him suspiciously. "Hello, Nate, it's very nice to meet you."

"Hello."

Young Eric felt something move through him and he knew he was being urged by the Spirit to speak. "Hmm, tell me Nate, what is your favorite thing to do?"

He shrugged. "Watch TV."

"Do you like to play outside?"

"No."

"Well, I *love* to play outside. And I love to run on the beach. Have you ever seen the ocean?"

"No."

"Do you know what the ocean is?"

"I do, I do," Abraham said.

"What is it, Abe?" Grandmaster Kino asked.

"It's a, a lot of water, big water and it has waves that knock you over and it has sand and you can make sand castles."

"Very good."

"Nate, I bet you know what the ocean is," young Eric continued.

"Yes."

"So, did you know that *this* house, which is now *your* new home, is right next to the ocean?"

"Yes. I saw the ocean out the kitchen window."

"Tell ya what, take my hand and you and I will walk down to see the ocean."

Young Eric stood. Held out his hand. He knew better than to give the kid an option. There was no option. He was gonna walk outside.

"Come on, let's go," young Eric insisted.

The little boy sighed and reached up to take Eric's hand. Eric immediately walked him out the back door.

"I wanna go," Manny said loudly.

"Okay, in just a few minutes," Shelley said softly. "Let's give Nate a chance to get to know Eric."

"Yeah," Jordan said, "and you get to sit with me and listen to the story I have to tell. It's umm, about a gingerbread man. Do you know what a gingerbread man is?"

"Nuh uh."

"It's like a cookie, that's shaped like a little man. With a head and arms and legs, but the little cookie can talk and he can run really fast."

Manny laughed. Shelley smiled as the four children listened with rapt attention to Jordan tell the story of the gingerbread man.

Meanwhile, on the beach, young Eric walked hand in hand with Nate. "So," he began. "What do you think about the ocean?"

"It's big."

Eric nodded. "Yeah it is. I like the sound the waves make. Let's stop and just listen for a minute."

They did. And for one second, Nate looked up at Eric and offered a slight smile. Eric nodded at him. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I hear you're good with numbers."

"I like math."

"That is very cool, cuz guess what? I do too! I like math so much that my girlfriend calls me a number instead of my name."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, she doesn't call me Eric. She calls me Three."

Nate stopped walking and looked up at Eric for the first time with

interest. “Why does she call you Three?”

“Well, because I’m the third person in our family with the name Eric. Your father’s name is Eric. He’s the first one. Then he had his first son and named him Eric. That’s your brother Ricky.”

“Why do they call him Ricky?”

“That’s a nickname. Like Nate is your nickname for Nathaniel.”

“Okay.”

“But Ricky is actually Eric number what in our family?”

“Number two.”

“Right.”

“And then when Ricky grew up and got married he had a little boy, and that was me. And he named me Eric Kino the Third. And Jordan, my girlfriend that you just saw inside, she calls me Three for my nickname because she knows I love numbers.”

“Write it.”

“Write my name?”

“Yes.”

Eric bent down and used his finger to write in the sand. He wrote Eric Kino III.

Nate shook his head. “That’s not how you write ‘three’.”

Eric smiled. “Well, from a long time ago, someone decided that you use Roman numerals in a name.”

“Roman numerals?”

“Yes. I’ll teach them to you one day.”

“Show me now.”

Eric nodded. “I’ll show the first five.” He proceeded to write the numerals in the sand and then explain what they meant.

Nate nodded with a smile and looked up at Eric. “Can I call you Three?”

He chuckled. “It’s MAY I call you Three, and yes, you may.”

Nate nodded and offered another smile.

“So, I guess we need to head back. Your new brothers and sister will be wanting to come down to play on the beach.”

“I don’t like to play.”

“Well, Nate, I know you like to learn, and to do math, but there are other things that you need in your life. You need to know how to have fun and how to laugh, how to sing and dance, how to play ball and run fast and how to do martial arts. That’s really important in our family. And now you are part of our family.”

“What’s martial arts?”

“You’ll learn soon. Martial arts is like fighting and dancing all at the same time. It’s a very cool thing. I’ll show you some videos later. Your father is what they call a Grandmaster of the martial arts, and he’s the best martial arts teacher that there is and he is going to teach you.”

“He’s really nice. I was scared of him, but I’m not anymore.”

"Good, because he's very kind, and he already loves you so much, and he will always take very good care of you."

"And my new mommy too?"

"Yes. She's the best. Your new Mommy is my grandmother and she loves everyone so much and we all love her too." He knelt down in front of the child. "But you and I, Nate, we're special. Because we both love numbers. And I'm gonna teach you a whole lot about numbers. I'm gonna try to see you every week and teach you a trillion things about numbers."

Nate smiled. "My other mommy, she didn't understand about numbers. She just thought it was funny that I knew so much about numbers."

Eric sighed. "That's okay. There are a lot of people who don't understand about math. It's very hard for some people. And that's okay. But we can love math, and that's okay too, as long as we learn about and do other things too."

They both looked up as Jordan, Shelley and Eric came down the steps with the other four children.

"So now," young Eric went on. "What I want you to learn is how to have fun with your brothers and sister. They already love you, and love is the best thing in the world, that's what Jesus taught."

"Who's Jesus?"

"Hmm, well, He's the Son of God, and that is a long conversation and I know your father and mother will be teaching you all about Him soon. But I'll tell you just one thing about God; He created this whole world and He knows more about numbers than *anyone* else."

Nate smiled.

"Come on, let me see how fast you can run."

Young Eric took off running and then turned backward and motioned for Nate to follow. When he did, every adult on that beach let out a sigh of relief.

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Matthew 18:6

"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

Chapter Sixteen

September 19th, Thursday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jordan sat in front of Grandmaster Kino's desk, looking up into his handsome face, taking comfort in his smile, which was always so kind and compassionate.

"I see you're feeling a little better, at least physically," he said.

She smiled. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry for going off the deep end like that. I don't really know what happened. I was just gonna have one little drink. But one led to another and another."

He nodded. "I know how it goes. And it didn't help that more than likely, someone spiked your drink."

"Yeah, but who? And why?"

"Well, Jordan, the 'why' is obvious. The young man was talking about you being a virgin. I believe he intended to change that."

Her face reddened. "How do you know that I'm a, you know?"

"Sorry. Agent Trout could hear what others around you were saying. That's how we know he was talking about your virginity. And when young Eric thought you may have been drugged, his mother called Jeffy to ask how to treat you, and then Jeffy and I consulted. In our family we all communicate as much as possible on a regular basis. Communication is the key to good relationships. I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you."

"Oh, no, that's okay. I just feel so ashamed."

"What makes you feel that way?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's all so confusing."

"Well, let's figure this out. What do you think you did wrong that would make you ashamed?"

"I went to a frat party intending to drink, though I'm underage."

Eric nodded. "Going to a party, frat or not, is not wrong. You were invited. You were actually guilted into it by your roommate, but that's another issue we'll talk about. So, going to the party was not wrong, the drinking was, and I don't need to dwell on that because you are already remorseful about that. You know better. Don't do it anymore. Enough said. The real question is, why did you intend to drink? Just for the fun of it? For the buzz? Or something else?"

She looked down as she thought. "I don't know, I guess, well, I guess I was feeling sorry for myself."

"About what?"

"Jackie had me convinced that Three couldn't possibly have any real feelings for me. That, like, where I come from, the life I'm used to, it wouldn't jive well with what Three is used to, and he couldn't be interested

in someone so plain and simple as me. He was born rich, privileged, spoiled, and I eat ramen noodles for dinner. And..." she trailed off.

"You said Jackie *had* you convinced. Past tense. Yet it sounds to me like you might still feel that way."

She looked up, surprised. Blinked. "I don't know what I feel."

"Yes you do. Say it."

"Am I– am I back to thinking I don't deserve someone as wonderful as Eric?"

"That's what it sounds like to me."

"I'm sorry. I know we've already covered this subject."

Eric chuckled. "Well, Jordan, sometimes it takes some reinforcement to really integrate something, so don't apologize."

She nodded.

"Let me help with some more reinforcements. My wife and I are happily married and very much in love. When I met her, I was financially very well off, halfway to my first billion, while she was struggling to keep gas in her car and working two jobs. Sound familiar?"

Jordan nodded again, her eyes wide with surprise.

"When Shelley first came to this house she told me she couldn't even conceive living this way. Those were her exact words."

"Well, I feel the same way," Jordan said with a nod.

He smiled at her. "Like you, like your mother, Shelley worked very hard all her life. She struggled to keep a roof over her kids' heads and food on the table. She cleaned other people's homes along with working a full-time job. On top of that, she was taking TaeKwonDo lessons at a local YMCA to try to better herself and to try to empower herself, because she'd been sexually assaulted and was struggling with dealing with the aftermath of that."

"Wow. I didn't know that."

He nodded. "If Shelley hadn't stepped up to take that martial arts class, I never would have met her. But she felt motivated or prompted to do that because she and I meeting was part of God's plan, and it happened perfectly. Shelley's lack of money was what made her strong. She was not spoiled, or pampered. She was sweet, and kind, and took nothing for granted. She worked hard, she was full of love and compassion. She was smart and funny. She was perfect."

Jordan smiled. "She is such a sweet lady."

"She is the best and I love her with my whole soul. And Jordan, the qualities I saw in her are the same qualities I see in you."

Jordan looked down.

"And I know young Eric sees those same qualities. His interest in you is because he sees you for who you are. He doesn't feel sorry for you. He sees an unspoiled, strong, powerful young woman. One who's been traumatized, just like my Shelley had been, yes, but that doesn't make you less in his eyes. And you come from humble beginnings. All of that makes

you more in his eyes. He thinks you are remarkable. He admires you. He respects you."

"But, I feel so ashamed that I broke down last Sunday when my stepfather accosted me. I totally broke down. How weak is that? And then I had to be rescued from a stupid frat party. Eric must think I'm a total loser."

"You broke down from trauma that you'd never addressed. No one can fault you for that. So, let me be sure of this, you are worried that Eric seeing you be frightened will make you less in his eyes?"

"Maybe."

He smiled. "Well, it doesn't. Jordan, men, real men, have an innate need to take care of and protect women. There's nothing wrong with you stirring up that need in him. He doesn't see you as less. He knows, and you should know, that people don't go through life on a steady, calm, stream. The waters get rough. The waves swell and crash. We have ups and downs, some small, and some huge. These things don't make us less. These things make us strong. They're good for us. You handled yourself well when your would-be rapist accosted you again. You stood up to him. I'm proud of you. Young Eric is proud of you. He told me so."

"He did?"

"Yes. Like I said, our family communicates on a regular basis. I encourage it."

She smiled.

"Now, before we adjourn, I'd like to correct something you said Jackie told you. She said that young Eric was spoiled. Do you believe that?"

"Not really. He seems like a sweet, humble guy. But, I mean, he is rich, right? And he is privileged, right?"

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "He is blessed. Yes. He has always had what he needed, though not always what he wanted. His father has been very careful to make sure that privilege is earned in some way, and that whims are not indulged. He could be spoiled, many people who are blessed with so much can be. Yet, in the Bible it says, '...everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.' So, along with the privilege young Eric has received, a great burden has been placed on his back.

"It also says in the Bible that the 'love of money is the root of all evil and it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter into heaven.' Another huge burden. Young Eric does not love money. He doesn't live for money. He lives to do God's will. He lives to serve. Our whole family believes that. Live to serve. We have been blessed with much and we carry a great burden to make sure we don't get caught up in the pleasures of the world. If we lost it all tomorrow, we would still strive to serve God's children and to do God's will and to carry whatever cross we must bear.

"Young Eric wakes early in the morning, prays, meditates, works out,

trains, takes care of his own business, takes care of family business, and takes care of anyone God puts in his path. He works until he falls into bed exhausted, and then he gets up the next morning and does it again. Does that sound like someone who is spoiled?"

Jordan shook her head. "No. It sounds like the perfect man."

Grandmaster Kino laughed. "Well, he's not perfect. There was only one perfect man. Still, we all strive to be as close to perfect as possible. We have to be careful to set a good example. We can't afford to preach one thing and live another way. We cannot be hypocritical. We must walk a very straight line."

Jordan nodded. "Much is expected," she quoted.

"Right. For example, I guess you've heard of the miracle that just occurred in our lives just a few weeks ago. I've spoken with Jesus. He says there is more for me to do here. He gave me my life back. What will I do with that? Take a vacation? Sleep until I'm not sleepy anymore?"

She smiled. "No, you take time to counsel a foolish young girl."

He chuckled. "A smart young lady, completely worthy of my time."

Her eyes moistened. "Are you allowed to take any time for yourself?"

He nodded. "Of course. I take my rest in joyful things." He glanced at the large clock on the wall. "Like, in a few minutes we're gonna pack up my beautiful children and go see Taylor play ball. And maybe, when I'm there, I'll find someone I can serve. This past Tuesday while I was at Bayside High, I had a young man approach me and ask me to speak a few words on a video for him to take to his mother who was in a car accident and is now paralyzed. She used to take classes at one of our studios. She was a yellow belt. So I did. And I got her contact information and I'll make an appointment to go see her. That's how we stay in service."

"That's beautiful. And will you go to all of Taylor's games?"

"I'll try. It's her senior year. It's the only time she's played a sport. It's important to her, and she is important to me and I need to show that, and be in service to her."

"I love that. You know, I think I'm not just in love with Three, I'm in love with your whole family." Her eyes went wide. "Oh! Oh shoot, I really didn't mean to say that. It just popped out."

He smiled. "Like it wasn't completely obvious."

She blushed.

"Well, I guess we better get going," he said. "And, by the way, I'd like you to get me your softball schedule. We'll be watching you too, Miss Jordan Brooks."

"I will, and I'd be so very honored to have you come watch me play."

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Still September 19th, Thursday Evening

Jordan walked slowly out to Three's car as they left the Casa Latina. She started to get in but he grabbed her arm and pulled her to him, leaning

her against the car.

She looked down at his strong hand holding her arm. He let go.

"Hmm, maybe we should talk a minute."

She nodded. "Okay."

"First, you're awfully quiet. Are you feeling okay?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"Are you angry with me?"

"No, why would you say that?"

"Because of the look you gave me just now when I grabbed your arm."

She smiled. "Oh. Sorry. It just made me think about Sunday when Peter grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the car."

"I wasn't trying to be rough with you. I just wanted to be close to you."

"I know that. It was just a flash. No big deal. And it reminded me of Taylor right before her game started."

His brow creased. "What about Taylor?"

"Right before the game, Lance, the quarterback guy, he walked up and grabbed her arm to get her attention."

"Yes. I know."

She smiled. "Oh, I know you know. I looked around at your family, ya know, to see if anyone was gonna do anything."

"And?"

"And you, your dad, Grandmaster Kino, Agent Ward, and Cam were all standing, like, at attention, all very still, all watching intently."

Eric shrugged. "Alert and ready."

"It was cool, that's all. I felt so much, I don't know, power I guess. You guys are all so very powerful."

Young Eric ran one finger up her arm to her shoulder, to her cheek. "That should make you feel ultra powerful then, because you can control me with just a look."

She giggled. "Right."

"I was relieved though, that Lance was actually apologizing to Taylor. I was watching her face very closely. When she smiled and offered her hand to him, I breathed a sigh of relief."

"Yes, you all did," Jordan said. "It was kinda cute. And then, when he came over to your dad and apologized. I mean, that took guts."

Eric smiled. "Yeah it did. And that was good on him. So, is that what you've been thinking about?"

"Not just that. I really enjoyed watching Taylor play. She's a force to be reckoned with. I'm glad they won, though it seemed like an easy win. And I was glad that your mom livestreamed it. I mean, for Gabe. He's really in love with her."

Eric nodded. "He seems to be."

She sighed. "And I've been thinking about things your grandfather and I discussed today, which will remain private."

"Okay. I understand."

"So, why did you stop me from getting in the car?"

"Well, I need to know our plans and I have a suggestion."

"Our plans?"

"Yes, like, where am I taking you? Do you need to go back to your apartment—and—um, would you consider staying with me for the weekend?"

Her mouth dropped open. "Oh! Well, I was gonna go home on Saturday and Sunday and spend some time with my brother and sister and mom. See if they need anything."

"Okay, well, let me throw this out. You were gonna come see me train tomorrow, right?"

"Yes."

"So, stay the night tonight and come spend the whole day with me tomorrow. I know it may be boring just watching me train, but you could participate a little and learn some stuff at the same time. There's gonna be a group of Kino black belts come in and they are gonna work with me, and Granddad is gonna use my training to teach them, so that may be interesting. And then, you can spend the night again, and we can go together to see your family. Have that dinner your mom said she'd cook me maybe, take the kids to the park. Then, go to JoJo's game. Maybe your brother and sister would like to come to the game. And then, you could spend the night again and you could come to church with us on Sunday. Maybe your family could come too, or maybe if they don't want to, they could come to Sunday dinner at our house. I mean, I know this is last minute, but it sounds like it could be a lot of fun. And Jamie would love to meet my father, right?"

"Yes he would. And my mother would love to meet your mother."

"That sounds like you're considering it."

"I mean, I don't see a good reason to turn it down. Except, I need to get some clothes from my apartment, and I'll need to call my mother and see if she had any plans. Sometimes she caters for people."

"So call her," Eric said excitedly.

Jordan smiled. Pulled out her phone. Called her mother.

The phone rang five times before it was answered.

"Hello."

Jordan drew a sharp breath then frowned. "What are you doing answering my mother's phone?"

"Your mother is busy doing up the dinner dishes and her hands are wet. She asked me to grab it. What do you want?"

"Put her on the phone."

"What do you want?"

"I want to speak to my mother. Now put her on the phone!" she yelled.

Young Eric motioned for her to give him the phone. She shook her head. He frowned at her. She did however, put the phone on speaker.

"You tell my mother right now that it's me who called and put her on the phone."

"You don't give me orders, little girl."

"Mr. Perez," young Eric said sternly. "I suggest you put the phone down and go get Mrs. Perez, and tell her that Jordan wants to speak with her right now, because if I have to drive down to the house just so that Jordan can speak with her mother, there is gonna be hell to pay."

"Are you threatening me, you little punk?"

"Yes."

There were several moments of silence on the other end. "Fine, I'll put her on, but let me tell you something, you rich, spoiled little punk. One day we're gonna come face to face and you're not gonna think you're so high and mighty then."

Eric smiled. "I look forward to it."

Eric nodded at Jordan. "Mute the phone."

She did. "Don't tell your mom our plans yet. Just talk to her and keep her on the phone as long as possible. I'll explain in a minute."

Jordan nodded. Took the phone off mute. "Mom?...Yes... Hi... Well..."

Young Eric pulled his phone and called Jason. "What's up, Eric?"

"Uncle Jason, do you have any agents in the area of Jordan's mother's house? Or some police friends you can call? Cuz if you go right now, Peter Perez is there."

"I'm on it." Jason hung up.

Eric put his phone away and listened to Jordan talk to her mother.

"Well actually, Mom, I called because I have to ask you about some plans I'm making, but I don't want to talk to you about them when that POS is standing there listening to your call. And I know he is, Mom, because I know him and I know you're intimidated by him and I really wish you didn't have to even deal with him." She stopped, closing her eyes in frustration as she listened to her mother defend the man who tried to rape her own daughter.

"He hasn't changed, Mom. He isn't sorry. He still wants to do what he intended that day. He wants to do worse than that. He wants to hurt me, Mom. I know... I just know that's how... Listen to me... Last Sunday when I left, he was waiting for me... No, I'm not mistaken.... No, he didn't leave, he just moved the car... because he grabbed me, Mom. He threatened me... Because I didn't want to worry you about it because you have enough to worry about. Look, I know he's standing right there listening. Call me back when he leaves... Mom... Do you hear me? Call me back when he leaves. And don't let him in again. I mean it... Okay, call me back." She ended the call. Looked slowly up at Eric.

He pulled her to him and held her close. She was trembling. "Okay, babe, you're okay. Deep breath. Good." He put his hands on either side of her head. "Father, give her healing and peace, in Jesus' mighty name."

Almost immediately her body stopped shaking and she relaxed. She looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

He smiled at her. "Let's head to your apartment to get what you need while we wait for your mother to call you back."

She nodded.

Fifteen minutes later, it was Jason who called young Eric. "Accept call," Eric said. "Did you get him?"

"No. I sent the Hillcrest police. They were the closest. They got there pretty fast but he was gone. Ask Jordan about the description of the car he was driving again. Is she sure about the make and model?"

Jordan nodded. "I'm not really that sure. I'm sorry. It was a strange color. Almost kind of pink and tan. I'm pretty sure it was a Chevrolet, because of the symbol. Off to the right I thought it said, Nova, but yeah, I could be wrong."

"There is no car registered in his name. So it has to be he's borrowing it from someone. Any guess who that might be?"

"No. I have no idea who would lend him their car. I don't know any of his friends. Surprised he has any."

"If only we could get a tag number. There are close to twenty thousand Novas registered in California."

"Oh my goodness, I just remembered," Jordan said. "When he was there last Sunday, I took a picture of his car, thinking I could use it to prove he was there threatening me."

"Could you shoot that to Eric, please, and he'll send it to me."

"Yes, sir. I'll do it right now. Sorry I forgot."

"No worries, Jordan. Our brains do funny things during traumatic times. I'm hanging up, you kids be safe. Send that pic."

Jordan sent the pic just before her mother called her. Young Eric listened as Jordan made plans for the weekend with her mother, and then, at the end of the conversation, she softly reprimanded her mother for not standing up to Peter Perez. Her sweet mother apologized. It was obvious to Eric that she was very afraid of the man and that she was used to trying to please people and placate people, including him and including Jordan. He thought he might share that information with his grandfather to see how that situation could be handled, and healed.

Young Eric forwarded the picture to Jason. They went to Jordan's apartment intending to gather some clothing for the weekend. But when they went in, her roommates were there.

Colton was simply glad Jordan was okay and hugged her. "Oh Jordan, when Coach told us what happened to you I was so worried."

Jackie, was not quite so warm. "You left me at that party," Jackie accused. "And then I come home and find out you've gone to stay at your rich boyfriend's house. How is that supposed to make me feel?"

Jordan's silence and look of puzzlement on her face was what made Eric

step in.

"You mean, you're glad she's okay, and you wonder who would put something in her drink, and you're sorry that you convinced her to go to a party where someone planned on getting her drunk enough to give up her virginity without a fight? I'm sure that's what you meant to say, right?"

Jackie stood glaring at him. Then suddenly her face softened. "I am sorry that you had a bad night, Jordy. Really I am."

Jordan nodded. "It's over. I'm over it. But I *am* wondering, Jackie, who told those boys that I'm a virgin? How did they know?"

Jackie looked astounded. "You don't think I did, do you? You actually think that I set you up?"

"It crossed my mind. Because just a little earlier I told you that I was a virgin."

"And I told you I wasn't surprised. And I can't believe you think I'd actually set you up to what? To be raped by a bunch of frat boys?"

"Did you?"

"No! Gosh, Jordan, I may not be the greatest friend, mostly because I'm all about me, but I wouldn't do that, and I'm really hurt that you would think that. I wanted to get close to Allen Cooper and I didn't want to go alone. And I accomplished that."

"At my expense. You didn't want to go alone, and then you had no qualms leaving *me* alone while you went to do your thing with Allen Cooper. Did you have any idea that I was incapacitated?"

"I knew you were drunk. I figured you could take care of yourself. I mean, you are a big, strong athlete, right?"

Jordan just shook her head.

"Look, Jordy, I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't know you'd been drugged. I didn't have anything to do with it. I hope we can get past this."

Jordan sighed. "It's fine, Jackie. Anyway, I'm here to get some things because I'm staying the weekend with Three."

She left Eric in the living room and went to her room.

Jackie smiled at him. He sighed. There was nothing more to say. She was a narcissist, and had said so herself just a moment ago. She's all about 'me.' Strangely, he believed her. He didn't think she set Jordan up. Why would she? What would she get out of it? And if she didn't, who did? It could be that they saw a beautiful girl and decided to go after her. But they knew she was a virgin. Or maybe not. Maybe they simply assumed she was an innocent.

It didn't take Jordan long to gather what she needed for the weekend. Once they were back in the car, Eric was quiet as he mulled some things around in his head. Finally he spoke, but not to Jordan.

"Call Uncle Joey."

"Hey, guy," Joey said. "Whatcha got?"

"Hey, Uncle Joey. Listen, we won't need Agent Trout until Monday

morning after Jordan's practice. She's gonna stay the weekend with me and before you say anything, she's in the car with me."

Joey chuckled. "Got it. Hey, good try on Peter Perez. We were so close. From what Mrs. Perez told the police, they missed him by about five minutes. And now that we have a tag number, they're already headed out to the registered address. Fingers crossed. Now, Eric, I have to say, for the future, if Jordan had told her mother what happened, her mother could have told the police when she made the dinner appointment with Perez and they would have him."

"Maybe. Except, if Mrs. Perez had known that he accosted Jordan, she may not have made the appointment."

"Maybe, not. But we could have asked her to make an appointment if he called her. Just remember, communication is the key."

"Yes, sir."

The call ended and immediately Eric called his mother.

"Hey, honey, you on your way back?"

"Yes, ma'am. So, there's been a little change of plans. Jordan is gonna stay the weekend with us. On Saturday, we're gonna go spend some time with her mother and siblings. Jordan's mom is gonna feed us an early dinner. Then they are all coming to see JoJo's game, so we need to use some of the extra tickets."

"Even Jordan's mom?"

"Yes, is that okay?"

"Yes, of course! I think that's awesome that she wants to come."

"Good. And then, they are all gonna stay the night at our house and go to church with us on Sunday."

"Wonderful!"

"Yep. And then, uh, I invited everyone to stay for Sunday dinner."

"Oh! Well, that's no problem either, but it will be at Grandma's house, not ours."

"Okay. Will you let Grandma know?"

"I'll be happy to do that. Sounds like an interesting weekend."

"Yep, I'm pretty happy about it."

"I bet. Bye honey. See ya soon. Drive safe."

"Bye, Mom."

He smiled, glanced at Jordan. "Okay. I think we've got it all planned."

Jordan nodded.

"You okay?"

"Yes. Just thinking about something."

"What's that?"

"Well, yesterday, about this time, so about twenty-four hours ago, in a drunken stupor, I told you I loved you."

He smiled. "I thought you didn't remember that."

"I didn't, but you told me I did."

"Oh, yeah, that's right."

"And then, you told me you're glad I said it because you love me too."

He nodded. "I did say that. And I meant it."

"And in the past twenty-four hours, you haven't kissed me one time, except maybe on the cheek."

"I haven't?"

"Nope. And it seems like when two people tell each other that they love each other for the first time, there should be like, a huge makeout session at the very least."

He nodded. "It does seem that way."

He turned on his blinker, turned off the highway, pulled into a gas station around the side of the building, put the car in park, leaned over the center console and kissed her. Long. Slow. Sensual.

Jordan sighed when he finally pulled away and smiled at her. "So, is that better?"

She shook her head.

He put his arm around her, pulled her to him, and kissed her hard.

When he let her go, he shook his head. "Nope, this is not comfortable." He got out of the car, came to her side, pulled her out of the car, leaned her back against the door, pinned her there with the length of his body and kissed her deeply.

She moaned. He did too.

He pulled away, gazed into her beautiful gray eyes, and dove right back in. Breathing hard now, he forced himself to back away. He opened her car door. "That'll have to hold us for a few minutes, because making out at night in a suburb of Los Angeles on the side of a gas station is kind of a dangerous situation, and I don't like the idea that I put us in a dangerous situation. Maybe you can sneak into my room tonight and wake me up."

She giggled as she got back in the car. "Or, even better, maybe you can sneak into mine."

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September 20th, Very Early Friday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric's phone alarm rang and he quickly shut it off. The beautiful creature sleeping beside him stirred. He turned back to her, nuzzled her neck. She sighed. He'd come to her room. It didn't seem gentlemanly to make her come to him. That's how he rationalized it anyway. She turned to face him.

"What time is it?"

"Five."

"Why is your alarm set for five?"

"Because I have to be dressed, proteined and on the beach with my family for our morning workout by six."

"Umm, sucks for you," she murmured.

He chuckled. "Naw, it actually doesn't suck. It's awesome. I love this

morning time with the family, and also, it's another day, I mean, another day I get to try to get it right."

She raised her head. "Get what right?"

"Life. Can I do better than yesterday? What can I do today to help someone? But today is so much more exciting than usual, because I get to spend it with you."

She smiled up at him and he kissed her gently.

"So, good morning, Jordan."

"Good morning. This is wonderful isn't it?"

"What?"

"Waking up next to each other. Knowing we can stay together all day."

"Yes it is. Absolutely wonderful."

She sighed. "So, Three, do you think your family would let me crash your beach party this morning?"

He rose up. "Wow! Yes of course! Would you like to join us?"

"Yes. I think I'd really like to experience your life for a day and try to participate in any way I can."

"Man, Jordan, I just fell in love with you all over again."

She smiled. "Ditto. So, what's the first thing you're gonna do?"

"I'm gonna take a quick shower, just to wake me up, dress in clothes to exercise, then kneel down and pray before I leave my room, but, like, we could get dressed and I'll come back in here and we could pray together."

"That sounds great. Well, let's get a move on," she said.

"First things first." He rolled on top of her, pinned her arms above her head and kissed her soundly. "Okay. See ya in fifteen."

She gasped. "Fifteen?" She rolled out of bed. "Get out of here."

Laughing he left the room, but his father was in the hall, just coming out of Taylor's room.

"Oh, hey, Dad. Good morning."

Ricky nodded. "Good morning, son." He paused and sighed. "Ya know, you're playing with fire."

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. But nothing happened."

Ricky smiled. "Nothing, huh?"

Eric grinned, shrugged. "Is Taylor okay?"

"Yes. I just wanted to make sure she was getting up." He headed toward the stairs. "See ya on the beach."

Eric dashed into his room, showered, dressed, made his bed, and made his way back to Jordan. She was just putting on her shoes.

He smiled at her. Her hair was wet. Her face shone. Her bed was made.

Jordan finished putting on her shoes, stood and came to him. He took her hands in his. "You smell good," he said.

"You do too. So, what now? How do you do this?"

He knelt down on the plush gray and white rug. "Come kneel here in front of me so I can hold your hands while we pray."

She knelt down, held her hands out to him. She didn't think he knew it, but she was always amazed at how powerful he is. So strong. So confident. Kneeling in front of him, his strong hands holding hers, it was hard to describe, but maybe it was like a oneness. She would never find this feeling with another guy; she was sure of that.

He looked into her eyes. "I'll say the prayer, unless you want to."

"You say it," she said immediately.

He smiled. Closed his eyes. "Dear Father, wow, Father I feel so close to You this morning. So, Jordan and I are kneeling before you today, first to thank You for another day to serve You in some way and for another day to love each other. Father, thank You for bringing us together. I'm so grateful for Jordan. I think she feels grateful for me too."

"I do," she whispered.

He smiled. "So, Father, we are so blessed and we just want to thank You for all that we have. We want to do Your will today, we want to serve You today, so please place in front of us anything You want us to do, or anyone You want us to help. We love You. Jordan may not know it yet, so I pray You will touch her today and help us both to build a closer relationship to You. Jesus, we're so grateful for You and we love You. Please stay by our side this day and lead us and guide us. Help us to be strong. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

He opened his eyes. She was staring at him.

"That was beautiful," she said softly.

"When Jesus touches your heart, it's always a beautiful thing."

He stood, helped her up. "We gotta go. I have to get a protein shake in me before I hit the beach."

They ran downstairs, made a giant smoothie filled with protein and vitamins and supplements, raw milk, raw honey, and free-range eggs. "Everything has to be of high vibration," he explained to her. "What you put in your body can actually help you to be closer to God."

Jordan raised her eyebrows. "You are amazing, Three."

He smiled. "Whew, I'm glad you said that, because I was thinking you might just think I'm totally weird."

"I could think that, but obviously, one only has to look at your family and realize that the formula you guys are using actually works."

"It seems to help, and of course, Jeffy is a huge part of that."

"Exactly why I'm studying her protocols."

"Get that smoothie down. We have to be on the beach in three minutes."

Taylor came rushing into the kitchen. "Hey! Good morning you two! Jordan, are you coming down to the beach with us?"

Jordan nodded as she swallowed a mouthful of her drink.

"So awesome! Eric, can I have a swallow of your smoothie? I'm running late."

He handed her his glass. She took several swallows. Handed it back. He

finished it off. "Let's go."

The three headed down to the beach.

Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams stood holding hands and standing face to face, speaking softly to each other. They both turned as the kids joined them.

"Good morning," Bree said. "Jordan, so nice to have you join us. Well, family enjoy yourselves." She started back to the house.

Young Eric smiled at the puzzled look on Jordan's face. "She doesn't do martial arts," he explained.

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "She's never been interested."

Jordan's brow creased. "I find that absolutely fascinating that the wife of Ricky Kino isn't interested in the martial arts."

Eric laughed.

"Jordan, just do your best to imitate today," Ricky said. "If you can't keep up, there's no shame in taking a rest."

Jordan nodded, wondering what they were about to do.

It started out with some beautiful, slow, deep stretching, then moved into a slow-moving Tai Chi. She'd seen that before in movies. Then it got harder. Beginning with forms, and then practicing punches and kicks. Ricky helped her as he told the others what to do. After what seemed like hundreds of kicks she was breathing hard, but refused to drop out. She was pouring sweat, her side hurt. She looked over at Three and Taylor and they didn't seem to even be breathing heavy. Finally, they all ran several wind sprints, then stood together in a circle while Ricky Kino prayed over his family. As soon as it was over, Jordan sank to the ground.

Young Eric came to her and knelt in front of her. "You okay?"

She couldn't speak but nodded her head.

"Okay, good, because we gotta go. I'm due at the studio in thirty minutes."

"Well, I gotta go get ready for school," Taylor said as she approached. She hugged Jordan. "It's so awesome having you here. It's kinda like having a sister."

"Have a good day at school," Jordan said breathlessly.

Eric pulled Jordan to her feet. "Gonna make it?"

She nodded. "You people don't mess around, do ya?"

He laughed. "Sure we do. Or have you already forgotten last night."

She giggled.

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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 Seventeen

September 20th, Friday Afternoon
Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

Jordan didn't think she could be more impressed with Three after watching him train *last* Friday. But today was proving that notion wrong. He was like, superhuman. Do all fighters actually train this hard? Besides all that, she had to remember he'd already had what she considered a difficult workout on the beach with his father. Of course, neither Three nor Taylor had seemed too affected by the earlier workout. She shook her head. It was amazing. Today, not only was Grandmaster Kino here, but Ricky too. And she'd been told that a lot more people would be arriving soon. It was a big day and there would be video taken to use as teaching for the Kino schools.

The weights Three was just lifting clanged down as he dropped them onto the floor. He was breathing hard. He wiped his brow with the towel his father handed to him. He was told to hydrate and he rose slowly and walked to where he'd placed his water bottle.

Ricky motioned her over to him. She rose and came quickly. He smiled at her. "While we give young Eric a rest, wanna show me how much you can bench?"

She smiled nervously. "Okay, but it's not much."

"Whaddya wanna start with?" he asked. "What's your max?"

"I'm up to one-eighty."

"Good job," Ricky complimented. "So, let's start with one-sixty and see how that goes." He loaded the weights.

Young Eric watched as Jordan stretched out her arms, then lay back on the bench. She reached up, grabbed the bar and pressed out ten while his father spotted her.

"Good job," Ricky said. He added more weight. Let her rest for one minute. Nodded.

She lay back and pressed out ten at one-seventy.

He repeated the process for one-eighty. Then one-eighty-five, then one-ninety, but she only got four before she gave out.

He nodded. "Great job, Jordan."

She rose, smiling. "Well, don't know how I did that, but cool!"

"Keep going like that and you're gonna be blowing those girls away at the plate."

At that moment several more people arrived at the studio. They went

straight to the locker rooms and changed into uniforms. They all wore black belts. Ricky, Grandmaster Kino and young Eric all walked around to shake their hands. Then more arrived, and more, and soon it seemed like fifty more people were there. Some ready to train, it seemed, and others just spectators, and still others with recording equipment.

Young Eric came over to speak to Jordan. "So, good job on the bench."

She smiled. "Well, it's not double my body weight like you, but it's the best I've ever done, so thanks. So, what's about to happen here?"

He drew a deep breath. "Well, all of these guys study martial arts at our studios all across California. They're all black belts. And they're all here to beat me up."

Jordan's brows rose. "Um, I don't think I like this game."

He chuckled. "Well, it's all for a good cause. It will help me to get stronger, and it will help them to learn. Watch Granddad. Listen to what he says. He is a really good teacher. They're all here to learn from the best, and he is the best."

Jordan nodded. "Aren't you tired?"

"A little. But that's good too. When someone has to fight, it's not always the opportune time. They may be exhausted, which is actually often the case. So, learning to fight when I'm tired, learning to somehow dig deep and give it my all, that's what I'll try to do today. Against multiples."

"What is multiples? Oh, you mean like, fighting more than one person at a time?"

"Right. So, if I train and learn to fight two or three or more people at one time, then when I'm in the ring and fighting just one person, it almost seems easy."

She nodded. "But, if you get hurt, Grandmaster Kino will stop the fight, right?"

He smiled. "Are you worried about me?"

"I guess I am."

"Well that's sweet, but don't worry. I'll survive."

Young Eric was called to the center of the mats and the training began. Jordan watched, trying to keep from biting her nails.

One of the black belt men was chosen to come and face young Eric. They bowed to each other. In only a few seconds, Eric dispatched him. Grandmaster Kino stopped, asked questions of the observers, brought the man back, had him show what he did and then told why young Eric responded how he did. They went over the sequence again. Then someone else was invited to the floor.

It went on, opponent after opponent. Jordan noticed that Three was finally starting to breathe hard. He was given a water break and his father toweled him off, and then he came right back.

Just when Jordan thought it was finally over, that he'd finally made it through all opponents, defeating all of them, the multiples started. Now, the

opponents were getting in shots, making contact. Still, Three was winning. He sparred against two, and then three, and then finally four. She couldn't believe how fast he was moving. He had to be exhausted. Then, suddenly, he was called on to fight singles again. The single opponents were being asked to use and demonstrate the lessons they'd learned.

Three was breathing hard, pouring sweat. The guy he was currently fighting, Jordan didn't like him. He seemed too happy to connect with Three, which he'd done several times now. He spun hard and his powerful kick caught Three right across his chest. Young Eric sank to his knees, gasping for breath his hands resting on his thighs. The opponent spun again.

"Halt," Grandmaster Kino said sharply.

The guy stopped. "Ah, come on, let me finish him," he said.

Jordan noticed a few people who were obviously uncomfortable with the disrespectful way the guy addressed Grandmaster Kino.

"He is finished," Grandmaster Kino responded firmly.

Young Eric's head bent.

"I just want to be able to say that I defeated the great Eric Kino the Third," the guy complained.

Grandmaster Kino frowned. "Is that what you think you did?"

Jordan looked around at the other black belts. They all shook their heads at the guy. Of course he didn't defeat Three. He'd just fought like thirty men, and then fought them again. This one guy did not defeat him.

The guy looked around, realizing he'd erred. "Um, no, sir. Sorry, sir, I guess I got in the zone and forgot what I was doing."

Jordan looked back at Three. He hadn't moved. She was worried about him. She looked at his father, and he didn't seem worried, so she relaxed.

"Stand, Eric," Grandmaster Kino commanded.

Everyone watched as young Eric struggled to get to his feet. No one helped him. They all just waited patiently. When he finally did, Grandmaster Kino commanded him to bow to his opponent. He did. His opponent also bowed. Then they turned and bowed to both Grandmasters in the room.

Everyone was commanded to sit while Grandmaster Kino went on to teach what was done well, what was done wrong. About that time, Bree arrived and came to sit next to Jordan.

"It's hard to watch, huh?" she whispered.

Jordan nodded. "I just want to go to him and hug him."

Bree smiled. "That tells me a lot."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you love my son."

Jordan smiled. "I do. I know we haven't known each other very long, but I am so in love with him."

"I'm glad. Well, the caterers are about to arrive with lunch. Wanna help me boss them around?"

Jordan smiled. "I'd love to."

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Young Eric smiled at his girl as they sat together on the floor and ate lunch. “So, whaddya think about the training so far today?”

“I think it was crazy. What you did, how you fought, you are amazing. And that last guy, he made me so mad.”

Eric chuckled. “Well, sometimes, we do get into the zone and all we want to do is finish someone off, meaning, knock them unconscious. I can’t blame him. He fought hard. Granddad protected me by bringing him out of it. No big deal.”

“You were pretty much unconscious.”

He shrugged. “Pretty close. I was having a hard time getting my bearings. I’ll have to work on that.”

She shook her head. She watched him wolf down another whole sandwich. He was honest and humble, and had no anger in him. He was such a good guy. “So, is the day over or do you have more training?”

“I have lots more to go. Cam and my uncles are coming in again. And Jason is sending some JETTs. They are trained to kill and so it will be great practice working against them.”

She reached out. “You have a little cut here, beside your mouth.”

He touched the spot. “Kiss it better?”

She did so softly.

Across the room, Grandmaster Kino smiled. They made a beautiful couple.

Jordan helped clean up after the large lunch. The morning’s opponents took their leave, and Three’s uncles showed up, as well as three JETTs. The men chatted for a while, allowing young Eric time to digest. And then Jordan sat in amazement as Three squared off against a whole other class of fighters. She could tell there was a difference, though she didn’t quite know how to define it. Maybe like the difference between a college football player and a pro. Similar. But different.

Grandmaster Kino instructed, pointing out things Three did poorly, making him work hard, and think hard. Again, as before lunch, he went at it until he collapsed in exhaustion.

Then there was some more instruction, with everyone there adding to Grandmaster Kino’s remarks. Finally, young Eric went to shower and dress.

Jordan checked the time. It was only 4:00. She looked up as Grandmaster Kino approached her.

“Hello, Jordan.”

“Hello, sir.”

“I understand you joined the family on the beach this morning.”

“Yes, I wanted to see what this ‘not spoiled’ rich boy did on a daily basis.”

“And what do you think so far?”

“Well, so far, I’m amazed. He does more in the first few hours of his

day, than most people do the entire day."

"Yes he does, and he's not finished yet. Though I'm gonna encourage him to be finished."

"What do you mean?"

"We worked him hard today. His body is exhausted. More so than a usual training day. He will not let that hold him back. My wish for him is to go home, have a meal and sleep until the morning. But he will probably want to take you to dinner, and who knows what else," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, maybe I can encourage him to take the night off."

"I came to ask you to do just that. If his body breaks down, he could get sick. He needs to rest."

"I'll take care of it. I don't want him to get sick."

"Good girl. And on another note, how are *you* feeling?"

She smiled. "I'm feeling pretty darn good."

He nodded. "I feel that you are. See me again next Tuesday?"

"Yes, sir, I look forward to it."

She smiled as Three came out of the locker room and shook hands with some of the people still hanging around, including his uncles. He turned and came toward her, making her heart do a little stutter. She was totally smitten with him.

"Hey," he said as he approached, took her hands and kissed her on the cheek.

"Hey. You were like, awesome out there today."

"I'm getting stronger. I have a long way to go though. Still, at least I haven't thrown up lately."

She giggled. "No, I think I did enough of that for the both of us."

He smiled. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I am, but I'm really tired. Do you think we could just grab something to eat back at the house?"

He nodded. "Of course."

He went to his grandfather, bowed, shook his hand, hugged him, thanked him, and they headed home. Once there though, plans changed.

Agent Ward was there, waiting on Taylor, who intended to go to the Brookside football game again. As soon as they walked in the door, Taylor began begging young Eric and Jordan to come with her. Jordan had to do some fast thinking and talking because she saw that Three was about to capitulate.

"Taylor," Jordan began. "How about just you and me, us girls go and have some girl time together at the game. We can be crazy silly without your brother rolling his eyes at us every few seconds. Three, you won't mind, would you?"

He frowned. "No, if that's what you'd like to do, you girls go ahead and have fun." He looked up at Agent Ward. "I told Joey that Jordan didn't need

an agent this weekend because she'd be with me. You'd have to watch out for her too, and you know her stepfather is trying to get to her."

"I think I can handle it," he said dryly. "Do you have a picture of her stepfather?"

"I do," Jordan said quickly. She pulled it up on her phone, got Agent Ward's number and sent it to him.

"Oh, this is just gonna be so much fun!" Taylor said.

"Well I need to change clothes," Jordan said.

"And eat," Eric said. "Both you and Taylor need to have something to eat before you go. You go change, I'll go see what's to eat."

"I can do that after I change," Jordan said.

He frowned. "Why, when I can do it while you change? Go."

She sighed. He was always in service. Rather than argue, she kissed his cheek and ran up to her designated room, quickly changed out of the yoga pants and sweatshirt she'd donned at 5:00 a.m. and into some jeans and a t-shirt.

Bree came into the kitchen while Eric was looking through the refrigerator. "Hi hon, if you're looking for something to eat, I will have dinner ready in about five minutes." She smiled. "Approximately."

Eric turned and smiled at his mom. "Oh, okay, so, what is it?"

"It's mom's potato soup that you all love so much and I'm about to make grilled cheese sandwiches to go along with it. Sorry, I didn't think you would be home for dinner or I would have planned something more elaborate."

"No, that's okay, Mom, Jordan was tired and wanted to come home, but now she's been sucked into going to the game with Taylor and I wanted her to eat something before they left. Some soup and sandwich would be perfect."

"Good, hand me that loaf of bread," she said. "And ask Agent Ward if he would like something to eat."

Eric did as his mother requested, and as usual, the agent declined.

It wasn't long before Jordan and Taylor and young Eric had all been fed and the girls left with Agent Ward.

Young Eric sighed. His father finally got home and joined them in the kitchen, grabbing his own bowl of soup as his mother made another sandwich for him. His father looked him over. "Hard day?"

Young Eric smiled and nodded. "Pretty tough."

"My father told me to tell you to eat and go straight to bed. Jordan will understand."

Eric smirked. "Well, Jordan just left with Agent Ward and Taylor to go to the football game. So, I guess I will go on to bed. I'm pretty tired."

Ricky nodded. "I'm proud of you son. You did a great job today. I think you're better than I was at your age."

Eric gave a soft laugh. "Yeah, right. Nice try. But I highly doubt that."

"Uh, I don't lie. So put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Uh, I don't smoke," young Eric countered, making his father laugh.

"Go to bed, son. Rest. I can tell you're tired. Did you know that you're slurring your words?"

"Am I?' He stood, put his bowl in the dishwasher. "Mom, thanks for dinner. Goodnight you guys."

Meanwhile, Jordan and Taylor were having a great time. They sat in the student section. Taylor introduced Jordan to her friends. They cheered, they sang, they screamed for Brookside. This wasn't a close game like the previous week's game. Brookside was a powerhouse, and they won this one easily. After the game, Taylor and Jordan waited for some of the team to join the kids in the stands. Lance came up. He was polite and still apologetic. He knew Agent Ward had his eye on him though. Taylor and Jordan both told the guys they played a great game. Finally, the group broke up and everyone either went home or out to grab a burger.

Taylor and Jordan decided to head home. It was 10:30 and Jordan was pretty tired. In the car Jordan listened to the FaceTime conversation between Gabe and Taylor. She smiled. They were so sweet and so in love.

"Just one more week, Tay," Gabe said. "One more week and I'll see you in Nashville. We'll dance together on live TV and then I'm coming to Cali to train for the MiniMart so I'll get to see you a lot. I don't know where I'll be staying, your house or Grandmaster Kino's house."

"I hope it's my house. I just need to be near you."

"I miss you, Tay. I need to be near you too."

Jordan smiled. She understood just how they felt, and she didn't know if she could endure a lengthy separation from Three. She was already to the point where she didn't want to ever leave him.

"Well, before you say anything more personal, let me just tell you that Jordan is here with me. We went to the game together." She turned the phone and Jordan smiled at the handsome Gabe Tanner.

"Hey, Jordan! Nice to see you again. How's Eric?"

"He's training hard. He's tired. The training they did today, he actually just collapsed with fatigue. I felt sorry for him. Like, thirty people beat him up."

Gabe laughed. "I understand. Guess I'm about to understand even more. Is he past the throwing up stage?"

"Yes, just barely."

"Well, ya know what they say, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

"Well he's getting really strong then."

"So, I'm glad you and Taylor got to spend some time together."

Taylor turned the phone back so she could see Gabe. "Oh, Gabe, she's so awesome. She's like having a sister. I just love her so much already."

Gabe chuckled. "You love everyone just so much, Tay. That's why I love you, just so much."

Jordan smiled and listened to their lovesick words the rest of the way home. At the house, they greeted Taylor's parents and headed upstairs to bed.

Once up in the hall, Taylor hugged Jordan. "Thanks so much for coming with me to the game. I had fun."

"I did too."

"So, are you gonna sneak into Eric's room?"

Jordan's mouth opened in surprise. She smiled. "Actually, I was thinking of doing just that."

"Just don't let my Dad catch you."

"What will happen if he does?"

"Well, nothing to you. But Eric will probably catch a long talk about responsibility and honor and respect, and then will be told it's his freewill to choose his path, and then to try to make good choices."

"Okay, well, do *you* think I shouldn't sneak into see him?"

"Oh, I think you should! How could you not with him right across the hall from you. I mean, I know you're in love with him, right?"

"Um, well, yeah I am."

"And usually you're up at your school, right? And he's down here, right? But tonight, he's right across the hall. How can you not take advantage of that?" She grinned, hugged Jordan, and told her goodnight.

Jordan blinked as the whirlwind went to her own room. Then she went into her room, showered, got in her pajamas and got in her own bed. But her eyes remained open. Because all she could think was, Three was right across the hall, all snug and warm in his bed, and she wanted to be close to him more than anything in the world. She scooted out of bed, opened the door of her room and peeked out. The coast was clear. She hurried across the hall and tried Three's door. It opened. She quietly came in and shut the door behind her.

She could hear his slow, even breathing. The sound moved something in her. His room faced the ocean side of the house and there was a small bit of light coming in the window. She could see the outline of his body. He was turned on his side, facing her. She crept close to the bed, slowly pulled the cover back and started to slip in beside him.

Suddenly he moved, in a split second he flipped her on her back, had his hand over her mouth and her body pinned down with his. But this wasn't playing. He was hurting her. His free hand moved to her throat. She tried to struggle, tried to scream but the sound was muffled.

He stopped and blinked several times. "Jordan?"

She nodded her head because she couldn't speak.

He moved his hand from her mouth. "Oh God, Jordan. I'm sorry. I was dreaming. Oh, baby, I'm so sorry."

She tugged on the hand that was still on her throat.

He moved it immediately, and she drew a sharp breath.

"Oh, babe, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he said again and again. "I didn't

mean to hurt you, Jordan. I was dreaming. I would never hurt you, you know that, right? Tell me you know that."

She nodded, trying to get the tears to go away.

"You're shaking, Jordan. Are you hurt? Did I hurt you?"

"No, I'm okay," she said softly.

He bent his head, touching his forehead to hers. "Babe, it was a dream. I train so much, I fight so much, I dream about it. I'm sorry. Tell me you understand."

"I do understand," she said.

"You're trembling."

"I know. It'll stop in a minute."

"I'm so sorry."

She drew a deep breath. "You don't have to keep apologizing. I understand what happened." She started to laugh. "Damn, Three, you're pretty scary."

He blew out a breath. "I never wanted you to see that or know that. I was so tired. I was so deep asleep."

"I get it, Three. No big deal."

"Hurting you is a big deal."

"I'm not hurt. Not permanently anyway," she said with a laugh.

He smiled. He was still on top of her, and he didn't want to move. He loved the feel of her body underneath his. He felt his body respond. Felt his heart speed up. He bent his head and kissed her. When he realized all he wanted to do was get his hand on her, he pushed himself off her and rolled to his back, breathing hard.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come in here," she began. "I just needed to see you, needed to be close to you."

"I need to be close to you too, Jordan. I'm glad you came in, except for the little show of dominance you just experienced."

"If that was a little show, I'd hate to see a big show."

He turned toward her. Put his hand on her face. "You are so beautiful. I want you. Lord have mercy on me, I want you bad."

"You have me, Three. I'm yours."

He pulled her close and kissed her passionately, then tucked her safely up under his chin. They fell asleep together in only a few minutes. And only a few minutes after that, it seemed, Eric's phone alarm went off.

Jordan groaned. "Is it really five already?"

"No. It's six. I was granted an extra hour today." He took her in his arms. "You don't have to join me if you don't want. I understand, believe me."

"But I *want* to join you. I'm so impressed by what you do every day, I just want to try to be like you."

He gave a soft laugh. "My grandfather would say, 'don't try to be like me. Try to be like Jesus.'"

She smiled. “Okay, I’ll try to be like Jesus. Though, I don’t know exactly how to do that.”

“You will eventually. But in a nutshell, Jesus did what He had to do, no matter how difficult it was, so I try to pick up my own little cross and carry it every day, but my burden is light compared to His. And it’s a good thing. So, like, waking up early and getting to work, that’s no big deal.” He rose from the bed. “I’ll be in the shower.”

She watched him go. Lord have mercy, he was a beautiful man. She got out of his bed, made it up for him, and hurried to her room to get ready.

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September 21st, Saturday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Breathing labored, Jeffy headed out of her bedroom, crossed the hall and knocked on her parents’ door. “Mom? Dad?”

Her father opened the door. “Well, good morning, baby girl, I was just headed downstairs. Whatcha need?”

She leaned over.

“Jeffy? What’s wrong? Are you going into labor?”

She shook her head. “No, sir. Where’s Mom?”

“Well, she’s probably downstairs having some alone time before we dive into getting the kids up. Why?”

Jeffy shook her head. “She’s not well. Daddy, please go find her.”

“Thanks, Jeffy. Watch the children for me, please.”

Eric hurried downstairs. When he didn’t see his wife in the kitchen, a little tingle of nerves started up his spine. He started to head downstairs, thinking maybe she was getting in an early workout, but glancing out the kitchen window, he saw her. Kneeling on the beach, bent completely over, her forehead touching the sand.

He headed out, asking for guidance as he approached his wife. She appeared to be praying, and he thought maybe he shouldn’t disturb her, but Jeffy had said she wasn’t well. Sighing, he approached her and placing his hand on her shoulder he knelt down beside her.

“Sweetheart,” he began. “What’s wrong?”

She looked up at her strong husband, who just a few weeks ago she thought was lost to her. She shook her head. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

He smiled at the classic answer. “I’m fine,” really meant, something is wrong but I don’t want to bother you with it, or, I don’t know how to tell you what’s wrong, and either way, somehow I’ll try to deal with it myself.

“Did I disturb your prayer?”

“No. You could never disturb me.”

“Okay. Then you won’t be mad if I tell you that I know something is wrong and I would like to help you.”

“I won’t be mad, Eric, but no offense, if I wanted to share whatever my problem is with you, I would have.” She turned and looked out to sea as the

early morning light began to reflect on the water.

"So, you're saying that we're *not* in this together right now?"

She turned and looked up into his face, sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what to tell you."

"You don't know what to tell me because you don't know how to tell me what's wrong? Or, you don't know what to tell me because you don't want to hurt my feelings when you say we are NOT in this together?"

He thought he might get a smile out of her for that, but instead she blinked up at him as her eyes welled with tears.

"Oh, Shelley girl, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry. I was teasing you."

She sniffed. "I know. We don't have time for a long discussion, Eric. I have to go get the kids up and get them dressed and make them breakfast. Their room is a mess because I was too tired to get them to put their toys away last night. I have so much to do, I can't sit here on the beach with you and talk about my feelings."

"I'll help you with all of those things, hon. Is that what's bothering you? You're tired and there's just too much to do?"

"No. No. I can't let that bother me. I'm so grateful that we have our new babies, that they're safe and sound here with us, the ones who weren't murdered," she added, her voice choking with emotion. "It doesn't matter how tired I am, I can make it. I'll suffer through."

His eyes narrowed. He sighed and shook his head.

"Am I confusing you?" she asked.

"Nope. Your words say so much more than you think they do." He took her hand. "What makes you think you should suffer through, without help?"

"I don't think I should, I'm just saying that I will do what I have to do."

"That sounds noble, sweetie, but it's not how you should face your day."

"Well, Eric, that's easy for you to say," she said shortly as she rose. "Excuse me but I have to get inside."

He rose and grabbed her hand. "Okay, I get that you don't want to share your feelings with me right now, but we *will* get to the bottom of whatever is eating at you. So, get ready. If you think I'm just gonna accept that you're okay and watch you put on a brave face as you walk through each day like some martyr, then you don't know me very well at all." His words were not said in anger, but firmly, so that she would know there was no getting out of this discussion.

She looked down at his hand holding hers. A clear message. He let her go and walked beside her up toward the house.

"I'll go wake the children," he said, moving toward the back stairs.

"Don't you have to train young Eric today?"

"I gave him the day off to spend time with Jordan's mother and siblings. I have the day with you until we have to leave for JoJo's game. Unless, you'd rather not go and instead, stay home and get some rest."

"Of course I'm going to JoJo's game. I wouldn't miss it."

Eric nodded. "Okay. And is Mickey coming to babysit again?"

"Yes, and Lindsey, who is a teenager that lives down the street from Mickey, is coming with her."

Eric nodded. "And we have an agent at the gate, but I might have Jason send someone else, to watch over the place while we're gone."

"Why? Is something going on?"

"No, just feeling protective, and I've learned to not ignore my feelings. I'll take care of it. I'm gonna go wake the kids. You relax."

Shelley shook her head. "Yeah, right."

Eric ran up the stairs and eased open the door to the children's room. Angelina was already awake. The beautiful child was sitting up, rocking her baby doll. She looked up at him and put a finger to her lips. He smiled and nodded.

He looked around the room. The balcony door was not only solidly locked, but completely blocked off by a large dresser. Two sets of bunk beds were to the left back corner, the heads of the beds meeting in the corner, where there was a climbing platform to go from one bed to the other.

Currently Noah slept in the one top bunk, and Abraham *and* Manny slept together in the other top bunk. Eric smiled at that. In the lower bed, just underneath where Noah slept, Nathaniel was sound asleep. Ever since young Eric had spoken with him Thursday, the newest little Kino had begun to open up.

Eric knew it was gonna be a bumpy road for a while. Nate didn't remember his first set of parents, Steffie and Max Allen. All he knew was Sandra Norton, who was not the ideal mother. Though her disability affected her brain, the rest of her body fell in sync with that. She was very overweight. She almost never went outside. She fed Nate a diet of processed foods, and highly sugared soft drinks, which was why the boy was a little overweight. As far as he could tell from what Nate said he ate, he'd almost never had a home-cooked meal made of fresh foods.

So, Nate was getting used to several new things. Healthy foods. Going outside to play in the sunshine. Learning to speak to other children, namely his siblings. Learning to deal with a paternal authority. And not watching TV. He wanted to argue and rebel. But when Eric took the time to explain things to his brilliant mind and asked Nate to mull it over and see if he could understand, it was a challenge he couldn't resist. He now understood about vitamin D and sunshine, about healthy food and why our bodies needed it, about the social construct of a family, and the importance of it, which brought them to the discussion of God. It was a lot. But Nate's mind was very much like Jeffy's and Eric and Shelley had experience dealing with her high genius mind. It was a challenge. But one they could meet.

Closing his eyes briefly and praying over his children, Eric nodded, smiled and moved forward.

"Good morning, Angelina," he said softly. "Are you hungry for some breakfast?"

"Daddy, you have to be quiet. Mawia is sweeping."

He didn't know she'd named her doll after her murdered sister. He nodded. "Sorry, little Angel," he whispered. "But it's time to wake up and start our day. Maybe if you put Maria in her cradle and cover her up, she'll stay asleep."

Angelina did as instructed.

Nate sat up.

"Good morning, Nate," Eric said with a smile, waiting to see if he would return the greeting like Eric taught him yesterday.

"Good morning, Daddy," Nate finally said.

Eric mussed his hair. "Good job. That gives me a wonderful feeling."

Nate smiled up at the man.

The other boys woke up and were each greeted. Abraham was commended on allowing Manny to come up and sleep on the top bunk with him.

"So, Manny," Eric continued. "Since Abraham was so kind to you last night, I wonder what you could do for him that would also be kind."

Manny frowned as he thought. "Um, Abe bwoke his truck. I could wet him pway wif mine."

Eric nodded. "That would be very nice. How do you think it will make Abe feel when he plays with your truck?"

"Uh, he will be happy."

"Do we care if Abe is happy?"

"Yes, we want evewyone to be happy."

"Right, because it's part of having love in our hearts, which is the most important thing. And we love our brothers and sisters, and we love our whole family. And I'm your father and I love you so very much. And your mom loves you too, so very much. Who loves Mommy?"

"I do," all five children said loudly.

"Good. So, Mommy is downstairs making you a delicious breakfast and we're gonna all go use the bathroom, get dressed, make our beds, pick up our toys, and put all the dirty clothes in this basket," he said as he grabbed the laundry basket from behind the closet door and placed it in the center of the room. "Angel, you go use the bathroom first. One, two three, go!"

He turned to see Jeffy standing in the doorway, smiling at him. "Aw, Daddy. This really brings me back to when I was little. I love you so much."

He smiled at his daughter. "I love you too, baby girl. And now here you are, standing there about to have a child of your own. This life has gone by in the blink of an eye. Who would've thought one day you'd be standing in our home, married, pregnant, and watching your five little siblings run around."

Jeffy sighed. "Yeah, Dad, life has been so strange. And these children

exist because of me in a way, because if not for me, you and mom wouldn't have been taken and your eggs and sperm taken. But Dad, ya know, I've been thinking. I mean, an evil person caused these children to be made. You don't think that would make them like, cursed, right?"

He sighed. "If a woman is raped and she conceives, should we kill the baby, because of how it was conceived?"

"No. Abortion is never the answer to anything. You know that and you know I feel the same way."

"The child is innocent, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"These children are mine and your mother's DNA. They are part of us. Do you think they're evil?"

"No, of course not."

"The man who manipulated our seed and eggs is of the darkness, but he cannot change our DNA into anything other than what it is. We belong to God, and He created our DNA, and that is what makes up my seed and your mother's eggs. Once God's, always God's."

"Jeffy, will you help me?" Angelina asked as she struggled to get her little butterfly shirt over her head, ending the conversation.

Jeffy moved forward to help her sister. Her tiny sister with the same parents. This tiny girl was completely innocent.

Eric helped Noah get his pants pulled up because he was struggling because the snap was closed.

Cam came to the bedroom door. "There you are Jeffy." He looked around at the children. "Good morning, kiddos."

"Good morning, Uncle Cam," they said.

No one bothered to tell them differently. They were explaining things to them slowly. They knew Jeffy was their sister. They didn't quite understand brother-in-law yet, so Uncle Cam it was until further notice.

"Who's gonna have an awesome day?" Cam asked loudly.

"We are," they all answered. It was the same question he asked them every day.

"Jeffy," he said softly. "I'm gonna have to meet you at the game. I may be late."

"Where's your assignment?"

"It's uh, on the border."

"What border? I mean there's Cali/Oregon, Cali/Nevada, Cali/Arizona— "

"The Mexican border. Baja."

"But I thought Jason wasn't gonna send you too far off while I'm pregnant."

"It's closer than Oregon."

Jeffy frowned. "Can I ask what's going on down in Baja?"

He shook his head. "No. And I gotta go right now."

She squeezed her eyes shut. Eric came and grabbed both their hands. "May God bless you both with peace and safety and bring you back Cam, alive. In Jesus' name."

"Amen," Jeffy whispered.

"Amen," Cam said loudly before he shook Eric's hand, kissed his wife, and left.

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3 John 1:4

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my
children are walking in the truth."

Chapter Eighteen

September 21st, Saturday Morning
Perez home, Hillcrest, California

Young Eric and Jordan drove up to the tiny house in Hillcrest at 11:00 AMnow is actually, th. They'd already worked out on the beach, a longer one than the day before since young Eric had been given the day off. They then had a delicious breakfast, showered again, dressed, and headed south. All of those activities so far had been peppered with kisses and hugs and murmurs of "I love you's."

The door opened before they could get to it, and Jamie came running out. "Hey, Jordan! Hey, Eric!"

Jordan held out her arms and her little brother ran to her and hugged her. He then looked over at Eric, who offered a hand. Jamie grinned as he proudly shook hands.

"You must be excited about our day," Jordan said.

"I am and Josie is too! And my friend down the street is too. He's gonna come up to meet you, Eric, cuz he doesn't believe that I know you."

Jordan looked up at Eric. "Oh, Three, I'm sorry."

He smiled. "It's okay. We'll show this friend that Jamie doesn't lie, right Jamie?"

Jamie nodded. They made their way inside. Josie ran to hug Jordan. Jordan hugged her a long time. When she finally had to pull her away, she frowned. "What's wrong, honey," Jordan asked.

The quiet girl looked up at Jordan and then at Eric. She didn't say anything.

"Josie, you wanna talk later, like, privately?"

She nodded.

Jewell Perez came in from the kitchen. "Well, hello, Eric Kino the third. It's so nice to see you again."

"You too, Mrs. Perez." He sniffed the air. "It smells really good in here. My stomach is already rumbling."

She laughed. "Good. I hope you have a good appetite because I'm making plenty of food. But what you smell right now is actually the dessert."

"It smells so good. What is it?"

"Buñuelos."

"I've never heard of it," Eric said.

Jordan laughed. "Mom says they're buñuelos. I say they're donuts."

"Well, whatever they are, it smells so good. Mrs. Perez, I hope you didn't go way out of your way just to cook for me."

She giggled. "Cooking is never out of my way. I love to cook."

She giggled like a little girl, Eric thought. She was such a sweet lady. Her giggle reminded him of Jordan. He turned toward the children. "So, guys, are you ready to go find a park that has a ball field, and maybe a basketball court?"

"Basketball? You didn't say anything about basketball," Jordan said.

He shrugged. "Well, when I was looking for my old glove I found my old basketball. I used to play a little and thought it might be fun, a little 2V2, ya know?"

"I like to play basketball," Jamie quickly put in before Jordan could veto the idea. "We play down at Cory's house all the time."

Eric smiled. "Cool. Mrs. Perez, what time do you want us back here to eat?"

"Oh, I guess between 3:30 to 4:00 would be good. Unless you get bored. Come on back anytime."

He smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

They loaded up into young Eric's BMW and headed out, but almost immediately, Eric decided to take a detour. "Hey, Jordan, do you mind if we make a short stop?"

"No, of course not. Hear that guys? We're gonna make a stop before we get to the park."

Jamie looked slightly disappointed, Eric saw in the rearview mirror, but he knew that would change in just a few seconds. He pulled into the strip shopping center across the main road from the neighborhood, drove to the far end of the long building and pulled up in front of a sleek store front, with Kino Martial Arts printed on the large glass window. There was a collective gasp.

Eric smiled. "I thought we could just run in real quick, see if Master Cook is in, get some information and see what it would take to get Jamie into the school on like, a scholarship. And Josie too, if she's interested. I think it would be really good for Josie. Martial arts instills confidence in kids."

"Can I come in with you?" Jamie said.

"Of course. You can all come in, or if you girls wanna wait in the car, you can."

"Oh, no, I don't wait in the car. I'm coming in. I wanna see how different this studio is than the one in Newport," Jordan said.

"Well, the one in Newport is one of our flagship studios and it's also one of the biggest. It was an old warehouse, that was converted into a small private school, who built the gym, and then when the school moved to a bigger place, my grandfather procured the building. So Newport is a great deal bigger than most all of the other studios. There's one other in New York that was also an old school."

He turned off the car. “Let’s go in. There might be a Saturday class going. We’ll just have to see.”

Eric held the door and let the three precede him. A woman in a white gi and a black belt smiled up at them from where she sat at a desk. She rose and nodded. “Hello there! Nice to see you all and what can I help you with?” She shook the kids’ hands, then Jordan’s and then looked into young Eric’s face as she shook his hand, and stopped, her mouth forming an ‘O.’ “Oh my goodness, Master Kino! Oh my. What are, I mean, um, how can I help you, sir?”

Eric smiled. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Erin Cook. Master Cook’s wife.”

“Mrs. Cook, we just wanted to get some information for my friends here. We were hoping to look into a scholarship for Jamie, possibly for Josie too if not now then down the road.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” She started gathering brochures. “Take these, but, Master Kino, my husband is in class right now,” she said nodding toward the class area. “He would be so honored to have you all come in and visit, even if just for a few minutes. And Mr. Jamie here could get a look at what a class is like. Please, would you consider stepping into the class?”

Eric looked at Jordan and the kids. “Whaddya say, guys? Can we spare a few minutes to watch the class?”

Jamie nodded, his eyes wide with excitement. Josie didn’t really say anything.

Jordan smiled, her eyes dancing because she knew young Eric was a little uncomfortable with the complete adoration Mrs. Cook was displaying. “Oh yes, *Master* Kino,” she mocked. “Let’s go watch the class. It’s a perfect opportunity.”

Eric frowned at her, then nodded at Mrs. Cook. “Okay, we’re in. Lead the way.”

They followed the woman to the class area. She opened the door. The class was currently divided into groups of four, with black belts holding kicking pads for the younger ones. Master Cook looked up at the intrusion and smiled at his wife.

“Master Cook,” she said. “You have some visitors.” She walked in and they followed her to the front of class.

Master Cook’s eyes widened in surprise. “Attention class,” he said loudly. They all immediately lined up and stood absolutely still. Master Cook moved forward and bowed to young Eric. “Master Kino, it’s an honor to have you visit us.”

Eric bowed. “The honor is mine.” He quickly looked him over. He was about thirty, Eric guessed. About six feet tall, short brown hair, thick, muscular. Looked ex-military. Eric offered his hand and Master Cook shook it. “Master Cook, I’m sorry for barging in. I only came by to see about possibly having this young man here attend your school. He’s a good friend

of mine and lives nearby. I apologize that I didn't make an appointment. It was a spur of the moment decision to swing in and check it out."

"No need to apologize, sir. We're glad you did."

"This is Jamie Perez," Eric said. "Jamie, this is Master Cook."

The man bowed to Jamie and Jamie bowed like young Eric had shown him last week. When he raised up he smiled at Eric, grateful that he knew how to bow.

"So, your kind wife invited us to watch class for a few minutes," Eric said.

The Master nodded, then turned to his class. They were waiting to find out who was visiting, though most of them already knew. They were all grinning, and there was a murmuring and pointing as each person spotted Eric and pointed him out to their friends.

There were parents sitting in chairs at the back of the class, and they too, were whispering and motioning. Jordan watched all this and realized, like Eric had once told her, it was not all fun being famous. She looked up at him. He had his head slightly bent, in a humble gesture.

"Attention, class," Master Cook said again, his brows arched as if he couldn't believe they would be undisciplined in front of this distinguished visitor. The class snapped immediately back to attention. "We have some visitors. As some of you have already realized, Master Eric Kino the Third is here. Everyone, please show him your respect."

"Turn." The entire class turned slightly to completely face Eric. "Attention." They became completely still, arms and legs straight and touching each other, toes pointing forward and their arms straight down at their sides. "Bow." The entire class bowed slowly and deeply.

Eric returned the honor, then straightened and spoke. "Hello, everyone."

"Hello, sir," they returned.

Eric smiled. "I'd like you to meet Jamie. He's a good friend of mine and lives nearby." He leaned over and whispered to Jamie.

Jamie bowed, and the class bowed to him.

"And this is Josie, another good friend of mine." He whispered to Josie and she bowed, and the class bowed to her.

He put his arm around Jordan. "And this is Miss Brooks, and she's my girl." The class chuckled and bowed to her. Jordan bowed to them.

"So, Master Cook," Eric said. "Please continue on with your class."

"Maybe, we'll do some forms for your friends there, and demonstrate some punches and kicks."

"I'll leave it to your discretion."

"Let me get some chairs for you," he said.

"Nonsense, we can just sit on the floor here."

"Please, sir, I couldn't let it get around that we didn't provide you with a chair."

Eric nodded, and some of the students grabbed four empty chairs and

brought them to the front of the class.

Master Cook swung the class into action, beginning with the youngest students doing their forms, then the next level, and so on up to the black belts, who were very impressive. Jamie was grinning from ear to ear.

Then the class was called to attention and Master Cook called out fighting sequences and the class demonstrated some punches and kicks. The young students who sometimes didn't remember their left from their right were gently corrected.

Eric decided after about twenty minutes, it was time for them to go. He rose, and Master Cook came to him. "Eric, thank you for stopping in. You've really made the day for some of these kids."

Eric stepped away from Jordan and the kids for a more private conversation. "My pleasure. You really made the day for Jamie." He leaned close to Master Cook and spoke softly. "He's had a hard time. Father went to prison, very limited finances. Let me know what he would require to audition for you, to gain access to a scholarship. Of course, if he doesn't pass, I'll pay his way. But either way, let's make this happen."

"I'll just give him a scholarship."

Eric shook his head. "Though I appreciate the sentiment, he has to work for it."

"I understand. Uh, Eric, some of my young teenage black belts are working extremely hard to try to be awarded with the opportunity to face Gabe Tanner in the coming Mini-MART. Would you consider staying an extra five minutes and demonstrating a special form or some sparring moves with them? It might really motivate them."

Eric sighed. "I'm not in uniform."

"I'm sure they'll understand. After all, sir, are we in uniform when called upon to actually fight?"

Eric smiled. "Ya got me there. Yes, I'll demonstrate a few sparring moves to use against Gabe," he said with a smile, thinking that Gabe would appreciate the humor of the situation.

"Class," Master Cook said. "Master Kino has agreed to demonstrate some sparring moves, ones that might possibly be applied if you were to make it to the Mini-MART."

"Yes," a few students whispered excitedly.

The students moved out to sit in a large circle around the class area. Eric bowed, then moved to the center of the room, stood at attention and bowed to Master Cook. He relaxed and began to speak and demonstrate as he did.

Jordan watched, amazed at how the entire class and the parents in the back sat in rapt attention. Of course, her Eric was extremely captivating. He spoke softly. Moved with extreme speed and power. After demonstrating a move, and explaining the reasoning behind it, he motioned toward one of the teen black belts and asked him to stand and fight.

He went through some movements with him in slow motion, and when

the young man thought he had it, they went in real time. Of course, the young man ended up on his back. But he was grinning. He stood, bowed to Eric and then looked at his class with a grin. "Wow."

They all chuckled.

Eric demonstrated on all four teen black belts and then decided it was time to go. "I'll leave you with a special form my father and I have been working on and may one day introduce to the schools. It's an advanced form. I'm a 3rd Dan. My father, as you know, is a Grandmaster, so it's pretty difficult for me, but I'll try.

He backed up to the center of the room. Bowed. Took his fighting stance and went into motion. The class was totally silent except for some sharply indrawn breaths and a few 'oohs' and 'awws.'

When he ended and bowed, the entire class and the parents all stood reverently and gave him a standing ovation.

He went to Master Cook, thanked him again. Everyone bowed to everyone and finally, Eric, Jordan, Josie, and Jamie were back in the car and headed for the park.

"Sorry, everyone," Eric said. "I didn't think it would turn into such a big deal to stop by the studio."

"That's okay," Jordan said. "It's always fun to see you in your element. It's hot."

He glanced at her with a smile. "You know your brother and sister can hear you."

She laughed. "So. Josie thinks you're hot, don't ya, Josie?"

Josie giggled.

Eric rolled his eyes. "Let's go play some ball."

They went to a sports complex that had it all. Three ballfields. Eight soccer fields. Two outdoor b-ball courts, though they were a little worse for wear. Two playgrounds, one for little kids and one for older kids. A dog park section. A skate park. And a splash pad.

They went immediately to the ball park.

Everyone got some batting practice. Eric and Jamie used his baseball bats and balls, and Jordan and Josie used her softball bats and balls. Josie pitched to Jordan while Eric ran around the outfield snagging balls, throwing them into Jamie who then threw them to Josie. When it was Eric's turn to hit, Jamie pitched and Jordan chased down his balls. But softball fields were much shorter than baseball fields and after he hit the fourth ball out of the park they made him switch to bat left-handed.

Jordan pitched to both Jamie and Josie while Eric played the field. When they tired of softball, they went to play some basketball at one of the courts. Neither one was currently occupied which meant they got to play and try weird trick shots and be silly.

Jamie tossed a ball high, Josie caught it and Eric lifted her high to dunk it. Jordan dribbled the ball between her legs, pulled up, jumped and hit a

perfect three. Eric smiled at her. “You played in high school, didn’t you?”

She grinned. “Ya think?”

The game was on. Eric and Josie against Jamie and Jordan.

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September 21st, Saturday Afternoon

Just South of the Californian/Mexican Border

There was no way they were gonna be able to get close to the fourteen women being held captive in that warehouse, not without a direct approach. He drove up in the white van with clear lettering on the side, *Gomez Brother’s Couriers, Twenty-four Hour Guarantee Delivery or It’s Free!* He was alone. More than one in the courier truck and they would be suspicious. Though he wasn’t really alone. His overwatch today, and sniper if needed, was Jensen Deal. One of the best.

“Okay, Cam, we got the fourteen hostages in a room in the warehouse in the back left corner. There is one small exit door in the back right corner. The guy watching the monitors in the front right office will be the one to come to the door when you knock. That means no one will be monitoring the screens. Once you take him out we’ll send in our four with the six Federales through that rear door. So that means, right now, you have the camera dude who answers the door and seven others. Four of them are sitting at a table directly to the left of your front entrance, two more about halfway down on the right in a room, looks like they’re sleeping. Next room over, a bathroom occupied by one. After that, as far as we can tell, there’s only one standing guard in front of the room where the women are, and the Federales will take him and protect the women. All others mentioned above, that’s all you.”

“Got it.” Drawing a deep breath, and saying a quick prayer, Cam got out of the van and went to the back to get the package. He carried the box, acting like it was heavy. Even put it down to get a better grip and pick it back up. He knew he was on camera. The box was the same shape and size of two other deliveries sent here over the past week. Same courier name, same shape box. It should get him entrance. He approached and knocked.

The door opened. “You’re not Melio,” the guy said in Spanish.

“No, definitivamente,” Cam replied. *Definitely not.* “Melio no está disponible.” *Melio is not available.*

“¿Por qué no?” Why not.

Cam gave a soft chuckle. “Porque desobedeció órdenes.” Because he disobeyed orders. “Y ahora está muerto.” And now he’s dead.

The guy at the door snickered. “Mala suerte para el.” Bad luck for him.

“Si, pero buena suerte para mi.” Yes, but good luck for me.

He opened the door wider. Cam pretended to struggle with the package. The man stepped out of the door to help. Cam grabbed him from behind, choked him out, zip tied his hands and feet and slapped tape over his mouth in about thirty seconds time. “Consider yourself lucky,” he murmured.

“Door guy neutralized. Send in the troops. I’m goin’ in,” he whispered.

He stepped through the door. The four at a table were in clear view and immediately rose and pulled guns. He had no choice, he had to take them out, which he did quickly.

The warehouse was huge. Gun drawn, Cam headed immediately down toward the women, and was accosted by the two coming out of the bedroom on the right.

"Si no quieres terminar como los otros, suelta el arma y tirate al piso." If you don't wanna end up like your buddies, drop your weapons and get on the floor.

They glanced past him at the four prone bodies lying behind Cam before they placed their guns on the floor and raised their hands in the air. "Ponte en el suelo," Cam yelled again. Get on the floor.

He kicked the guns out of reach and knelt down to search them and zip tie wrists and ankles. He sensed movement behind him and turned, just in time to block the guy coming at him with a knife. The blade nicked Cam's face and slashed through his forearm. Cam rolled, came up and grabbed the guy's wrist, rolled his body again, breaking the wrist. The guy screamed.

Cam's blood was making it slippery, but he was finally able to choke the guy out and secure him. He was breathing hard and in pain and realizing his shoulder also had a gaping wound. He cursed as he sank down against a wall.

"Cam, you okay?"

"Uh, losing blood. Think I'm gonna need some stitches."

"Everyone's been neutralized. Fourteen grateful ladies are being led to safety. Agent Wyatt should be approaching you with first aid. He'll assess and we'll airlift you out."

"Yep, got it. Hey, Wyatt."

"Geez, Cam. Agent Deal, we're def gonna need to airlift him out."

"Chopper is standing by. ETA seven minutes."

"Just let me see him, please. I'm a doctor."

Cam looked up at one of the rescued women trying to get past a Mexican police officer. "She says she's a doctor, let her come help me, please."

The officer lowered his arm and allowed her by. The woman approached. "My name is Doctor Julia Roberts."

"You're kidding," Cam said with a grunt and a slight grin. "Well, you're certainly a 'pretty woman.'"

She smiled. "Gee, I've never heard that one before. I'm a doctor. I was taken by these idiots from a medical camp in Bolivia. Will you let me help you?"

He nodded.

"Lie down."

He rolled to his back. "Gladly, cuz I'm not feeling too well."

She went through the first aid bag Agent Wyatt had provided and pulled out a hemostatic clotting sponge and began to work on him. "You're gonna

need some stitches," she said.

"Yep, that was my assessment," Cam mumbled with a laugh.

She worked on him quickly, stopped the bleeding, and then wrapped the arm and shoulder. Next, she took out an antiseptic wipe and worked on the cut on his cheek, just under his right eye. She looked into his eyes as she worked on him and smiled. "You're the pretty one," she said. "You might end up with a scar on this pretty face."

Cam chuckled and allowed his eyes to close.

The doctor looked down at Cam's hand, picked it up, examined his wedding ring. "Oh well, the good guys are always taken."

"Yeah, he's definitely taken," Agent Wyatt said. "And you'll probably know who his wife is."

"Why? Who's his wife?"

"Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, wow, well then, I can't compete with that."

Cam moaned.

"Nauseated?" the doc asked.

"Yes."

Agent Wyatt put his hand to his earpiece. "Chopper's here for Cam. The one to transport you ladies is right behind. Thank you, Dr. Roberts for your help."

"My pleasure. Thank you all. I mean, really, for believing we were important enough to come and get. I thought I'd never see my family again and who knows what lay ahead of me."

Wyatt shook his head. "Well if you don't know, I guess I shouldn't tell you. And really, it was actually the Mexican Federales who contacted Ameritech and asked us to help get you ladies out, so, thank them."

"I will."

EMS arrived with a stretcher and loaded Cam up.

She squeezed his hand. "You'll be okay, Agent...uh..."

"Wallace," Cam whispered, feeling weak. "Thanks for your help. I'll have my wife contact you."

"I'll very much look forward to that."

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Still September 21st, Saturday Afternoon

Young Eric, Jordan, Josie and Jamie left the basketball court and went to sit on the green lawn under the shade of a fern pine tree.

"You played basketball in high school, too, didn't you?" Jordan asked.

Eric laughed. "A little. It wasn't my focus, but I played my sophomore and junior years. I didn't start."

Eric pulled four water bottles out of his pack, kept one for himself and handed one to each of them. "Those are yours to keep."

Jordan looked at the water bottles. "Uh, Three, these are Hydro Flasks. They're very expensive water bottles."

Eric looked at her, his brow furrowed. "Are you really gonna give me a hard time about giving you a gift as insignificant as a water bottle? We have a whole stack in the kitchen closet."

She sighed.

"Besides," he went on. "You all three are athletes, you're gonna need a good water bottle."

"Okay, I get it. And I realize the two hundred dollars you or someone spent on these is no big deal to you, but I just want you to know that I appreciate the gesture."

He smiled. "That's what I love about you. You don't take anything for granted. Please always keep me on my toes about stuff like that."

She grinned. "You can count on it."

He pulled out his phone. "Almost time to head back."

"Aww," Jamie complained. "Before we do, will you show me some stuff?"

"What stuff would you like me to show you?"

"I mean, some karate, uh, some martial arts stuff."

He nodded. "Okay. I'll teach you the form you'll need to know in order to get your scholarship." He stood.

Jordan stood. "Okay, then, while you guys do that, Josie and I are gonna take a walk and have a little girl talk."

Eric nodded. "Don't go too far, please. Stay where I can see you. And don't go near the parking lot. Jason told me that though they located the car in your picture, they didn't locate your, uh, the guy we were looking for."

She nodded as she and Josie walked away. Eric turned to Jamie, had him come to attention, then bow, and then showed him the fighting stance.

On their walk, Jordan spoke quickly. "Okay, Josie. Finally, you and me have some alone time to talk. But we don't have a lot of time, so, let's get right to it, sweet girl. What's wrong?"

Josie looked up at Jordan, her lips trembling. "I know that my dad hurt you. I know that's why he went to jail."

Jordan nodded her head.

"I don't understand why he gets to visit with me and Jamie."

Jordan sighed. "Well, really, I don't get it either. But they think he hurt me because I wasn't really related to him. Like, he's not my real father. They think he wouldn't hurt you like he hurt me because he is your real father."

Josie sniffed. "Yeah, but Jordan, I think he would."

Jordan stopped walking. "Has he touched you? Has he hurt you?"

Josie looked up at her sister. "He's touched me. He hasn't hurt me."

"What do you mean, he's touched you?"

She shrugged. "He always makes us give him a hug when he comes to visit. I mean, I don't even really know him. I was only five when he went away. I don't remember him very much at all. I remember he was mean, and he yelled at Mom all the time. But I really don't know him and I sure don't

feel like hugging him and I don't see why I have to."

"You don't."

"Yes I do. Because if I don't he gets mad."

Jordan started walking again. "And what does Mom say?"

Josie shook her head. "Mom tells me to give him a hug."

Jordan could see that. Her mother was trying to just keep the peace and make sure they all survive the time with this man. Trying not to rile him. This was not working, and they needed to get the visitation order revoked. She needed to talk to Mr. Adams. She turned her attention back to Josie. "And do you know how Jamie feels about his dad?"

She shrugged. "Jamie doesn't know him either. He was only three. He doesn't remember him at all and he doesn't like him. Because he's so mean. And he yells at us. And he just wants us to be quiet and go to our rooms while he talks to Mom."

Jordan nodded. Her eyes moistened. This situation just could not go on any longer. She needed to do something. "Josie, did something happen that made you want to tell me all this?"

Josie nodded. "So, when he came the other night, the night you called Mom and he wouldn't let you speak to her, he went back to our room. I went back to see what he was doing in our bedroom, and he was like, looking through your stuff. He was looking through your drawers and in that box you keep under your bed."

Jordan felt so overwhelmed she couldn't keep the tears from filling her eyes. She swallowed. "And what happened?"

"And I told him that was your stuff and you would be mad if anyone went through your stuff, and he grabbed my arms and shook me and told me that I'd better keep my mouth shut."

Jordan grabbed her sister and hugged her hard. "Oh, sweetie, you were so brave to speak up and I'm so sorry he did that to you. Okay, don't you worry anymore. You don't have to see him ever again. I'll make sure of it."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes. I have to talk to a lawyer and get a court order, but I'll make sure of it. Besides, did you know that if the police ever see him again, they're gonna arrest him and take him to jail?"

"Really?"

"Yes, because he's not supposed to get near me and he grabbed me the other day. So, that means he's goin' back to jail. They just have to catch him. So, Josie, if you ever see him, if he ever comes back, you have to call the police, or just call me and I'll call the police, okay?"

"How?"

Jordan frowned. "Oh. Right. Well, I guess I'm gonna have to get you a cell phone. I'll get right on it."

Young Eric kept his eyes on Jordan and Josie as they walked back and forth on the green lawn that was between the basketball courts and the

softball fields. He could tell there was a very serious discussion taking place and he surmised it had to do with Jordan's stepfather.

What young Eric didn't know was that someone else was watching Jordan and Josie as they walked and talked. Peter Perez sat in a white Toyota Camry, using binoculars to watch every move they made. His blood boiled with hatred for the cool, confident, blonde who'd sent him to jail. And here she was, allowing her boyfriend to interact with *his* children. Who the hell did she think she was?

Not that his kids were anything special. The boy seemed about as dumb as a brick, and the girl, though she was pretty, like her mom, was a carbon copy of Jordan's attitude. High and mighty, though Josie was much quieter. When she'd told him to leave Jordan's things alone the other day, he'd wanted to knock her upside the head. And almost had. Still, he didn't really care about seeing the little brats. They were a means to an end. Nope, he wasn't interested in Jamie, or Josie, or even Jordan. But the boyfriend. That was the way to go.

Young Eric smiled at Jamie. "You're doing great. You almost have it down. You're a fast learner." He glanced at his phone. "But it's time to go eat and then, we're all gonna go see my cousin play football in a giant stadium and then spend the night at my house. How's that sound?"

"It sounds great," Jamie said with a huge grin.

"Jordan," Eric called. "We need to head out."

Jordan took Josie's arm and went to join Eric and Jamie.

Eric could instantly tell that tears had been shed. He looked into Jordan's eyes. He sighed, then smiled at her and gave her a nod, telling her without words that whatever was taking place, he was in her corner, and he would do whatever she needed him to do in order to help.

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Still September 21st, Saturday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric senior looked over the five napping children and quietly left their room in search of his wife. He found her at the kitchen table where she'd been folding laundry but was currently also napping, her head on her arms with a stack of freshly folded towels as a pillow. His heart went out to her. He'd never seen her so fatigued, even when she was training for the MART. Of course, she was thirty years older now.

Still, the fact is, she's tired, she's working non-stop, and for some odd reason, she doesn't want to allow anyone to help her. Well, he was gonna have to get to the bottom of what she's thinking, be it consciously or sub-consciously, because for sure he was not going to allow her to run herself into the ground.

He started gathering the stacks of little shirts and pants and underwear and placing them in the basket to take upstairs. Shelley startled awake with an indrawn breath. She looked around, trying to get her bearings, her eyes

blinking.

"It's just me," Eric said softly.

"I, uh, must've fallen asleep for a minute. Sorry."

He shook his head. "Sweetheart, why don't you go upstairs and have a nap. You're obviously exhausted."

She shook her head. "The children will be awake soon."

"I'll take care of them."

"And I need to start their dinner before Mickey gets here."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Doesn't Mickey know how to cook?"

Shelley laughed. "Probably better than I do."

"Then let her do it. She'll have a helper with her, correct?"

"Yes. But still, that hardly seems fair. I mean, Mickey is six months pregnant."

Eric nodded with a sigh. "This situation is not working out."

"What? What are you saying?"

"I'm thinking these children are just not fitting into our lifestyle very well."

"How can you say that? These are *our* children. We are all they have. I'm surprised at you."

He nodded. Eyebrows raised. "Shelley, I'm gonna ask you a question and I need you to be totally honest."

She sighed. "Okay."

"Do you want these children?"

Her mouth opened wide with shock. She rose. "I am gonna pretend that you didn't really ask me that question. I'm gonna pretend that you don't really think that. I'm gonna chalk this up to you trying to pull some psychological BS on me."

He smiled because she nailed it. Then he put on his serious face again. "Do you think I'm gonna stand by and watch you work yourself to death?"

Shelley stared up at him. "These are our children. And I'll do what I have to do to take care of them and raise them and teach them."

He waited.

"What?" Shelley asked.

"And love them?"

"Well of course." Tears welled in her eyes and spilled over. She dashed them away with the back of her hand. "I love them. But ya know what? I'm not sure how I feel about *you* right now."

He pressed his lips together to keep the smile from showing.

She quickly gathered the laundry from the table, lifted the basket and stormed up the stairs.

He watched her go. He realized he was gonna have to go after this problem in stages. Stage one, get her to acknowledge that she wanted the

children and loved the children, but get her also to search her soul to question her deepest feelings about the situation. When he questioned if the children fit into their lifestyle, her maternal instincts swung into action. She became defensive and protective. Good. Still, this was not gonna be an easy fix. He sighed. Well, he accepted the challenge. God sent him back for a reason, probably for many reasons. He hadn't thought his Shelley girl would be one of them, but her problems always brought out the best in him. He was looking forward to dealing with her and discovering what amazing thoughts are going through her head.

Jeffy came downstairs. "Dad, what in the world did you say to Mom?"

"It's between me and her," he answered. "Why? What did she say?"

"That you are an insufferable idiot man, that you think you can say hurtful things to her with no consequences, and that she will not stand by and let you act like you haven't done anything wrong."

"She told you all that?"

"Well, she wasn't speaking to me. She's in her room folding clothes and sort of talking to herself."

Eric smiled at the picture Jeffy painted.

"Well, Daddy? Are you gonna go make up with her?"

He shook his head. "No. She needs to think about the things I said."

Jeffy's eyes narrowed.

"Honey, have I ever done anything to hurt your mom?"

"Probably."

He laughed. "Obviously, you don't trust me to take care of my wife. She's working herself to death. I'm not gonna allow it. She won't speak to me about what the real problem is and I'm gonna have to do some deep diving to get to the bottom of it. Some of it is probably the trauma of what she just went through over the past month, and it's surfacing in unexpected ways. But we're in a very strange situation and I don't think there's a precedent. So, I'm muddling my way through."

"Okay. So, sorry I accused you of mistreating Mom. It's just that, she's so sweet and she works so hard, and— "

"Ooh, no," Jeffy said, putting her hand to her head.

Eric moved forward, put his arms around her. "Is it Cam?"

She sniffed. "Yes. Oh, Daddy."

"Sit down."

He eased her down into a chair at the kitchen table and pulled his phone.

"He's okay," Jason said immediately when he answered the phone.

"How bad?" Eric asked.

"A couple of bad cuts. He's being airlifted. He'll get stitched up and swears he'll meet Jeffy at the game."

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2 Timothy 3:16-17

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,

for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
that the man of God may be complete,
equipped for every good work."

Chapter Nineteen

September 21st, Saturday Late Afternoon
En Route to LA Memorial Coliseum

Young Eric glanced over at the beautiful girl sitting in the passenger seat. She smiled up at him. He checked his rearview mirror to make sure Mrs. Perez and the kids were still behind him since they couldn't all fit in his M4.

"That dinner was absolutely fantastic. Does your mom always cook like that?"

Jordan gave a short laugh. "Uh, no. She can't afford to cook like that. I mean, the paella calls for shrimp and lobster, though she didn't use the lobster, still, it's expensive."

He frowned. He'd known she would spend money they didn't have to make him a good meal, but he didn't know how to ask to pay for the ingredients without insulting her. He still didn't. But he'd think of something.

"I'm not complaining, Three, if that's what you think. Just being honest. Don't feel bad. She wanted to cook for you. She loves cooking and she loves seeing the look of pleasure on people's faces when they take that first bite. She spent some money on the ingredients and I donated with some of my college money."

"Hmm, would *you* accept a donation from me?"

"Absolutely not. You've already done so much for me."

He sighed. Okay. He'd make it up to them somewhere else. "Anyway, what's the name of that potato dish again?"

"Patatas bravas."

"That stuff was amazing."

She nodded. "It's one of my favorite dishes."

He changed the subject. "So, I was wondering, if Josie is okay. But if you don't want to share it with me, I'll understand."

"Yes, sorry, I was gonna tell you what she said because I will accept your help with something to do with her. In a nutshell, she doesn't want to see her father anymore. She's afraid of him. She knows he hurt me and that he went to jail for it. And neither she nor Jamie really remember him and they don't like him. She says he only yells at her and Jamie and spends his time talking to Mom, or yelling at her. But the big thing she said is, he went into my bedroom and was going through my stuff and Josie told him I would be mad if he went through my stuff and he grabbed her and shook her and

pretty much threatened her to keep her mouth shut."

Eric's jaw clenched tightly. He had to fight the anger down. He thought of tiny little Josie, small for her ten years, probably because she didn't always get the nutrition she needed. He thought of a man grabbing her frail little body and shaking her. He shook his head. Josie looked a lot like Jordan except different coloring. She looked meek, angelic, gentle. Eric's feelings of anger were inconsequential though, and he needed to get himself together for Jordan's sake. He nodded at her. "So, they're gonna eventually find him. And he will be arrested. Until then, we'll make sure there's an agent on your family. Not just when you're there, but all the time."

Jordan nodded. "I would so appreciate that, though I know Ameritech agents are super expensive."

He sighed. This money thing has got to be talked about and made to go away. "My father said he would take care of the expenses."

"I know, but—"

"Jordan, do you know how much money my father has?"

"I've heard billions."

"Multi billions. Do you know how much a billion dollars is?"

"Yes," she said, raising her chin.

"I'm not talking down to you, babe. But I think you don't understand just how much money that is. It's a lot. A lot, and he's making more every day because of royalty residuals and mostly because of my grandfather's and Justin's investment plans. And that's just my dad's acting career. He has other business investments. Add to that, my father will eventually completely own *Kino Martial Arts*, which rakes in the dough and is a multi-billion dollar business. And the business is multiplying since everything that's happened with my grandfather getting shot and even before that, with Granddad training Gabe Tanner for that Mini-MART.

"And forget about my dad. My mom is also rockin' it. So, there is no problem with my dad paying to have even a slew of agents follow you all around. And for all I know, that might be exactly what Uncle Joey will arrange when I tell him about this new information. Bottom line, babe, you need to forget about the bottom line."

Jordan sighed. "Okay. I'll try to not worry about the money thing. It's just that, you have to understand, Three, we've always struggled. Sometimes just buying a loaf of bread was difficult."

He nodded. "I understand. I do." And I'm gonna change all that, he thought. "Now, you said a minute ago that you would accept my help about something. Were you talking about protecting your family, or something else?"

"Well, yes, protecting my family with the agents, but also in other ways. There's a couple of things. First, I know that when my stepfather is found he'll be arrested, but I would still like to make sure the cops know he is not allowed to come to see my sister, or brother, or Mom."

"But he is allowed."

"Exactly. I would like to ask your Uncle Mark to get a restraining order, based on what Josie told me today. I want his visitation rights revoked and a restraining order because of the way he bullies my mom. I mean, I know she's afraid of him. And Josie told me my mom makes her give him the hug he demands every time he shows up, because if she tries to refuse, he gets mad."

Eric nodded. "Okay. We'll talk to Uncle Mark. What else?"

Jordan sighed. "I would like to get Josie a cell phone, so that she can call me, or you, if Peter shows up at the house. She'll keep the phone a secret. Keep it back in our bedroom. And if he comes, or if mom tells her he's coming, she can call us real quick and we can have someone there to intercept. This is gonna sound awful, but I don't trust Mom to let us know, because she's afraid, or timid, or something. It kinda makes me mad. But whatever. If Josie has a phone, I know I can depend on her."

Eric nodded. "Good plan. Let's do it."

Jordan breathed a sigh of relief.

Eric smiled at her. "It's all gonna be okay, Jordan. Don't worry, baby."

She nodded.

"Incoming call."

"Accept," young Eric said. "Hey, Dad."

"Son, you on the way to the game?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just calling the fam for a quick prayer circle for Cam."

"Oh no. How bad is it?" Eric asked, his voice filled with concern.

"Not too bad. He got into a knife fight. But he won, so, there's that. He's being life-flighted to the hospital. Will get stitches, but he lost a lot of blood. Knife nicked the artery in his forearm. So I'll send a link. Join it at 5:45."

"Will do. Can I call anyone else for you?"

"Nope, got it covered. Taylor and Gabe were a huge help."

"Of course they were. Okay. 5:45. See you then."

He glanced at Jordan's pale face. "I know it sounds bad, but he'll be okay."

"How do you know?"

"Just feel it. Like, a feeling of peace came over me."

"But he's lost a lot of blood. And poor Dr. Kino, she's pregnant with their first baby, she's got to be terrified."

"Aunt Jeffy probably *is not* panicking. She probably knew he was gonna be alright before everyone else. And if she was scared, Dad would've told me, to let me know how serious it is."

"Well, then why even bother to pray?" Jordan asked, her brow raised.

He smiled at her. "Well, we don't take things for granted. So, we pray to give thanks that he's still alive. That it wasn't worse than it was, and that nothing else will go wrong, that he'll land at the hospital with no problems,

that he'll heal quickly. Those kinds of things."

Jordan nodded. "Gotcha. Ya know, Three, I wasn't meaning to be disrespectful. I was really just trying to understand."

He took her hand. "I know." He sighed. "I love you, Jordan. Everything you do, everything you say, every question you ask is so endearing. You are special, my love." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips.

She smiled at him. "I love you too, Three. I am so freakin' much in love with you that it hurts."

"No, don't hurt, baby. Just relish the feeling. Every night, I tell God how grateful I am that I saw you that day, saw you jump on that lug wrench." He chuckled. "And you thought I might be like, a serial killer or something."

She grinned at him. "Well, you totally slayed me."

He laughed. "And she tells 'dad jokes.' Can you be any more perfect?"

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September 21st, Still Saturday Early Evening

Once the prayer circle was over, Eric and Shelley kissed the children and left for the game. Jeffy was in her own car, right behind them. She took her car so in case Cam needed to leave the game early, she could drive him home.

Eric glanced over at his wife. She was still giving him the silent treatment. He smiled. She could be pretty stubborn if she wanted. Apparently, she wanted. Still, he had to do, what he had to do. He cleared his throat. "Sweetheart?"

Silence.

"You know, I'm only trying to help you."

She turned to glare at him. "Accusing me that I don't love our children? I'm not sure how that is helpful."

"I didn't say you don't love them. I asked you if you loved them."

She frowned. "Don't be playing your mind games on me."

"No games, Shelley girl. This is serious. I asked you if you loved them to get you to realize that you do love them."

She sighed. "Well of course I do. Still a stupid question," she muttered.

Eric went on. "You would love any little two-year-old who showed up at your door, right? Especially one with no mother or father, or one who'd been kept locked away in a daycare all of their lives, or one who'd been given away by the only mother he'd ever known to his aunt and who never went outside to play?"

Her eyes narrowed as she tried to figure his line of questioning. "Yes, of course, Eric. Whose heart wouldn't go out to children like that?"

"Right. Anyone's children."

She nodded. "Yes, anyone's. What's your point, Eric?"

"But these aren't just anyone's children, right? They're ours. They were made from our bodies. Our DNA. They belong to us. Well, they actually belong to God, but He gave them to us to steward."

"Yeah, He *finally* did."

Eric mulled over that response. He glanced at her while he drove. The light was flickering, starting to come on for him, but he wasn't gonna solve this tonight.

"Shelley, I'm gonna change the subject for a minute. What are you grateful for?"

"Did I ask you for a therapy session?"

He hid his smile. "No, but I'm your husband, and that's what I do."

"Well, may I request my husband to please stop trying to analyze me?"

"You may request anything, but I'm giving you fair warning, I will get to the bottom of whatever your problem is. And like I said earlier today, as your husband, I won't stand idly by and let you work yourself until you drop from exhaustion. I love you, I want you well, I want you happy, I want you to enjoy being with me and the children, and you know me well enough that I won't just let this drop."

She sighed.

"There's something keeping you from accepting help. There's something keeping you from smiling. I'm not sure when it started. It might have begun back when I was in the hospital that first week you had the children alone. What is going on, Shelley? Why do you feel so overwhelmed and so sad?"

"I don't know what's wrong. I don't know why I feel sad. I don't know why I feel frustrated. I don't know why I feel so confused and just plain lost. I don't know why I'm mad at you. I don't know anything."

He smiled, nodded. Stage two, get her to admit all is not well and state her feelings. Done. That was enough for today.

"Okay, sweetheart. Don't worry. We'll get to the bottom of it, and we'll figure it out, and you'll feel so much better very soon. Do you trust me?"

She was silent as she thought and finally nodded. "Yes, of course I do. You've always been there for me. Well, almost always."

He nodded. Another clue. "Okay, well, trust me now. I'm here, I'm not going anywhere for at least fifteen years, so, we'll figure this out."

"Fifteen years? What is that supposed to mean?"

He laughed. "Hezekiah was given fifteen more years to live, remember? So, I figure I'll be given at least that, or maybe more."

"Or maybe less."

"Think positive, babe."

He held out his hand. Sighing, she reluctantly placed her hand in his. He brought it to his lips and kissed her fingertips.

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Young Eric motioned for Mrs. Perez to pull in right next to him in the parking garage. He clapped his hands as Jordan and her family stood around him. "Well now, Jamie and Josie, and Mrs. Perez, Jordan and I have on the right colors, but you guys do not and we can't have that. So, first things first,

as soon as we get in we're gonna go pick up some team jerseys. You don't have to get JoJo's name, if you'd prefer someone else's jersey."

Jordan laughed. "What a silly statement. Who wants JoJo's jersey?"

"We do," the kids said.

They headed in and went straight to purchase jerseys. All of them with JoJo's name and number. JoJo's jersey was one of the few that had his nickname on the back instead of his surname. Everyone pulled the jersey on and they headed to their seats.

Young Eric's parents and sister were already there, and Jeff and his boys, and of course, his Uncle Mark and Uncle Joey and his Aunt Bella and Aunt Breez and Logan, with a girl Jordan didn't know. Neither his grandparents nor his Aunt Jeffy were there yet.

Introductions were made all around.

Young Eric's mother called to Mrs. Perez. "Jewell, please come sit next to me. I'm dying to get to know you," Bree said.

Smiling, Jordan watched as her mother's face glowed as she gleefully went to sit next to one of her favorite actresses.

"And Josie," Taylor said. "Please come sit with me."

Josie did. Taylor grinned at her and turned her phone to Josie. "Josie meet Gabe."

"Hey, Josie," Gabe said kindly. "So nice to meet you."

Josie's face turned red. "Hi," she said softly.

Taylor giggled. "Don't be shy. He's really nice. And we're gonna end the call in a minute anyway and then you and I can talk and stuff."

Josie nodded.

"Hey, Jamie, come sit with us," Daniel and Jeremy Davis said. "We got ya covered."

Jamie looked up at Jordan. "Can I?"

"Of course."

"But don't let those guys talk you into doing anything crazy. They're a couple of hoodlums," young Eric said with a laugh.

"Look who's talkin'," Jeff Davis said.

Jordan looked up at Eric with a question. "What's he talkin' about?"

"Um, my younger years. Maybe I'll tell you about it someday."

Young Eric and Jordan took their seats on row eight where Logan sat with his date. Jordan sat down next to the girl and smiled at her. She'd just been introduced to everyone but wanted to be sure that she got the girl's name right.

"Hello, Angie, right?" Jordan greeted.

The girl nodded politely. "Yes, Angie. Hi."

"So, have you known Logan long?" Jordan asked, glancing over at the handsome guy whose voice could melt the heart of any girl.

She shook her head. "Nope, just met him a few weeks ago. He's in my lit class."

"Cool," Jordan said. She turned and smiled up at Eric when he took her hand.

"So, how'd he talk you into coming to the game with him?" young Eric asked.

"Uh, you know I'm sitting right here, right?" Logan asked, making them laugh.

Angie smiled at young Eric. "We were talking about Shakespeare and the festival that's happening at Griffin Park and I asked him if he was interested, and he told me he couldn't come because of his brother's game and asked if I'd like to come." She smiled at Eric again, looking him in the eye. "So, like, you're a Kino, right?"

Young Eric's eyes cut to Logan, who glanced up at Eric. Logan sighed. Eric frowned. "Yes, why do you ask?"

"Well, I mean, the Kinos are pretty famous."

"Yeah, but so are the Adams," Eric rebutted. "I mean, Logan's dad is Breanna Adams' brother. And Logan's uncle is Joey Adams who is the current Kino Challenge Champion. And Logan himself is gonna be super famous one day."

"Really?" Angie said, turning to look at him. "What for?"

Logan just shook his head.

"Uh, because he sings and plays like a dozen instruments and he's gonna be a huge star," Young Eric said quickly.

"But Breanna Adams is actually YOUR mother, right? And Ricky Kino is YOUR dad, right? And that gorgeous Taylor Kino is your sister, right?"

"Yep, and with all that, compared to them and Logan, I'm nothing."

"I don't think you're nothing. I mean, just look at you."

"Yep, just look at me." Frowning, he stood and clapped as the team came on the field to warm up.

Jordan also stood and let loose a whistle, accidentally startling Angie. Or was it accidental? Young Eric smiled at her. She shrugged.

"This would be a cool time for you to speak Chinese to me," Jordan said quietly to Three."

"Why?"

"Cuz I have some things to say that I don't want someone else to hear."

Eric patted her hand. "Calm down, tiger. It's okay. We're used to it."

"I see what you mean, now."

"It sucks, but hey, it's the world we live in." He leaned over. "Angie," young Eric said. "So, do you speak any other languages?"

"No, why?"

"I was just wondering, because Jordan and I were just talking about it."

Eric smiled. "Hey, Logan," he said, getting his cousin's attention. "Jordan está preocupada por ti." Jordan is worried about you.

"Dile que no se preocupe. Estoy bien." Tell her don't be, I'm okay.

"Ya lo hice." I already did. "Encontrarás a la indicada." You'll find the

right one. “Eventualmente.” Eventually.

“Whatever, bro,” he murmured and then stood. “Would you like to come with me to the concession stand, Angie?”

“No, that’s okay, but hey, if you’re going, will you grab me a Dr. Pepper?”

“Yep.”

“Thank you so much.”

“No problem.” He looked at Jordan. “You guys want anything?”

“No, thanks, Logan. We had a huge dinner right before we came here, thanks to my awesome mom.”

As Logan started down, his grandparents finally arrived. “Hey, Grandma, Granddad,” Logan greeted.

“Logan,” Grandmaster Kino said, shaking his hand and pulling him in for a hug. “Hmm, you okay?”

“Yep, just another date that’s not working out.”

They both looked up to see the girl he was speaking about.

“The right one will come,” Eric said softly.

The elder Kinos greeted everyone, were introduced to Angie, Jewell, Jamie and Josie and took their seats. Just a few minutes later, Jeffy arrived.

Jeff Davis quickly got up and took her arm and led her to her seat. “Heard anything else?” Jeff asked.

“I just spoke to him. He’s all stitched up and actually was given some blood, and he’s about to head this way. He sounds okay.”

“Good. Well, until he gets here, you need anything, just let me know.”

She smiled at him. “You’re still my favorite agent.”

He chuckled. “But am I still cute?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she chimed.

“So, who’s that Dr. Kino is talking to down there?” Angie asked as she leaned over Jordan to speak to young Eric.

“That’s Jeff Davis. I’ll introduce you to him later. You’ll like him. He’s famous too!” he said excitedly.

Jordan burst out laughing then put her hand over her mouth. She then leaned toward Angie. “So, have you ever been to a football game before?”

“No. I’ve always thought football is just a rough game for mindless jocks and a bunch of beer drinking guys screaming at the TV.”

“Hmm, well, actually, it’s pretty interesting. Just let me know if you don’t understand what’s happening, and I’ll be happy to explain it to you. Ya might find you like it.”

“Well, I very much doubt that.”

Jordan frowned. “So, if you truly dislike football that much, why did you agree to come to the game with Logan?”

“Everyone knows Logan comes from a famous family, I mean, the Kinos, ya know? Everyone in this country would love to actually meet a Kino.”

"Why?"

"You're kidding, right? I mean, look at you, you're like, dating a Kino, how lucky is that?" Jordan glanced up at Three to see if he could hear the conversation, though she'd been trying to keep her voice low. However, Angie wasn't even trying to keep it down. It was as if she didn't care that he heard her. It was as if to her, he wasn't a real person with feelings. He was a Kino, a show pony. Nothing more. The look on Three's face told Jordan that he was indeed hearing what was being said.

"I'm dating a Kino because we have feelings for each other. I'm certainly not dating him because he's famous."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that."

Jordan's mouth opened in surprise. She sighed. "You know, it's a shame that you can't see what a prize Logan is, and anyway, he's part of the same family. My Eric's grandparents are also Logan's grandparents."

"Yes, but Logan is just Logan Adams, and you're dating Eric Kino. That is a huge difference."

"Angie, I'm trying to be kind to you, but can't you see that your perspective is about as shallow as one can be?"

Angie shrugged. "You asked me why I came. I told you. I was honest."

"Wow."

Angie motioned at Ricky Kino, who rose from his seat. "I wonder where he's going. I'd love to get a pic with him."

Jordan just shook her head. She watched Eric's father go down one row to speak with Jeff Davis. He shook his hand, and then shook the hands of Daniel and Jeremy Davis, and then shook Jamie's hand. Jordan smiled. Then Mr. Kino knelt in front of Jamie and was having a conversation with the eight-year-old. Jordan smiled up at Three. He nodded and smiled back. She sighed. When Three smiled at her, she felt so full, so satisfied, so content, so safe, so protected, so loved. All of that just from his smile.

"So," Angie began. "Why are all the players leaving the field?"

"It's only for a few minutes. They're gonna have a quick meeting in the locker room and come back out, they'll have the national anthem and the game will start."

"How long does a game last?"

Jordan smiled. "Well, there are four quarters of fifteen minutes."

"So, the game lasts about an hour?"

Jordan chuckled. "The game lasts about three hours, because like they stop the clock when someone with the ball goes out of bounds, or on an incomplete pass, or during time outs, or to reset the play after a first down, or for an injury. And then, there's halftime, where the bands will play."

"Oh, that part might be interesting."

"So, you do like music?"

"Sure, doesn't everyone?"

"But you're not impressed that Logan is a musician and a singer?"

"Well, I've never heard him sing."

"He can def sing. Take my word for it."

About that time Logan came back.

"There you are. I was wondering when you'd be back," Angie said. "You were gone a really long time."

"Yeah, the crowd is crazy out there." He handed a drink to her. "Here ya go."

"Thank you. So, I was wondering, would you take me down and introduce me to Ricky Kino. He's like related to you, right?"

"He's my uncle."

"Cool. And like, Breanna Adams, she's your aunt, right?"

"Yes, she's my aunt, but her legal last name is actually Kino, because she's married to Ricky. She just keeps Adams as her professional name, because that's the name everyone knows her by."

"And like, your father is her brother, right?"

"Right. So, if you want to get a pic with them, come on, let's do it now, cuz once the game starts, I'll be watching the game."

"Because your brother is the quarterback, right?"

"Yep." Logan held out his hand and he walked Angie down to get a picture with his Aunt Bree and Uncle Rick.

Jordan watched them go. She looked over at Three and took his hand. "I'm sorry, Three. You said on the very first day I met you that you have a hard time meeting people who didn't want something from you. I thought that was no big deal. But ya know what, it's actually pretty sad."

He grinned. "No, you were right in the first place. It's no big deal. I'm not a victim. And Logan's not a victim. It's just sad that people are so, like you called it, shallow. It's just that their priorities are all mixed up. If you worship fame and fortune and idolize people, how will you ever find God? So, we really need to have compassion for her and help any way we can. Though, I'm at a loss as to how to get through to her. Still, I'm not worried about it. God will touch her heart if and when the time is right."

Jordan leaned close to him. "When you say stuff like that, Three, when you show how deep your heart is, it makes me fall in love with you even more." She turned her face up to him and he kissed her.

"Good. Cuz, I am in love with you, Two-three."

She grinned.

The teams came back out, the national anthem was sung, the game started and everyone's attention was focused on JoJo. Though, from the very beginning it looked like it was gonna be an easy win. They were playing Fresno State. By the end of the first quarter, the score was 28-3. Everyone's focus changed though, when Cam made his way up toward his seat. Since Jeff was the closest, he leapt up and ran down to escort him. Cam waved him off, but Jeff still walked behind him.

Jeffy looked her husband over as he approached. He had a butterfly

bandage on his cheek, which just made him look pitiful. His right forearm was wrapped in a thick gauze bandage, and his right arm was in a sling. Jeffy stood as Cam came to her. She put her hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes.

"Oh, Cam, I hate when you get hurt."

He smiled. "I know. But I'm okay, Jeffy. Really."

She touched his shoulder. "Your shoulder is bandaged too?"

"Yes. Two big slices. Forearm and shoulder. And then this," he said touching his face. "But I'm okay, babe."

"Are you sure you feel like watching the game?"

Cam's eyes opened wide. "Uh, yeah, it's my nephew, Heisman candidate, playing football, I wouldn't miss it."

"It's a cupcake game," Jeffy reminded him.

"Doesn't matter. I'm staying."

Cam took a minute to turn and wave or nod at or greet the other members of his family, then had a seat.

Meanwhile, Angie leaned over to talk to Logan. "So, that guy that just arrived, he's Dr. Kino's husband, right?" she asked.

He nodded without taking his eyes off the field.

"What happened to him?"

"He's a security agent and he was helping rescue some people and someone attacked him with a knife."

"Oh, wow." She was silent a moment. "So, if he's a security guy, does that mean he's armed?"

"Yes."

"But I mean, is he armed right now?"

"Probably."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Yes."

"I mean, in this big crowd of people, do you think it's good that he's armed?"

Logan finally looked at her. "Uh, yeah. And you'd think it was good too if someone started shooting, because Uncle Cam would take them out. Or Uncle Joey. Or Mr. Davis. Because they're all security agents and they're all armed."

"Well, I just don't understand how anyone can think that a gun saves lives."

Jordan sighed and shook her head. She'd recently learned the family secret that when Logan was eleven years old he'd had to use a gun to shoot his father in order to save his mother's life.

Jordan had a feeling that this girl and Logan were definitely not gonna work out.

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September 21st, Saturday Night

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

It was late by the time they'd all gotten back to the house. Bree showed Jewell Perez to her room, and told her if there was anything she needed to please call her cell, and she put her number into Jewell's phone. She hugged her and told her what a lovely family she had and then said goodnight.

Jamie had fallen asleep in the car and young Eric carried him to the room next door to his mother. Josie decided she wanted to stay the night with her sister. So, reluctantly, young Eric kissed Jordan goodnight and then went to visit his sister in her room because he felt like he hadn't been giving her much attention lately.

Once everyone was in their respective rooms, Jordan and Josie went to say goodnight to their mother. They knocked on Jewell's door and were told to come in.

Jewell smiled at her daughters.

"Hey, Mom," Jordan said. "Just wanted to say goodnight and make sure you're okay. Do you need anything?"

"No, dear, but thank you. This has been a fun day, hasn't it?"

Jordan smiled. "Yes it has. And thank you, Mom, for making such a delicious dinner for Eric. He couldn't stop talking about how good it was."

Jewell smiled. "I'm so glad to do it."

"Well, I guess we'd better say goodnight. They wake up early in this house and we have to be ready to leave for church by nine."

"What do you think about going to church?" Jewell asked.

"I think it will be interesting. Eric, really his whole family, they have a strong faith, and I have to say, the things he says make a lot of sense. The miracles he's told me about, I mean, it's pretty cool, and makes me want to feel that closeness to God, like he does."

Jewell nodded. "I haven't been to church in a very long time."

"I didn't know you ever went to church," Jordan said.

"I went when I was young. Long before I married your father. Maybe it's time."

Jordan nodded.

"I think it's gonna be fun going to church with them. And Taylor is so nice," Josie said.

"The whole family is really nice," Jewell said. "They're just so kind to everyone, and so loving to each other. I mean, Mr. Kino took time to talk to Jamie personally, and he's so loving to his wife. I really like them. They're not at all what I expected."

Jordan laughed. "What did you expect, Mom?"

Jewell smiled. "Hmm, I don't know. I guess I thought they'd be a little stand-offish. Snobby. But they're just good people."

"They really are. I mean, look at Three. He's such a good guy. He'd have to be raised by good people."

"You're in love with him, aren't you, sweetie?"

"I am, Mom. I really am. Lord I hope he doesn't suddenly come to his senses and dump me."

"Nonsense. Why would he do that?"

She shook her head. "Actually, Grandmaster Kino says I'm not supposed to think like that. He says I am worthy of love, I am worthy of Three's love. I hope so. It does seem too good to be true, to find someone who gets me, who is so honorable. I didn't know guys like him even existed."

Jewell hugged both her girls. "I know it seems like good men are few and far between. I can't blame you. But there are good guys out there. Don't give up hope."

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"Hey, Eric! To what do I owe this honor?" Taylor asked her big brother.

He smiled. "Just haven't had much of a chance to chat with my little sister and thought I'd see how you're doing. So, tell me, are you all over the QBLance thing?"

She waved her hand. "Oh yeah, been over that. I'm not playing victim if that's what you mean."

"Okay. How about when you passed out in the bathroom at school?"

She frowned. "Still have some work to do there. Gabe said he's gonna do some exposure therapy with me when he gets back."

"Then he definitely *is* coming back, I mean for the Mini-MART? I haven't heard if it's definite."

"Yes. It's definite. I'm surprised Granddad hasn't mentioned it to you, because from what I understand, he's gonna be training with you."

"Oh. Well, I didn't know that. That's very cool."

"I think so too. And Mom and Dad and I are leaving after my volleyball game Thursday night to fly to Nashville. Gabe is meeting me there and we're gonna rehearse with Miss Caroline, and then we'll perform on Monday night and fly home on Tuesday morning."

"Hmm, so, that means I'll have the house to myself."

Taylor grinned. "So, Eric, tell me about you and Jordan."

He shrugged. "What's to tell?"

"You two are getting pretty close."

He nodded. "We are."

"You're in love with her."

He nodded with a smile. "I am."

"Happened pretty fast, huh?"

"Like it was meant to be."

"Are you gonna marry her?"

"I really hope so."

"Have you proposed?"

"Not yet. Thought I'd wait at least until after my twenty-first birthday. Or not. I just don't know."

"I love her," Taylor said.

"I do too," Eric agreed.

"If you propose and she says, 'yes,' when will you marry her? I mean, won't Mom and Dad want you to wait until you're older?"

"I've already spoken to Dad about it and he said some surprising things, like about the world and like, what the 'establishment' says about things and that convention isn't always the correct way. So, I think he's open to me marrying her. He just wants me to have a plan, to know how I'll support her and stuff like that."

"Didn't you just make a cool million on that movie?"

"Made more than that. Still, I'm not sure if that's what I want to do."

"Didn't you tell me that you really enjoyed it?"

"I did. I really did. It actually surprised me how much, but I also want to use my brain. I mean, I may still do something in the field of math, or physics. Maybe. See? I'm just not sure and Dad says I need to have a plan. I've prayed about it. Now I'm waiting for God's answer."

Taylor nodded. "Thanks for sharing that with me, Eric. I know I'm just a little sister, so, it feels good that you would share that with me."

"You're more than just a little sister, little sister. You're an amazing person. And I'm blessed to have you for my sis."

"Thanks, Eric. And right backatcha."

"Well, that's enough warm fuzzies for the night. The morning comes fast. Get some sleep." He moved forward and hugged her.

Out in the hall he looked up as Jordan and Josie came out of their mother's room and headed toward the room they were sharing.

"Well, hey there, ladies."

"Hey. We were just saying 'goodnight' to Mom."

He nodded. "Is she okay?"

"Yes. She's great. She says she's had a wonderful day and that she just really likes your family."

"I think they really like her." He smiled. "Well, goodnight, ladies."

Jordan stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Goodnight, Three."

He breathed a sigh. "Goodnight."

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September 22nd, Sunday Afternoon

Big Canyon Church of Christ, Newport, California

They'd decided to attend the *Big Canyon Church of Christ*. The decision had come because this particular church was very good at making new attendees feel very welcome. Today, they'd lived up to their reputation. They'd taken little Jamie and Josie, Jordan and Jewell under their wing. They'd divided up into different Sunday School classes. The pastor's eyes had lit up when he realized the Kinos were in attendance, and had immediately invited Eric senior to speak. So, when everyone adjourned from their separate classes and met back in the large chapel, everyone was excited to hear the elder Kino's testimony, after his dying, meeting with Jesus and

miraculously coming back to life.

Jordan knew what had happened because she followed Gabe and Taylor on social media. She had shared the tale with her family. Still, listening to Grandmaster Kino tell it from his perspective, to tell of the peace and the love he felt from being in the presence of the Savior and then the conflict of wanting to stay with Jesus, and yet having compassion on his family and wanting to be with them also. It was an amazing story he told.

As he told it, not only did Jordan feel tears fill her eyes, but she felt a stirring in her heart. Something was telling her that this Jesus, someone who lived over two thousand years ago, was not just a cool story, but He was real. He existed. He proclaimed to be the Son of a living God, and his disciples testified that he died and came back to life. Apparently, this blew them away, and they went around and told everyone about it with such fervency that thousands per day were convicted of the truth of their words. And they didn't have the internet back then, Grandmaster Kino just pointed out, making the congregation chuckle.

She looked down at her hand when Three clasped it in his own, then looked up into his eyes. They too were moist.

"You feel it, don't you?" he whispered.

"I feel something. Don't know what it is," Jordan said.

"It's the Holy Spirit. It's the same Holy Spirit that moved through those people two thousand years ago that convicted them of the truth of what the apostles were teaching. It's moving through me and convicting me. It's a warm and emotional feeling and I think that's what you're feeling."

"There really is something happening," she admitted. "It's actually a pretty good feeling."

He smiled. "Gabe says it's addictive."

She smiled up at the guy with whom she was deeply in love. "I get it." She shook her head as a tear escaped. "Three, you are changing my life."

"Not me. God is moving in your life. I'm just part of His plan for you."

"So, you think you and me, we were meant to be?"

"Oh, yes, I do."

She smiled. "I think I'm beginning to believe the same thing."

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2 Corinthians 3:17

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where
the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

September 22nd, Sunday Late Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jewell Perez decided she would be brave and ask Mrs. Shelley Kino if she could help with Sunday dinner. When she'd asked, Grandmaster Kino had been in the kitchen and Shelley had glanced up at her husband. He had his eyebrows raised and he was nodding his head. Shelley had then turned to Jewell with a smile.

"Sure. There is so much to do. I'm having a traditional southern Sunday dinner, which we don't do too often. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, biscuits."

Jewell nodded. "Oh, yes, I can do that. I don't know if Jordan has told you, but cooking is my thing. I do a lot of Spanish dishes, but I've always loved the southern cooking."

Shelley smiled. "I'm originally from Georgia, and it's like, ingrained in me, but I try to do it with healthier choices. For example, instead of all-purpose flour, I bread the chicken in almond flour, raw milk, and free-range eggs and I fry it using a combination of avocado oil and olive oil and with the right spices, it can be pretty flavorful. The problem is, I don't always get the spices quite right. I've never been a very good cook."

"Oh, I can help you with that. Please, Mrs. Kino, let me help you. Let me cook for you, if only to show my appreciation for your hospitality." Shelley started to shake her head.

"Please. Let me have the blessing of serving you."

Shelley grimaced. "Well, when you put it that way, I guess I have to say 'yes.'"

Jewell Perez took over, and soon, dinner was being prepared by Jewell with Shelley Kino merely as a helper. Bree, Breez, and Bella also came in to help. It wasn't long before the house filled with the aromas of chicken frying and some banana bread baking. The banana bread hadn't been on the menu, but when Jewell saw the overripe fruit, she asked if she could make something and, of course, Shelley agreed.

The Kino and Adams women were mesmerized by the seemingly timid and quiet woman suddenly taking charge as if she were the head chef of a restaurant. She was obviously skilled and in her element.

There were twenty-seven people, nine of those being young children. The men were assigned to figure out seating around the huge table. Smaller chairs were brought in from the kitchen table for the little ones.

When dinner was ready and the family was called to eat, it was simply a beautiful thing. So many people, so many beautiful children, so much love. Eric senior looked around the table. "My goodness, how amazingly blessed we are."

Everyone smiled in agreement.

"I want to formally welcome our newest family members: our Nathaniel, and Jewell Perez, and her three beautiful children, Jordan, Josie, and Jamie. We're so glad to have you here. Welcome to our family dinner." He stopped and smiled. "And let's see, who should I call on to bless the food?"

Several children all raised their hands.

"Hmm, I think I'll call on miss Sophia, this time. It's been a while since we've heard from her."

Six-year-old Sophia gave a huge smile.

Joey nodded at her. "Do you need help, sweetie?"

"No, Daddy. I can say it all by myself." She looked around. "Everyone, you have to bow your heads now."

Everyone did as instructed, suppressing their laughter.

"Dear Father who lives way up in heaven, but not really way, way, cuz Mommy says You're always nearby. Thank you for our food. I love to eat and so does my whole family. Thank you that the mommies cooked the food for us, and bless them. Um, and thank you for the daddies too. And um, please bless everyone because we love everyone. And please, God, bless the new little baby that is growing in Aunt Bella's tummy."

There were several audible gasps.

"And I hope my mommy gets another baby growing in her tummy too and it doesn't matter if it's a boy or a girl, because I love my sister AND my brother. Okay, so that's all for now, Father, oh, and I pray in Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen," everyone said and then immediately looked up toward Bella and Mark.

Bella smiled. Mark shrugged. "She ain't lyin', though I'd like to know how she knew," he said, looking at his sister-in-law.

Breez' eyes opened wide. "It wasn't me. I didn't say anything to her." She looked at Sophia. "Sweetie, how did you know Aunt Bella is gonna have a baby?"

Sophia grinned. "I heard you talking on the phone."

"When are you due?" Shelley asked.

Bella smiled sweetly. "The end of May."

Everyone was talking about another baby coming into the family and passing the food around and chattering away, but then, it suddenly got silent.

Jordan turned quickly to look at her mother. She smiled as the 'umms' and 'ahhhs' began. Jewell's face was glowing.

"Wow, this is delicious," Bree said. "Jewell, oh my goodness. Jordan told me you love to cook and that you're a great cook and that you sometimes cook for people's weddings and stuff, but oh my goodness, this is so scrumptious."

"It is," Shelley said. "I mean, the spices on the chicken, perfect."

"And the mashed potatoes are so creamy and buttery and, hmm,

something else," Jeffy said. "Something amazing."

"It's the dried cilantro and the sour cream," Jewell offered.

"Don't tell people your secrets," Breez joked.

"We're not people, we're family. That's what Eric always says," Bella put in.

The men all agreed it was a mouth-watering meal by having seconds and thirds. Even the children ate well, except for Nate who was still detoxing from sugar and processed foods.

"Yesterday, Mrs. Perez made me paella and um, patatas bravas. It was like eating at a five-star restaurant," young Eric stated.

Ricky smiled at the woman. "Jewell, have you ever thought about opening your own restaurant?"

She giggled. "Oh, wouldn't that be nice! I've fantasized about it, but I don't think it's something I'm capable of making happen. You have to have startup capital, and I barely, I mean, well, I, uh, don't see that happening."

"Well, we can talk about the particulars of starting a restaurant later," Ricky said. "The possibilities are endless, and I've invested in several restaurants. Whaddya say we talk about this soon?"

"I'm not sure what you're saying, Mr. Kino."

"It's Ricky. Please call me Ricky, and what I'm saying is, let's talk about you and me opening a restaurant."

Jewell's face turned a bright red.

Ricky shrugged. "Just talk. I don't mean to put any pressure on you. We can just talk maybe this next week sometime and just throw around some thoughts and ideas. No pressure. Just some creating fun. And if you decide 'no go,' then no worries."

Jordan smiled. She glanced at young Eric but he was smiling at Nate.

"Hey, Nate," young Eric said. "How many green beans do you think are on your plate? No counting. Just take a guess."

Nate looked down at his plate. "I think nine."

"Okay, now let's count," young Eric said.

They counted eleven.

"You were close. Good job. Now, if I said you have to eat half of those green beans, how many does that mean you have to eat?"

"That's easy. Five and a half."

"Good job. Now get to it," young Eric said with a smile.

As Nate picked up a green bean and stuffed it in his mouth, Taylor grinned at her brother. "You're so smart, Eric."

He laughed. "I have my moments." He turned to JoJo. "Like my brother at that game last night. That was a sixty-eight yard touchdown pass."

JoJo shook his head. "That Tilson Beck is just a great receiver. All I have to do is put the ball in the air in his general vicinity. He's gonna come down with it."

"Then why isn't *he* up for a Heisman?"

"He should be. What does that tell you about the system?"

"Stop being humble, bro," Logan said. "You deserve it."

Jordan glanced over at the good-looking Logan. Her heart went out to him after last night's date bomb.

Taylor's phone went off. She glanced down at it, then up at her father. He shook his head at her. Frowning, she declined the call.

"I'm guessing that was Gabe?" Ricky said.

"No, sir. It was Miss Caroline."

"Well, why didn't you say so." He sighed. "Text her real fast and tell her you're at dinner and you'll call her back in a little bit."

Taylor did so quickly.

Jordan ate and pretty much listened to everyone interact, much like Three had told her he was doing once. People were asking Miss Bella when she was due, still talking about how good the meal was, talking about JoJo's game, talking about Taylor's volleyball, talking about Three's training and the fact that Gabe is gonna come out and start training next week. Mark talked about an interesting case he was working on and Cam talked about how he got into a knife fight and about the doctor who helped him and how she flirted with him and called him pretty and how her name was Julia Roberts.

The whole meal was so entertaining, Jordan almost forgot to eat. The little ones were giggling and being cute. Jamie was making them laugh. Josie was actually joining in to make them laugh. It was simply delightful and Jordan thought she'd never forget this night, her first dinner with the Kinos/Adams clan that included her own family.

Once the meal ended, Taylor went immediately to call Miss Caroline back while all the men helped clean up the dining room and the women refused the men's help in the kitchen. They also refused Shelley's and Jeffy's help and made Shelley go spend time with her new babies and Jeffy go rest.

With so many hands, the work was all done in about twenty minutes and they all came into the giant living room to relax and talk. Jordan looked around. Two weeks ago was the first time she'd been in this room and it looked much different. That day the furniture had all been moved out toward the walls for a dance floor. However, then and now, the whole place reverberated with love. So much love in this home. Jordan sighed.

Taylor came into the room with her phone held up. "Logan, Miss Caroline wants to speak with you."

"Tell her I refuse to dance with Gabe," he joked.

She gave him the phone. "Put it on speaker, Logan," Taylor said.

Everyone got quiet to listen.

"Hello, Miss Caroline," Logan said. "How's Mr. Nash, and Grace and Brody?"

"They're doing great. So, Mr. Logan sir, as you know, Taylor and Gabe are gonna come and dance live on the show next Monday."

"Yes, ma'am. But I'm not a very good dancer."

"I don't know about that, but that's not why I'm calling. You see, the dance Gabe and Taylor are doing, is the 'Uptown Funk' one they did at Prom and at the Appel wedding that went viral. So, anyway, while they're here in Nashville, the other producers want them to go ahead and do a second spot. They want them to do the other dance that went viral."

"What dance was that?"

"It's the one they did at the birthday party for Bree and Taylor."

"Cool. Still don't understand where I come in."

"Well, they were dancing to a song you were singing."

"You're talking about 'Don't You Feel Like Crying'?"

"Yes, sir, I am. What we want to know, Logan, is if you would sing that song a week from tomorrow, live, on national TV."

"But, Miss Caroline, I mean, I'm a nobody, and you have a multi-platinum singer right there in your own household."

"I do. But he's not the one who went viral."

"But it was Gabe and Taylor that made that go viral."

"Was it? I think it was a joint effort and so do the other producers. They want you, Logan. And I'm sorry this is so last minute, but I'm gonna need your answer tonight, because they're gonna be advertising that the three of you are coming to do the number live. You'll sing. They'll dance."

"Miss Caroline, will you hold on a minute?"

"Yes I will."

Logan looked around the room. "Mom, Dad? Everyone?"

"Go, Logan. It's a great opportunity," Bella said.

Mark nodded his head. "I agree."

"Go," JoJo said. "You can't turn this down, but hey, I can't believe they don't want me to come play my bongos."

"Um, don't you have a game and practice?" Caro asked.

"Yes, I do. But ya know what? Young Eric was singing on the video too."

Young Eric started shaking his head. "First, she didn't ask for me and that was with good reason. Logan is the singer and we all know it. Second, I cannot take another day off of training."

"Says who?"

"Says me," his grandfather said quickly.

"Go Logan. You'll miss a few classes. No big deal," young Eric said.

"And JoJo's game."

"Excuses," JoJo said. "Don't use me as an excuse."

He looked around from face to face. "Miss Caroline?"

"I'm still here."

"I guess— the answer is 'yes'."

"Wonderful. I'll make the arrangements. And Taylor, that means you and Gabe will learn another dance number, and since I know the one you did

wasn't choreographed, I will be choreographing a dance for you to the song Logan will sing."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm so excited."

"Well, Kinos, it was very nice to chat with you. I'll see some of you first thing Friday morning."

"Looking forward to it, Caro," Bree said.

Taylor ended the call and threw her arms around Logan. "Oh this is just gonna be so much fun!"

He smiled. "I hope so. I hope I don't freeze up and blow it."

"Words have power, Logan," his grandfather warned softly.

It seemed the night went by much too fast for Jordan. In no time, it was time for her mother and Josie and Jamie to head back home. Joey had already arranged for an agent to be there waiting on them and one to follow Jewell around and one to accompany the kids except for the time they were in school. Young Eric had ordered a phone for Josie and it would be in by tomorrow and Jordan would covertly take it down to Josie and make sure she knew how to use it.

Jewell and the children said their farewells to the Kino and Adams families and took their leave. Shortly thereafter Mark and Bella, with Em, JoJo and Logan also headed off. Then Joey, Breez and their three children headed out. Jeffy and Cam said goodnight and headed upstairs.

Eric and Shelley also said goodnight and headed up to put the little ones to bed. Ricky, Bree and Taylor left at the same time that young Eric and Jordan left, both headed to the same place.

Jordan would stay at their house one more night, before everything would go back to normal. Training, practice, classes, roommates.

Once they were back at the house, Ricky, Bree and Taylor all said their goodnights and headed to their rooms. Taylor had some homework she'd put off. Ricky said 5:00 a.m. comes very fast, more for young Eric's benefit than for his own. Young Eric and Jordan headed upstairs. He walked her to her room. She turned and leaned against the door. He lifted his arm and braced it on the doorframe. "I hate saying goodbye to you," he said softly.

"I hate it too. Will you come to visit me tonight?"

"I'm not sure. I'm gonna try to be strong and stay in my room. But I don't know if I can do it."

"Hmm, well if it's strength you're looking for, wouldn't it take even more strength to come to my room and lie next to me, and not, like, do anything?"

"Yes. And I'm not that strong, Jordan. You don't know how hard it is to not touch you when my whole body screams to me that if I don't touch you I will die."

"I think I do understand, Three, because right now I'm thinking if you don't kiss me, I'm gonna die."

He smiled. "Well, we can't have that."

He used his free hand to lift her chin slightly, lowered his head and kissed her softly. He pulled away and smiled at her. “How’s that?”

She shook her head. “More.”

He took his arm off the doorframe, put both hands on her waist, pulled her roughly to him and kissed her soundly.

She whimpered. He lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He pushed her against the wall and kissed her like a man dying of thirst.

They stopped at the clearing of his father’s throat.

Jordan immediately put her feet on the floor, her face red.

Ricky nodded. “Um, just got a call from Dad. He said you’re gonna train tomorrow at his house instead of the studio. Shelley is having a hard time about something and he can’t leave her.”

Young Eric nodded. “Yes, sir. Did you remind him about us having to speak to the softball team tomorrow?”

Ricky smiled. “I did.” He turned to go back down the stairs, then turned back. “Uh, carry on.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But not too late.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good night, children.”

“Good night, sir.”

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September 23rd, Monday Morning

UCLA Sports Complex Dining Hall, Los Angeles, California

Jordan spent the night one more time with the Kinos so that Three wouldn’t have to take her home Sunday night and then turn around and come right back into the city on Monday morning. Though they’d said good night, initially, they’d ended up spending half the night together, kissing and holding each other. Somehow, young Eric found the strength to not go any further. Though he wanted to show her all the love he felt, he didn’t want to disrespect the woman he hoped would be his wife one day, and the mother of his children.

The coaches of the UCLA Bruins women’s softball team excitedly ushered the girls into the dining hall for the special breakfast. After all, you don’t invite Ricky Kino and his son to speak to a collegiate team without offering them a meal. Both Ricky and Eric were greeted warmly by the three female coaches while Jordan went to sit with the team next to Colton. The food was set up buffet style and after an initial welcome, everyone was invited to eat their fill.

Though Ricky and young Eric had already had their protein smoothie, they were always willing to chow down on an extra meal. The girls watched them curiously to see how much they ate, and also noticed that they both bowed their heads briefly before they began to eat. The two men sat at the table in the front of the room and the three coaches sat near them. They all

looked up with surprise, to see the school's athletic director and two of the associate directors come in.

The softball coaches immediately rose and welcomed them and directed them to eat their fill. The three men filled their plates and came to the head table. Ricky and young Eric both rose when the men joined them. They were introduced and shook hands and invited to please sit and finish their meal.

At 8:25 on the dot, Coach Kelli Lind stood and looked over the group. "Our meeting starts in five minutes, ladies. Please clear plates and turn your chairs."

There was a rustle of plates and chairs and silverware. Two girls came to clear the Kinos' plates and two others came to clear the athletic directors' plates and asked if they could get them anything else.

Once that was done, Coach Kelli faced the group again. "Okay, welcome everyone to a very special team meeting. We're grateful that Grandmaster Ricky Kino and Master Eric Kino the Third have so graciously given us their time this morning. Please give them a round of applause to welcome them."

They all clapped their hands, and being the athletes they were, they offered a few 'woo hoos', and 'heck yeses.'

"So, they're gonna give us a little pep talk about hard work, determination, and reaching our goals individually and as a team." She looked over at them. "I'm not sure which one of you wants to go first."

Ricky stood and buttoned his sport coat. "I'll go first and give Eric some time to get his thoughts together."

Young Eric made a face at the slight insult, making the girls giggle.

Colton leaned over and whispered to Jordan. "Lord, Jordan he is so freakin' hot. You are so lucky."

Jordan smiled with pride.

Ricky Kino walked to the front of the room. The girls looked him over now that it was okay to stare at him. He was in his fifties they knew, but he only looked to be a few years older than his son. He looked every bit as good in person as he did on the big screen. He had dark hair, large brown eyes, perfect lips, a bright, white smile. He had a slight Hawaiian look about him. He was a few inches shorter than his son. Strong broad shoulders. Flat stomach. Thick, muscular thighs. He wore dark blue slacks, a white button-down shirt and a sport coat a little lighter blue than the slacks. Casual, yet distinguished. He was hot.

He smiled and the girls almost swooned. "Good morning, everyone. And thank you for such a warm welcome. Eric and I are honored to be able to speak with you today. Coach Kelli has asked us to speak about helping you to obtain your goals, both individually and as a team. And your coach is absolutely correct, in that both of those things are equally important. You want to obtain your personal goals of strength and speed, and quickness of mind, so that you won't be the team's weak link.

"So, first, how do you go about obtaining your personal goals? Well, first you have to define what those goals are. Do you want to be a faster base runner? A more accurate pitcher? A more consistent hitter? What is it you want to accomplish? And once you have that clear in your mind, figure out how to accomplish it. For example, you wanna get faster, certain leg training and ab-work would be beneficial. So, decide what you can actually do to work toward what you want. And then, now listen carefully cuz this is the answer to it all, once you decide, then you have to actually take time to do it.

"Now, some of you may say that you don't have time to do things. You have to study. You have practice. You have classes. You have to party."

He stopped while they laughed. He nodded. "No, really, you're young and pretty much life is a party. Still, there is a way to obtain your goals and that is by making a schedule and actually sticking to it, no— matter— what. My father and I have been asked many times to divulge our daily schedules and so, today, I'm gonna show you how what you want to do and accomplish, is possible."

Ricky went on to describe an example of a daily schedule that could accommodate all the things they wanted to do, using his own schedule as a basis, but without disclosing the times or places he does things. By the time he finished the girls were nodding their heads and smiling. They were completely motivated to move to the next level, both physically and mentally.

"And now that you see that your goals are completely obtainable, through some common sense planning, and turning off the TV, and then some hard work, I'll turn the time over to my son to see what he has to say about all of that."

Another round of laughter. Young Eric stood but didn't bother to re-button his sport coat. He met his father, shook his hand. "Thanks, Dad."

Jordan felt her heart speed up as the man she loved made his way to the center front of the room. He turned and smiled at the group. He glanced at her. She knew her face turned red.

He wore jeans, with a button-down light blue shirt and a darker blue sports coat. He was a little taller and thinner than his father. Though he had his father's dark hair and brown eyes, he didn't have that slight Asian look to him. He did have the same lips and pretty smile. His body was ripped with muscle. He was a superb specimen.

"Good morning, ladies," he said, his voice low and soft.

"I'm not a lady, I'm an athlete," one girl said.

"You can be both," he quipped right back.

Jordan smiled because his mind was fast.

"My father, for whom I have great respect, likes to play these mind games with me. He likes to make me squirm and see if I can figure a way out of the fix I'm in. He knows he's covered the subject of the day pretty well, and he wants to see if I can figure out something of value to add." He looked

over at his father who was smiling and nodding.

"He's not being cruel. He's just using this opportunity to teach me, or to help me grow. I get it. I'm not resentful. I gladly accept the challenge."

Jordan sighed. Could he be any more perfect?

"My father is a Grandmaster. I'm only a 3rd Dan in the martial arts world. I'm just getting started, so I don't have a lot of wisdom or experience to pass on. However, I AM currently training to fight in the Kino Challenge coming up in November and I absolutely *do* know what it takes to achieve my goals. It's hard work, and not giving up, and never giving in. Those sound like just a bunch of cliches, I know. But let me see if I can bring them to life."

Jordan watched and listened as Three described his daily training routine. She knew the girls still didn't understand just how hard he worked. They wouldn't unless they saw it.

"I work to failure. Work until my body rejects it by throwing up my guts, or literally collapsing into semi-consciousness. But why? Why would I do this? Why would I fight three or four very lethal people until I simply collapse? Because if I can work so hard that I can hold my own against multiples, then fighting just one person in the ring will seem easy. If I work my way up to bench more than double my body weight, then when I throw that punch, it will not just bother my opponent, it will hurt him. So, if I translate that to you, it would mean, I won't just hit a single. I'll hit a double, triple, or home run every time." He looked around the room, making eye contact with the girls.

"Forget for a moment though, about the schedules, and obtaining goals and extra work my father was speaking about. Forget it for a moment, not for good. Just for a moment. Pretend that the only thing you can do is attend your practice and your conditioning team workouts. If you are not giving your absolute all at your conditioning or practice, then you are cheating yourselves and your team members. I mean your absolute all. Put everything you have into every single thing that you do. Like, run hard. Don't trot. Swing hard. Scoop hard. Don't pitch ten times, pitch twenty times. Improve your quickness while at practice. Waiting for your turn? Do squats. Work on footwork.

"Go all out. All day. Every day. I go until I puke or collapse. You go until you think you have nothing left, then find a little more. If you give it everything you've got when you're at practice, then the games will seem easier. You'll have confidence. You'll be fierce. You'll have the edge. Vow to yourselves that when you go out there and practice today, your coaches will see a new you. A determined you. A hardworking you. A focused you."

"Are you telling us that you do that every time, every day?" one girl asked. "I mean, really?"

He smiled. "I really do."

Jordan turned to her teammate. "I've watched his training. It's actually

unbelievable what he does."

"Let us come and watch," the girl said.

Young Eric glanced at his father who gave a slight nod of his head.

"Okay. I'll give a one-time offer to let you come watch my training day. 'Eight o'clock, Friday, at the Newport Kino Martial Arts Studio. Come five minutes early. Don't be late or you'll be locked out."

"You're kidding," a girl said.

"Not kidding. That's how strict our schedule is. You may come. You may watch. You may not be disruptive in any way. That's not my rule, but my grandfather, who is training me."

The team started murmuring with excitement. Young Eric turned to the coaches and athletic directors. "You're invited too, of course. But not more than fifty people total, please. There will be sparring in the afternoon when a bunch of people come in to the studio to help beat me up. It's a fun time all around."

The group chuckled.

"Well, that's about all I have to say. Now, go out there and practice hard. Give it your all today, so your coach's effort in bringing us here won't be in vain. Thanks, and I guess I'll see you on Friday." He walked back toward his seat, as the team stood and gave him a standing ovation.

Coach Kelli stood, thanked everyone, told them they were expected on the field in fifteen minutes and dismissed the group.

Ricky and young Eric took time to shake hands with everyone, allowed some selfies to be taken, and finally made their way out of the building. Eric quickly caught up to Jordan and pulled her aside, glancing around to see if anyone was watching.

"How'd I do," he asked.

"You were awesome. And now every member of my team wants you."

"Well, you're the only one I want," he said softly, brushing her hair from her face because the wind was blowing it. He smiled at her. "Will I see you at Taylor's game tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"I can't wait."

She sighed. "Me too. I hate saying goodbye."

"Me too." He tilted her face up and kissed her softly. "You'd better get going. You don't want anyone accusing you of getting special treatment."

She nodded. "See you tomorrow, Three."

He smiled. "I love you, Jordan."

She grinned. "You just made my heart happy."

"Good. Now go."

She ran off and he stood there and watched her go.

"Hey, son, you were great in there."

Young Eric smiled at his father. "You were too. Ya ready to go back to Granddad's and kick my butt?"

"Always ready for that."

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"Hey, sweetheart," Ricky said as he answered the call as he and young Eric drove to his father's home.

"Hey," Bree replied.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, I'm not really sure. I'm just coming back from picking up the little ones from Mom. Your dad called me and asked me to come and get the children. He said Mom's not well."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Your dad says he thinks that it's exhaustion mixed with some other kind of emotional trauma."

"Did he say for Eric and I to not come?"

"No. He wants you there."

Ricky glanced over at his son.

"Okay, so, Bree, are you okay with the kids?"

"Yes, honey. I can handle four little kids with no problem."

"There's five, Bree. Five."

She laughed. "I know, I was just teasing you."

"Very funny. Okay, well, thanks for the heads up."

"You're welcome. How did the meeting with the team go?"

"Well, your son had them all swooning over his every word."

"I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Ricky smiled. "Thanks for the ego boost, babe."

"Again, you're welcome. Keep me posted about Mom, please."

"Will do."

It wasn't long before Ricky and young Eric drove up to the house and entered through the kitchen door.

"I don't know, Eric," Shelley was saying quite loudly. "I don't know. Please, I just need to go and take care of the children."

"The children are okay," Eric said.

"Don't you even care about them?" she yelled.

Ricky and young Eric looked at each other. Ricky's expression was one of acceptance. Young Eric's was one of apprehension.

"I don't think I've ever heard Grandma yell," young Eric whispered.

Ricky smiled. "Well— I have. A long time ago, when she and Dad were first getting together. She yelled at him and really put it to him."

"And what did Granddad do?"

"He kissed her."

Young Eric chuckled, but quickly sobered as she continued.

"Well stop. Just stop. I don't want to say anymore."

"Fine, then just listen. You're getting about three hours of sleep a night. You can't do it all, Shelley. Why are you trying so hard? Do you think having help makes you look weak? Do you think it's a message that you're

getting old?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Baby, I'm not commenting on your age. But while we're there, let's think about this a moment. You're about to be sixty-five years old. Now, before you get all huffy, I know that your sixty-five is like most people's fifty. Still, your body is older and even though you're in great shape, you have limitations. Most young women cannot handle five little ones by themselves around the clock without help. And hear me now, Shelley, you *are* going to have help."

"But— "

"Period. So, you might as well work this out with me, or with someone. Dr. Goldstein doesn't practice anymore, but he has some young proteges that I can call. Or I can just find someone myself if you don't want to talk to me. But Shelley, you're gonna talk to someone and you're gonna have to get to the bottom of this. You're not happy. And if you're not happy, you're not raising our children in joy. And I know you want to raise them in joy, am I right?"

"Yes, you're right. As usual. You're always right."

He sighed. "I don't care if you wanna take this out on me. Go ahead. I can take it. What is bothering you? Think. What is the problem?"

Ricky looked at young Eric. "I'm gonna go let Dad know that we're here and that we'll be working out on the beach until he needs us. You go ahead down."

"Yes, sir. Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Go easy on her, okay? She's so, like, special, ya know?"

Ricky smiled. "Yes, I know."

"And I love her."

"I do too."

Young Eric left out the dining room doors. Ricky headed into the living room. Shelley looked up at him, tears streaming down her face.

"Ricky, good, you're here," she said. "Tell your father to back off."

"Shelley, you know I can't do that, right?"

"Why not?"

He grinned. "Because, like I've told you many times, I'm more afraid of him than I am of you."

She literally growled at him.

"Shelley," Ricky said. "This isn't like you. Can you tell *me* why you don't want anyone to help you? I mean, let's pretend for a minute that Dad didn't make it and now it's just you and me, and the rest of the fam, trying to do right for these little ones. How could I help?"

"You can't help, Ricky, because you didn't carry them. How can you know them? How can you help?"

Ricky glanced at his dad. Eric nodded for him to continue.

"Well, you didn't carry them either," Ricky prodded.

"Oh, how kind for you to point that out."

"I'm not trying to be mean, Shelley, but does it matter that neither I nor you carried these children?"

"You mean, do I still love them even though I didn't carry them in my body. Yes of course. Why do you and Eric keep asking me if I love them?"

A light began to come on in Eric's head. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart, we've been asking the wrong question. It just came to me, so I'm gonna echo his first question. Why does it matter that you didn't carry the children? Or, what would be different if you had carried them?"

Her eyes welled with tears. She shook her head. "Who knows? I mean, when a child is carried in the womb, you bond with it, you feel its life force growing and it feels the love you have for it. My sweet babies were carried by women for who knows what reason? I mean was it only for the money? Or were they desperate. Did they feel love for the child they carried? Were they hoping to have some kind of relationship with the child they carried? Or, did they think they were just gonna get paid and go off on their merry way? And then, did they realize they were about to be murdered? I mean, what kind of energy surrounds that?"

"You're doing good, honey. What else? Help me understand."

"So you asked what would be different? Well, I would've bonded with my child. I would have carried him or her. I would have suffered through the pregnancies. I would've had swollen ankles, and pain in my back. I would've felt them kick, feel their life." She put her hand to her mouth as she realized how desperately she wished she'd felt that. She drew a ragged breath. "And then, and then I would've felt the labor come on and suffered the pains and worked hard to push that baby into the world. I would've done that. I would've done all of that."

She put her hands to her head and sank to the floor. "I can't do this. I don't wanna talk about this anymore. Please."

He knelt in front of her. "Don't stop now, baby. You're so close. You're so close to breaking through," Eric said softly. "Tell me, what else. What else would you have done had you carried these babies yourself?"

She drew a ragged breath. "I would've nursed them. I would've nourished my babies and held them close. I would've held them so close and kissed their sweet faces, and made them laugh. But instead, the woman who carried them was murdered. And then some of the babies were murdered. Oh my God, I can't stand it. And it's like, oh well, let's just go on, there's no closure, there's no crying over them. And I didn't even suffer to bring these children into the world."

He nodded. "But you should've suffered, right?"

"Right."

"So instead, you'll suffer now. You'll work yourself into exhaustion. And you won't let anyone help because you should have suffered and

sacrificed to bring your very own children into the world."

"Right," she whispered. "I should suffer. And I have to be strong, and I have to take care of business. Like you always do. I have to do it. And those women suffered and died. And my babies were murdered. Little Maria, oh dear Lord Jesus, I can't stand the thought of what happened to her. And I imagine the other ones were killed the same way." She put her hand to her mouth to stifle the moan.

Eric settled on the floor and pulled her into his arms. "Okay my Shelley girl. Okay, now, I've got you. I've got you baby. It's gonna be okay, I promise."

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Matthew 5:4
"Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted."

Chapter Twenty-One

Eric sat on the floor with his beautiful wife cuddled safely in his lap for several minutes.

"Eric," she finally whispered.

"Yes, baby."

"I know you're busy training young Eric, and I know we have so little time, but could we have like a funeral or a memorial for little Maria, and actually, for all the children who lost their lives?"

"Oh, sweetheart," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry I didn't think of that. We need closure. Yes, of course. We should have a memorial for them."

"And, could we look into the families of the women who died and see if they were able to have funerals, or something, and if not, could we honor them too? I mean, could we learn about them, who they were?"

"Yes, yes, we'll take care of all of them."

Eric nodded at Ricky. "Son, where's young Eric?"

"On the beach."

"Will you have him come in and the three of us will lay hands on Shelley and bless her?"

Ricky pulled out his phone and called young Eric in.

Shelley wiped her eyes and looked up into the face of the husband she'd thought she'd lost just a few weeks ago. She shook her head. "You don't know, Eric, you weren't there. You don't know how hard it was to know you were dying, you were leaving me and I had to somehow raise your children without you."

Eric nodded in understanding. "You're right, I don't know. You went through that trauma. I didn't. I just came back and for me, everything was fine, just as I left it. But it wasn't, was it? You went through unfathomable heartache and emotional turmoil, and just because I came back to you doesn't instantly heal your trauma. Baby, my Shelley girl, I'm so sorry."

She sniffed. "And your letter. You said you weren't worried about me because I always come through when things get hard. Well, I just want you to know, Eric, that I don't always come through, or rise up or whatever you said. Oh, maybe for a minute or two, I mean, maybe I can handle things in small doses. But I'm not strong, Eric. I'm not strong without you."

"I know you think that. You've always thought that. But if only you could see yourself through my eyes. I'm so proud of you, Shelley. You are strong."

"Stop saying that."

"Okay. I understand. There are times you just don't want to be strong. I get it. And you know what? You don't have to be. I'm here for you, babe. So, please, relax. Let go. You don't have to be strong anymore. I'm here and you don't have to be strong, my love. I'll be strong enough for both of us."

Ricky butted in. "Okay, so, while we're waiting on young Eric to get here, let's recap, so that you can focus Shelley, and like, get all of your feelings in order. But first— "

Ricky ran into the dining room, grabbed a chair and brought it back into the living room, took Shelley's hand and pulled her out of his father's lap where he sat on the floor and sat her in the chair. He then held his hand out to his father and pulled him to his feet. He lifted him with no effort and his father looked him in the eye and nodded his head with a smile.

Ricky didn't quite understand what his father was smiling at, but he got the feeling again, it was another passing of the torch type thing. It seemed everything meant something to his father. For now, Ricky brushed it aside and turned his mind to the problem at hand.

"So," Ricky went on. "Let's recap. Shelley, you've been feeling bad, or maybe guilty, that you weren't the one to carry your own children inside your own body and give them life. You feel like, you must suffer the pains of childbirth and the trials of new motherhood to be able to bond with your children. Still, you do know and understand that they are your children, and that it's okay and that you love them. You know that God brought them to you in a different way. Why? Who knows? Maybe God will make it clear to you one day. But the thing that seems clear to me is God wanted YOU and Dad to have these children and to raise these children, because God, well, He works in mysterious ways.

"God also knows you're older now, and there are limitations to what you can do, but Shelley, He's given you vast resources, including a giant family, and we are willing to do whatever you need us to do. I mean, I also want to get to know my new brothers and sister. And I too want to mourn the ones we lost and to get to know and actually mourn the women who gave their lives. And I know Jeffy feels the same, and Mark and Joey and Bree.

"So, Shelley, you're not alone in this. And— my father *is* back. It's such a blessing. Do you remember standing by his hospital bed together with me? Do you remember the feeling of loss and emptiness, and the pain and the heartbreak. Dad won't ever know what we went through. But you know, and I know, and I know you'll never forget that pain, because I'll never forget it. Still, we can let go and move forward and be filled with joy because Dad IS here. What a blessing."

Ricky looked over at his father, whose eyes shone with pride for his son. At that moment young Eric came running in through the dining room doors, down the steps and into the room. He was breathing heavy, covered with perspiration and wore only his shorts and athletic shoes.

Ricky looked at him. "What took you so long?"

He shrugged. "Sorry. I was a mile or two away when you called. I sprinted back as fast as I could."

"Well go grab a towel and wipe your face and wash your hands and come back and help us give Shelley a blessing."

"Yes, sir. But, uh, I'm not dressed."

"God doesn't mind."

Nodding, young Eric ran into the kitchen, did as ordered and rushed back into the living room.

Eric nodded at his son and grandson. They all laid their hands on Shelley, Eric's hands on her head, Ricky's on one shoulder and young Eric's on the other.

"Father," Eric began. "We come before you at this time in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, to bless Your sweet daughter, Shelley. She's been struggling so much, Father, I guess You know, but we just figured it out. We ask a healing for her right now. We ask You to heal her heart, to fill her with joy, to give her understanding, and to give her strength. Father, we're grateful for the challenge and the opportunity of raising five more of your children. We bless Shelley with physical stamina, and with wisdom, and with emotional healing and strength. Fill her with the knowledge of Your love, and with our love too."

As Eric continued to speak and to bless, something did indeed begin to happen. Shelley became filled with warmth and love and the Holy Spirit. She heard whispering, and the words, "power of three generations," came into her head. And she realized, these three men, these three strong, powerful, light-filled, God-fearing men, were a force to be reckoned with. And more, she heard. More. She wasn't sure what that meant. But she felt at peace. The yearning ceased. The aching emptiness eased. Her heart opened up. The peace and strength came back and her eyes filled with tears.

The blessing ended. She hadn't even heard the last part of it. The heaviness of the men's hands lightened as they lifted their hands from her. No one spoke, but Shelley could hear their heavy breathing, as if they'd all been running.

Eric finally reached his hand out to her. "We need to ground. Take your shoes off and we'll go walk on the beach."

She nodded, slipped off her shoes and walked with her husband.

Young Eric silently went to the front window and stared out.

Ricky drew several deep breaths as he tried to figure out what had just taken place. Sometimes life was so real, like eating a meal, falling asleep next to his wife after making love, washing the car, vacuuming the living room. And sometimes it was surreal. Like now. When a person can feel God's presence and His power, and His wisdom so close, yet not knowing how to grasp it, how to hold onto it.

"You're not at a place where you can hold onto it," he heard inside his

own head. “It is not given for your mortal bodies to remain in My presence for long periods of time. Not yet. But reach out, Eric Kinos, sons of Eric Kino, and I’ll be there for you. Continue to strive to do the will of God. Stay clean. Resist temptation. You are loved.”

Ricky almost stumbled backward. He grabbed the back of the chair he’d brought into the room. He couldn’t hold back the tears. And his son turned from the window and stared at him, tears running over his cheeks. “Did you hear that?”

Ricky looked up. “Did you?”

Young Eric nodded. “I will never forget this day.”

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“Hey, Three!” Jordan said as she answered her phone. “It’s late. Everything okay?”

“Yes. Everything is fine. Just needed to hear your voice. How was your day?”

“I worked hard, like you recommended. I’m tired, but pleasantly so. Got a C on an algebra test though. But hey, it’s math.”

“I can help you with that, ya know. A little tutoring and you’ll be making A’s in no time.”

“If you can find time, I’ll take you up on that.”

“For you, Jordan, I’ll make time.”

“Cool. So, tell me about your day.”

“It was a very strange, but unforgettable day.”

“Sounds intriguing. Tell me, unless it’s too personal.”

“No, it’s not too personal. I mean, it’s personal for my family, but I want to tell *you*.” Young Eric went on to describe the emotional distress that his grandmother was in, even the part that he hadn’t heard while he was out running. His father had filled him in. He went on to tell Jordan about the blessing they gave and the words both he and his father had heard. As he told her, he prayed God would touch her heart and help her to understand what he was trying to tell her. He wasn’t sure that she truly got it, but at least she listened and didn’t react like she thought he’d lost his mind. Actually, she was unusually quiet.

When she didn’t say anything, he asked. “So, what do you think about that?”

“Well, I believe you. I mean, I don’t think I quite get it. Or understand it. But I know you and your family enough to know that you are all very spiritual, very connected, and if you heard God speak to you, well, I’m thinking God couldn’t have found a better person to speak to.”

Young Eric smiled. “Jordan, I was thinking, our relationship happened so fast.”

“Oh, no, Three, if you’re about to break up with me, I don’t want to hear it.”

He chuckled. “Break up with you? You’re kidding, right? No, of course

not. I'm just saying, we started out kind of in the wrong order. I mean, you met my family on our very first date."

"Yeah, maybe it's them I'm in love with. I mean, they are really and truly awesome people."

"Yeah, they are. But I'm being serious right now."

"Oh, sorry. Go ahead."

"So, we've been to a few sporting events and out to dinner a few times, and really, that's it. You've watched me get my butt kicked a bunch of times, I've played with your brother and sister. Let's do something together that's fun. Just you and me. What kind of things do you like to do, like, something you would do if you didn't have anything else pressing."

She giggled. "We've done that too."

He laughed. "Again, we're way out of order. Really now, tell me something you really enjoy."

"I'm not too deep, Three. I like sports. I haven't really done a lot of things that I could say I like this and I don't like that."

"Why?"

She sighed. "It's the money thing and I'm pretty sure you don't wanna talk about that. Let me just say, I know things I *don't* like to do."

"Okay, like what?"

"Let me see. Well, I mean, I don't like to work at *Sunny's Hamburgers*. I don't even like to cook. I don't like to ask neighbors if I can wash their car for a few dollars. I don't really like amusement parks. I don't like video games. I don't like scrubbing the driveway. I don't like to babysit for Mr. Ainsley's two rotten kids while he goes out with sleazy women and comes home drunk and ready to get amorous."

"What the hell?"

"Don't get all protective and stuff, Three, I was able to deflect pretty well."

He sighed. "How old were you?"

"I guess about twelve or so."

"Just a little kid," Eric mumbled and then sighed. "Okay. Tell me about this scrubbing driveways thing. That was a job you had?"

"No, it was a job Peter made me do for punishment."

He drew a deep breath. "What did you do that he made you scrub the driveway?"

"Well, usually it was because I talked back to him. You may have noticed that I have a tendency to speak my mind."

Young Eric smiled. "Yes, and I love that about you. So, you talked back and he sent you out with like, a broom and a bucket?"

"Huh. I wish I had a broom. I *did* have a bucket of very hot soapy water. It was so hot that it turned my hands bright red. And I had like, a hand-held scrub brush and I sat on my knees for hours scrubbing every inch of the driveway. My knees were raw and my knuckles were bloody, because I kept

scraping them. It sucked."

"Good grief, Jordan. How old were you when you had to do that?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. I guess I was about ten."

"So before he tried to rape you, he abused you in other ways."

"Oh, whatever. It was no big deal. A little hard work never hurt anyone. Change the subject please."

He shook his head. "Okay. So, um, tell me why you hate amusement parks?"

"Well, I've only been to one, so I guess that's not really fair." She laughed. "Not really '*fair,*' get it?"

He chuckled. "So, did your whole family go together?"

"Ha, that would've been rich. No. I was almost sixteen. Some of the girls on the softball team were going. Jess' mom drove us and dropped us off. I'd earned enough babysitting money to have twenty bucks to spend and I felt guilty about that, but I went anyway. We went to Pacific Park on the Santa Monica Pier."

"I know it well."

"Right. So, you know that you don't like, pay to get in, you just buy tickets for each ride or buy a wristband for unlimited rides. But a wristband cost forty bucks, unless you're a kid, which I wasn't, so, I rode a couple of rides and pretended I didn't like to ride. And I guess I decided amusement parks were stupid. Why go and pay people good money to throw your body around in a machine?"

"Well, it's the thrill. I think parents engrave it into their children by taking them on piggyback rides, or spinning them around..."

"Or making them fly?" Jordan asked with a laugh.

He laughed. "Guilty. And so, you never went back?"

"No. Besides, I felt too guilty. How could I go and not take my brother and sister. After that I started to just use any money I made to help out my mom with any bills I could help with."

"You're such a good daughter. So, do you think your brother and sister might like to go to an amusement park?"

She laughed. "They're kids aren't they? But I just don't have that kind of money to waste right now."

"Well, I do, and it wouldn't be a waste, if it brought smiles to their faces and gave them an outing with their sister that they'd always remember."

"Three, I can't ask you to do that."

"You're not asking me. Stop it with the money thing, Jordan. I have money. I'm not gonna apologize for that. Allow me to give you and your siblings a fun day."

She sighed. "Okay. But only as long as you understand that I don't like you for your money."

"I believe you. Now, back to what I was asking about, what are things YOU like to do. I mean, do you like movies?"

"Sure."

"Do you like to swim?"

"Sure."

"In a pool or in the ocean?"

"Both, but I've only been in a pool a few times."

"Okay. Interesting. Do you like to surf?"

"I've never tried."

"Would you like to? I mean, if I teach you?"

"Sure. I'm game."

"Cool. We could probably surf off Ocean Park. It's good for beginners."

"You won't let me drown."

He smiled. "I promise to keep you safe."

"So, when do you want to make any of these things happen?" she asked.

He sighed. "Well, the thing is, the day you met me, my life changed. When I'd normally have time off, now I have to train every day except Sundays. But there are a few time slots we can make some things happen. Like, this coming Saturday. My family will be in Nashville. JoJo's game is an away game at Oregon State. I would usually go, we all would. But Logan is going to Nashville, and Granddad is staying home with Grandma and the kids. So, I might be able to get the last half of the day off with nowhere to go except surfing with my girl. Or a movie. Or dinner and dancing. Do you like to dance?"

"Yes. Now that's something I like to do."

"Awesome. Well, maybe we'll squeeze in a little of both. Surf. Get cleaned up. Dinner and dancing, maybe at the Sunset, though I might find another place. A lot of drinking going on there. We'll figure it out."

"Sounds like fun."

"Which part?"

"The part where I get to spend the day with you."

He smiled. "Well, I guess I'd better get some sleep."

"Me too. Good night, Three."

"Night, Jordan."

"Three?"

"Yep."

"Love you," she said softly.

"I love you too, Jordan."

✝✝✝

The week inched by. On Tuesday Jordan attended Taylor's game and the fam went to eat at Casa Latina. Young Eric and Jordan had a difficult time saying 'goodbye.' Wednesday and Thursday both Eric and Jordan did their best to focus on the tasks at hand. Namely, training for Eric, and classes and practice for Jordan.

On Thursday, young Eric's family left after Taylor's game to go to dance in Nashville. He was happy for Taylor. All she'd been able to talk

about was seeing Gabe again and dancing. It was the two best things in the world put together. Young Eric had watched their online practice and was truly impressed. Taylor was a natural dancer. And Gabe was also really good. The kid was good at everything he did. He was special. Eric wasn't jealous. He was just in awe.

That night, with the house being empty, young Eric felt really alone and wished he'd invited Jordan for the weekend. But he had a feeling that with everyone gone, that would be a fire he couldn't put out. So, he stayed strong. Besides, Friday was a big day. He would do his morning beach routine alone, and then head to the studio where Jordan's team would come to see if he practiced what he preached. So, he needed a good night's sleep.

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September 27th, Wee hours Friday Morning
Omni Nashville Hotel, Nashville Tennessee

Thursday night, Taylor's flight got in just after 1:00 a.m., so it was officially Friday morning. Gabe had arrived earlier, alone. His father had thought about sending an agent to look after him, but instead Gabe had convinced him that it was time to be a man. And they both knew that Ricky would be here and that Toby was here and they had a driver meet Gabe at the airport. Both Gabe and the Kinos would be staying at the same hotel. Ricky, Bree and Taylor would share a suite. Logan and Gabe each had a room of their own.

Currently, Gabe sat in the hotel lobby waiting for the Kinos and Logan to arrive from the airport. He wasn't sleepy because he was too jacked up to be able to see and hold and kiss his girl again. It'd been three long weeks. It seemed like months. He'd been told to come home. Sleep for three days. Start working out. Eat healthy. Get checked out by his doc, and if he gives the okay, Gabe would start training for the second ever, Kino Mini-MART. It seemed like he'd been away from Taylor forever, when instead it'd been less than three weeks.

Though it was essentially the middle of the night, the lobby wasn't empty, although there were fewer people than earlier when Gabe had gone out to dinner. He turned when he heard some murmuring at the door and saw a bellhop hurry out with a luggage carrier. Gabe stood to see if it was them. He didn't even have to go looking. The beautiful girl came running in through the doors, her hair blowing in the breeze that the door created, her smile wide.

Taylor spotted him, gave a slight squeal and ran at him. Grinning, he watched her come, held his arms open, and she jumped into them. It was instant relief. Instant comfort. The ache faded. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world to be reunited with the person you love.

She buried her face on his shoulder and cried. "Oh, Gabe, I'm so happy to see you." Lifting her head she touched his chest. "Oh, goodness I jumped on you. Are you okay? I mean, like, where you were shot?"

He laughed. "I'm good. All healed up and back to being myself. A little weaker, maybe, but that's all."

She hugged him harder. "I've missed you so much."

He set her down, took her face in his hands. "Me too. I mean..."

She giggled. "I know what you mean, now ki..."

He kissed her, long and slow.

When he pulled away Taylor immediately noticed the cameras. Not the people who stopped to video on their phones, but the bigger cameras. Studio cameras. "Are we being taped?"

Gabe nodded. "Yes. The studio is taping every move we make. It's for advertising the show. I don't understand why it's so important. I mean, it's not like their ratings are down."

"Maybe they're not down because they think of stuff like this," Taylor said, motioning toward a camera.

"Maybe. But I'm thinking you and I are gonna have to find some time alone."

Taylor smiled sweetly. "I would love that."

"I have my own room," Gabe said.

Taylor giggled. "Wow. You made that almost sound sleazy."

Gabe chuckled. "Well, it won't be. But still, I was thinkin' just a little time alone, that's all I'm talkin' about."

He looked up as Ricky and Bree left the front desk and approached him.

Gabe stepped forward. "Grandmaster Kino," he said as he bowed.

Ricky grinned. "That's my father," he quipped. He bowed and then held out his hand. "How ya doin' guy?"

"I'm well, sir. Feelin' great."

"Good. Young Eric is looking forward to training with you."

"Me too. I mean, I'm looking forward to training with him," he said as he winked at Taylor.

Taylor giggled. Gabe turned to Bree. "Mrs. Kino, nice to see you again."

"Oh, stop, Gabe with the formal stuff and give me a hug." She grabbed him, hugged him and kissed both his cheeks.

"There," she said with a laugh. "That should please the studio heads."

They all laughed.

Logan stepped forward from behind the Kinos and held out his hand. "Hey, bro."

Gabe grinned. "Logan, man, so glad you decided to do this." They shook hands and then pulled in for a hug.

"It was an intriguing offer," Logan said. "Besides, everyone knows if ya wanna get famous, just hang out with the Gabe and Taylor duo."

"Yep. Silly isn't it?"

"Well the people that your new foundation is helping don't think it's so silly."

"I didn't know you were keeping up."

"My dad is your attorney and he may have broken some privilege, but he was telling us at dinner about some of the kids your foundation has already helped."

Gabe nodded humbly. "I hope to do a lot more."

"I know you do, cuz, my bro, that's just what you do."

The group laughed.

"So, listen kids," Ricky began, "I know you two want to spend time together, but it's late and you have a big day tomorrow, so I'm gonna have to insist we all go to our rooms, get some sleep and meet for breakfast in the morning. We're due in the studio for rehearsal at 9:00."

Taylor frowned. Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. Too bad there's not a beach nearby, we could do the beach morning routine."

Ricky smiled. "I can make that happen. Not the beach. But a place to do our routine, at least part of it. Would you join me?"

"I'd be honored."

Ricky turned. "Logan?"

"Of course, Uncle Ricky. Honored as well."

"Taylor?"

She smiled. "Anytime spent with Gabe, I'm in."

Ricky raised his brows at her.

She giggled."Yes, Grandmaster Kino, I'd be honored."

Gabe watched as Ricky walked over to speak with the concierge. The Kinos always took care of things immediately if possible.

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September 27th, Friday Morning

Omni Nashville, Nashville, Tennessee

It was a good thing Ricky had insisted they get some sleep. The morning seemed to come very fast. At 7:00 a.m. Gabe, Taylor, Logan and Ricky stood together in a mirrored room intended for a fitness class. As they went through their routine, they'd gathered an audience outside the glass walls, but it didn't distract them. And again, the studio cameras were there, keeping track of their every move.

Cameras or not, Gabe couldn't keep himself from pulling Taylor close a few times and kissing her soundly. Of course, the studio heads wouldn't mind that a bit. They were playing up the romance between the two.

Taylor frowned though, and asked him. "Does it bother you, the cameras and the publicity going on around you all the time?"

"It used to. But you're the one who kept telling me it's all for a good cause, because every bit of exposure brings attention to the foundation. So now, I don't even pay any attention to it. It doesn't change how I act toward you or how I feel about you. Because when I'm with you, all I think about is how much I love you."

"And how much is that?"

He smiled. "This much," he said softly as he lowered his mouth to her

and kissed her long and slow.

They pulled away at the clearing of a throat. They looked up to see Ricky frowning. "Not the time or place."

Gabe nodded. "Sorry sir. Can't seem to help myself."

"I can help it. Step forward and let's practice some sparring moves."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said as he bowed. He stepped forward and went through a sparring routine of sorts. A Kino original.

When they finished, the audience outside the room applauded.

Ricky nodded. "I guess we're done, guys." He bowed to the three. They returned the honor.

"Let's go eat," Gabe said.

They went to their rooms, quickly changed clothes and met Bree at the restaurant. After breakfast, a limo drove them to the studio. Both Caroline and Toby met them out front.

"Wow, this is some welcoming committee," Ricky said.

Toby smiled, moved forward and shook Ricky's hand before he pulled him in for a big bear hug. "Only the best for you guys. And we're the best," he joked.

"That you are," Bree agreed.

Toby turned and kissed her cheek and stepped away so that she could hug Caroline, which he knew was who she really wanted to see.

Caroline hugged Ricky. She always felt a little giddy around him. The first time she'd met him, she was a lowly waitress who'd been in big trouble with the law. He was powerful then, and his power had not diminished. He seemed to dominate a room with some kind of electrical energy that simply took one's breath away.

"Ricky," she said softly as she kissed his cheek.

"Caro, you're as beautiful as ever. Killed anyone lately?"

She laughed. "Not lately, but keep it up and see what happens."

Toby smiled. His Caroline wasn't a meek little nobody anymore.

"Well," Caroline said. "Let me see my stars."

Ricky and Bree stepped aside while Gabe, Taylor and Logan were properly greeted by both Caroline and Toby.

Logan was always a little shy around Toby and it showed. Toby patted him on the back. "You ready to show the world what you got?"

"Not sure. But guess I'd better get ready."

"That's right. But I'm not worried about you at all. You just sing like you did on that video, like you're singing to your family, and you're gonna be a big star. As a matter of fact, Grace said she'd like to get together with you while you're here and share some songs."

Logan nodded. "I'd like that. Is she here today?"

"Not yet, but she will be. Come on, let's go in and get started."

Caro nodded as they headed inside. "Logan, Toby will take you down to the sound studio and introduce you to the guys in the band so you can get

goin'."

"Yes, ma'am," Logan said as he walked with Toby down the corridor.

Caro turned to Taylor and Gabe. "You guys come with me. We're gonna head to the dance studio and work on the *Uptown Funk* dance first. Then when we get a rough recording of how Logan's song goes, we'll start on choreography for that. Ricky and Bree, y'all are welcome to watch either rehearsal, or a little of both. Make yourselves at home. Everyone knows you're here and there will be assistants at your beck and call." She nodded at the girl coming down the corridor. "And there's one right now. Steph, meet Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams."

The woman smiled and offered her hand. "So nice to meet you both. If you need anything at all. I'll be nearby all day."

"Thanks, Steph," Bree said. "We'll let you know if we need anything." She turned back to Caro. "And thanks to you for showing such hospitality. But don't worry, we'll be fine. We don't really require any special kind of treatment, except absolutely no green M&Ms."

Ricky laughed at Caro's surprised look. "She's joking, Caro. She's just not very good at joking."

Bree's eyes narrowed. "The problem is, Ricky Kino, I'm *too* good at it. I'm such a fine actress, Caro didn't know that I was kidding."

Caroline laughed. "Okay, then. Well, let's get to work."

They headed into the dance studio. There was a large floor. A wall covered with mirrors. A barre. Some chairs and a table off to one side with water and some other goodies and refreshments. Ricky and Bree took a seat.

Taylor and Gabe took off their jackets. Taylor wore baggy black dance pants and a sweatshirt over her sports top. Gabe had on baggy gray sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Taylor shivered. "Forgot how it gets cold in other parts of the country this time of year."

Caro nodded. "Oh yeah, we actually have seasons here. And you're in for a treat because tonight we're expecting severe thunderstorms."

"Oh, yaaay," Taylor said facetiously as she shivered.

"Don't worry, you'll be very warm in a few minutes."

Caroline played their music while she led them through some warmup stretches and moves. When she felt confident they were warmed up, she nodded and backed away. "Okay, kiddos. Let me see whatcha got."

They went through their dance, then stood facing Miss Caroline, waiting to hear what she had to say.

"Well, you guys have been working hard, that much I can tell. It's much sharper than what it was at the wedding, so, good job on that. It's really good. There's just a few places that maybe need a little tweaking, and we may change up a few things, just to make your transitions smoother. I hope it doesn't hurt your feelings for me to make some changes."

"No, ma'am," Gabe said quickly. "You're the teacher. We're all yours."

Caroline smiled. "Good. Let's get to work."

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September 27th, Friday Morning

Kino Martial Arts, Newport Beach, California

On Friday morning, young Eric went about business as usual. He finished his own workout on the beach, and grabbed his bag with dry t-shirts for the coming day and clean clothes for later, after his shower. He headed to the studio.

He arrived earlier than usual because he'd wanted to get there before the visitors. Inside, his grandfather was speaking with Master Foreman. Young Eric dropped his bag in its usual place, went to the locker room briefly, then came out and presented himself to his grandfather and Master Foreman.

He bowed. "Excuse me, sirs, but do you need me to set up chairs, or will we ask our visitors to sit on the floor?"

"Good morning, Eric," his grandfather said.

"Oh, yep, absolutely. Good morning, sir."

"Set up a few chairs for the coaches and the athletic director, in case he comes, and the rest can sit on the floor or grab their own chair if they wish. And grab the cooler out of Master Foreman's car."

Young Eric bowed. "Yes, sir." He moved quickly to get the cooler first and then began setting up five chairs. He was almost done when Jordan arrived, and then right after her, Colton and three other girls arrived.

Young Eric smiled with pleasure as he approached his girl and gave her a quick kiss. "Hey, Jordan."

"Hey, Three."

He smiled and nodded. "Hello, Colton, ladies."

He shook Agent Trout's hand. "Are you staying?"

"I wish, but I'm just making sure she got here okay. Jason has a quick job for me for the next few hours."

Young Eric nodded. "Cool, so about tonight, I haven't asked her yet, but hopefully she'll agree to have dinner with me."

"Okay, well, you have my number. Let me know what time to see her home. Unless it's after midnight. If that's the case, Agent Brown will be on call."

Eric nodded. "Either way, I'll see her home myself. So I guess that means, Agent Trout, that you're free until the morning. And then tomorrow will be a pretty short day because after she goes to visit her family in the morning, she'll be with me the rest of the day."

"Um, and the night?"

"Um, let's play that by ear."

Agent Trout smiled. "You're a lucky guy, Kino," he said as he took his leave.

Eric nodded. "Yes. Yes I am," he uttered as he turned and smiled at Jordan, but looked back at his grandfather who was frowning. "I, uh, I'm

supposed to be stretching out. The chairs are for the coaches, but if anyone else wants one they're in that stack over there on the other side of the bench. Otherwise, you can just sit on the floor around the outer perimeter of the room."

"We got it," Jordan said. "Go stretch before you have to do a punishment before you even start."

He grinned. "Being with you is worth it." He kissed her cheek and went to the other side of the large room and began stretching.

"His own grandfather would punish him just because he isn't stretching?" one of the girls asked.

"He's tough. Which is why everyone he trains, wins. Come on, let's find the best place to sit."

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2 Samuel 6:14

"And David danced before the Lord with all his might.
And David was wearing a linen ephod."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Young Eric stopped thinking about the people who'd come to watch and focused on the task at hand. The place was filling up. All three softball coaches arrived and the UCLA athletic director also arrived. When Master Foreman ordered his assistant to lock the front doors there were forty-eight spectators.

They watched as Grandmaster Kino on the other side of the room, placed his hand on young Eric's shoulder and they both bowed their heads. After that, they bowed to one another. Grandmaster Kino said something to young Eric, he nodded and turned to the visitors.

"Good morning, everyone. Nice to see you all again, and I think a few extra too. May I introduce to you, Master Foreman, he runs this particular Kino studio."

Eric turned to him and bowed. Master Foreman bowed to the visitors.

"And it gives me immense pleasure to be able to introduce to you, my grandfather, Grandmaster Eric Kino."

The elder Eric also bowed to the visitors.

Young Eric turned back. "We are gonna try to go through the day as normally as possible. We will treat you all to lunch here at noon. You're welcome to leave then to get your own if you prefer, but at 1:30 the doors get locked again. Please refrain from loud talking and if you have any questions, my aunt, Dr. Kino Wallace, will be here in about an hour and you can ask her. Until she gets here, Jordan might be able to answer your questions. If you stick around after lunch, you will see several large and very mean men come into the studio," Eric joked with a smile. "They will be here to beat me up. But each Friday, it's getting a little harder for them to do that. Today, my Uncle Joey Adams, the current Challenge champion will be here, and also a guy named Jon Sweet, who is a private special forces dude from Australia whose main problem when he fights me is trying to NOT kill me."

The group laughed.

Eric shook his head. "And I'm not even joking. I'm not sure who else is coming, but I think it's a few Masters from some of the other studios. Anyway, if you like to watch the Challenge, then you should enjoy this afternoon's sparring. One more rule, no video is to be taken, so, put those phones away. Afterward, if you want some pics, we can accommodate that. So, I'm gonna shut up and get to work now."

He ran back to the center of the floor and did some more stretching,

some of it seemingly impossible. Then Grandmaster Kino called him to work on kicks. Almost immediately he was being corrected and made to do it twenty more times with one leg and then the other. Then he went into combination kicks, and then kicks and punches. His targets started with the large bag hanging from the ceiling, to the large pad Master Foreman held, to Master Foreman himself, wearing a chest protector.

The girls jumped a few times at first, because whenever Eric kicked, the sound of his foot hitting the bag or hitting Master Foreman made a very loud popping sound. Several times he knocked Master Foreman down. Jordan was smiling, nodding her head in approval.

After about thirty minutes of constant kicking, Eric was given a few seconds to wipe the sweat from his face and gulp some water.

He immediately started on fight sequences and kick and punch combinations that Grandmaster Kino called out. This was the part that really impressed Jordan. It seemed he called out very long sequences and combinations. Only a few times did Three say, "repeat." He had to be completely focused. Completely immersed. His look of concentration had Jordan's heart beating faster. There was something about a guy doing his thing that was ultra attractive.

He went non-stop for an hour and was breathing very hard. The sweat poured from his body. He got to where he couldn't see what he was doing and had to grab a towel and wipe his face a few times.

When he stumbled and fell onto his back, the visitors all made an 'oooh,' sound. But were astounded by what they heard.

"Get up," Grandmaster Kino commanded.

Eric nodded, as he gasped for breath, but didn't move.

"You have thirty seconds to get up or you'll do a thousand abs."

Eric nodded again and forced himself to his knees, then slowly rose to take a fighting stance.

"Double side kick," Grandmaster Kino stated. "Cross, cross, upper cut, spinning hook. Go."

Somehow, he was able to dig deep and give his grandfather what he wanted. When he finished, he swayed, waiting for the next command.

"Get water, change to a dry shirt, and we'll do the ab work."

Eric bowed to his grandfather, ran to where he kept his bag, drank some water, toweled himself off, and pulled the soaking wet shirt over his head.

"Oh– my– God, do you see that?"

Jordan turned at the remark. She herself had used that expression many times, 'oh my God.' She'd never really thought about it until she met Three, but she knew the Kinos never said that. She made a note to ask Three about it. Back to her teammate she smiled at what she was looking at. Jordan nodded. "He's something, isn't he?"

"Is he human?"

"I'm not sure," Jordan said softly, watching as he pulled on a dry shirt.

"He's human," Dr. Kino said with a laugh. "He just works really hard."

Jordan smiled at her. "You're really proud of him, aren't you?"

"Yes I am. He's got such a good heart. He works tirelessly. He wants to do good in the world. He's humble. He's funny. He loves his family. So proud of him."

"His grandfather is really hard on him," one of the girls said. "Like when he collapsed, he made him get back up."

"It's important," Jeffy answered, "to discover that when you think you can't go another second, or do one more pushup, or run one more step, you actually can dig deep and just do it. My father made him get up to show him that he could. If he were in a fight for his life, it would be important to know you can do it. You can get back up and keep fighting. You know because you've done it before."

The coaches and several girls nodded in understanding.

"Well, I think Grandmaster Kino is really mean," another girl said.

Jeffy laughed. "Aww, he's just a big teddy bear. He's in teaching mode right now, and he knows young Eric can take it. But my father is so kind, so gentle. You should see him with the little ones. He tells them stories, and tickles them and plays with them, and he'd do anything to help anyone. He's not mean. He's tough. Coddling people is not being loving. It's the worst thing you can do for them. So, when you get married and have your own children and you want them to be strong, successful people, don't coddle them. Be tough, seasoned with love of course."

"Dr. Kino, you are very wise," a girl said.

She smiled. "My father's words."

They turned to watch as young Eric was made to go through a grueling ab workout. He went until he fell onto his back again and was made to get up again. And fell again. That second time he gave a soft groan, got up quickly and ran to the men's locker room.

Jordan smiled. He was throwing up again. Bless his heart. He'd thought he'd gotten past that part.

Young Eric came back quickly. Apologized to Grandmaster Kino for the interruption and continued on. The end of the ab workout and noon arrived at the same time, by design. Eric slowly rose from the floor where he'd collapsed in exhaustion, walked over to the watching crowd and offered a slight smile.

"Hey, everyone, so, as you can see, my sweet grandmother has arrived with the caterers with lunch for everyone. Doors are open if you wish to leave or get some air. We'll resume training at 1:30 on the dot. So, I'm just gonna bless the food real quick, bow your heads if you wish to join."

"Father, we are so grateful for the food we're about to eat, bless it we pray, and bless all those who partake that they may be nourished and healed in any way they need. In Jesus' name, Amen."

He headed immediately to Jordan. Looked at her and then at her friends.

"Ready to chow down?"

"Yes," Jordan said.

"Well, let's have a giant picnic right here on the floor." He started toward the large tables covered with food.

"Hey, Three!"

He turned. It wasn't Jordan's voice. It was Colton's. "Yeah?"

"That was pretty freakin' impressive."

He grinned. "Thanks, but, well, it ain't over."

"I don't know how you can even walk around right now."

He shrugged. "There was a time, I couldn't. But it gets a little easier every day. By the time the Challenge happens, I should be good to go."

They all joined him in grabbing plates filled with subway-type sandwiches, healthy bags of snacks, and fruits, and then sat in a large circle on the floor of the studio. As they ate, the girls, the coaches and even the athletic director asked questions. Some about the reasoning behind some of the moves he was working on, some about the coming Challenge, and one about what they'd heard Jordan and Colton call him, 'Three.' He explained Jordan's reasoning and all agreed, they liked it.

Young Eric finished his lunch, and relaxed back against the wall. Taking Jordan's hand, he kissed it, and gave it a squeeze. "I'm gonna relax and digest for a bit."

She leaned close and nodded. "You do that. I'm gonna go see if Miss Shelley needs help with anything."

"That's very thoughtful, Jordan."

"No problem. I mean, you told me about her having a hard time lately. I think I just want to give her a hug."

"She would like that, I'm sure."

She started to get up but he jerked on her arm and she fell back against his chest.

He kissed her. She giggled and pulled away. "So, you realize there are a lot of people around watching you."

He smiled. "Sorry. I forgot for a minute. You make me forget everything."

Shaking her head, she pulled away and went to help.

Colton joined her. "Ya know, you just made every female in this building green with envy."

Jordan laughed. "I didn't do it. He did it."

"So, have you two— "

"No, we haven't. Now shush, and let's go help Miss Shelley."

Everyone had eaten, used the bathrooms, walked outside and breathed some fresh air, come back in and found a place to sit, ready for the afternoon's spectacle. Three was stretching and warming up.

He'd been right about some very mean looking guys coming into the studio. Six of them. Master Linney from the Compton Studio, Master Carlton

from the Long Beach Studio, Master Cook from the Hillcrest Studio, Jon Sweet, an Ameritech JETT, Cam Wallace, also a JETT, and Joey Adams, Ameritech Deputy Chief and current Challenge Champion.

Jordan had been surprised to see Master Cook and immediately went up to him and shook his hand. "Master Cook, it's nice to see you again."

He nodded and shook her hand. "You too, Miss Jordan Brooks, right?"

"Wow, yes, I can't believe you remember."

"Well, when Master Kino walks into my studio with his girlfriend, ya make a special note."

She giggled. "I'm a nobody."

"I doubt he sees it that way."

"So, you're gonna beat him up today?"

"Don't know. Guess we're about to see."

Jordan went back to her seat. Grandmaster Kino walked to the middle of the floor. The room became immediately silent.

Eric senior gave a bow. "We're gonna get started because we have a lot to work on. While they're taping their hands, I'm gonna go ahead and introduce our five sparring volunteers today. Master Linney is a 6th degree black belt from our studio in Compton. He's 6 feet, 180 pounds and a former Army Ranger."

Master Linney bowed while the group applauded.

"Master Carlton is also a 6th degree black belt from our Long Beach studio. He's 6 feet, 186 pounds and a former cornerback for the LA Rams."

Eric waited for the applause to end.

Master Cook comes to us from our Hillcrest Studio. He's a 5th degree black belt and is 6'1", 195 pounds, and a former Marine."

After the applause he went on. "Jon Sweet is a JETT, which, for those who don't know, is like special ops in the military, only a JETT works for Ameritech Security and stands for Jason's Elite Tactical Team. Jon is 6'3" and weighs 205 pounds. Jon is helping us last minute by stepping in for Cameron Wallace, my son-in-law, young Eric's uncle, who was injured on a mission recently and so is not currently able to beat up on his nephew. Jon, being the good friend that he is, volunteered to do the deed."

He waited for the laughter and applause to subside. "And last, but definitely not least, the current Kino Challenge Champion, also young Eric's uncle, also a JETT and second in command at Ameritech Security, Joey Adams. Joey is 6 feet, and 179 pounds."

"And he's fast as hell," Jon put in quickly. He smiled at Grandmaster Kino who raised his brow at the agent. "Sorry, mate, I mean, sir. My admiration for my boss got the best of me."

Grandmaster Kino turned back to the group. "As I'm sure you can tell from his accent, Jon is an Aussie. And he's very exuberant, and by the way, very available."

That remark had all the girls swooning and all the men chuckling

because it will make Jon pay for interrupting.

Jon nodded at Grandmaster Kino with a smile. “Well done, sir.”

Eric senior smiled. “Those are today’s challengers. Eric is a 3rd degree black belt, 6'2" and 180 pounds. So, let’s get on with it. Master Linney. You’re up. Master Foreman will ref. What he says goes. If I say ‘halt,’ then that means stop immediately. Do not pull punches. Do not go easy on him. That won’t help him. The only thing we won’t do today is groin kicks. Remember, the Challenge is a no-holds-barred bare knuckles tournament. It’s real. It’s dangerous. Let’s get young Eric ready. We’ll go two, three-minute rounds with each of you. That gives him ten rounds, if he makes it. One-minute rest period between each round. Five minutes between each match.”

Master Linney pulled off his shirt and strode to the center of the mat.

There was an excitement in the air as they watched Three fold himself in half at the end of his stretching routine. He pulled off his shirt and walked to the middle of the floor. Both young Eric and Master Linney turned and bowed to Grandmaster Kino, then to Master Foreman. Once they bowed to each other, they fell immediately into a fighting stance. “Begin,” Master Foreman said sharply.

Jordan reached down and squeezed Colton’s hand in nervousness. Colton smiled up at her. “I think Three is the hottest guy I’ve ever seen. Good Lord, Jordan, look at him. Is he real?”

Jordan giggled. “Sometimes I wonder.” She watched as the two men went at each other. Three was blocking well, or so she thought. By the end of the first round, neither man had landed a punch or kick. That was better than last Friday, she guessed in her uneducated state.

He sat down for the one-minute rest time, drank some water, spit some water, tried to catch his breath.

Second round, it was Three who struck first when he landed a second side kick, then spun with the hook kick. Jordan actually recognized it as the sequence Grandmaster Kino had made him get up and do earlier when he’d collapsed. Double side kick, spinning hook kick. But then, Master Linney landed a glancing blow to Eric’s face and he went down. He quickly rolled and came up, shook it off, and fought back hard. Still he received more than he gave and was obviously glad when the second three minutes ended.

Jordan watched him. He looked pitiful as Grandmaster Kino spoke to him about what he did right or wrong, wiped blood from a small cut over his eyebrow, had him drink, and finally sent him out to meet his next opponent, Master Carlton.

That match went pretty much the way of the first one, with Three holding his own for the first round, and then getting pummeled in the second round.

Against Master Cook, again, about the same. Though at one point, Three put Master Cook down briefly. Master Cook retaliated by almost knocking Three out. Grandmaster Kino called a halt to the fight.

Master Cook immediately apologized. Grandmaster Kino shook his head. "Never apologize for fighting well. I stopped the fight to allow him time to recover. I want him trained and ready. Not dead. But Eric will learn much from what just happened, right Eric?"

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir, first lesson, don't ever cross this man," he said breathlessly.

The group laughed, but Jordan was worried. She got up and went to where Jeffy sat in a chair and whispered in her ear. "Is he okay?"

Jeffy closed her eyes. "He's a little dizzy. No concussion. He's very tired. Hmm, pain in his left thigh. Might have pulled a muscle. Or a cramp. Yes, I think a cramp." Jeffy smiled at her. "He's okay. Don't worry, sweetie. But I have to say, I love the way you love him."

"Oh! Are you reading *me*?"

"Well, in my defense, you're projecting. But also, you're just easy to read. Your love for him is strong. I love that. Don't worry. Now, go sit and enjoy. He's not in distress physically or emotionally."

Jordan bit on her lip and went back to her place next to Colton.

"What did you ask her?" Colton whispered.

"Tell ya later. Though you probably won't believe me."

Jordan watched as Grandmaster Kino knelt in front of Three, his hand on his leg, speaking and nodding. Three appeared to be asking him a question and he was answering and then stood to demonstrate, moving his own leg in a wide circle, so fast, Jordan's mouth fell open. She looked around and saw other people also watching Grandmaster Kino, also seemingly similarly impressed. She hadn't really thought about it, but of course, the man who knew how to teach so many, could also do everything he taught. Very cool.

Everyone was excited about seeing the Aussie fight next. He looked so big out there on mat. He wasn't smiling and acting silly any more. He was dead serious.

"Don't kill him," Cam reminded him, making everyone laugh except for Jordan. Her heart was beating a mile a minute.

Three took several deep breaths, and walked out onto the mat. They bowed like the others did. Eric settled into a fighting stance. Jon only stood very still.

Eric spun with blinding speed intending to land a hook kick, but Jon caught his leg, elbowed him in the gut and Eric landed on his back. Master Foreman waved Jon off, made sure Eric was okay, allowed him to stand and restarted the fight. Eric went at Jon with several punches which were blocked, a kick which actually missed and two more punches which Jon also blocked, but held on to Eric's arm and punched him in the face and then threw him over his shoulder. Young Eric landed with a thud. The rest of the round went the same way and when time was called, Eric limped over to sit and listen to his grandfather.

After the minute of rest and instruction, Eric came back out. He circled

and waited. Jon charged in with punch and kick combinations, all of which Eric blocked, then at the moment Jon was slightly off balance on the last blocked kick, Eric spun and delivered a roundhouse with blinding speed and kicked him right in the face. Jon hit the mat.

The crowd cheered.

Jon rose quickly. The rest of the round was at electrifying speed. They were moving so fast it was almost impossible to tell what was happening.

Jordan was pretty sure that both Jon and Three had gotten in a few more punches, but unfortunately it ended when Eric leaped in the air intending to kick Jon in the face, but Jon stumbled as he tried to block with a kick and accidentally caught Eric in the groin. Eric went down immediately.

Jon knelt by him. "Geez, sorry mate."

Knowing there were a bunch of females watching, Eric worked hard to not grab himself, but couldn't stop the moan.

"Take deep breaths," Jon said.

Eric coughed and nodded and grunted in pain several times and finally curled in a ball, his breath coming in great gasps.

"Can ya hear me, mate?"

Eric couldn't speak but he nodded. Finally, he struggled to his knees and sat there for a full minute, waiting for the pain to subside.

Jordan's eyes were opened wide. There was nothing to do except watch him suffer through the waves of pain.

Grandmaster Kino knelt in front of him. "Going away yet?"

"Yes, sir," he said breathlessly. "Almost."

"There's thirty seconds left in the bout. Wanna stay down?"

"No, sir. Let's finish it," young Eric said as he slowly got to his feet and stood ready. He waited for the ref to start the fight and did his best to block the incoming punches and kicks for thirty more seconds. He took a few more body shots before the time was up.

Grandmaster Kino nodded his approval as young Eric staggered back to sit and rest, waiting for the next bout. The hardest bout. The one against his uncle.

"You're making progress, Eric," his grandfather said.

"It doesn't feel like I am," he complained.

"Yeah, well, your perspective is off. Unless you think I don't know what I'm talking about."

"No, sir, that's not what I think."

"Okay then. So, buck up. Now, tell, me what's Joey's number one attribute?"

"Speed."

"Correct. So, concentrate on blocking, you're not gonna be able to get inside unless he leaves an opening, but he *will* eventually leave an opening."

Eric nodded.

"Almost time. Drink some water. Breathe deep and slow. One more

bout. You can do this."

He nodded again. Stood, walked to the mat. His uncle put a hand on his head. "You okay, buddy?"

"Yes, sir."

Joey smiled at him. "Eric— block. Do you hear me? Block!"

He nodded. "Same thing Granddad said."

"Of course he did."

Joey stepped back, pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

"Good grief," Colton whispered to Jordan. "I mean, the whole freakin' family, they're just not real."

"Yeah, and he just turned thirty-eight."

"That's amazing."

"Right?"

Uncle and nephew bowed and the fight began. Joey punched so fast, so many times, within the first thirty seconds young Eric had been hit several times. His nose was already bleeding.

"Block," Joey said fiercely.

"I would if I could see it coming," Eric returned.

"Don't watch my fists. Feel it. Be blind. Block like you feel it's coming at you."

He tried what Joey was saying, and actually was able to block the next several punches. But he was so tired, and it felt like he was moving in slow motion. Joey kicked and Eric went down. He struggled to his feet. Joey kicked again. Eric went down again. He tried to get up, but stumbled and fell onto his back, breathing hard.

"One more time," Grandmaster Kino said softly. "Get up just one more time."

Eric turned onto his stomach, worked his knees underneath him and pushed himself up. He stood ready.

Joey came at him again. Eric was so tired that he stopped thinking. It was instinct that made him move his head to the side, making Joey miss. Again, instinctively, Eric's fist struck out. He connected. Joey staggered back with the force of the blow, nodded his head with a smile. "Good job."

Eric smiled. "Thanks," he said as he fell forward.

Joey caught him, held him for a few moments, and then let him sink to the floor. Young Eric, on his knees, his head bent, couldn't will himself to do anything else.

The attendees were on their feet, all clapping hard for the young man who'd worked so hard, who'd endured to the end, who'd definitely practiced what he preached, which was to give one's all. He'd given it.

Jordan stood and clapped too, her eyes moist with the emotion she felt. She loved him so. She was so proud of him. He was so strong. He'd endured so much today. Even more than the other times she'd watched. She had so much respect for him, not just because of what he can do in the martial arts,

but because with all that, he's still humble, and kind and compassionate and like Grandmaster Kino said, he serves. He serves others because God says, of those who have much, much is expected. If she'd had any doubts before that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with this guy, she had no doubts now. She hoped and prayed he felt the same way about her.

While young Eric went to shower and dress, Grandmaster Kino came to speak to the softball coaches and athletic director of UCLA. He shook their hands and answered their questions. They were very impressed and very grateful for the opportunity to be allowed to witness something that thousands of people would love to see. The athletic director asked Grandmaster Kino if he, or Ricky or young Eric would consider speaking to the other athletes at the school.

Grandmaster Kino told them they could work something out and to be in touch. The masters of the Kino studios who'd come to spar with young Eric also made their way around, shaking hands and inviting people out to their respective studios.

Joey and Jon Sweet also made their way around, shaking hands, answering questions and allowing selfies. Joey laughed as Jon was asked out several times and actually ended up exchanging numbers with a few girls.

There was a large murmuring as young Eric, the star of today's show, reemerged, freshly showered and dressed. Even the small cut over his eyebrow and the new bruise on his cheek didn't diminish his good looks. They made him look rugged. Sexy. The girls crowded around to shake hands, get selfies with him and tell him how awesome he was, and how inspiring he was, and how they were now gonna work as hard as him at all of their endeavors.

It seemed he spoke with each and every one of Jordan's team members. Finally, he looked past the last one and saw Jordan, smiling, patiently waiting her turn. He finished the selfie and made his way to her. He may be suffering from that ailment Agent Tanner and his buddies were always talking about, the primal post-war reaction syndrome thing, because right now all he wanted to do was get Jordan alone. He didn't smile, didn't stop, just grabbed her and kissed her, very passionately.

Jordan's teammates all turned to watch the moment.

"Woo hoo," one said as she cheered them on.

A few others joined with applause.

Sheepishly, he pulled away and when he did, he was breathless again, like he'd been almost all day.

"Wow," Jordan said, breathing hard herself. "Where did that come from?"

He shook his head. "It's all I could think about doing while I was taking a shower. Actually, that's not true. I could think about doing a lot more things."

"Um, well, I'm not sure what to say to that," Jordan said.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't say things like that. I just had an overwhelming need to be close to you."

"I'm glad you did, and I would love to get close to you. If these people would just hurry and go home."

He smiled. "And then, will you come home with me? Not to stay the night, but for a little while. It's kinda lonely in that big house all by myself."

"I would love that. Maybe we could get a pizza?"

He grinned. "Absolutely. Eat pizza and just relax. Hey, we could watch a movie. Dinner and a movie, classic date."

"Sounds great. What movie?"

He shrugged. "Anyone you want." He pulled out his phone and his fingers moved quickly.

"What are you doing?"

He looked up with a smile and tucked his phone away. "I just ordered the pizzas. We'll pick them up on the way to the house."

"You ordered that fast?"

"Well, I have a standing order on speed dial."

"Of course you do," she laughed.

Young Eric then joined everyone else, shaking hands, taking pics and thanking the men who came to help with his training. He was glad when the crowd dwindled down. Eric asked his grandfather if there was anything he could do for him.

"Yes, you can go home and rest. It's been a hard day. You outdid yourself and I'm very happy with your progress."

Young Eric smiled. "Thank you, sir. Thanks for all you do. And thanks for being here and training me." He hugged him. "I love you, Granddad."

"I love you too, son. Now go." He was dismissed.

He went to his grandmother and hugged her. "Thanks for coming, Grandma and for the food."

"My pleasure, sweet boy. I'm so proud of you. You were a beast out there today. I just know you're gonna do well at the Challenge. So don't you worry about that."

"Thanks, Grandma. And, like, well, I mean, how are you feeling?"

She nodded. "Much better. And thank you, for helping to give me a blessing. That was very special. Three generations of Kino men all praying over little old me."

"You're not old, Grandma. Age is a state of mind."

She laughed. "You sound like your grandfather."

He grinned. "Then there's hope for me yet."

"And now you sound like your father."

Young Eric laughed. "Do you need any help with anything?"

"Nope. It's all taken care of."

"Um, where are the kids?"

"Luciana came to help today. She's at the house and Agent Ward is

there to assist her in anything she might need."

"That's awesome. Well, I'm gonna try to get out of here."

Shelley smiled at her young grandson. "You and Jordan have fun. But not too much fun."

"Yes, ma'am."

He turned and smiled at his girl. Nodded toward the door. She met him there and they slipped out.

"You don't have to drive slow," she quipped as he helped her into her car. "I can keep up."

He grinned. "We'll just see about that. The pizzas will be delivered to the gatehouse. If you wanna race to my house, you're on."

She grinned and revved her engine. He chuckled.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled through the gate at the south Kino estate. Eric pulled in far enough for Jordan, who was behind him, to get through the gate and stopped.

Jordan watched as Three got out of his car and went to the door of the gatehouse. An agent stepped out holding three pizza boxes. Her eyebrows lifted. Three? How much did he intend to eat? The agent handed the boxes to Eric. Eric then pulled off the top one and handed it back to him. The agent smiled and nodded. Jordan smiled too. He was always thinking of others. He jumped back into his car and pulled to the front door.

Jordan got out of her car and looked up at the place her guy called home. The home was very large. There were three stories. A bunch of bedrooms and bathrooms on the top level. On the entry level there was a formal living room, a very large den, an office or study, two more bedrooms and three bathrooms, a giant kitchen, a giant dining room. The house was only similar to his grandparents' house in that it had the ocean for a backyard and giant, beautifully manicured lawn for a front yard and the kitchen at the back of the house where one could look out the kitchen window and watch the sunset.

But the dining room at what they called the "south estate," was on the other side of the kitchen and looked out over the far left side of the house, and the stairway leading up to the bedrooms was not accessible from the front entryway like at his grandparents' home. The south estate's giant staircase faced the large open kitchen, so that when you come down the steps in the morning, you walk about ten steps forward and you could sit at an enormous breakfast island.

She followed Three into the kitchen. He set the pizza boxes down, grabbed a couple of plates from a cabinet, and pulled several paper towels from the roll. These he handed to Jordan.

"Whatcha want to drink?" he asked.

"Whatcha got?"

He opened the fridge. "Hmm, there's water, some La Croix, some juices, like, mango, orange, papaya, cranberry. Oh, and there's some ginger ale. The real stuff."

"I'll try that."

He grabbed a couple of cans and a bottle of water and handed them to her. He grabbed the pizza and plates and they walked back to the den.

Jordan looked around. She'd been in here before, but last time it was filled with his family and she hadn't really noticed the room itself. Like everything else, it too was large. It had a giant screen TV on one wall and some shelving along another wall covered in books.

There was plenty of room for two big L-shape sofas, and four roomy recliners. In front of one of the sofas was a very large coffee table. Three set the pizza boxes down there and opened them up. They sat down on the sofa and he smiled at her. "You wanna say the blessing?"

"Um, I don't think I'm ready for that yet."

"No problem. Just thought I'd ask. I didn't want to be a blessing hogger."

She laughed. "No, I don't feel that way. You go ahead."

He quickly blessed the food and they dug in.

He took a huge bite of pizza and then grabbed up the remote and started surfing for movies.

"Whaddya want? We got dramas, rom coms, action, lots of action movies, westerns, oldies, martial arts, sci fi, documentaries, romance, Hallmark, musicals, classics, old classics, really old classics, or we could watch one of my mom's or one of my dad's, though I don't really want to do that."

She laughed. "I don't know, you choose."

He shrugged. "Okay, well, how about this one?"

She looked at the highlighted movie. "Yeah, I've always wanted to see that."

"You've never seen it?"

"I probably haven't seen most of those movies. It'd be easier for me to tell you what I have seen instead of what I haven't seen."

"Okay, well, we'll start with this one, and we'll make a lifelong goal to see all of these movies."

"Life long?"

He nodded, looked into her eyes. "Yes."

She didn't push it, but she liked the way that sounded.

He pushed the button on the remote and the movie, "Ghost" with Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore started to play.

"So, like, is this a scary movie?"

He chuckled. "Maybe a little bit, but not the way you think."

They chowed down on their pizza, guzzled ginger ale and then leaned back on the sofa to watch the movie. Young Eric pulled a fuzzy blanket off the back of the sofa and covered them up.

Jordan cuddled against his side, sighing with pleasure. Their bellies were full, she was warm and comfortable, and cuddled up close to the most

wonderful guy in the world. But Jordan got upset when Patrick Swayze in the movie almost immediately gets killed.

Three had to calm her down to get her to watch the rest of the movie. He did that by kissing her. But she got upset again when the bad guy came to see Demi Moore.

"It's gonna be okay," Eric said.

She sniffed. "He's dead. How is it gonna be okay?"

Laughing softly, he lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "So, ya know it's not real. It's just a movie, right?"

She nodded and wiped at a tear from her eye.

He frowned. "Are you actually crying?"

She shrugged. He chuckled. "Baby, you are so sweet." He bent his head and kissed her softly.

Jordan sighed at the touch of his warm lips to hers. He kissed her so slowly. He tasted her lips. He nipped at her bottom lip, then her chin. He rubbed his cheek over hers and then went back to her mouth and kissed her deeply. He pushed her down, and lay beside her. She rolled to her back so he could continue kissing her. He kissed her over and over and her body grew warm with want.

He knew he was getting to the place where he might lose control when he imagined his hands on her body. He pulled back, drew a deep breath, and turned her to face the TV. "Watch the movie, it actually has a happy ending."

She sighed. "Okay, if you say so."

"I say so."

She nestled back against him. He put his arm around her waist and closed his eyes in complete bliss at the smell of her and the feel of her in his arms.

✞✞✞

1 Corinthians 10:13

"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.
God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your
ability, but with the temptation he will also provide
the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Chapter Twenty-Three

September 28th, Saturday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric woke with a start when his phone went off.

He turned off the alarm and glanced at the time. It was 7:00 AM. He'd fallen asleep during the movie which meant he'd been asleep for about ten hours. Jordan lay on the couch next to him, but turned toward him, her face nestled against his chest. She moaned slightly when he tried to move.

He hated to wake her, she was sleeping so soundly, but he had to get moving. Slowly, he lifted himself up and climbed over the back of the sofa. She immediately stretched out to take up the whole space, making him smile.

He quickly ran upstairs, used the restroom, changed clothes, headed back down to the kitchen and made his smoothie. He gulped it down, rinsed out the glass and the blender and went back to check on her. She was still sleeping. He pulled the cover up over her shoulder, turned and headed out the back glass doors to the beach.

He frowned. He'd missed the sunrise by about thirty minutes. His grandfather had told him to take an extra hour this morning. Still, he hated to miss the sunrise. He made his way across the large deck and to the steps that led down toward the beach, but stopped when something caught his eye on the first step. A cigarette butt. This was not good. Quickly, he went back in the house, got a plastic snack bag from the kitchen, came back and scooped up the butt.

He searched the area and found another butt on the beach. It could be anybody, some person walking the beach at night who got curious about the big house on the hill and came up to inspect. But he doubted that. He pulled his phone, to call his Uncle Joey but remembered he and his whole family were going to the game at Oregon State today, so instead, he called Jason and told him what he'd found.

"Okay, I'll send an agent to retrieve the butts. We'll run DNA on them and see what we have and in the meantime, I'll pull video from the security cameras and get a visual."

"Thanks, Uncle Jason."

"Yep. And I don't want you on the beach alone."

"Uncle Jason, I can take care of myself."

"Some men once took your father off a beach, you know that right?"

Young Eric sighed. "Yes, sir."

"With your dad out of state, I feel responsible for you, so, young man, I don't want you down there on the beach alone. Go to your grandfather's house and do your workout there. You were going there anyway, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get a move on."

"Yes, sir. I, uh, have to wake Jordan."

Jason was silent a moment.

"Nothing happened," young Eric said quickly.

"Nothing has happened *yet.* But it's not my place to say."

"Yes, it is, Uncle Jason. You can say to me whatever you feel you need to say. I honor you as my father honors you."

"Okay, well then, just be careful, Eric, because regret is no fun. Live in a way that you won't have to face regret."

"Message received, sir."

"Good. Okay. Now, get off that beach."

"Yes, sir."

Young Eric ran back into the house, locked the door and went to wake the beautiful blonde sleeping on the sofa in the den.

He sat beside her and softly touched her shoulder. She sighed, stretched and turned over.

"Good morning, Three," she purred.

He smiled. "Good morning, Two-Three," he returned.

"What time is it?"

"It's 7:30."

"Are you already done with your workout?"

"No, I haven't started. Had a little glitch. So, I've been ordered to go work out at my grandfather's house."

"Ordered by whom?"

He sighed. "By Jason."

"Why?" she asked, becoming alert.

He frowned. "Well, it appears we had a visitor last night. Someone hanging around outside who got as close as the deck and Jason doesn't like it."

"So, do you mean, someone like a peeping Tom kinda person, or a vagrant, or something worse?"

"Dunno. Jason is checking the video off the security cameras and we'll know soon. For now, I have to get you up and off to see your family before I can leave."

"Agent Trout won't be here until 8:00."

Eric frowned. "How does he even know to come here?"

"I called him last night after you fell asleep and told him I was gonna stay here. You were so sound asleep. I didn't want to wake you to see me off. But I'm sorry I told him 8:00. I didn't know we'd need him earlier."

"No worries. It's not that long. We'll wait."

"So, now I've messed up your workout."

"Stop that. *You* haven't messed up anything. Now tell me, Two-three, would you like one of my famous smoothies?"

"Sure," she said as she sat up.

He smiled at her. "So, I guess I should apologize. I didn't mean to fall asleep and leave you stranded. Guess I was really tired."

"You were worn out, and with good reason. Besides, no need to apologize because I love sleeping with you."

"I love sleeping with you too. Except when I'm *not* tired and all I do is try to control myself all night. That's no fun."

"So, as long as you're worn out, I can sleep with you?"

"My father would still say that's playing with fire."

She smiled. "That's just cuz I'm so hot."

He laughed. "You are when you make 'dad jokes.' Now kiss me and go freshen up while I make your breakfast."

She kissed him quickly and ran upstairs to the bathroom.

He worked on her smoothie adding a little extra honey. Just as he poured it into a cup for her, his phone buzzed.

"Whatcha got, Jason?"

"Well, you're not gonna like it, Eric, because the man smoking those cigarettes is Peter Perez."

"Damn. Uh, sorry, Uncle Jason."

"He was there almost an hour. Appeared to be drunk I'm guessing because of the zig zag of his walk. Came from the south on the beach. Walked around the entire house. If he'd touched a window an alarm would've sounded so, I'm guessing for now, he was just curious, casing the house, or possibly getting the layout. Don't know what he's thinking, but you did piss him off the other day on the phone."

"Do you think he knew that Jordan was here?"

"I don't think he has the resources to track her, but, he might have assumed that she was there, and her car parked out front would have confirmed it for him."

Eric nodded. "Now what?"

"We'll have to up security. Have someone monitor the cameras. Turn on the electric fencing."

"Can we wait to call my father? I mean, he's with Taylor and I don't wanna worry him."

"Uh, what a silly question. You think I would honor that request?"

"No, sir."

"Do you think he'd want me to honor that request?"

"No, sir. Okay, it was a stupid request."

"Tell Jordan what's up so she can be aware."

"It's gonna scare her."

"Good."

"Got it. Thanks, Uncle Jason."

"You're welcome. Do not dally."

"Yes, sir."

Jordan came downstairs and sat at the island. He set the smoothie in front of her.

"What's wrong?" she asked immediately.

He sighed. "Drink your smoothie first and then I'll tell you."

She smiled. "That sounds ominous, but okay."

He watched her drink as he tried to decide how to let her know what was up. Finally, he decided to just come out with it. "I was just talking to Jason. Soo, the guy who visited us last night, it was your step-father."

She stopped sucking on the straw and put the cup down. Immediately her hands began to shake. He moved around to stand next to her and she turned on the stool to face him.

"He, he was here? How?"

"He walked up from the beach. He circled around the house and hung out for about an hour."

"Oh no, Eric, what is he thinking? What do you think he wanted?"

"We're not sure what he's thinking. Maybe casing the place. Trying to figure out if he can get in, get to you, get to me, get to my family, I don't know. As Jason reminded me, I pissed him off the other day when I threatened him. He could be after you or he could be after me."

Tears filled her eyes. "What are we gonna do?"

"Babe, don't be afraid. I'm certainly not afraid of him."

"But what if he comes after you?" she said, her voice hysterical.

He smiled. "I really hope he does. I'd love to have a reason to take him down."

She shook her head. "No, Three, he's not honorable. He won't come right at you. He'll sucker punch you, and I'm not talking about with his fists. He's underhanded, Three. He's devious. He'd sneak up on you, or put a bomb in your car, or something like that. He wouldn't actually face you in a fair fight."

Eric took out his phone. "Right, he only beats up on little girls." He called Jason, put it on speaker.

"Already?" Jason asked.

"Sorry, but I just thought about something. So, he knew or discovered that Jordan was here because we left our cars out front. But like, on the video, did he go near the cars at all?"

"He passed by the cars. He didn't stop, or touch them or try to break into them."

"I'm asking because Jordan says he'd do something like plant a bomb."

"I believe her. So put cars away at night. Lock the garage. From here on out we'll activate the fence between the beach and the house. Still, take precautions until we're able to find this guy. A loose cannon is dangerous."

"Yes, sir." He looked at his phone as it buzzed. "Granddad is trying to call. Thanks, Uncle Jason."

"Yep."

"Good morning, Granddad. You're on speaker."

"Good morning. I've been briefed on the situation."

"Uncle Jason works fast."

"He has to, he has a large company to run."

"Why doesn't he pass something like this off to one of his assistants?"

"He does, usually, but family matters he handles personally. Him or Joey. Eric, I'd like you to pack a bag and stay at my house until your parents get back."

Eric sighed. "But, I'm okay. Jason says we'll up security here, turn on the fences, put two men in the booth."

"Yes, and I still want him to do that. But I want you here."

"Is there no way I can talk you out of that? I can take care of myself."

"Talk me out of it? No. Still, you have your own freewill. You can obey my wishes or not. That's up to you. Let me just say, I have a strong feeling about this and I'm usually right. I've spoken to Jeffy and she too has a strong feeling about this. Honor my wishes or not, Eric. The choice is yours."

Eric smiled. "Geez, Granddad, you have to know when you put it that way there is no way I could disregard your wishes. I'll go pack a bag. But, uh, Granddad, I was gonna take Jordan on a date this afternoon."

"Where to?"

"I was gonna teach her to surf over at Ocean Park. Then we were gonna get cleaned up and go to dinner. Maybe dancing."

"Hmm, big night. I'm not gung ho about Ocean Park. The agents can't follow you out. Teach her to surf here. The breaks are big enough for a beginner. Dinner and dancing is doable, but you'll have to have a couple of tails."

Sighing, young Eric agreed to his grandfather's wishes. He hung up and smiled at Jordan. "Well, there you have it."

She put her hands up around his neck. "As long as we're together, that's what really counts."

He bent his head and kissed her. "You're right."

"I'm sorry about all this."

"Don't apologize for the actions of others, Jordan. You are not responsible for what they do."

"It kinda makes me a real downer to be with though."

"You're about to make me mad."

She giggled. "I'm shakin' in my boots."

"You should be," he said as he pulled her off the stool, flipped her onto the floor and straddled her.

She pulled back a fist, making him laugh. He grabbed both her arms and pinned them over her head and smiled down at her. "What now?"

She tried to buck him off, he gave a grunt, but his smile disappeared. He lowered himself, pressed his body against hers and kissed her. She immediately stopped resisting. When he lifted his head, they both were breathing hard. "Your phone is buzzing," he murmured.

"I can't get to it."

He moved aside and let her up. She looked at her phone and sighed. "Agent Trout is here."

He stood and pulled her up. "Well, Miss Jordan Brooks, you have a great morning with your family. When you leave there, meet me at my grandparents' house. Bring a bathing suit."

She smiled and gave him a brief kiss. "Bye, Three. See you later."

Eric watched her gather her purse and shoes and head out. He followed her to the door. Jordan started toward her own car, but Agent Trout spoke with her. He gestured up toward young Eric. Jordan frowned. She went back up the front steps to him.

"What's wrong?"

"Agent Trout has asked me to ride with him from now on until they are able to find Peter."

"I think that's a good idea."

"He told me to get you to put my car in the garage, so, here's the keys."

Eric smiled, took the keys, kissed her hand. "Bye again."

She smiled. "Bye."

She trotted down the steps, got into Agent Trout's front seat. He closed the door, waved at Eric, got in the car and drove away.

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September 28th, Saturday Morning

Sky-Nash Studios, Nashville, Tennessee

Caro bit down on her lower lip. These were kids. Taylor was a minor. Caro had gone out of her way to choreograph a number that had no sleaze in it. But these two kids were hot. She looked over at her assistant.

"Whaddya think, Steph?" she whispered.

The woman shook her head, spoke softly because of the other people in the room. "I think that may be the sexiest dance you've ever choreographed."

Caro nodded. "I actually tried to make it NOT sexy."

"I see that. The moves are innocent. But these two, the chemistry is hot. That Gabe, have mercy, he is a stud. When he puts his hands on her waist to lift her, the way he does it, it makes your mouth go dry. He's hot. Not just the way he looks, but, like, his natural way, like his masculine way, he's gonna have to beat them away with a stick after this airs."

Caro glanced over her shoulder at the Kinos. She couldn't tell if they were pleased or angry. Well, she had to face it sometime. She put a smile on her face and went to where they stood near the front of the room.

"So, what do you think? It might need a little tweaking."

Bree smiled. "What's wrong, Caro?"

Caro looked down, sighed, and looked back up. "Well, I don't want you to think that I'm exploiting your child, but it turned out a little, like, uh, sexier than I thought it would."

"It's pretty sexy," Ricky agreed. "But, with those two, holding hands is sexy."

"Right?" Caro agreed quickly. "I'm not sure what to do to tone it down without just having them walk around together. This IS a dance show, so, they have to actually dance. I guess I could make it where he doesn't lift her, but he's so good at it. And remember, he's not a trained dancer, so he loses some points on that, but he makes up for it when he lifts her so effortlessly. The transitions are great. Her natural style is phenomenal. I can't wait for her to get into class."

Bree nodded. "Her volleyball season ends in a few weeks. After that, dance will be her big thing. I hope you understand that she'd already committed to volleyball when she found out from you that she wasn't too old to start dancing. I mean, the volleyball coach had given her a special tryout since she missed the real one. We didn't think she should quit after that. She's been kind of a late bloomer. Not knowing what she wants to do, or what she *can* do until recently. Much of that is our fault. We were sort of protecting her a little too much."

Caro waved her concern away. "You don't have to explain. I understand completely. I am just very excited though to hear what her dance teachers say once she starts at my school." She sighed. "So, you don't think the dance is too sexy? I mean, for a minor?"

Ricky frowned. "Like you say, I don't see how you can change it. And this number, to me, isn't even as sexy as the *Uptown Funk* number."

Caro nodded. "Yes, I think I might agree. But *they* did the choreography in that one. I just brushed it up a bit. So, I can't take the blame there," she said with a laugh.

"Well, those two can't help but be sexy," Bree said. "They both are gorgeous, they are totally in love with each other, and it shows in every thing they do. But I have to say, when Gabe does that move, like a New Zealand Haka, with those strong thighs moving in and out, it's pretty mesmerizing."

Ricky laughed. "Hmmm, I'll have to remember that. You know my love, us Hawaiians do the same kind of thing, the Ha'a Koa."

"Yes, I've seen you do a little of it. Ya know, Ricky, you and your dad and your son, and Gabe, and your brothers, and their sons, you should teach them and do it for me on my next birthday!"

Ricky nodded. "You got it babe." He looked down as his phone buzzed. Read the text. "Call me when you get a moment." He looked up. "It's Jason. I need to step out and call him."

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September 28th, Late Saturday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric nodded at his grandfather, took a deep breath and went through the fighting sequence again.

"Again," Grandmaster Kino said softly. "Faster."

Young Eric did as asked.

"Again."

He did.

"Again."

He did.

"There! Did you feel the difference?"

Young Eric shook his head.

"Then do it again," Grandmaster Kino said.

He did.

"Again," he commanded.

He did it again and then sank to the ground breathless. "What is wrong with me?"

"Not a thing."

"Why can't I get it right?"

"You are getting it right. But you can't feel the difference so that means you won't get it right next time."

"What is the difference?"

"The speed and the placement. The accuracy. Try again."

He stood back up. Swung into action. Grandmaster Kino nodded his head. "Good."

Young Eric sunk to the ground again, trying to catch his breath.

Grandmaster Kino smiled at him. "I think you need some head work."

Young Eric sighed. "Why? What did I do wrong?"

"Your question reveals the answer."

Eric thought. Nodded in understanding. Grandmaster Kino sat down in front of his grandson on the sand, pulling his legs into a lotus. "Let's talk about your confidence."

"I feel confident."

"Do you?"

"I think so."

"When was the last time you competed in a tournament?"

"When I was sixteen."

"I remember. You won."

"Of course."

"Why do you say, 'of course?'"

"If you're Ricky Kino's kid, you have to win."

"And if you don't?"

"Then kids will feel free to beat up on you."

"Which they've tried to do your entire life."

"Yes, sir."

"How many times have you actually been jumped?"

"Too many to count."

"Does your father know about this?"

"No, sir. Well, not every time."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"What was he supposed to do about it? Go complain to the school? Then it's not just 'spoiled little rich kid isn't as good as his dad,' but then it's, 'he had to get his daddy to come and take up for him.' No thanks. I'll take my beating."

"Did you usually lose?"

"No. I usually won unless there were a bunch of guys at once."

"If you usually won, why would they think you weren't as good as your dad?"

"Well, they thought that *before* they tested me. I had to prove myself over and over. Then they started bringing friends. Big friends. Big, mean, strong friends. I got my butt handed to me many times."

"So, you can take a beating. You've shown that in the training too."

Young Eric shrugged. "No big deal. It keeps me humble."

"I'm thinking it keeps you too humble."

"I have confidence, Granddad. I really do."

"Do you think you can win at the Challenge?"

"Yes, sir. At least I hope I can."

"Not the same thing."

He nodded. "I think I can."

"I'm gonna need you to know."

"How can I know?"

"That's my department."

"So, it's *you* who needs to know?"

"I do know. You *will* win. But I need you, young Eric, to go into the event with the confidence of knowing."

"Granddad, I don't understand. Anything can happen. I could lose."

He shook his head. "Those are not the words of a champion. Son, words have power. And some words are self-fulfilling."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Believe in yourself. Not because you're Ricky Kino's son. But because you've put forth the hard work that it takes to win. You're strong. You're quick. You're skilled. Your instincts are right on. Yesterday, against Joey, when you let go, you instinctively dodged his fist. So, trust yourself. Let go. What does Obi-Wan Kenobi tell Luke, in the first *Star Wars*?"

"He tells him to let go and use the force."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "As silly as it sounds, that's exactly what you need to do."

"And what if I do that and fail? What if I'm the first Kino to lose a Kino Challenge?"

"Okay, you wanna go there? What if you are? What happens to you?"

"Um, I guess I live in disgrace for the rest of my life."

"Wow, Eric. I had no idea you were thinking this way. Son, people try and fail all the time. Life does not end. And the failure only lasts as long as it takes you to rise up and try again."

"So, you're saying that if I were to fail, you would support me to represent the family again?"

Eric smiled. "First, you are NOT gonna fail. I'm telling you. I know what I'm doing. But if somehow, you talk yourself into failing, not only would we trust you to represent us again, we'd insist upon it. So, you may as well prepare yourself to win Eric, because you eventually will."

He sighed. "This Kino Challenge, young Eric, does not take place out of pride, to say that the Kinos never lose. It's much more important than winning a tournament. It's raising warriors who don't quit, who give it their all. If you were to lose, and you won't, but if you did, the world would be watching to see how you handle that loss. They would be watching to see if you get back up, hold your head up high and try again. That would teach the world much more than you winning. And so, either way, you fighting in this Challenge is a good thing, a wonderful thing, and I'm proud of you thus far. Give it your all, try your best. Don't give up, then, win or lose, you will not disappoint me."

Young Eric's eyes moistened. He nodded his head. "It's strange. Sometimes I feel very confident. And sometimes I feel like I'm nothing compared to you or my father or my uncles."

"You are an amazing young man, Eric. You have already surpassed your father and I. You just don't realize it. Which is just like your father, who doesn't realize that he's surpassed me."

"My father?"

"Yes."

"He has confidence issues?"

"Yes. Sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"Yes. He is like, the ultimate guy, father, husband, man."

"Exactly. And he shouldn't have any confidence issues, right?"

"Right."

"And so, I'm trying to show you that you are the same. Other people would look at you and think, why in the world would someone like him have confidence issues?"

Eric looked down. "Maybe it's all the times I got beat up back in school. And, like, look at my face right now."

"You faced and held your own against men who are at a much higher level than you. When you beat all those black belts the week before, did you think it was a shame for them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because they were black belts and I'm a 3rd Dan."

"Exactly. There was no shame in that for them, and there should be no shame in that for you against guys who are close to being Grandmasters."

Young Eric nodded.

Grandmaster Kino smiled. "Your humility is good, but don't let it become distorted. Now, let's get back to work."

Young Eric's phone went off and he rose and ran to where it sat on top of the cooler of water. "Hey, Dad, how's it going?"

"It's good. Your sister is amazing and obviously totally in her element. Your honorary brothers are also amazing. Logan is gonna make an immediate name for himself, and Gabe is gonna do what Gabe always does, which is to go multi-million viral. Watch on Monday."

"I will."

"So, I heard that you had a visitor last night."

"Yes, sir."

"I know Dad wants you to stay at his house."

"Yes, sir."

"I appreciate your willingness to cooperate."

"Well I wasn't so willing, but I complied."

"Why not so willing?"

"Because the guy is after Jordan, not me. But also, if he did come after me, I'd welcome it because I'd love the chance to show him that I'm not some little girl he can knock around."

"That's revenge talking," Ricky said quickly.

"Dad, he needs someone to kick his butt."

"I understand. But what ***I*** need right now is to know that you're safe. So, stay at Dad's and, by the way, way to be observant. We have the video footage, we have the butts, we'll have the DNA and it will all show that he was at our house when Jordan was there. Meaning, he didn't accidentally show up at the wrong time at Jordan's house to see his children. He is specifically going after Jordan."

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September 28th, Saturday Afternoon

Omni Nashville, Nashville, Tennessee

Gabe was in heaven. Rehearsals were over until Monday and they had the rest of the afternoon to chill until they went to dinner with Taylor's parents and Logan and the Nash/Smiths.

Both Taylor and Gabe had quickly showered and dressed in warm, cozy sweats. Taylor had been allowed to come to his room to spend some time with him before dinner and they were currently snuggled up together on the bed watching the Dawgs beat up on South Carolina. Taylor was asking great questions about the game, questions that showed she was understanding the complexities of football. Gabe was explaining things to her. Could a guy be any luckier than to find a girl so beautiful, so intelligent, so talented and so interested in things he was interested in, like martial arts, guns and football

and other sports.

Of course, he wasn't just explaining the game to her. He was taking plenty of time to pull her close, to kiss her and to touch her. Not intimately. Just a touch of her shoulder. A stroke of her cheek. His hand resting on her thigh. At this moment life was perfect. She smelled so good. She tasted so good. Her voice was so sweet. Heaven.

The problem with life being so sweet, is you immediately want to figure out ways to keep this moment, or to continue this moment. He knew that wasn't gonna be possible. He was going into training. She was going back to school. He was eighteen. She was seventeen. A year difference that seemed like a giant chasm. She lived an extremely affluent life with her parents. He had a lot going for him, but he wasn't affluent like them.

Gabe had a good job waiting for him in January. He had his own foundation worth millions, though that money wasn't actually for him. It was to serve underprivileged kids and communities. Still, he didn't have to have it all figured out. Just have a plan, his father had told him. And his plan was to get through training, get started on school, wait for Taylor to graduate from high school, see what she decides she wants to do, and if it seems right and God answers his prayers, then ask her parents if he can marry her.

He understood that they were young. He understood that they may ask him to wait. He would wait. He would wait as long as it takes. Because he just couldn't see that anyone would be more perfect for him than Taylor Kino. She was a catch, alright. Millions of guys wanted her. Right now, though, he had her. And he wanted to make sure that stays that way.

He turned to her when she asked the next question. "But why don't they at least try instead of taking a knee? I mean, what do they have to lose?"

He smiled. He loved the fight in her. "Well, they do have something to lose. South Carolina is going into halftime with only two scores back. That's doable. Especially because they get the ball when they come back. It's third and long and the half is about to run out. They're not getting anywhere running the ball. Georgia has shut them down completely."

"But they could like, throw a hail Mary, right? I mean why not try."

"Because the odds are against them, and they could throw an interception, or fumble. They're playing it safe for now so that they don't give the Dawgs a chance to score again before the half."

"Well, I don't think a winning team should play it safe."

He smiled at her. "Well, you're right, sort of, but coaches have to answer for every decision they make, which sometimes makes them stick with the routine calls." He grabbed her and pushed her down on the bed. "You are so freakin' adorable, do you know that?"

She smiled. "You're pretty cute yourself."

He brushed his hand over her face, touched a finger to her lips. "Taylor, I am really in love with you."

"Me too," she said with a giggle.

He lowered his head and kissed her slowly, pulled away and then kissed her again, pressing close against her. Her arms reached up around his neck and held him tight, but he lifted his head when someone knocked on the door. Gabe jumped up immediately and went to the door and looked through the peephole. It was a hotel employee who was carrying a large tray.

"Room service," the guy said as he knocked again.

Gabe looked toward the bed. "Taylor, take your phone, go to the bathroom and call your dad. We didn't order room service."

Taylor did what he asked immediately. She'd learned over the past few months to trust him and to act immediately when he was trying to protect her. She grabbed her phone and ran into the bathroom.

Gabe turned back to the door. "We didn't order any room service. You have the wrong room."

"No, sir, this is room 927, and that's the room I was sent to."

Gabe instinctively touched his waistband. His gun wasn't there. He hadn't traveled with it this time because he flew on a commercial flight and he wasn't old enough to carry a gun unless he was an Ameritech agent, which he was briefly and will be again in January. But he couldn't have his gun for now. "Well, you can just leave whatever it is right there and walk away. I'm not opening the door," Gabe said.

The guy gave a salute and turned to someone else walking in the hall. There was another knock on the door. "Okay, Gabe, it's me, you can open the door now."

Gabe breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of Taylor's dad's voice. He looked out again to be sure and then opened the door. Ricky Kino stood there smiling. "Sorry, kiddo, it was a bet between my wife and I and you just won me a week of back rubs."

Gabe stepped aside to let Mr. Kino into the room. He went to the bathroom and told Taylor to come out.

Taylor came out and came straight to her father. She was trembling.

He put his arms around her. "Oh, honey, did that scare you?"

She sniffed and nodded her head.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry. Your mother and I were putting Gabe to the test. He did exactly what he should have done. He proved to us you're safe with him." He looked up at Gabe and held out his hand. "Good job, son."

Gabe sighed. "Not so sure about that. Really though, I reached for my gun. I can't wait until I can have it again."

"Until then, you'll have to depend on your wits and your body. And I believe in you."

"Obviously, since I just won your bet for you. But it kinda hurts that Mrs. Kino would bet against me."

"I think she wasn't betting against you as much as she was just disagreeing with me to disagree. But anyway, Gabe, that was quick thinking, good judgment. Proud of you."

"Thank you, sir."

"And Taylor, did she argue with you when you told her to go lock herself in the bathroom?"

"No, not at all. She immediately did exactly what I told her to do."

Ricky smiled. "Good girl, Taylor."

She shrugged. "I've learned that you guys know what you're doing."

"I'm proud of you both. Well, kids, it's almost dinner time. Taylor, you come back to the room with me and get dressed. Gabe, see you in about thirty minutes."

"Yes, sir." He smiled at Taylor. She kissed him on the cheek as she passed. He sighed.

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September 28th, Saturday Evening

Nashville Live, Nashville, Tennessee

Gabe looked around as they emerged from the limo. It was obvious *Nashville Live* was a high-end restaurant. There was a line out front and Gabe felt bad that they were ushered in past everyone. But maybe the people out front didn't have reservations, he thought. He glanced at Logan. "Cool place, huh?"

Logan nodded. "One day, I'm gonna sing here."

Gabe smiled. "I totally believe you." He shook his head. "Wow, I just had a vision of you singing here. I mean, literally, it popped into my head, made me dizzy. So, really, I believe you."

Logan grinned. "Cool. What was I wearing?"

Gabe laughed. "It was too fast for me to see."

"So, you think you've become like, psychic? Like Aunt Jeffy?"

He shook his head. "No. But something happens every once in a while. Don't know why. And can't control it."

Gabe and Logan followed the Kinos to the back of the restaurant, closest to the stage. The men all wore suits, the ladies were dressed to the hilt. Taylor had on the blue evening gown he remembered she'd worn back in Pine Forest at the ladies night out. She was 'take your breath away' beautiful. The Smiths, Toby, Caroline, Grace and Brody, were already there and they rose as the Kinos approached.

Toby Nash, tall and large, with his big friendly smile, greeted everyone brightly. Logan shook hands with him and then with Brody, who used his legal name, which was Smith. Brody turned twenty-two last July, just a week before Logan's own birthday, and was a big-time college baseball player. He was almost an exact replica of his father. His hair might be a shade lighter, but only a shade, and he obviously had his father's build. Then Logan took Miss Caro's hand and smiled warmly at her and shifted his gaze to Grace, who offered her hand to him. He took her hand and smiled. Grace, like Logan, was into music, mostly singing, and she used her father's stage name, Nash. She was beautiful, Logan thought. She'd gotten her mother's coloring

with dark blond hair and big brown eyes. She was stunning. Logan would be interested if she wasn't five years older than him. There was a big difference between twenty and twenty-five.

Gabe also greeted everyone, and once the ladies were seated, he sat down. He looked around. The place was nice and the aromas were making his mouth water. There was someone playing piano and Gabe smiled. It reminded him of his sister, Violet.

Taylor immediately took out her phone. Ricky didn't say anything about it because she'd been asked to get some content for Gabe's social media sites. She pointed her phone at Gabe first and nodded her head to let him know she was live.

He smiled. "Hey, everyone. So, we're here at *Nashville Live* restaurant and this place is smokin'. I'm obviously way out of my element, but I'll try to keep up. Taylor is gonna get some good footage for you and I'll leave that up to her because she's a lot more sophisticated than I am."

Taylor turned the phone to her face. "Hey, everyone," she said with a giggle and then turned the phone to the table. "Everyone, say hi to all of Gabe's followers. We have a treasure trove of people here. This is *the* Toby Nash."

Toby smiled and nodded at the phone. "Hello everyone," he said in his smooth deep voice.

"And you all know his gorgeous wife, Caroline Smith, former judge and current producer of *America Can Dance*, and runs the *New York School of Dance,* which, by the way, has locations in Nashville and Los Angeles."

Caro blew a kiss.

"And this beautiful lady is their daughter, Grace Nash, and like, be on the lookout for her because she can sing like her dad, only Grace is prettier."

Grace giggled and waved.

"This hunk is Brody Smith, and he plays baseball for Tennessee Vols, but we won't hold that against him."

Brody laughed and gave a small salute.

"And then, you all know my parents, no big deal."

Ricky and Bree both laughed and waved.

"And this cute guy is my cousin, Logan. And we are all so stoked to hear him sing Monday night on *America Can Dance*, so make sure you watch."

She put her face next to Gabe's. "And here we are back to just little old me and Gabe. Gabe, anything else you wanna say? We have like twenty thousand watching right now."

Gabe smiled. "Well, if we have that many watching, we need to take advantage of it. Have y'all done something nice for someone today? If not, do it now, get video and send it to us at the link on my website. We'll make a montage. And also post in the comment section of this video and let us know what you did. I know we're not supposed to do something and then

brag about it, but if it helps others to be encouraged to do something, then I think that's cool."

Taylor nodded. "Okay, you heard it. We'll do something too. And we'll get back on later if you wanna see what we order to eat. We love you guys. Byee."

She put her phone away and smiled at everyone. "Thanks, everyone, for putting up with that."

"Um, it's not just putting up with it," Caro said. "I'm pretty sure that kind of stuff is exactly what the producers are counting on."

Ricky, Bree and Toby all agreed.

Grace smiled. "Gabe, what you said, you touched me. You have all those people watching and you use it to get them to do something kind for other people. I think I'm in love with you."

Gabe's face reddened.

"Well, half the world is," Taylor put in. "But he's mine, so don't go gettin' any ideas."

"Cat fight," Logan quipped.

Grace shook her head. "No. Taylor is waaay above my grade. I concede."

"Oh, stop," Taylor said. "So, what nice thing can we do for someone?" Taylor asked.

They all looked at each other and then looked around the restaurant.

Toby looked around. "The people here are not in need of any financial assistance," he said.

"Not the patrons, but maybe the servers and the kitchen help," Caro said. "I mean, I used to be a waitress, and it's hard work."

Toby smiled at his sweet wife. "You're right. So, what if I leave a thousand-dollar tip for all servers and kitchen workers?"

"That would be nice," Caro said. "I think you'd certainly make someone's day."

"Okay, that's Toby, now what can I do," Caro said. "Hmm, let me think." Her eyes searched the place and came to rest on an elderly gentleman sitting at a table all alone. "I'm gonna go talk to that man, and see why he's here all alone." She rose. "Toby, you know what to order for me. I'll be back."

Gabe and Taylor smiled as they watched. The man's eyes got big as Caro came toward him. They couldn't hear what was being said but the man smiled and nodded. Caro sat down. She spoke to him for a few minutes and touched his hand, patted it. He wiped tears from his eyes. Then they both stood, went to the dance floor and she danced with him. Afterward, she walked him back to his table and kissed his cheek. Then turned and came back to sit with the group.

"Okay, you have to tell us," Bree said.

Caro wiped at the tears in her eyes. "His name is Brennan Turner. Today

is his fiftieth wedding anniversary, or it would be if his wife hadn't passed away five years ago. They came here on their first anniversary and they'd always talked about coming back, but they never did. So, ever since she died, he's come here every year, in her honor. I asked him if he would do me the honor of dancing with me in her place. Such a sweet man. So much heartache. I told him, that I believe we will see our loved ones again, because of the gift of Jesus. He said he used to believe and maybe he would do something he hadn't done in a long time. Pray."

"That is beautiful, Caroline," Toby said. "I'm so proud of you."

"Let's all add our prayers to his," Ricky said. "That he will find his way back to God, in Jesus' name."

"Amen," they all responded.

"And," Caro added. "I know something that Grace and maybe Logan can also do for him."

"What?" Grace asked.

"He said that the night he and his wife came here, they played *Unchained Melody*, and that had been their song ever since." She stopped, smiled and nodded at Grace and Logan. "I'm sure if Toby spoke to the manager he would let you two sing that song for the man. Do you know it, Logan? I know Grace knows it because she sang it in a talent show in high school."

Logan nodded. "Yes, I know it. I can take the harmony, that is, if Grace wants to do it."

Grace's eyes sparkled. "I'd love to, but who's gonna play for us," she asked pointedly, turning her eyes to her father.

He laughed. "Of course I will. Straight through, like, the Righteous Brothers, right?"

Grace and Logan both nodded.

"Okay, then," Toby said as he rose. "I'll go speak with management."

Taylor and Gabe smiled at each other. "This is so much fun, Gabe," Taylor said. "I just love you."

He grinned. "I just love you too. So, what are *we* gonna do?"

Taylor frowned. "Well, I don't have much to offer, as far as like, financial stuff. But I was thinking like, what Miss Caroline did, there's a young girl at that table up near the front when we first came in, who was in a wheel chair. I think I'd like to go talk to her. May I?"

Ricky nodded. "Yes, you may, but, take Agent Tanner with you," he said with a smile.

Gabe grinned. "Got it. Now?"

"Well, you know there's no time like the present," Ricky, Bree and Taylor all said at the same time.

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1 Peter 4:10-11

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good

stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

September 28th, Saturday Evening
Nashville Live, Nashville, Tennessee

Gabe pushed back from the table, reached out a hand to Taylor and they headed to the table near the front. The girl Taylor had spotted earlier was still there and she looked up and smiled as Taylor and Gabe approached.

"Hello," Taylor said brightly.

"Hi," the young girl answered. "I know who you are."

"You do?"

"Yes, you're Taylor and Gabe. Everyone knows who you are."

Taylor laughed. "I don't know about that." She nodded at the man and woman she surmised were the girl's parents. "Hello, I'm Taylor Kino, and this is Gabe Tanner."

"Oh, we know," the woman said. "Our daughter is bonkers over you guys."

"What's your name?" Taylor asked the girl.

"I'm Mandy. Mandy Tull."

Taylor held her hand out. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Mandy, and Mr. and Mrs. Tull. So, you're out having some family time, huh?"

"Yes, because it's my birthday," Mandy said.

"Really! Well, happy birthday! How old are you?"

"I'm twelve."

"Awesome!"

"And now that you two have miraculously shown up at her twelfth birthday, it will be a birthday she'd never forget. She's had a hard time. She was born with juvenile Paget's disease, which is a bone disorder."

"Mom, they don't wanna hear about that."

"Sure we do," Taylor said. "I've never heard of it."

"Well, it's a bone disease that causes her bones to become weak and deformed and it gets worse as she reaches the adolescent growth spurt. It's painful."

"Is it curable?"

"There is no cure. But it's treatable. Somewhat."

Taylor nodded. "Would it be okay for us to pray for you? For Mandy and for your whole family?"

"Sure, we'll take all the prayers we can get."

"Well, you can get a lot if you let Gabe and I put it on our sites. If that's

okay."

Mandy's eyes lit up. "You mean, we could like take a selfie and you put it on your site?"

"Oh, we can do better than that I think," Taylor said. She took out her phone. "May we have permission to do a quick live video?"

The parents nodded. "Anything to make Mandy happy."

Taylor smiled into her phone. "Hey, everyone. Well, I'm already back. We haven't ordered our food yet, but we've met a very special person." She reversed the camera. "This is Mandy and she's here at the restaurant with us and it's her birthday! We're gonna sing her happy birthday in just a few seconds, but first we want you to know that Mandy is in a wheelchair because she has a painful bone disease, and we'd like you all to record or comment your prayers for her so that she can read them or hear them and feel the beautiful comfort of the Holy Spirit. Okay, let's sing."

Taylor and Gabe got close to Mandy, one on each side of her, and sang happy birthday to her. Then they each kissed her cheek.

"Okay, everyone, thanks for sharing in Mandy's twelfth birthday! And we have another surprise for you very soon, because some awesome magical things are happening at this restaurant tonight, so look for your notice because we're gonna go live again, in just a few minutes!"

"Let's get a selfie of that birthday kiss," Taylor said. "Gabe, kiss her again."

They both kissed her cheeks again and took a pic. "Give me your number and I'll send it to you," Taylor said. "Good. All sent. And hey, now you have my number, and if you ever need anything, you can call me. Just do me a favor and don't give my number out to other people. This is just between you and me."

"I promise," Mandy said, her eyes wide.

"Well, we'd better get back to the table," Taylor said.

Mandy's parents rose. "We can't thank you two enough for taking time to come and talk to Mandy. She'll never forget this."

"I'm thinking we won't either. Thank you for allowing us to share some time."

They shook hands, hugged Mandy and went back to their table.

"How'd that go?" Bree asked.

Gabe shook his head with a smile. "Your daughter is a bright light. That's all I gotta say."

"Well I can say a lot more than that," Taylor laughed as she told the people at the table about Mandy.

The server came with drinks and took orders.

The person playing the piano stopped playing and spoke into his microphone. "Good evening, everyone. So, before our big show tonight we have a very special treat. As usual, we have a few local celebs with us, and tonight, we also have a few Hollywood celebs as well. Please show a warm

southern welcome to Breanna Adams and Ricky Kino."

Ricky and Bree smiled and waved.

"Tonight, our own Toby Nash is here and he is gonna share something with you. Toby, come on up."

The whole restaurant applauded as Toby, Grace and Logan came to the stage. Toby stood in front of one of the three floor mics. He took the mic from its stand and smiled at the crowd. Taylor pulled out her phone again. "And I'm back! So, here we go. Let's make this go viral. Everyone invite others. On stage right now is Toby Nash, who is good friends with my family and Gabe's family. Let's listen."

"Hey, everyone, and thanks for that great welcome. Please allow me to introduce to you my daughter Gracie Nash, whom I'm guessing you already know since she's making quite the name for herself in gospel music." He stopped and waited for the applause to die down.

Grace smiled and nodded her appreciation for such a kind welcome.

"And our good friend, who is the nephew of Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams, Logan Adams."

Again, he waited. "Tonight my wife was honored to meet one of this restaurant's regular patrons. His name is Brennan Turner. Mr. Turner and his lovely wife came here on their very first wedding anniversary fifty years ago. Mrs. Turner has passed to a better world, but Mr. Turner is here to commemorate their beautiful life together. The very first time they were here, someone up here on this stage played *Unchained Melody* for them and it was Mrs. Turner's song ever since. So tonight, in honor of the Turners, my daughter Grace, and our good friend, Logan, are gonna sing *Unchained Melody* for you."

Toby put the mic back in its place and went to the piano. He nodded at the kids. "Test your mics real quick, kiddos."

"Test, test," they both said.

Toby smiled and nodded. "Good." He nodded at Grace and Logan and played the intro they'd discussed.

Grace began alone for the first line, her voice, clear and sweet. Then Logan sang the second line alone, his voice rich and warm. Then, they blended in harmony. It was exquisite. Their voices blended perfectly. They'd only sung together at a few family gatherings. They hadn't rehearsed other than to discuss the arrangement as they sat at the table. But one could've heard a pin drop. And in between the actual singing, Toby's piano was rich and full.

"Oh my goodness," Bree whispered in her husband's ear as she listened. "I am blown away."

Ricky nodded.

Caroline wiped tears from her eyes as she watched the look on Mr. Turner's face.

Gabe and Taylor couldn't stop smiling.

"This is so cool," Taylor whispered.

"They are freakin' awesome," Gabe agreed. "Get close ups of their faces."

"I got this," Taylor complained.

The number ended. The restaurant applauded, some people actually stood, which is a big deal at a restaurant. Taylor got video of Logan taking Grace's arm as she came down off the stage and holding her chair for her and also of Mr. Turner's face. Finally, she turned the camera on her own face. "Well, everyone, that was special. Let us know in the comments if you think Logan Adams and Grace Nash were just awesome. I sure do! So, I guess that's all we have for you tonight. Let's get one more comment from Gabe." She flipped the camera again. "Gabe, whaddya got?"

Gabe smiled. "I'm so proud of Logan and Grace. I mean, it's like, they tell you to always be prepared because you never know when an opportunity will knock at the door. And both he and Grace, with no rehearsal, went up there and winged it, and brought Mr. Turner some comfort. I'm lovin' it. So, thanks everyone for gettin' on here and sharing it with us. You guys are the greatest followers. I love the way you jump in and take up any challenge, and I'm looking forward to reading and watching the videos of what you send in. We might go live tomorrow, at church, if we can do it without causing a disturbance. I have it on good authority that Breanna Adams and Ricky Kino have been asked to speak at one of the Calvary Cross Christian Churches somewhere in Tennessee tomorrow. We'll see if we can swing it. Until then all you good people, stay strong, and be blessed."

Taylor ended the feed and smiled at Gabe. "You're getting good at this."

He laughed. "Just trying to concentrate as if I'm talking to someone standing right in front of me. And if some stranger I've never met in person is standing in front of me, listening to what little old me has to say, then, I'd be grateful and I'd invite them to church with me, right? So, that's really all I was doing."

"You're so real, Gabe. That's what everyone loves about you."

The servers came with their food and as they were leaving, Brody jumped up and had a lengthy discussion with one of them.

"What was that all about?" Logan asked.

Brody smiled. "You'll see."

"So, Mom, Dad," Taylor began. "What are you guys gonna do? I mean, you know, you haven't done your good deed yet."

Bree smiled. "Are you so sure?"

"Oh! Well, then, what did you do?"

"Nunya," Ricky said quickly. "If you don't mind, we'd like to keep our little deed private. But I promise, we're doing something."

"Okay. That's cool."

The good deeds done, the food served, the conversation turned to the delicious food and the adults talking about what each of their families had

been up to. It was lovely. And shortly thereafter, a band featuring an up-and-coming young female singer took the stage. The evening at Nashville Live turned out to be well-spent.

As they got ready to leave the servers came out with several large paper bags with handles, each filled with 'to go' dinners. Twenty in all. They handed them to Brody.

"What's this?" Toby asked.

Brody smiled. "If you don't mind, I'd like to make a stop on the way home. On the way here, only a few blocks away, under the freeway underpass, there was a bunch of homeless people. Would you mind if we stop and hand these out real quick?"

Toby smiled. "Of course I don't mind."

"Oh," Taylor exclaimed. "Can we follow and help, Brody?"

"Of course, if it's okay with your parents."

"Well," Ricky said. "I was gonna offer myself, Logan and Gabe as security detail anyway, so yes, we'll go."

"You think I need someone to protect me?" Toby asked.

"We always need someone to have our '6'," Ricky said. "I got yours."

Gabe smiled proudly. In his life he was surrounded by warriors, and he loved it.

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September 28th, Saturday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric watched Jordan as she made her way down to the beach from the pool house where she'd changed clothes into her bathing suit. His mouth went dry. He'd known she would be a knockout. After all, the first time he'd seen her she was wearing a little black dress and he could tell she was athletic. Still, Jordan in a lime green bikini, her blond hair blowing around her face, she was stunning. She had muscle where he hadn't known she had muscle. Her abs. Her thighs. Her.... well.... he needed to keep his eyes up on her face.

She wore a white coverup over the suit, but it was blowing back and not covering up much. She laid her bag on one of the lounge chairs he'd brought down. He'd already spread out two large towels on the chairs. She took off her cover up and hung it over the back of the chair, then took off her sunglasses and smiled at him.

He stood in the ocean, only ankle deep. "Wow, Jordan. You look, I mean, you are, uh beautiful."

"Uh beautiful. Hmm. Were ya gonna say something else?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I was gonna say you are sexy as...heck."

She smiled. "So are you, in your cute shorts there."

He looked down. "Cute?"

"By cute I mean, hot."

He shook his head. "They're just shorts."

"Yes, but they have cute little palm trees on them."

He laughed. "They were a gift from Tay a few years ago."

"She has cute taste, then," Jordan said.

"She got them for me for Christmas. She said my navy blue swim trunks were boring and for old men."

"She's right."

"You're just stalling. Come here."

She came to where he stood in the water, holding a surfboard in one arm.

She raised up and kissed him quickly. He dropped the board, took her in his arms and kissed her the way he thought she should be kissed.

"Ready to learn to surf?"

She nodded nervously.

"Don't be afraid. You're an athlete. I know you can do this. But surfing is a difficult sport and it takes time to learn. So don't get down on yourself.

"Can I just see you do it first?"

"Sure." He turned grabbed a different board lying on the beach, attached the leash and headed out.

She watched him catch three waves, though, the third one he wiped out.

He came back in.

"Did that hurt?"

"Naw. The waves here aren't big enough to hurt."

"I'm surprised you fell."

He laughed. "Everybody falls. All the time. Even pro surfers wipe out. All the time. No wave is the same. It's like the playing field changing on you throughout the ride. You have to adjust continually, but it becomes instinctive."

"So, I'm not even sure if I can get up."

"We'll never know until you try. Come on, I'll just show you how to mount the board."

She nodded. "Don't let me drown."

"Um, how well do you swim?"

"Well enough that I was on a summer swim team at the 'YMCA' once. But the ocean kind of scares me."

"I got you, babe," he said softly. He held out his hand.

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Jordan lay flat on her back, breathing hard. Young Eric lay next to her, on his side looking down at her. "You're okay."

"I almost drowned."

He chuckled. "Almost drowning has to do with sucking water into your lungs, which you did not. You merely went under and got disoriented as to which way was up and which way was down. But I had you. I told you. I got you."

"Well, you could have "gotten" me," she said putting the word in air

quotes, "a lot faster."

He tried to control his laughter. "I had to give you a few seconds to see if you were able to right yourself. I mean, if I'd grabbed you right away, you would've yelled at me for helping you when you didn't need help."

She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. "Well, don't you just think you're so smart."

He grinned. "That's cuz I am. About some things. How long do you think you'll stay mad at me?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm hoping as smart as I think I am, that I didn't miscalculate."

She giggled.

Young Eric looked up to see his grandparents and five little ones coming down to the beach. He smiled. Nate came at him on a run. And Manny came right to Jordan and threw himself on her.

She grunted as she turned and wrestled him down. "Hey, you little rat."

He laughed and put his arms around her. She had a soft spot for Manny and she guessed he knew it.

"We gonna build castles. Wanna help us?"

"Oh, I definitely do," Jordan said. She stood and went to join Mrs. Kino with Noah and Abe.

Grandmaster Kino had Angelina in his arms and was carrying her out into the ocean to play in the waves.

Three bent down to have a conversation with Nate.

"So, how's it going Mr. Nathaniel?"

"I like coming out to the beach."

"Well, I'm glad you do. Me too."

"Mommy said you're teaching Jordan how to surf. Will you teach me?"

"Sure. First though, you have to sit here and watch me. Watch exactly what I do and see how many things you can remember and then when I come back in, tell me the things I did, okay?"

Nate smiled. "Okay."

Out in the water, Angelina put her arms tightly around her father's neck. "I'm scared, Daddy."

Eric held her tight. "Aw, sweetheart, I've got you. Daddy won't let anything happen to you, I promise. Do you know what makes you scared?"

"Uh uh. I'm just scared."

"Well, are you scared if I put you down over there on the sand?"

"No."

"Okay, then, maybe it's the water that scares you."

"Uh huh. It's so big."

He held her in one arm so they could look out over the ocean together. "That is a whole lot of water, isn't it, little Angel?"

She moved her arm in a wide circle. "It's dis big."

"Ya know, way, way, way out there," he said as he pointed west. "Way

out in the middle of all this big water, is a little island called Kauai. That's where I was born and where I grew up."

"You gwew up way out dere in the middle of da big water?"

"Yes, ma'am. Way out there is an island, which is land like this," he said pointing at the shore, "but not as big. I'll show you a picture when we go inside. And one day we'll go on a vacation and your mommy and I will take you on a plane and fly way over to the island so you can see it. But we'll wait until you're a little older."

"Okay."

He smiled at her, getting the idea that she was glad they were gonna wait. Lifting her away from his chest, he started to lower her into the water. She screamed and tried to get her arms back around his neck.

"Daddy, don't wet me go!"

"I won't baby. I won't let you go. I'm just gonna let your feet touch the water and you can splash a little bit."

"No, I don't want to," she cried.

"Okay, sweetheart, we'll wait. Calm down. So, I'm just gonna sit down in the water and hold you."

He chuckled as her arms squeezed his neck in a death grip. "It's okay. I won't let go of you." He sat in the water where the waves would only come to waist deep, and turned her around and sat her on his lap. "Watch way out there. See, the waves are starting to form, and they move close to shore and then they break."

"What's sho-a?"

"The shore is where the water meets the land."

He smiled as she began to relax as they sat and watched and listened to the rhythm of the waves. He softly grabbed her ankles and wiggled them up and down, making her feet splash the water. She giggled.

"Isn't the ocean wonderful?"

"Yes," she said timidly, obviously still unsure about that.

"God made a beautiful world."

"Did he make da big water too?"

"Yes, He made the ocean. And He made the land. And He made the sun and the stars and the whole universe."

"How?"

"Good question. He's very smart, very powerful. Smarter than everyone."

"Even smotter dan Nate? Cuz Nate says he's smotter dan evewyone."

"Oh he does, does he? Hmm, well, Nate *is* very smart, but he's not smarter than everyone, and no one is smarter than God, though a lot of people think they are. Some people don't believe God is real."

"Why?"

"Because it's very difficult for people to believe that there is someone as smart and powerful as God. But I know He's real."

"You do?"

"Yes, because He speaks to me, and a long time ago, He sent His messenger to talk to me when I was just a little boy. I will never forget that. A lot of people have received messages from God, but other people don't believe it."

"Maybe God will talk to dem too so dey can bewieve."

"Maybe. But you have to pray, and believe and He will start to talk to you in small ways, but people don't want to have to do all that. They think it's too hard or too silly to pray to God, but that's because they don't believe. It's very sad and God is sad when His children don't open their minds enough to try to hear Him."

"Who are God's chidwen?"

"We are. You and me and your Mommy and all of our family and friends. Almost all the people of the world. And He loves us very much and He's happy when we pray to Him so that we can get close to Him and hear Him. And He's very happy when we obey his rules."

"What are da wules?"

"Well, first He wants us to have love in our hearts for each other and for Him, that's the biggest one. And then things like, don't tell lies; always tell the truth."

"Why does God make wules?"

"He makes them to help us be safe and to be happy."

Her little brow furrowed so he made it easier. "Do I have some rules that I make for our family?"

"Yes."

"Tell me one of the rules."

"Um, no wunning in the bafwoom."

"Why do you think I made that rule, no running in the bathroom?"

"So day Noah and Abe won't fall down anymore."

"Right. Very good. Why don't we want them to fall?"

"Because when dey hit deir head it hurts."

"And we don't want them to hurt, right?"

"Wight."

"So, that's why God makes rules for us. So that we don't hurt ourselves. And like, telling lies can make us unhappy and He doesn't want us to be unhappy. He wants to help us, always."

"What utter wules does God make?"

"Well, He says don't steal things from other people. Don't kill people."

"You mean wike when someone killed my sista?"

He hugged her close. "Yes, baby. That was a bad man that did that."

"Yes, and I miss Mawia."

"I know, sweetheart. But guess where she is?"

"Luci told me she's with Jesus."

He smiled. "That's right. She's with God our Father and with Jesus, who

is God's Son. And she's happy and loved and no one can hurt her ever again."

"God is our Fahdder?"

"Yes."

"But you is my fahdder, right?"

"Yes, I'm your earthly father, but God is our Heavenly Father. He's my Father too. That's why we pray to Him and say, dear Father, or Father in Heaven. He's listening. Always listening, and when we pray He hears us."

"Can Mawia hear us?"

Eric sighed. "Well, ya know what, I'm not sure about that. But I bet God could give her a message if we ask Him to."

"I want to ask Him to tell Mawia dat I miss her."

"Tonight, when we pray together let's ask Him."

"Okay. But Daddy, what happens to people who don't fawhoah God's wules?"

He sighed. "Well, that's between them and God. Sometimes, if we don't say we're sorry and try to do better, then He will punish us."

"Like when Manny had to sit in timeout?"

He smiled. "Something like that."

"Daddy, does you bemember when dat man shot you?"

He sighed. "Yes, sweetheart. Do you still think about that?"

"It made me very sad, and scared and sometimes I dweam about it."

"Oh, baby. It was a scary time, but I'm okay now. And I'm so happy that I get to stay here with you and be your Daddy because I love you so much."

She turned and put her arms around his neck. "I love you too. I'm glad you're my Daddy. You is bewy nice. Not wike dat bad man."

"Angelina, if you ever get scared you can always come and talk to me or Mommy or anyone in our family."

"Can I talk to Taywor?"

He smiled. "Yes of course." He made a mental note to talk to Taylor about what she should say to help the kids when they want to talk about what happened with Maria or with them witnessing his shooting.

He pointed out toward the water. "Look at what young Eric is doing."

She smiled. "I wanna do dat."

He laughed. "Well, when you get a little bigger I'll teach you. But first, you have to learn to swim, and in order to do that, you have to be able to stand in the water."

"I can stand," she said as she lifted herself up and stood between his legs.

"Good job. Stay right there and let me stand and I'll hold your hand and we'll walk up and see what kind of sand castle the others have made."

She didn't flinch when he stood and took her hand, and together they walked through the water.

Meanwhile, young Eric came in and walked up to Nate. "Okay, I'm

back. Did you watch?"

"Yes."

"What things did you see me do?"

"I saw you pick up the surfboard, I saw you put that thing on your foot. I saw you run out into the water, and then lie down on the surfboard and then use your hands to swim away very far. Then I saw you stop and turn around. And then you just sat there a long time. Why?"

"I was waiting to catch a bigger wave than the ones coming in."

"Why?"

"Because the bigger the wave, the better I can ride it."

"Okay."

"What did you see after that?"

"I saw you swim toward me on the board and then jump up to stand on the board and then you wiggled your body to steer the board and you let the wave push the board toward shore, and then you fell off the board and stood up and grabbed it and came here to talk to me."

Young Eric laughed. "Good job. And how many times did I blink my eyes?"

"Huh?"

He chuckled. "Just kidding." He held out his hand. "So, you ready to come for a little ride with me?"

Nate nodded.

"Run go grab a life vest up there next to where your Mom is."

He turned and ran. Jordan looked up at young Eric admiring him as he stood there on the beach, the late afternoon sun shining on his skin. She smiled at him. He smiled back at her and just that slight nod from him made her heart soar. She sighed and turned back to the sand castle she and Noah were creating.

Shelley was working on another sand castle with Angelina. Abraham had taken Eric's hand and headed out to have some one-on-one time with his Daddy. Shelley looked to see young Eric making eyes at Jordan then turned back and smiled at the beautiful girl. "He's pretty cute, isn't he?"

Jordan blushed. "Yeah he is. He's more than cute."

"I agree. He's a special young man."

"He's like, too good to be true," Jordan said. "I mean, how in the world did I end up with him?"

"It's because you're special too, Jordan."

"Your husband says I'm not supposed to second guess my worthiness, but I really can't help it. How does little old me rate a guy like Three."

Shelley smiled at the pet name. "Listen to me, Jordan. I know where you're coming from because I felt the exact same way when I met my husband and fell in love. He loved me, and it was unbelievable that a man of his stature could be interested in me. But where young Eric, uh, Three, is concerned, let me just tell you, he could have any girl he wanted. He could

have his pick."

"That I realize."

"And of all those girls, he chose you, Jordan. You. He chose you because he sees your worth. He is not a shallow guy. He sees and understands your worth. Has he told you he loves you yet?"

"Yes he has," Jordan answered dreamily.

"Then he does. And if you love him too, and I can see that you do, then nothing short of death will keep him from you. Nothing. Not even you thinking you're not worthy, so you have to stop that."

"I'm trying. I just slip back into it sometimes."

"Again, I understand. Been there done that."

They heard a child shriek and looked out to see Nate lying flat on the surfboard and Three pushing him around. The child was laughing and acting like a child and to Shelley it was a beautiful thing. "He has a connection with Nate, and I'm grateful for that. He also has a connection with you. Don't push him away."

"I won't. I don't have the strength to do that anyway," she said with a laugh.

Shelley looked up at the sun. "Hmm, it's getting late. Don't you two have a dinner date?"

"Yes we do. I guess I'm gonna go get a shower and get changed."

"Instead of using the pool house, why don't you go up the staircase, take a right and the last bedroom on the left is Bree's old room. It'll be much more comfortable to get ready in there."

"Okay, I'll do that. Thanks, Mrs. Kino. Ya know, you are so sweet."

Shelley grinned. "I can be. But I'm not always. You cross me or hurt one of my children and I become someone's worst nightmare."

Jordan laughed. "Well, you being a Kino, I have no doubt about that."

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September 28th, Saturday Night

Baja Club, Los Angeles, California

Young Eric watched as Jordan walked back to their table from the restroom. She wore a sparkly, baby-blue, close-fitting dress that was a tad short, she said, because it was a few years old and Jordan had grown since then. It had tiny little sleeves, and was a tiny bit low-cut in the front. He shook his head and smiled as she approached.

"What are you shaking your head about?" she asked when she got to the table and he jumped up to pull out her chair.

Eric nodded at the agent who'd followed her to the restroom and looked back at Jordan with a smile. "I was shaking my head because I can't believe how absolutely beautiful you are."

She sighed.

"What? You don't believe me?"

"I believe you because that's like the tenth time you've said it."

"Wow. Am I overdoing it? Coming on like an amateur?" He laughed.

"Well, you certainly don't dance like an amateur. I mean, Three, you got some hot moves there."

"You're the one who's hot. Do you know that when we're out there dancing every guy here is watching you?"

"Oh Lord, don't tell me that. I won't dance anymore."

"Well, not even if I ask you sweetly? I mean, it's gonna be weeks before we're able to go out like this again."

He rose, stood by her chair. "I think they're playing our song!"

She stood. "We have a song?"

"I think we do now," he laughed.

They headed back to the dance floor. The place was super crowded. After all, it was L.A. on a Saturday night. Jordan was tired and thought Three had to be about to fall down. He'd been working hard since early this morning. She was glad the song, that was now their song, was a slow one. Three took her in his arms and she laid her head on his chest. Heaven.

They weren't really dancing. Just swaying slowly back and forth to the music, a throwback number, "*Can't Help Falling in Love with You.*" It was apropos, Jordan thought, because that's how she felt. Just as the song ended, young Eric bent his head and kissed her softly.

She looked up at him and totally broke the spell. "I'm so thirsty."

He chuckled. "You just ruined my moment."

"Sorry," she giggled. "You wanna redo?"

He thought for a second. "Nope. The moment is gone," he joked, then looked around. "Hmm, let's just get the drinks at the bar. If we go back to the table it could take forever."

They headed to the bar. Young Eric worked his way in.

"Can I help you sir?"

"Yes, may I have a large ginger ale on the rocks and a Perrier with lime."

The bartender nodded then looked closely at Eric. "You're a Kino, aren't ya?"

Eric nodded.

"Oh yeah, now that I look at you I can see it. I recognized the drink order first though."

Eric smiled. "That would be my dad. He'll always opt for Perrier. You know him?"

"I've waited on him many times over the past ten years."

"Cool."

"He's a nice guy."

"Thanks, I'll tell him you said so."

The man set both drinks down in front of Eric. At the same time, to his right where Jordan stood, some guy bumped into Jordan.

She moved back.

"Scuse me," the guy said, obviously having had a few too many.

"No problem," Jordan said quickly.

"Well, you are one gorgeous number," the man said, placing his hand on Jordan's arm.

Eric turned to face the guy. "Back off."

The guy sneered at Eric. "Man, I wasn't meaning anything by it. Cool your jets. You think you're some big tough guy?"

"Just move along," Eric said. "I don't want any trouble."

"Well, I think you got it."

Two agents moved in and simply escorted the guy away.

Eric sighed, turned and grabbed the drinks and went to their table.

"Well that was interesting," Jordan said.

Young Eric shrugged. "It happens fairly often. Usually though it's because somebody recognizes me as Ricky Kino's kid. It seems like a flashing neon sign hangs over me, fight me, fight me," he said opening and closing his hands.

"Well, if they do, I bet they're surprised."

He smiled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Jordan lifted her glass and drank almost the entire contents. She put it down, eyed the remainder. "I guess that wasn't very lady-like."

"Hey, if you're thirsty, you're thirsty."

"I think it was those fancy potatoes. They tasted really salty."

"Pommes de Terre Chantilly," he said.

She giggled. "You sound very sexy when you say that."

"Really, then how about, boeuf bourguignon, and chicken confit, quiche Lorraine and crème brûlée."

She giggled. "Stop Three, or take me to bed right now."

He chuckled. "Oh wow, Jordan. Those words coming out of your mouth. I think I just had a heart attack."

"Sorry, I was just teasing."

"I know you were, but one day, I'm gonna do just that."

She blinked up at him, not knowing what to say. Because he'd told her he was waiting to be married before he has sex. So, was that like a kind of proposal? Or the foreshadowing of one? She closed her eyes and thought about it.

"Are you falling asleep on me?" he asked.

"I am a little tired. I can't believe you aren't."

"I'm gettin' there pretty fast."

They sat chit-chatting for several minutes, but mostly staring into each other's eyes. Every once in a while, he would lean over and kiss her softly.

She sighed, put her hand to her head. "I may be about to say those words again, but this time I mean it."

"You mean, take you to bed?"

"Yes, but I mean, take me to *my* bed." She frowned. "I'm not feeling

great."

"What's wrong?"

"I suddenly have a pounding headache, and I'm a little dizzy."

Young Eric frowned. "When was your last physical?"

"Right before school started. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm very healthy. But I might be coming down with a virus or something. I hate to ruin the evening."

"It's not ruined. We were about to leave anyway. I think we both have had about enough."

He looked around, waved at their server, who came immediately with the check on her hand held device. He quickly added a generous tip and tapped his card.

He motioned at one of the agents. They were ones he hadn't met before tonight. Agents Torres and Stanton. Agent Torres came quickly.

"Problem sir?"

Eric smiled. "Just call me Eric. I'm the one that should be calling you, sir. And yes, she's not feeling well, so I'm gonna go ahead and take her home. Just letting you know so you can get your car."

"Yes, sir. And let us get yours too. Sit there until we get you."

"Thanks." He turned back to Jordan. "How ya doin', babe?"

"Gettin' worse. I can feel my heart racing. I sh-wear, it feelzz like I'm drunk."

"You sound like you're drunk." He lifted her glass and smelled, then motioned again at the server. "I know it's just a tiny little bit, but would you mind putting just this leftover amount into a to-go cup for me?"

"No, sir, I don't mind. You want me to top it off?"

"No. I want only what's in the glass."

"You got it, Mr. Kino."

She brought the to-go cup back in a minute and Agent Torres came in to get them at the same time.

Young Eric stood, and pulled out Jordan's chair. "Can you stand?"

"I think so."

Pulling her up, he supported her with his arm, guided her out and loaded her in the car, reaching across and placing the cup in the console. He then pulled a few bills from his pocket and handed them to the valet, got in the car and started home.

He glanced over at his girl as she sat slumped against the door, breathing heavy. "How ya doin'?"

She shook her head. "Not so great. I'm juzzed gonna close my eyezz and ress."

"Ok. Babe, maybe I should take you to the hospital."

"Oh no, pleazze nooo."

"Okay, then I'm gonna take you to my grandparents' house. And I'm gonna get Aunt Jeffy to check you out."

Jordan only nodded.

They drove in silence for a few minutes but then Eric looked up in his rearview mirror. He saw flashing red and blue lights. He slowed hoping they would pass. The cops flew past the agents who were driving behind him, and then suddenly cut into his lane, right behind him, up close and personal. He gave a soft curse. He was being pulled over. Blowing out a breath, he pulled over to the shoulder of the highway, pulled out his wallet and let his window down and waited, as he watched in his side view mirror.

There were two police cars. The cops just sat there a minute.

"Whazz goin' on?" Jordan asked.

"We got pulled over."

"You? You drive like a grandma," she said slowly.

He smiled.

Finally he saw the cops approach. One on one side of his car and one on the other side. The one who approached his side came stealthily to the window.

"Officer," Eric said respectfully. "Was I speeding?"

"Let me see your license and registration."

"Oookay," he said, handing it to him immediately.

The officer studied the information, and looked in the window, shining his flashlight in Eric's face. "Who else is in the car?"

"That's my girlfriend, her name is Jordan Brooks."

"Uh huh. And where are you heading?"

"To my grandparents' house. Jordan isn't feeling well and I was gonna have my Aunt check her out."

"Your aunt?"

"She's a doctor."

"Right."

Eric's brow furrowed. What was that supposed to mean? At that moment an ambulance pulled in right in front of Eric's car.

"Sir, step out of the car."

Eric turned to look at the cop, surprised by the order.

"Step out of the car now!" the officer commanded.

Eric reached up and turned off the car, but apparently even that tiny motion was unacceptable.

"Let me see your hands."

Blowing out a breath, young Eric put both his hands out the window. The officer tried to open the door but it was locked.

"Unlock the door," he yelled.

"Okay, but I have to use one of my hands to do that," Eric said.

"Don't be smart, boy. Just unlock the door."

Eric did it slowly to make sure the cop didn't think he was doing something else and then shoot him.

The cop opened the door. "Get out of the car."

"Three, whazz happening," Jordan asked, trying to sit up.

"I'm not sure, babe. Hang tight."

Young Eric rose out of the car.

"Step to the back of the vehicle."

"You're kidding? What's goin' on? Why are you pulling me over?"

The cop stood back and drew his gun. "Step to the back of the vehicle," he yelled.

Eric did as instructed. He was confused. He had no idea what he'd done, or what they thought he'd done. A third officer moved forward. "Put your hands behind your back."

"Am I being arrested?"

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Matthew 5:11

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Do as I tell you— now!"

Sighing, young Eric obeyed and he was cuffed. He heard a scuffle coming from behind him and heard cops yelling and Agent Torres yelling back. The agent was trying to explain who he was and why they'd stopped when Eric was pulled over. He was telling the cops that they were Ameritech agents and that they'd been watching over Eric and Jordan all night and could vouch for them. But the officers didn't want to hear it and seemed pretty intent on arresting Eric. So Agent Torres yelled out, "We got you, Eric. Calling Jason now."

"Do you have any weapons or anything that could stick me," the cop asked as he went to search Eric.

Eric gave a short laugh. "You're kidding, right? I mean, you know who I am. You know I don't do drugs, I don't drink. What is your deal?"

"Shut up and just answer the question."

He sighed. "No, I don't have anything on me."

As they searched him he watched another officer open Jordan's door and motioned toward the EMTs to come and tend to her.

"Will you at least tell me why I'm being arrested?" Eric pleaded.

"You're being charged with using an illegal substance in an attempted sexual assault of a minor."

"What? Are you freakin' kidding me? What minor? Are you talking about my girlfriend? I didn't drug her. And she's not a minor. And she's my girlfriend. And yes, I think she was drugged which was why we were going home to let my Aunt look at her. *I* didn't drug her. It wasn't me."

"Yep, that's what they all say," the officer said as he grabbed him by the arm and placed him in the back of the squad car.

He needed to call Jason. Then he remembered the agents. They'd already done that. He sat there in the car and watched as paramedics got Jordan out of the car and onto the gurney. She looked so pitiful. "Dammit," he murmured, then immediately repented. He directed his thoughts heavenward. "Jesus, I know you know what this is like. I need help."

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Jason Lee lay snuggled with his wife, Angel. They'd spent the evening making love and watching JoJo play football on TV. He was just lying there watching her sleep when his phone went off. Not an unusual thing as the guy who ran Ameritech Security, though he'd worked hard revamping things so

that it pretty much ran itself.

He rolled over, glanced at the phone and answered the call. "Yea, Noelle, whatcha got?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but I was pretty sure you'd want to handle this one. It's young Eric Kino, sir. He's been arrested. Agents Torres and Stanton were with him tonight."

Jason swung his legs down and stood, put the phone on speaker. "Tell me while I get dressed."

She went on to tell what she knew. Miss Jordan had been ill. They left the restaurant. Young Eric was gonna take her to see Jeffy. He was pulled over and the ambulance was already there as if they'd known she was ill. "That's all the agents knew," she said. "They said the cops were pretty sure they were gonna arrest Eric from the start. And the officers were not forthcoming with the agents as to why he was being arrested, but both agents feel like he'd been set up in some way."

Jason nodded. "Thanks, Noelle. I'm on it." He ended the call. "Call Justin."

"This had better be good," Justin said.

"Or bad, and it is." He told his brother what was going down.

"I'm on it," he said and hung up.

Fifteen minutes later he called Jason back with the information. "It looks bad, Jas. He's been charged with a felony. Using an illegal substance in an attempted sexual assault of a minor."

"What minor?"

"Jordan."

"She's not a minor," Jason stated.

"Right. Anonymous caller says he saw Eric put something in her drink at the Baja Club on Sunset and that when they left the club the girl was in obvious distress, so this concerned citizen followed them out and got the license plate and called the cops. It was the caller who called Jordan a minor. They caught up to Eric pretty quick. He was arrested and taken to central holding at Met detention. Jordan was pretty much unconscious and taken to the nearest hospital which was Valley Regional."

Jason sighed. "Can you get me a warrant to pull that security video at the club?"

"Already on it. I've called in a favor but it still might take a few hours."

"Okay, as soon as you have that warrant, I'll have Trout and Brown waiting to accompany police when they execute," Jason said.

"What about the agents who were actually there?" Justin asked.

"They followed the ambulance to the hospital. I'll have their testimony too, but right now, I want them to stay with Jordan. They won't leave her side." Jason heaved a sigh. "So, your thoughts?"

"Obvious set up. Nothing will stick once we pull the video and once Jordan wakes up. Done to hurt either Jordan or Eric. Though, don't know

how Jordan's stepfather would have the means to hire anyone to do his dirty work, unless he has funds we don't know about."

"So, they'll get through this unscathed," Jason mumbled.

"Not quite," Justin answered. "Young Eric's rep is gonna be damaged. And you know as well as I, that it can never be fully restored."

"We'll have to work on that part. I'll leave it up to the Kinos who are the experts in that department. And that is the next thing I have to do. Contact them." He let out a long sigh. "This– will not be pleasant," Jason complained.

"Well, it's like four in the morning for the ones in Nashville," Justin said. "Let's let them sleep that last hour before we call them. But Eric is probably wondering why young Eric hasn't come home and why he isn't answering his phone."

"Yeah, and if not, he will be soon. You wanna call him?" Jason asked.

"I will if you're too chicken."

"Let's do it together in case he has questions I can't answer."

"Okay. Let's do it," Justin agreed.

"Hold on." Jason switched over and made the call, then added Justin in.

Eric answered on the second ring. "This can't be good," Eric said softly as he rose from bed and left the room to keep from waking his exhausted wife. He walked down the hallway to be away from his wife's hearing and to not wake Jeffy and Cam or the children.

"It's not, and you're on conference with Justin," Jason said promptly.

He quickly explained what was happening. Eric listened quietly as usual, his mind immediately looking for possible solutions and remedies.

"Who did you call in the favor with?" Eric asked Justin.

"With Judge Smith. Oren Smith."

Eric nodded. "Good, then we'll have the warrant sooner than later. As soon as you know this is a sure thing, Jason, as soon as you examine that video, let me know. And I want whoever was involved found and questioned before the cops do, if that's possible."

"I'm on it, Eric."

Eric looked up as Jeffy came out in the hall. "Dad," she said, her voice in a panic. "There's something wrong with young Eric."

"I know. I'm on the phone with Jason and Justin right now."

Jeffy jerked and shook her head. "Dad, he's in pain. Both physical and emotional." She jerked again, put her hands to her face. "Oh, Dad, I think he's hurt. We have to help him."

"Well damn," Eric muttered. He explained what Jeffy said to the brothers. They gave the same response. They needed to work faster.

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Young Eric's emotions were on the surface and he knew he needed to get control. He sat in the back of the police cruiser as they drove him to wherever they intended to book him. This was not gonna be fun. There is so

much wrong about what was happening. He'd been set up. That much he realized. By whom? He had to think it had something to do with Peter Perez. He had to hand it to him. He got him good.

Putting his mind to what was about to take place, he steeled himself. It wasn't the humiliation. He could get past that. It was two things. Other inmates finding out who he is and him having to defend himself, and the ever-present claustrophobia. Just thinking about the fact that he currently couldn't move his arms and could not simply get out of the car, was causing him to hyperventilate. He drew a deep breath and tried to slow his breathing.

He realized his whole body was trembling and that was only from the claustrophobia, but they would think it was because he was afraid, and he didn't want people to think that, and so, he really wanted to get himself to calm down. And he knew what to do for that. He closed his eyes and prayed silently for himself, and for Jordan. In only a few minutes, he began to relax, and he was immediately grateful.

Young Eric thought about Jordan and wondered what was going on with her. He hoped the agents were aware enough to stay with her at the hospital. If she'd been drugged again then she could be out for some time. He knew Jason had been made aware of the situation and he knew that means he would probably be out of jail by the morning. Except it was now Sunday, so, it's possible he could be here until Monday morning. His heart rate sped up again. That was like thirty-six hours away. Could he hold on for that long without a complete mental breakdown?

They got to some place on Alameda in downtown Los Angeles. He was ushered inside for booking. First stop was him giving information to a woman as she put it in a computer. There was already a buzz, he knew, because he was a Kino. He heard his name mentioned several times as officers spoke to other officers. He shook his head. This was gonna be all over the news. Not that he really cared about that, not usually anyway, or, maybe he did. He wasn't sure. He'd always lived his life so that he would have nothing to be ashamed of, but was that because he didn't want any bad publicity? He sighed as he thought about his parents and his sister and how they will try to defend his honor. Hell.

A mug shot was taken next and then his watch, cell phone, wallet– and then clothes were taken. He was issued the classic orange jumpsuit and a pair of orange canvas slip-on shoes. He was then fingerprinted. The humiliation came next. A full body search. When Eric asked why it was necessary, one of the officers sarcastically made certain he understood that just because he's a celebrity, he wasn't gonna get any special treatment.

Eric mumbled that he WAS getting special treatment for that same reason. Just in the reverse. Next he was questioned about gang affiliation, which Eric simply scoffed at. "I'm not a member of a gang and you know it. And I'm not gonna answer any more questions without my lawyer present. But I'll ask you a question."

"Ask away."

"Can you put me in a cell away from everyone else?"

"Why? You think you're special?"

"No. But when people know I'm Ricky Kino's kid they tend to try me. And if you wanna keep peace in your little slice of hell here, I suggest you do as I request."

"Are you threatening to fight?"

"No. I would never start a fight. However, if someone else does, I'll defend myself. And it won't bode well for the others."

The officer laughed. "Well, pretty boy, we'll take our chances. You don't get a cell to yourself."

Young Eric sighed and shook his head.

He was led to an elevator and then down a corridor, through a set of large steel doors and to a cell. It was smaller than he imagined and his heart began to pound in his chest. *Please, Dear Father God, he pleaded silently. Help me through this.* There were already six men in the cell. Eric glanced around at them and then kept his head down. He just wanted to be left alone. He found an empty place to sit on the floor on the left side of the cell.

He closed his eyes to pray. It already felt like the walls were closing in on him. The frustration of not being able to even walk around, much less leave the tiny enclosure, well, he may as well be in space. Funny that the word, 'space,' means the exact opposite of how it makes him feel. He didn't have time to ponder it though because someone kicked his leg and he opened his eyes.

"Whatcha in for?"

Eric sighed. He could ignore the guy, but that would make Eric appear unfriendly and make him even more of a target. He gave a shrug. "For false charges."

The guys in the cell laughed.

Eric smiled. "Same for all of you?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," the guy said.

"Not me," another said as he laughed. "I tried to kill that guy and I'd do it again if I get a chance."

"Not me either," another guy said. "I admit, I'm drunk as hell."

Eric nodded, thinking, hoping, that would end their interest in him.

"You look familiar. Do I know you?"

Eric's heart fell. "I don't think so," he said in a friendly tone.

"He does look familiar," the first guy who'd kicked his leg spoke again. "Come on, really. You're like a singer, or something, somebody special?"

"Nope. Just a regular guy, like everyone else in here."

A younger guy, who'd been silent the whole time and had been sitting across from Eric stood up. "I know who the hell you are," he said. "You're a Kino. You're Ricky Kino's kid."

"The one with the hot sister?" the other guy asked.

"Yeah, that's something I'd love to get my hands on."

Eric shook his head, telling himself to not let them get a rise out of him.

"It is you, isn't it?" The guy kicked his leg again.

Eric looked up at him. He didn't answer, but just smiled.

"You gonna let him talk about your sister like that?"

"Words don't hurt," he said.

"Aww, then she *is* your sister."

Eric remained silent.

"What kinda man doesn't defend his own sister?"

"Maybe we should talk about his mother, because that piece is also hot." He then went on to say some very vulgar things about Breanna Adams.

Eric swallowed.

The guy kicked his leg again, this time harder. "Not much of a man who let's someone talk about his mother like that."

"Words," Eric repeated.

"So, they say you're supposed to be some big time martial arts dude, like your fake-ass father."

And here it comes, Eric thought. He looked around. If he rose, it might start a fight. If he remained sitting, he's at a disadvantage. He compromised and decided to move his legs up underneath him, and stay down, hoping things would de-escalate.

The guy kicked his leg again, but harder this time. "Just like I thought. Just a little boy pretending to be big and tough."

"Little rich boy," someone else chimed in.

"Am I right," the guy said, kicking him again.

"Look guys. I don't want any trouble."

"I bet you don't. Cuz you can't buy your way out of this one."

Eric nodded. "Right."

The guy reared back and kicked him hard this time. Really hard.

Eric looked up at him. "Stop," he warned.

He kicked him again. "Whaddya gonna do about it?"

Eric shook his head.

The guy drew back to kick him again and Eric snapped out, grabbed his leg, twisted the leg and Eric's own body around, brought him down, stood, and kicked the guy in the forehead, knocking him out cold.

Another guy advanced. "You just messed up."

Eric pointed at the downed guy. "He messed up. Take my advice and don't do it."

The guy swung at him, while a guy behind Eric tried to grab him. Eric blocked the guy swinging, and threw the ever-helpful elbow to the nose, while at the same time kicked the guy behind him right in the throat.

Blood spurted and the two guys fell.

Eric turned, looking for room. But there just wasn't any. Several guys dove in then. Eric blocked, punched, kicked and hurt several more, but there

were just too many and they were too large and there was no room.

By the time the guards arrived, they'd pretty much pummeled him to a pulp. Still Eric grabbed at the groin of someone, the guy cried out, and Eric rose and kicked two more, one in the gut and one in the groin. They both fell. It was because of those actions that the guards tackled Eric. They pulled him up and slammed him against the bars, cuffing him and dragging him out of the cell and down the corridor.

Eric was barely conscious. "I told you it would happen," he mumbled to one of the guards.

"Well, it won't happen again." They came to a different corridor and opened a solid cell door. Eric looked in. The room was no bigger than maybe 6X8 if that much. They tossed him in. The door slammed shut and Eric was in the dark. "No!" He screamed. "I didn't start it."

He rolled over onto his back. The phobia overcame him. "Dear God, please, I can't stand this. Please." He couldn't stop the tears that flowed from his eyes, and down the sides of his face into his ears. His heart was pounding. The panic was overwhelming. He couldn't see anything. "Please," he screamed again. He got control for a second. "Father, help me. I can't do this. I can't move. I can't breathe. Please help me. I can't do this."

The words came into his head. "Yes you can. I'm here with you. Be still."

Eric closed his eyes and tried very hard to be still and listen to God.

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Ricky grabbed up his phone, glancing at the time. 5:00 AM. "Yeah, Dad. Everything okay?"

"Sorry, son. Not really, but everyone is still alive."

Ricky rose, his heart pounding. "Lay it on me," he said as he went into the bathroom.

His father explained everything quickly and succinctly.

Ricky sighed. "I'll see if Jason can let me hop an Ameritech jet home."

"No, Rick. This is Taylor's big moment. And Logan's too. Think about it. Young Eric will be filled with guilt if he took this away from her, having her father by her side, or from Logan. It's important to both of them."

"Well, I'm pretty sure Taylor will feel the same way I do, that Eric takes precedence."

"Yes, she will. But remember how you all asked JoJo to continue to play football when I'd been shot? Why?"

"Because there was nothing he could do for you, other than to keep living."

"Right. And we need to ask Logan, and Taylor, and Gabe, to do their thing. We're gonna have Eric out sometime today. He's gonna be okay. It's gonna be found to be a set up. The bigger problem is gonna be repairing his reputation. Which, you may have the power to start on this morning when you speak in church."

"I'm not sure that I can speak with my son sitting in a jail cell somewhere."

"Rick, I know this is hard. But do we just fall down and lick our wounds when we're hurt or do we fight back? We fight. And you speaking today is a great opportunity to fight back."

"Dad, my SON is sitting in a cell, no sleep, probably having to defend himself, his body has been violated. This is killing me."

"I know all too well how you're feeling."

Ricky thought about that a minute. His father was talking about the time Rick had gotten himself arrested when he almost killed the man who'd kidnapped his baby sister. He sighed. "I guess you do know, Dad, but I need to tell you something else. Eric has been having a problem for the past few years. He's developed a very strong case of claustrophobia. He finally told me it's why he dropped out of school."

Eric senior thought about this. "Claustrophobia is a powerful fear. And if he has a bad case, then yes, he's suffering. And he must have a bad case to make him throw off the goal he's had almost his entire life. But young Eric is also strong, and he *will* deal with whatever he's facing until we can get him out. A little immersion therapy won't kill him. I know it sounds heartless of me, but for now, there is nothing either one of us can do for young Eric except keep our minds focused and not give into grief. He's alive. He'll survive."

Eric didn't dare tell Ricky how Jeffy has picked up on young Eric's emotions. "Ricky, he'll be out within the next twelve hours and as soon as he is, we'll video call so you can speak to him face to face. Buck up, son. Help him right now in the only way you can. Make sure his sister and the guys he calls his brothers do their thing. And be proactive and start repairing his rep before everything hits the news. Because it IS gonna hit."

Ricky nodded. "Yes, sir," he said softly. Drew a deep breath. "I need to go wake my wife and tell her. And then I'll call the kids together. If you find out any information let me know because it will help whatever I have to say. If I'm gonna make a public statement, it has to have facts."

"Now your mind is thinking along the right lines. Good. I'll get back to you."

"Dad, it's the middle of the night for you. Have you been up all night?"

"I got an hour sleep before I got the call from Jason. No big deal. We'll all crash later when young Eric is home safe." He stopped and thought a moment. "Ricky, I'm not sure what you can say in church, or, just as a public statement, but pray about it. The words will come. And as soon as we look at that video, we'll know the truth of what happened. We'll make it public. That will help."

Ricky nodded and blew out a breath. "Okay, uh, so, thanks, Dad, for talking me off a ledge, and sorry for being so emotional."

"No need for thanks, Rick, he's your little boy and I get that. So, just a

small question. Why didn't you or young Eric come to me about the claustrophobia? I might have been able to help."

"I encouraged him to do so, but he was too ashamed of the fear. I was gonna speak to him again, about coming to you, but you know, stuff happened and it never seemed like the right time."

"Got it. Okay, go wake Bree."

"Yep. Fun times."

Rick left the bathroom and went back to his sleeping wife, touched her shoulder. She sighed and opened her eyes. He smiled at her. "Sweetheart, we need to talk."

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Young Eric had been praying almost nonstop. He was ashamed of this fear that was so strong he could barely function. So ashamed that it was as crippling as it was. Ashamed of the tears he cried. Ashamed of being a coward. His body was trembling intermittently. He would pray and the tremors would stop and he'd relax for a few minutes. Then his mind would go back to the fact that he was enclosed in this tiny room, in pitch blackness. The darkness seemed to press in on him, an actual pressure he could feel. It felt like he couldn't breathe. He'd start to panic, and then he'd pray again and the cycle would start over.

He just finished praying again when he felt the words come into his mind. "Let go, young Eric. Let go and open your eyes."

He did so slowly. Blinked several times. There seemed to be a tiny bit of light coming into the room. Maybe from the small opening in the door.

"Stand up." Again, the words seemed to come into his mind, almost audible, but not quite.

He stood. "Now what?" he said aloud.

"Touch the door. Move forward, reach out and touch the door."

He did so.

"Now, young Eric, keeping your hand on the walls, walk around the perimeter of the room."

Eric began to walk, went around a toilet when he got to the back of the cell, and kept going until he returned to the door.

"That's one," he thought, or heard, or both. "Do it seventy-two times."

He wasn't sure if he'd lost his mind. Thought maybe he had, but he started walking anyway. Concentrating on the numbers. His mind wandered of course. Mostly to Jordan. Was she okay? Was she scared? Was anyone with her? Was she even awake yet? He'd lost track of time. He had no idea if it'd been two hours or ten hours. He kept walking. Kept counting. Feeling calmer most of the time. A few times the panic flared up, but he fought it down and kept walking and counting. He had no idea why he felt he was being told to walk in a circle seventy-two times. When he got to sixty, he began to wonder what he would do when he made it to seventy-two. Would he start over again? Would he hear another voice?

But as he made the last round, he heard a sound. Some voices maybe. And right at the seventy-two mark, the door opened and the light came flooding in. "Thank you, Jesus," Eric said softly.

"Your lawyer is here to see you," an officer said. "Put your hands out."

Eric did as instructed and was quickly cuffed, both wrists and then ankles. He shuffled in front of the officer down a corridor, through some automatic doors and into a room with a table and two chairs. And Uncle Justin. The relief was immense. Justin Lee, his grandfather's best friend and one of the country's top, most powerful attorneys. He was a strong presence and Eric was grateful for that.

Young Eric waited to be uncuffed and then turned, went to the table, sat down and looked into Justin's dark brown eyes.

Justin smiled. "You been pickin' fights again, Eric?"

Eric smiled. "Am I going home now?"

Justin sadly shook his head. The hope in young Eric's voice was heartbreaking. "Not yet, son, but we're working on it and it won't be much longer."

"Is Jordan okay?"

"She's at the hospital. She has two agents keeping watch over her and her mother has been notified."

Eric nodded. "Uncle Justin, I've been set up. I'm sure of it."

"Yes, we know. We're getting the security footage. It will show that you weren't the one to spike Jordan's drink. It won't be much longer."

"When I realized she might have been drugged I got the girl to put the rest of Jordan's drink into a to-go cup. It's in the console of my car, which—I'm guessing has been impounded."

"Yes, it has."

"So, does my dad know what's happened?"

"Yes. Well, I mean, your grandfather is gonna call him. I don't know for sure if that's happened yet, but I think it has."

"Granddad, is he okay?"

Justin smiled. "He's a rock. He's holding everyone together. He's working with Jason and we'll have you out today."

"We won't have to wait until Monday?"

"No. I promise."

Young Eric's eyes moistened at the thought of getting out soon. He looked into Justin's eyes and nodded.

"You wanna tell me what happened to your face?"

Eric sighed and then told the story.

Justin listened. Took a picture. "I'm gonna get the video of that fight. Are you gonna be able to make it a few more hours?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"I guess not. But I'm gonna ask that they move you."

"They already did. They put me in solitary. But they didn't turn on the

light. Uncle Justin, I'm not complaining, but can you get them to give me some light. I really need to be able to see. Sitting there in the pitch black darkness for hours. I can't stand it."

Justin watched his face. There was terror in his eyes. "Yes. I'll talk to them. So, they put you in solitary. Did you start the fight?"

"No, sir. But I finished it. And that's all they saw. I'm pretty sure that a few of those guys needed some medical attention."

Justin sighed. Young Eric was not himself. Normally, the statement he just made would have been said with some attitude. Jovial or fierceness. But his voice was quiet. Almost a monotone. He was not a happy camper.

"Eric, it won't be much longer, son. You hold on."

He nodded. "I'm okay, Uncle Justin. I'm holding on."

"Maybe you can try to get a little sleep, until we come back to get you."

"I'll try."

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September 29th, Wee hours Sunday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Cam sat in the kitchen with his father-in-law, quietly talking over possible scenarios when Jason called. It was only about two hours since Jason's initial call. Eric put it on speaker so Cam could listen.

"Eric," Jason began. "We have the video. I've gone over it a few times now. We're having to break it down, but it clearly shows two men, one bumps into Jordan and gets young Eric's attention, and the other guy, standing behind Eric, puts the stuff in her drink. It appears to be a white powder which could possibly mean Ketamine. Lab results are forthcoming. Right now, the most important point is that it's clear it wasn't Eric who put the substance in her drink.

"Next. I got Jensen to do a little hacking. The 'concerned citizen' who called 911 and reported Eric's tag number, seemingly called from a cell phone. At first glance, it seemed like the call came from the vicinity of the club, but Jensen found a glitch and the call was only routed to appear to come from the club. It actually came from a phone at a Chinese restaurant in Laguna Beach, which is almost an hour away from the *Baja Club*. There was no way he ran out there and got Eric's tag number or even saw anything happening at that club. Also, we got the video of the front of the club, where the cars were pulled up and there is no one there except the two agents getting in their car, Eric and Jordan, three valets, and one other couple waiting for their vehicle, and none of them were using their cell phones."

"So, if the call came from someone else, it was probably Peter Perez. Can you get the 911 recording so that Jordan could identify the caller's voice?" Eric asked.

"Yes, we can, but it will take a little longer. We've also asked for, and will receive the body cams of the police officers involved in young Eric's arrest." He stopped, bracing himself for the next part. "Justin was able to get

in to see young Eric as his attorney. They had him in solitary because he got into a fight in the original cell they placed him in. Eric, he was beaten pretty badly. I'm shooting you a pic. We've demanded to have all video footage delivered to us by 7:00 a.m., and threatened that the footage better not disappear or people will lose their jobs."

Eric looked at his phone as the photo came through. He forced the emotions down as he looked at his grandson's bruised and battered face.

Jason went on. "Justin says that Eric's demeanor was quiet. He didn't seem too concerned about the beating he'd taken. Said he dished out better than he got. His main concern was that he'd been in solitary, sitting in the dark. Justin said he was pretty panicked about having to go back to that and asked that they give him light or put him in an open cell, alone, because he didn't want to have to fight with anyone else. Of course you know, he has to fight because people recognize him as Ricky Kino's son and immediately call him out."

Eric sighed. "Yes I know. And did the police agree to put him in an open cell or to give him light?"

"Not right away. And then Justin let them know that he had an appointment with Chief Mobley in a few hours and there was gonna be hell to pay, and the more they made young Eric suffer, the hotter that hell is gonna be. Then they began to backstep a bit and agreed to fix the situation."

"Good. Okay, so, all you have to do is present this evidence to the police chief and he'll have all charges dropped?"

"Well, yes, hopefully. Unless they want to play hard ball, which I don't think they'll want to do once Justin lets them know how bad this is gonna be for them. Justin and I have an appointment first thing this morning at the home of Chief Mack Mobley, the Chief of Police of the City of Los Angeles. He's agreed to see us before he and his wife head to their church."

"What time is that appointment?"

"8:00 AM. I'll be there with all the evidence. We'll have him out today. And I will be insisting on a public statement and apology."

"That will help. I guess I need to go ahead and call Mark and Joey. They're gonna want to be kept in the loop."

"Joey is my second, and he's already been briefed. I'm sure he's spoken with his brother. Have you called Ricky?"

"Yes and I had to do some quick talking to bring him down off the ledge, but he's now calm and focused."

"Good."

"And now that I have this update, he'll be even better."

"Got it. Call him."

"Jason. I can't thank you enough."

"Eric, you don't have to thank me. I owe everything to you. My wife. My company. All of my knowledge and skill. You made me."

"Don't be ridiculous. God and you worked together to make you who

you are. And Justin too. You are a huge part of God's plan. Thank you for what you've accomplished so that I *can* call you in my times of need."

Jason sighed. "You're welcome, Grandmaster Kino. It's my pleasure to serve. Oh, and by the way, my agents watching over Jordan's family have informed Mrs. Perez of Jordan's condition and what hospital she's in. Mrs. Perez is looking for someone to watch the children and then my agent will bring her up to the hospital so that she can be by Jordan's side."

"Have one of the agents bring the children here. We'll watch after them."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Will do. Later." Jason ended the call.

Eric immediately called Ricky.

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September 29th, Sunday Morning

Nashville Omni, Nashville, Tennessee

Ricky looked from face to face. Logan, Gabe and Taylor. He'd already told Bree, and she took it much better than he thought she would. As a matter of fact, she took it better than he did. That could be because she didn't know what took place during a booking, or what conditions her son was facing. And Ricky certainly wasn't gonna fill her in.

Still, he was proud of her. She was strong. Stoic. Vowed to do exactly what her father-in-law said to do. Go to church. Speak. Clear his name. Be positive. Be strong. Her son didn't need her all weepy and weak, she'd said. She was certainly right about that. And then she said something so loving, he'd had to blink back tears. She'd said she wanted to cry and fall apart, but young Eric's father needed to know he could depend on her to be strong for him and not add to the weight that was already on his shoulders.

He shook his head. He must've said hundreds of times over the years that he doesn't think he could love her any more than he already did, but his love continues to grow and so does his respect. She was his heart and soul. His rock. His beautiful rock. And he loved her so. Now the two of them sat in their suite at the Omni Nashville looking at young Eric's sister and two of the guys he thought of as brothers. One was his cousin. One was Gabe Tanner who seemed to have some kind of metaphysical connection to their family.

"Okay, kids," Ricky began. "I am sorry to wake you up so early, but there are some things going on back home that I think you need to know about and that we need to pray about."

The kids didn't say a thing. Only waited. Taylor took Gabe's hand and he put his arm around her for support.

"Last night young Eric and Jordan were out at a club and Jordan was drugged and Eric decided to take her home to let Jeffy take care of her, but the police pulled them over and arrested Eric."

Gabe and Taylor both drew in a sharp breath. Logan only sat quietly. Ricky went on to tell them how they believed young Eric was set up by

Jordan's stepfather and that he would be out of jail sometime today. He did his best to play it down. Questions were asked and answered the best Ricky could answer them. When Logan didn't say much, Ricky asked him if he was okay. He knew Logan and young Eric were very close.

Logan sighed. "I already knew. Uncle Joey was told hours ago because he works with Uncle Jason, and Uncle Joey told Dad, and JoJo overheard Dad's conversation and he called me."

Ricky nodded. "I see." He looked at the young ones. "So, like I said, we will continue on with our plans. We will work hard to explain to the public what we think really took place."

"But we need facts," Gabe said quickly. "We need evidence. Or everyone will just think he got off because he's rich or famous, or something like that."

"You're right. Hopefully, those facts will be coming in any time now. But even with the facts, there will still be people that will think exactly what you just said. There's no getting around that. That's just the nature of people. Try to not care."

Gabe nodded as Ricky's phone went off. He hit the button.

"Go ahead, Dad. You're on speaker. I have the kids and Bree here and they've been briefed."

"Good. Then they'll be happy to know that we now have video evidence that Eric is innocent. And we have more coming. We'll be able to make that video go public, which will go a long way to help Eric's rep, once we get it out there. First, there will be the big story of his arrest, but immediately following that there will be the big story of Jordan's stepfather setting him up. *If* it was him, and we'll have *that* information soon too."

"So," Logan said. "He'll be out soon?"

"Yes, Logan, sometime today," Eric senior assured. "Now, also, just so you're not shocked and because we also need to put this out there, Eric had to fight. He had to defend himself against several men, and he looks bad. He told Justin the other guys were the ones who needed medical care. I'm gonna send you a pic."

Ricky waited the few seconds it took, and picked up the phone and stared at his son's face. He shook his head and passed the phone to Logan, wishing he didn't have to show it to Bree. Both Logan and Gabe studied the picture but didn't say anything. Taylor began to cry and then passed the phone to her mother. Bree studied her son's picture. Blinked back the tears and handed the phone back to Ricky.

"He'll heal," she said softly.

"So," Eric continued and went on to tell exactly what the video showed and about the anonymous caller probably being Perez. He told them about Justin's meeting with young Eric. When Taylor asked about Jordan he told them only that she wasn't awake yet but that her mother and Shelley would be going to the hospital to see about her and that two agents were also

watching over her."

There were a few more questions asked and answered and then Eric senior went on. "It's six o'clock where you are, and Jason won't be meeting with the Police Chief here until eight o'clock our time, so that's four hours from now. As soon as that meeting takes place you'll already be in church, so I won't call you, but I'll text you. Bree, you might want to contact your friend Isla, to see if she wants to interview Taylor and Gabe and get the truth. She might be able to beat the media to it. That's if you can swing it with the time difference."

"I'll see what I can do. Isla told me she's always willing to work with us and to call her no matter what time it is, so, I guess I'll take her up on that. Eric, can you send us, or have Jason send us the video?"

"I'll take care of it," he said.

"I think going to Isla is a great idea," Taylor said. "Let's get to work."

Gabe smiled at his girl. Then he wondered if his own father had been briefed. It was seven o'clock in Georgia. He thought he might give him a call. The more prayers for young Eric and Jordan the better. Like Taylor said. Time to get to work. A strange thing to say on the Sabbath, Gabe thought, but Jesus said, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?"

When Ricky hung up the phone they all decided on a plan of action. Bree went to call Isla. Gabe went to call his people in Georgia. And Ricky thought it would be a good idea to let Toby and Caroline in on what was happening. After all, it was their church they were going to in a few hours.

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"Okay, now that we've got all our ducks in a row, are you guys ready to do this?" Isla August asked Bree and Taylor and Gabe.

Bree nodded. "I think the outline is perfect. We're ready. Action."

"Good morning all you amazing young people in America and around the world for those who are tuning in! I'm Isla August with Teenspotter.com. It's an early 7:00 a.m. here in sunny California, but the rest of the country is probably up and going. We're livestreaming so early this morning because we have a situation that needs your prayers and we're about to sign on with two of our favorite people, Gabe Tanner and Taylor Kino. Gabe and Taylor are currently in Nashville because they're gonna dance for us live on *America Can Dance* tomorrow night. I understand they're gonna perform their much beloved dance they did at prom last spring and then at their friend's wedding. But that's not what this livestream is about. It's about something much more serious, so let's get to it.

"Gabe, Taylor, are you there?"

Gabe and Taylor nodded seriously at the camera. "We're here, Isla."

"So, tell us, guys, what's going on?"

Taylor began. "Well, most of you out there know I have an older brother. He's the best guy in the whole world. He's a devout Christian and

he's training to fight in the Kino Challenge coming up in November. He's like my dad. He never lies. He's strong. He's kind. He helps people all the time. He's the best. And he has a girlfriend, who is such a sweet girl and I already love her like a sister."

Gabe stepped in. "Taylor is telling you all that because Eric, that's her brother's name, is having some trouble. Last night he was out with his girl and some crazy stuff happened."

Gabe went on to describe the false charges that were brought against Eric, with Taylor adding to his remarks. Between the two of them, they got out the entire story while Isla put up pictures of young Eric, showing his handsome face and strong body.

"That's some story," Isla said. "But you guys must know, a lot of the world won't simply take your word for it, that Eric is innocent just because you say he's innocent, right? There are a lot of criminals who claim to be innocent, right?"

"Right," Taylor said. "I understand that, but we actually have proof. Now, before we show the proof, I just have to say this; my brother, our whole family, and Gabe too, as most people know, we believe in saving sexual relations until we're married. So, I mean, logically speaking, why would Eric drug his girlfriend to have sex with her, when he wants to wait until they're married? It doesn't make any sense, and anyone who knows my brother would agree."

"That's right," Gabe said. "I know that pretty much the whole world knows how I feel about it. And I know young Eric well. We're like brothers and I have immense respect for him and he just wouldn't do what they accused him of because he has no intentions of having sex with anyone until he's married."

"So, what proof do you have?" Isla asked.

"We have a video from the restaurant where you can clearly see two guys, one bumped into Jordan, Eric's girlfriend, distracting Eric, while the other guy, standing behind Eric, put something in her drink."

"Let's show the video."

Isla's tech guy ran the video, stopping it and backing it up as they discussed it.

"Well, that *is* pretty clear," Isla agreed. "So, that must mean that Eric will be released?"

"Yes, hopefully soon, thank goodness, but still, the damage has already been done."

"You mean like, to his reputation?"

"Well, yes, that and also to him," Gabe said. "Some other inmates at the jail jumped him last night and he had to fight off like, five guys at one time. From what I understand, he sent a few of them to the infirmary, but five big guys at once will take its toll."

"Yes it will," Isla said. "And just to show what's happening, here's a

picture of Eric taken just a few hours ago."

Taylor looked down at her phone as the comment section blew up.

"So, everyone," Isla said seriously. "The purpose of having Gabe and Taylor on this morning is to help clear Eric Kino's name and reputation, and to ask for prayers for him and his girlfriend, who is in the hospital and is still not conscious."

Isla paused. "Okay, I just got word that news of Eric's arrest, along with his mug shot, is being aired right now on TV. Let's blow this interview up so we can get the truth out there. I know I can depend on our followers, because they are like warriors of truth. So let's do this everyone. Tell your parents. Tell your friends. Share this video. Call your local news stations. Let's not let the bad guys win."

"That's right," Gabe suddenly added. "And if one of YOU need help with a situation, contact my foundation. We'll work for *you*. We love you."

"Yes we do," Taylor added. "And we love you, Isla. You are one of God's warriors for sure."

Isla smiled brightly. "Okay, everyone. Don't forget to pray. Gabe, how would you like to send us off with a prayer? We all love to hear you pray."

Gabe nodded. "I'll never turn down an opportunity to pray." He bowed his head and began. He prayed for the truth to be known, he prayed for Jordan's and Eric's health in body, mind, and spirit. He prayed for the same things for everyone listening to the video and asked for the Holy Spirit to witness to those listening so they would know that God is real and prayer does work. He finally ended the prayer.

"Thank you, Gabe and Taylor. We'll touch back with you later today when Eric is free. Until then, this is Isla August. Don't forget to hit the like button and hey, if you haven't subscribed, do it right now. Have a great Sunday everyone. I love you too! Good bye."

The video ended. "Well, Mrs. Kino, how do you think we did?" Isla asked.

Bree smiled as she wiped tears from her eyes. "You were perfect. You were all perfect. And I think you're right about your followers. They seem to be an army of righteous warriors. Isla, do you realize what a powerful tool you have?"

"I'm beginning to realize it. I hope we can continue to work with your family in bringing light to the world."

"Absolutely. And Gabe. Don't forget, he's the one that started you on this path."

"Oh, I would never forget Gabe. He and his sweet Taylor. They are a force to be reckoned with."

Gabe smiled at Taylor, took her hand and kissed it.

"Well, we have to speak in church this morning," Bree said. "So, we have to get going. Thanks again, Isla."

"My pleasure. Call me anytime."

They ended the call. Bree turned just in time to see her son's mug shot on the local news. She glanced at her husband. The emotion, anger, and raw power emanating from him was palpable. He lifted the remote, turned up the volume and listened. Bree went to him, took his hand, squeezed it.

"He's gonna be okay. You know what God's doing right? He's growing deep roots for our son. He's honing him. Eric will be stronger than ever."

Ricky turned, looked down at her. "Thanks, babe. I love you."

"I love you too. Now turn that off. We have to leave soon."

He nodded and obeyed.

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Ephesians 5:11

"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness,
but instead expose them."

Chapter Twenty-Six

September 29th, Sunday Morning
Valley Regional Hospital, Newport Beach, California

Jewell Perez stood up from her chair next to the bed as her daughter moaned. She took Jordan's hand. "Baby girl? Can you hear me?"

She moaned again and opened her eyes. "Mom?"

"Yes, sweetie, it's me."

"Mom, what happened? Where am I?"

"You're in *Valley Regional Hospital*. Someone put something in your drink."

"Again?"

"Yes."

Jordan put her hand to her head. "I feel terrible, and my head, ooooh, my head feels like it's gonna explode."

"I'll get the nurse," Shelley Kino said as she rose from another chair near the door and left the room.

Jordan frowned. "Was that Mrs. Kino?"

"Yes, dear. She's so kind. She's been here with me the whole time."

"I don't understand. What's going on?" She gasped and tried to sit up. "Where's Three? I just remembered. I was out with Three."

Shelley and the nurse came back in the room. Jewell backed away from the bed to give the nurse access to her patient. The nurse started taking vitals and checking Jordan over. "Welcome back," she said to Jordan with a kind smile. "I'm gonna get the doctor."

Jordan nodded and then groaned. "Oh, no, I think I'm gonna be sick."

The nurse grabbed a basin and held it for her as Jordan emptied the contents of her stomach.

Jordan cried as she vomited. When she finished the nurse removed the basin and went to get the doctor. Shelley moved forward with a cool wash cloth, wiped her face and gave her some water to rinse her mouth.

"Thank you," Jordan said. "Where's Three? What happened?"

Jewell and Shelley looked at each other. Shelley smiled and stepped forward. "Jordan, young Eric was arrested last night."

"What? Why?"

Shelley went on to explain the whole situation. Jordan couldn't stop the tears as she thought about what Three was going through. And as Shelley continued to explain what they believe happened, Jordan realized he was in

jail because of her and the news was devastating.

"So, Peter did all this?" Jordan asked.

Jewell wrung her hands together. "I'm afraid that's what we all think, Jordan. I'm so sorry, sweetie."

The nurse came back with the doctor who examined her. He turned to her mother. "Her vitals are good. Let's keep her another hour, make sure there's no ill effects and then we can let her go home."

"Thank you, Doctor," Jewell said.

Shelley stepped out to speak to the agents who'd been there all night. "Hey, guys. So doc says she can go home in about an hour."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kino. We'll let the boss know. He's sending some reinforcements."

"Why?"

"There's a mob outside the hospital waiting to see Jordan and speak to her."

"Oh, I didn't realize."

"And also, now that she's awake the police are gonna want to question her."

Shelley frowned.

"But Mr. Lee can't be here right now because he's meeting with the police chief as we speak. So, we need to tell Miss Jordan to refuse to speak with them without her attorney present."

"My son, Mark Adams, works with Mr. Lee," Shelley said.

"Yes, ma'am, we know him. But he's out of state, right?"

"He was, but his flight is getting in soon. I'll contact him and get him to come straight here."

"That's perfect. I'll let the boss know." He immediately took out his phone and let Jason know that Jordan was awake, was being released in an hour and Mark Adams would come to the hospital to help in case the police show up.

"I'm sure you guys are tired," Shelley said. "You've been up all night."

"Yes, ma'am. Agent Lee was gonna send us relief, but we wanted to stay to make sure she was okay. Now that she'll be leaving, we'll wait until she's safely in your car and then our replacements will stay with you and we'll go get some rest."

"Thank you so much for your attention and concern."

"No need for thanks, Mrs. Kino. It's our job. And we really like Eric and Jordan. This was a bad rap and everyone knows it."

She nodded. "Thanks for that." She then immediately texted Mark to make sure he came straight to the hospital. She smiled and nodded at the doctor and nurse as they left the room. Shelley went back in.

"Mrs. Kino," Jordan said. "Have you heard from Three? Do you know how he's doing? I'm so worried about him. Do you know if he can get out on bail, or bond, or whatever it's supposed to be."

"I haven't heard from him personally but his Uncle Justin went to see him. They tell me that he will be out today. Not on bail or bond, but free because the charges will be dropped."

"I need to get out of here. I need to be there when he gets home. I need to see him," she said as tears ran down her cheeks.

Shelley nodded. "Yes, you do, and you will be there when he gets home, if that's what you want."

Jordan nodded. "That's what I want. I need to be with him. Mom, you don't mind, do you?"

"No dear, of course not. The children are there now anyway."

Jordan nodded. "I'm gonna be sick again," she moaned.

Thirty minutes later the nurse came in to remove Jordan's IV from her hand. Jewell helped Jordan to dress in the clothes she'd brought from home. Jordan sat dressed on the side of the bed waiting for the nurse to return with her release papers when Mark Adams arrived.

He hugged his mother, shook Jewell's hand and came to Jordan. "Hey, kiddo."

Jordan smiled at the handsome man. He was like all the others in Three's family. Powerful. He had an air about him, one of calm assurance. "Hello Mr. Adams. Nice to see you again."

He nodded. "Though I'm sure you'd like it to be under different circumstances."

"Yes, I would. So, did JoJo win his game?"

Mark grinned. "Yes, they won. Still undefeated. Looking good so far."

"Maybe if Three and I had stayed home to watch the game, none of this would've happened."

"Woulda, shoulda, coulda. Everything happens for a reason. This is not as bad as it seems Jordan. First, he's alive and so are you. Second, the charges will be dropped, it won't go to trial. This is no biggie compared to what I've seen happen, so chin up."

She nodded. "So, what should I say or not say to the police?"

"You should tell the truth. I'll be present so I won't let them twist words. They'll try to get you to say that Eric did what they accused him of or that he's capable of doing what they've accused him of doing."

"That's ridiculous."

"Exactly." He glanced at his watch. "Jason and Justin are with the chief of police right now. Hopefully, the charges will be dropped before the cops make it here to question you."

At that very moment the police arrived at the room.

Mark smiled. "So much for that. No worries."

Two detectives entered the room, showed their badges and ordered everyone else to leave the room.

Mark nodded at his mother and Mrs. Perez and they took their leave. He looked sternly at the detectives. "I'm her attorney."

They nodded.

"And just so you know, any minute the charges against Eric Kino will be dropped, so, you might want to give your captain a call before you even begin."

"The charges are serious, counselor, so I doubt they'll be dropped." They looked at Jordan. "Don't worry Miss Brooks, we will prosecute this guy to the fullest extent of the law."

Jordan laughed. "Don't worry? You might not understand the circumstances detectives. Eric didn't put anything in my drink."

"Miss Brooks, I know it's hard to believe that your own boyfriend would do that, but here you are, in the hospital and the blood work shows Ketamine has been ingested."

"Oh, I was drugged. But not by Eric. It was done to make it look like he did it, and the call was made to the police to get you to arrest Eric, but he didn't do it."

"What makes you think he didn't?"

"Mostly because if Eric wanted to get me into his bed I'd go willingly and often."

Their mouths opened.

She nodded. "Yeah, so there's that. He would have no reason to drug me to have sex with me. But the main reason he wouldn't do this is because Eric is very devout in his beliefs and he says sex is reserved for marriage. So he wouldn't try to get me into his bed by drugging me. And let me tell you another thing. The charges say he was arrested for attempted sexual assault of a minor. If you'd done anything resembling detective work you'd know that I'm not a minor. I'm nineteen. And if you really want to do your jobs, you should look into finding out where Peter Perez is, because he's my stepfather and just got out of prison a year ago for attempted rape of a fourteen-year-old girl, namely, me. And he's broken parole and has been harassing me and he threatened Eric and I'm positive that he staged this whole thing to get back at Eric."

"Get back at Eric for what?"

"Because I called my mother and Peter answered her phone and wouldn't let me speak to my mother and Eric told him to put my mother on the phone or he'd come down there and that wouldn't bode well for Peter. So, get off your butts and do some real police work. Find my stepfather and stop arresting innocent people."

Mark smiled at Jordan. The detectives didn't have much to say except "Sorry for the trouble," and "goodbye."

Shelley and Jewell came back in the room smiling, obviously having heard the exchange, proud of Jordan for speaking her mind.

"Well," Mark began. "You didn't need me at all. Miss Jordan Brooks, my nephew has found a treasure in you."

She smiled shyly. "Thanks, Mr. Adams."

"I'd be honored if you called me Uncle Mark." He shrugged. "Young Eric does."

A few minutes later, she was released. Agents Torres and Stanton, Mark, Shelley, and Jewell walked behind the wheelchair. When they came toward the large sliding glass doors they could see that there were reporters and cameras everywhere. Jordan rose, and Shelley and Jewell took each arm. Four more Ameritech agents came forward quickly. Mark and the six agents surrounded Jordan as she walked out. She was gonna just go straight to the car, but all of their questions were so full of misinformation and she couldn't stand it. She stopped and turned toward the cameras and rolled off pretty much the same thing she'd said to the detectives. Then she turned abruptly, got in the car with her mother, Mrs. Kino, and the two fresh agents, and headed back to the Kino Estate.

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September 29th, Sunday Morning

Calvary Cross Christian Church, Mt. Juliet, Tennessee

"Good Morning everyone," Pastor Matthew Lucas said brightly. "That was a rousing praise session, I have to say. Are you showing off for our guests?"

The congregation laughed.

"And thank you to our youth pastor, Chris Evans, for that beautiful prayer." He stopped and drew a deep breath. "So, I've been your pastor here for the past fifteen years and unless you're new here, you've probably heard me tell you fifteen times how I came to not only be the pastor here, but how I came to be a pastor at all. It was Toby Nash and his sweet Caroline that brought me here. I met them in New York during a tumultuous time for them. Five years later, they talked me into coming to Nashville and it's been one blessing after another, and lots of uphill battles to make this work.

"The story of how and why I followed the calling to become a pastor has to do with losing my father to a senseless car accident when I was just a teenager and all the life questions that came with that. Why did God have to take my dad? Why do bad things happen to good people? Does God even really exist? And if He does, why doesn't He care?"

"I won't repeat that sermon today. I usually do repeat it once a year on the anniversary of the forming of this congregation. I'm only mentioning it today, because the focal point of that sermon is here with us today. Ricky Kino, a friend of mine from waaaaay back when we were teenagers; he'd lost his mother and I'd lost my father and I couldn't make sense of it. It was Ricky who brought me into the fold. Ricky and his very wise father. Whom, by the way, Rick, our whole congregation prayed for him unceasingly when he'd been shot last month." He stopped and sighed. "So anyway, I am so excited that Ricky and his beautiful wife Breanna Adams, agreed to come and share their testimonies with us today. So, without further ado, let's bring Breanna Adams up here and show her our appreciation, and so that I don't

have to interrupt after she speaks, Rick, if you'll follow right after." He looked out at Ricky and he gave a thumbs up.

Bree rose from her seat in the large congregation. Ricky tugged on her hand, stood, and kissed her cheek, then sent her on her way. She went down the aisle, to the small set of steps leading up to the stage and headed to the lectern, while at the same time– Taylor went live.

Bree smiled the beautiful smile that had melted and stirred the hearts of the whole world. "Thank you so much for that lovely welcome," she began, in her beautiful voice, so clear it rang like a bell. "I'm always grateful for the opportunity to share my testimony and thoughts with others. I don't often speak to congregations. Usually, I speak at women's conferences, so, I'm honored. Thank you, Pastor Lucas." She turned and smiled at him where he'd taken a seat on the stage behind her.

She turned back. "I'd planned on speaking about my relationship with Jesus Christ, because, well, you can't go wrong when you do that. However, as Pastor Lucas was speaking a moment ago, I had the Holy Spirit come over me and prompt me to change the subject. So I will, though don't worry, Jesus is still very much a part of what I have to say, it's just a more personal testimony, and so, I will take all my organized and somewhat rehearsed remarks and throw them out the window. But, before I get to it, I'd like to address the elephant in the room.

"By now, many of you have probably seen or heard that our son was arrested last night and so that you understand how I can dare stand up here in front of everyone and speak, I feel I need to tell you a bit of the circumstances. A man, trying to get back at my son, made an anonymous call to the police and falsely reported that he had committed a heinous act. Rather than investigate or even ask a few questions, they simply arrested my son. Even though the allegations were false, and could even quickly be proven to be false, the person knew that the harm to young Eric's reputation would be hard to undo.

"In the eternal scheme of things, it is not as big as it feels to us this morning. So what, that my son had to endure false imprisonment and false allegations, *and* when the pictures are released later today, you will see that there was also some pretty rough treatment. Does that sound familiar? Of course– our Savior endured much worse than this. His apostles did too. So are *we* any better? Shouldn't we be honored to even slightly follow in His footsteps? So, though I haven't been allowed to speak to young Eric yet, I know my son is eager to shoulder his light burden, pick up his tiny cross today, and carry it. No big deal. Sometime today, probably before we adjourn, the vindicating video will be made public, and other pics and video evidence of his mistreatment. Spread the truth. That's all I have to say about that except that the truth *will* be revealed and God eventually shines a light on every dark thing to expose it.

"Thanks for listening to that. Now, as to my new direction. I was gonna

talk a little about how I juggle my career as an actress and my roles as wife and mother, with being a Christian woman. I mean, that is the usual question people ask me. But today, the Holy Spirit has directed me to change that and go in a slightly different direction, a direction that God feels we need to hear in light of what has been sweeping the country lately."

She stopped. Closed her eyes briefly. Opened them and blinked at the tears. "The Spirit is strong here," she said softly as she sniffed her emotions away. "My name is *not* Breanna Adams. My name is Breanna Adams Kino. I met my husband when I was just eighteen."

Ricky sat up straighter. This was a surprise. What was she gonna share? He wasn't sure, but she definitely had his attention.

"I was just eighteen. He was twenty-one. We dated a few times. He told me within a very short time of that first meeting that he was in love with me, but I didn't want to hear it. I was eighteen. I was young. I wanted to go out and have some crazy fun. I had my heart set on being an actress, making lots of movies, getting famous. I mean, Ricky was cute and all," she stopped and waited for the laughter to subside.

"He was more than cute. He was hot. He was rich and famous. But he wanted me to be exclusive. He wanted me to love him. But I didn't want to be in love. I wanted to have fun. I wanted to have a career. I wanted to be famous *like* him, but not *because* of him. I pictured myself like a certain TV show, living in an apartment in New York City with a bunch of friends and having a blast. Multiple relationships. I didn't know God back then. Life was just life. There was no real meaning to it for me, except being a success. Being famous. My mother had just met Ricky's dad, Grandmaster Eric Kino. He was teaching her about God, about Jesus, that they're real. But I turned a deaf ear to all that. I actually wasn't around very much at all to hear any of that. Some of that was because of school and then shows and then, well, we're not gonna talk about my career. Another reason I wasn't around though, was because I was avoiding Ricky."

She stopped again as everyone chuckled. "I told myself and him and the public, that I thought of him as my brother. Because, well, our parents married and we were step-siblings, though we were already adults when we became step-siblings. For nine years I did everything I could to ignore Ricky Kino. A hard thing to do. For nine years he tried to convince me that God had brought us together, that we were meant to be together, that he still loved me and that he believed I loved him too. He went to great lengths to convince me, but I wouldn't admit it until evil touched our lives and Ricky was taken. He was abducted. We had no idea if we would ever see him again and I was absolutely terrified. But in the end he *was* returned to us, and I swore I wouldn't waste any more time. Shortly thereafter we were married, and Ricky began to teach me about God and about His Son, Jesus Christ. He taught me about the gift of grace and slowly, my heart began to fill with the love of Jesus.

"I became Ricky's wife and the mother of his children. As I grew to know God, I began to see, or even better, to feel deep in my heart, that there were more important roles for me to fulfill, more important than being famous, having a slew of friends and going to parties. I love to act, to create, to tell a story, but now I'm much more careful and picky in what I do, in the roles I choose, and even choosing to turn down a role. And here's the big one that modern women nowadays don't like me to say– that is that the role of wife and mother is now the most important role of my life. I've been scolded that I've thrown away a brilliant career. I'm not throwing anything away. I'll still do the right film if it has the right message and if God tells me to do it. I'm not throwing it away. But I am gaining so much more by raising my children and being a mate, companion and helpmeet to my husband. I'm *creating* so much more than I did when following someone else's script and someone else's direction. Don't get me wrong. I don't regret the path I've taken. I know that I was meant to go down that path for a reason. Maybe it was so that I could speak with authority on the subject to all of you today.

"I just want to say publicly, that I am totally and completely committed to my husband, to his well-being. I have his back and he knows it. Always. Always," she whispered. "I love him with my whole self and I trust him completely to always have my well-being at heart. But you know, I may not feel that way if Ricky Kino was slothful, or lazy, if he didn't want to pray with his family, if he didn't protect us and lead us steadfastly to God, and if he didn't take the time and energy he takes to serve our family in every way possible. And yes, he serves us. And he makes me want to serve him. And I do want to serve him and take care of him, and I think that is what we're losing in the world today.

"Women think they're too high and mighty to serve their man. Yet they expect their man to comply with any request they have. They call themselves queens, and order their men around, demand high-priced gifts and make videos about it. Some of this is just humor, or acting. I certainly get that. But it's like these sound bites are gently guiding us, through humor and acting to see men as merely here to be at our beck and call, and yet, how dare a man ask us to cook his dinner? This kind of humor is not funny. Satan uses humor to make it seem easier to swallow. Lighten up, it's just a joke. But people, this is part of the dark forces' plan to destroy our home. He knows to destroy the relationship between man and woman, between husband and wife, between masculine and feminine, will destroy the family and therefore destroy God's children.

Women are playing the role of men. Some have to, and some want to. It's become such a given, that women who simply want to be wives and mothers are scorned, and told they're not living up to their potential. But I know that the role of wife and mother is hard, when it's done right, and is some of the greatest work of all, and I've had it easy. My mother was a single mother for years. She worked two jobs trying to make ends meet. She had to

call on friends to get rides for me to get to drama rehearsals or to cheer practice or home from cheer practice. I'm so grateful to God that Eric, my father-in-law, came into the picture to be her companion. But there are so many single moms that never get the help they need. Those women have to play the role of both women and men. They are some of the strongest, most noble women that live. And yes, there are also, on a smaller scale, single fathers. They have learned all that women do. They too have to work hard to both support and nurture. But today, I'm talking about the role of women, so let me not stray.

"Before I leave the subject of single mothers, and the amazing people they are, I want to give them some words of encouragement. Not because I know firsthand, but because I have several old high school friends who tell me what they are going through. I've prayed for them many a night, asking God to give me a message for them— something, anything, that might help them. And I felt the whisperings and then I talked them over with my husband, and my mother and a few pastors to make sure I was understanding the things God was putting into my brain and on my heart. He told me that like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, He didn't keep them from going into it, but He was with them IN the furnace. He was with them and He protected them and helped them through it. Those three Hebrews were righteous and God was with them.

"So, ladies, stay righteous, and no matter how difficult it may seem, don't forget that God is with you. Don't forget to pray and ask His help in everything, from how to make ends meet, to how to talk to your teenage son about puberty. And mostly, don't get bitter, and lose your faith. You are being tested and honed. Pass the test. Keep being strong. You are blessed. You are so much stronger than me. I couldn't do what you do. But remember, you have to stay sweet in your demeanor. Women are naturally nurturing and caring, and when you have to be firm with your children and demand respect because there is not a man standing by to do that for you, there is a fine line to walk. Well, you have *my* respect.

"And let me just call on you men, Pastor Lucas, Pastor Evans, any men in the congregation today who might run sports teams, who teach martial arts, who work in schools, or just who work with women, be on the lookout for those single moms who could use your help. Be on the lookout for those kids on your team or in your class who don't have a father in the home. Mentor them. Offer your help to their mothers. That's what we're supposed to do. How often does the Bible speak about being aware of the widows and the fatherless? In James 1:27 it says, '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.'

"Answer this call. Satan is trying to destroy the family. Answer this call. These single mothers need you. They need your counsel. They need your physical help. Clean their gutters. They need you to help them with their

children. And single mothers, reach out to your pastor, to a coach, to a teacher, let them know the circumstances and that your son or daughter doesn't have a father in the home. Don't be too proud to ask for help. It doesn't mean you aren't capable. You are amazing. Be strong. God is with you. Don't get bitter. Know that you are special. God is honing you and your children. Don't lose faith.

"Those of you who have both mother and father in your home, count your blessings and remember, to those who've been given much, much is expected. We who are blessed to have both parents in the home, we have a huge responsibility. Accept it. God knew what He was doing in the creation of a family. A father, a mother, male qualities and female qualities, working together to bring light to the world. Being a woman who loves to take care of her family is not stupid, or bad or lazy. It's brave. Go against the world. The prince of this world is trying to destroy the essence of the family. Do not let him succeed.

"Earlier this year, my daughter had to write a paper describing her life goals. She wrote that it was hard to decide, because the only thing that brings a smile to her face is the thought of being someone's wife, and having lots of children." Bree stopped for a moment because there was a murmuring and some laughter in the congregation, as Gabe grinned and put his arm around Taylor at those words. She simply turned and smiled at him while keeping the phone steady as she live-streamed. Bree went on. "The teacher would not accept that answer and gave her a bad grade for being lazy. But to me, my daughter was being honest, not lazy. She was feeling the call, what God's will is for her, not what the world's opinion is of the role of women. Never follow the world's opinion.

"Women, stop thinking you need to or have to play the role of men. Being a girl boss is not all it's cracked up to be. Some women have to, I know, and we just talked about them. I pray for them and help them whenever God places them in my path. But as women, no matter what role we're forced to play, we should never forget what makes us special. Our femininity. And by that I don't mean buying shoes and demanding gold and jewelry. That kind of thing gives us real women a bad name. Don't let me get started on that. My favorite role thus far has been the one where I take care of my husband and children. It gives me so much pleasure.

"Now, let me just wipe the smiles off the faces of the men for a minute." She stopped to let the laughter settle. "Men, if you want your wives to be totally devoted to you, then you need to live your lives in a way where you are always working, always progressing, and if you are a Christian man, to always be in service. And women should do the exact same. In that way, we *are* equal. Every morning, either before or after our personal prayer time, Ricky and I kneel together, as partners, to pray, to listen to God, to reach for a holy life, and we mostly ask God how can we be in service today, for God, for others and for each other. We ask God to place people that we can serve,

in our path.

"And you know what? Sometimes it seems God doesn't place anyone new in our path. And Ricky says, that's because God wants him to serve his family today. And then he does. He takes extra time and care. He speaks to the children. He calls his siblings, and parents. And he takes such good care of me. He sees to my needs emotionally, physically, spiritually and I trust him and I honor him as my husband, as my protector, as the strong man of God I know he is. His masculinity is NOT toxic. It's beautiful.

"So, how does a Christian *woman* handle things? I do the same as my husband. I serve my family. I serve my community. I serve my country. And yes, I serve my husband, and I do all of those things because *foremost* I serve God. Jesus didn't come here and act all high and mighty. He came to serve. He washed the feet of his apostles. He washed– their– feet! He allowed himself to be cursed at, ridiculed, spat at, scourged, beaten and humiliated. This Son of God, who could probably take the life of any of those people who were torturing him with the blink of His eye, He allowed himself to be put to death.

"That was His gift, given to those who sinned. To us who sin. A gift given freely and all we have to do is accept that gift. But do we accept that gift and then keep on living in a sinful manner? Or do we strive to live as holy, to stay as pure in thought and deed as if Jesus were standing next to us and watching our every move? Because, let me just tell you, He is. He sees us. He hears us. He feels what we feel. He understands this human frailty. He's lived it. He's suffered it. He's overcome it. He gets us. He really gets us. So, I want to live to honor Him by honoring my husband and family. Things are not important. Careers are not important, they are a means to an end, that end being, serve God by serving His people."

She stopped and looked out over the congregation. "Thank you for the opportunity to share my heart with you. I may have gone on a little too long. Thank you for your patience. As in everything, I say and do this in Jesus' holy name. Amen."

The congregation all repeated, "Amen." Some called it out several times.

Bree turned to walk back to her seat. Ricky was coming up onto the stage and he stopped her. Spoke to her. He kissed her cheek, then put his hand on her face in a loving gesture. She said something to him and he turned and looked out over the congregation, then led her down off the stage, and went back up to the lectern. "Good morning, everyone," he said, his masculine voice almost reverberating throughout the large chapel. Ricky turned when Pastor Lucas said something to him. He turned back smiling. "Pastor Lucas wants me to tell everyone what Bree said to me there a few seconds ago. Well, she reminded me that we were standing in front of a bunch of people, because she knows I have a reputation for public displays of affection." He waited until the laughter finished.

He smiled shook his head. "I mean, ya can't blame me, right?" More laughter. He sighed. "Really, there is no reason for me to even speak now. She pretty much said it all. We love and serve God and His Son Jesus Christ. We start out each day with that intention and with prayer and with action. We don't always get it right. But each day is another opportunity. I admit, today was a hard day to face. I started to cancel speaking here today and rush home to see to my son. But it was Bree and my father who helped me to see that I can do more good by staying here and doing what I'm doing right now, supporting my wife and my daughter, my nephew and Gabe. My son, Eric, will indeed pick up his cross and carry it. A hard thing to see your child do, even if you know it's for his good. How in the world was God able to watch His Son go through what He did?

"This morning, my heart was broken, I was in anguish, but Bree seemed to know exactly what I needed. She gave me her strength and reminded me that God is with us, and that He's with our son. She said, God was growing his roots, to help him to be even stronger for whatever life has in store for him. Wise words indeed. If she'd been off filming on location somewhere, she wouldn't have been with me this morning when I needed her calm strength, and she wouldn't have been with her daughter, showing her how to be a strong woman, and how to help her man in his time of need. So, I'm just saying publicly, how grateful I am for my wife, for God bringing her into my life. I am so blessed. So, Bree has given you all a little snapshot of our life. I just want to share with you my testimony. Because above all else, I love God, I love Jesus, and I know, as my father likes to say, 'They are real. They're not just some fairy story. They're real.'

"I recently read a comment from an angry man under a video where a woman was praying. He told her if she had the intelligence to read more than one book in her life, she would realize how ignorant she sounded. I could, we all could, take offense at such a statement. But that's how Satan works. He derides, he lies, he shames until people simply bow to the pressure of, 'if you want to be intelligent, you must not believe in God.' That's the lie. Intellectually speaking, there is no way this world, and all of the creations IN this world were a giant accident, an explosion, or chaos. God's universe is not random. It is not chaos. It is ordered. There are no such things as coincidences. God has a plan. And that plan, brothers and sisters in Christ, includes all of you.

"If you pay close attention to all the signs and wonders and miracles He performs on a daily basis, you will come to realize His perfect will for *your* life. Some of you are already on the path God has shown you. Others are still trying to find their way. Do this first. Establish your relationship with Jesus Christ so that you can hear, and recognize the voice of God, 'for no man cometh unto the Father but by me," Jesus said. So, pray more, stay quiet and listen more. You will learn to know His nudgings, His promptings, His whisperings. His voice is still and small a lot of the time. But sometimes it

is very loud.

"Pay attention. Read His word. Pray. Pray often. Establish that connection. He's there. I swear to you. He's shown me and our entire family too many miracles to deny it. I know He's done the same for Pastor Lucas and I'm sure for many of you here today. Leave church today with the intention of drawing closer to God through His Son, and do that with prayer and by being in service to those around you, to your family, and to whomever God places in your path. My love for God, it makes me, it drives me to be strong, it inspires me to work through my weariness, and it forces me to get back up when I fall. Not only do I love God, His Son Jesus Christ, my wife, my children, my extended family, and my friends, but at this moment, my love for all of you is flooding my heart. I hope you can feel it. It's the truth. I never lie.

"Let me leave you with this scripture. It's in Colossians chapter three. '*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*'"

Ricky stepped back and smiled. "I love that scripture. 'Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly'.... how beautiful is that? 'As you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom'.... and that? Isn't that exactly what we're doing every time we meet each other, whether we meet in church on a Sunday, or on the street. May we do those things." He paused, looked around. "And so, I leave this all with you, in Jesus' mighty name. Amen."

Pastor Lucas rose and went to shake Ricky's hand before he left the stage. "Ricky, in truth, I owe you my life," he said softly.

"Whatever you think you might owe me for nothing more than an act of kindness, you've paid it forward a million times."

Ricky left the stage and went back to the third row where his family sat. Taylor was still live and turned the camera to herself. "I'm so grateful for my mom and dad. Well, that's all for now," she whispered. "Gabe and Taylor, signing off... mostly cuz I'm almost out of battery. Byee!"

Ricky unbuttoned his suit coat before he sat, leaned over, tilted Bree's face up and quickly kissed her lips. Apparently everyone was still watching him because there was a murmuring of laughter.

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Young Eric sat on the floor against the side wall of the cell. He was concentrating on his breathing. He was still in the solitary cell, and even though he was still having to fight off the claustrophobia, it was a million

times better with the light on. Every once in a while, he could feel his heart rate start to surge, feel the panic rise, and he'd immediately start to pray again.

He wasn't sure what time it was. He'd seen his Uncle Justin about three in the morning. His uncle Justin, a powerful attorney, a strong martial artist, a 4th dan, his grandfather's closest friend. Eric had wanted to cling to him. Justin said they were gonna meet with the police chief at 8:00 this morning. Eric had received a morning meal he figured about that same time. The meal consisted of a donut and water. The time right after that was the worst, because he just knew that any minute, the door would open and he'd be free. But the minutes ticked on and it didn't happen. Hours later, lunch arrived. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich and apple juice.

The bread had mold on it and the peanut butter was thick and dry, but he forced it down, pretending he was on a survival camping trip like he'd been many times with his father. The harder part was choking down the dread that he wasn't getting out today. The meeting with the police chief must not have gone well. It shouldn't be taking this long.

He was probably gonna have to spend another night in this place and just the thought made his body begin to tremble again. He could do this if not for this stupid phobia. He could take anything else. He could take pain. He could take starving. He could take heat or cold. It was this thing, this ridiculous fear of closed spaces that was making him crazy. Literally crazy. When he felt like he might simply scream, something came into his head, so strong, he could almost audibly hear it. The numbers 19145 and then one word. "Sing."

"Sing?" he asked out loud and then felt a confirmation. Sing, he thought. And then again, 19145. He shook his head, gave a short, derisive laugh. Sing what? Almost immediately the words to *'How Great Thou Art*' began playing through his head. So, he began to sing softly and slowly.

"Oh– Lord.... my– God...." He stopped as emotions welled up. He sniffed and went on. "When I– in awesome wonder— " He paused and drew a deeper breath. "Consider all– the worlds– Thy hand has made." He was barely singing. Half song, half spoken, but, at least it was keeping him from losing his mind. "I see the stars," he continued, "I hear– the rolling thunder, Thy power throughout– the universe displayed."

He drew a deep breath and sang a bit louder. "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, how great Thou art, how great Thou art." He stopped, sniffed, and then sang even louder. "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, how great Thou art, how great Thou art."

Having finished the verse, he sat silent for a few minutes. Then he heard someone calling. "Hey—you—the guy that's singing. Don't stop now, bruh."

Eric sighed. "This is stupid," he whispered to himself.

"Yeah, keep goin' man," someone else said.

"Seriously?" Eric answered. "This is stupid."

"Naw, I been here since Friday man. I'm goin' crazy. The song, like, it helps. Come on," he urged.

Eric drew a deep breath. "Let's see," he said aloud. "Um, somethin' somethin' God, His Son not sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross, my burden gladly, um... bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, how great Thou art, how great Thou art. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, how great Thou art, how great– Thou– art."

Young Eric's cell door clanked and then opened. "Kino. Let's go."

"Thank you, Jesus," Eric whispered as he scrambled to his feet.

"Wait, dude, Kino? Any relation to Ricky Kino?" one of the other solitary mates called out.

"He's my father," Eric said. "What's your name? Hurry, tell me fast, cuz I'm leaving."

"I'm Buddy Kingston. Oh, wait, my real name's Jordan. Jordan Kingston."

"What? For real?"

"Uh, yeah, why man? You gonna help me?"

"I'll look into it."

"And, me, please bruh, I been here three days. Please. My name is Jamal White."

"Jordan Kingston, Jamal White, got it."

"Always loved that song man."

That was the last thing Eric heard as he was escorted down the corridor. He received his clothes and was made to change. Then collected his personal things at a window. He signed a few papers, release forms, he figured, because he wasn't really paying much attention. All he could think about was stepping outside the door of this building. Finally he headed toward the large, sliding glass doors. He could see out. He stopped. Sighed. There were cameras and reporters waiting for him to come out. He could see past them to the curb at the end of the walkway was an Ameritech van. He went to the doors, they slid open, he stepped out. Suddenly there was a rush of agents, Torres and Stanton, Ward and Trout, and two he didn't recognize. They moved up the walk and made a perimeter to keep the reporters and paparazzi away.

Eric moved out past the eave of the building, stopped again, and looked up at the wide open blue sky. He breathed a deep breath, smiled up at the sun, and thanked God. He started down the walk but only got half way when he saw his grandfather coming toward him, a calm smile on his face. He stopped right in front of him.

"Granddad," Eric said softly.

"Young Eric," he said, holding his arms out.

Eric went immediately into them and allowed his grandfather to hug him. When he finally moved back, he could barely hold back the tears

welling in his eyes.

"You okay?" his grandfather asked.

"Yes, sir. I'm good now. How's Jordan?"

"She's good. Still a little tired and weak. But good. Mostly looking forward to seeing you."

He sighed. Nodded. "I'll have to get my car out of impound."

"We'll take care of that, but Jordan is at the house."

"Oh." He looked down.

Eric senior frowned. "What? You don't want to see her?"

"I, uh, Granddad, I need some time to think."

Eric sighed and nodded. "Come on," his grandfather said as he ushered young Eric into the waiting vehicle. Agents Torres and Stanton hopped into the front and they all started home, not bothering to give the reporters any comments.

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Proverbs 15:3

"The eyes of the Lord are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Inside the van, it was young Eric who spoke first. “What were those reporters talking about? They said there was a video of a fight, and then something else that happened at the club?”

“Video of what actually took place at the *Baja Club* has been publicly released. Also body cam video of your arrest and also video of the cell you were first put in and the fight where you had to defend yourself. There was also a short press conference aired that was called a little while ago, apologizing for your arrest and promising to get to the bottom of things.”

Eric sighed in utter relief.

“Also, the short interview Jordan granted when she left the hospital has pretty much gone viral. She was absolutely remarkable.”

“Really,” Eric said without much enthusiasm.

“Okay, grandson, we’re gonna need to talk, that’s obvious. But first things first. I need to keep a promise.” He took out his phone and placed a video call. “When Ricky’s face appeared,” Eric senior handed the phone to young Eric.

Young Eric took the phone, and offered a slight smile as he looked into the eyes of his father and mother. The emotions welled up and he had to clear his throat before he spoke. “Hey, Mom. Dad.”

“Son,” Ricky said. “Better now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ya don’t sound better.”

“I am. Except feeling a little, I don’t know, I guess— ashamed.”

“Okay. I get it. I’m sorry I’m not there to talk to you.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you stayed with Tay and Logan.”

“I was made to see that it was the right thing to do. Listen, I understand how you’re feeling, and you don’t have me to talk to right now, but you have Granddad. Talk to him. He can help you.”

Young Eric nodded. “I will. I promise.”

“And Eric, you need to see the video from the club. You also need to see the sermon your mother gave this morning. She was amazing. She spoke about you too, so make sure you watch it. Not for entertainment purposes. It will help you. And you also need to see what Jordan had to say.”

Young Eric sighed. “I will catch up on everything.”

“Good. It will go a long way to make you feel like you again. Now, I’m gonna hang up because I’m being rude.”

"How are you being rude? Where are you?"

"We're at Toby and Caro's place and we're about to eat dinner and they are waiting on me to finish this call."

"Tell him we love him," young Eric heard Logan say. He smiled.

"Tell them all I love them too and I'm okay. No worries."

"Will do. Eric, talk to your grandfather. And watch those videos. I love you. Your mom and sister also send their love. And Gabe too."

There was shouting going on behind his father.

"And all the Nash/Smith people also send their love."

Young Eric smiled. "Bye Dad. Can't wait to see the show tomorrow night." The call ended.

Young Eric handed the phone back to his grandfather. Looked him in the eye.

"So, what are you ashamed of?" his grandfather asked.

"Granddad," young Eric shook his head. "I, uh, I didn't handle things well."

"When?"

"While I was in jail."

"How so? By the way, we all were pretty proud of the fight. You made great decisions, defended well. The kick to the forehead was perfect."

Young Eric smiled. "That's about the only thing I did well."

"Tell me."

"I, uh, I have this problem, Granddad."

"Are you talking about the claustrophobia?"

He looked up surprised. "My dad told you?"

"Yes. He was concerned and thought I should know. Do you mind if I ask why you felt you couldn't come to me?"

"No, I don't mind. I didn't want Dad or you, the two men I respect most in my life, to know about this weakness. You both are such strong men. I guess I'm ashamed of how much this stupid phobia seems to be affecting me. Granddad, in that cell, the one they moved me to, I totally lost it. I fell apart. I thought I'd rather be dead than stay there."

"Wow."

"Right? I prayed the whole time. I panicked every few minutes. I had to focus on my breathing."

"None of that sounds so bad. Actually, those are the things you should be doing to counteract the fear."

"Yes, but those are only the things I did when I wasn't shaking so hard I couldn't even think. And, well, I cried. I cried like a stupid little baby. I couldn't help it. I cried. The tears wouldn't stop."

"And after you cried, what would you do?"

"I'd calm down for a little while. Pray. Listen. Meditate."

"And then the cycle would start all over again?"

"Yes, sir. I could actually feel my heart rate increase. Feel the panic start

to rise again. Feel the tremors start again. Feel my eyes well with tears again. And I'd start praying again."

"Okay. I know that you know that when there is a fear or stress, adrenaline rushes through your body. It increases your heart rate and blood pressure, enlarges the pupils and heightens your senses. That's why you could feel it all rise again. Once the adrenaline has coursed through your body, there is a natural way your body expels it. Through perspiration and tears. Of course, the tears will also be affected by your emotions, which in your case was extreme stress, fear and then shame. The tears are also the body's way of relieving the stress. It's biology. Eric, there is no shame in those physical and emotional responses. And, claustrophobia is not a 'stupid phobia,' like you put it. It's a common phobia, but ya know what's interesting? It's not even the most common."

"What is the most common?"

"Believe it or not, it's arachnophobia."

"Spiders? Really?"

"Yes, and the second is ophidiophobia, fear of snakes."

Young Eric smiled. "Those seem almost laughable."

"I know what you mean."

"But then, I know how I feel isn't funny at all. So, that's not very kind of me."

"No, but it helps you put things into perspective. Claustrophobia is a common phobia too. But it's real. We can work through it. It will take time. But right now, I need you to see that there is nothing to be ashamed of, not even your tears. But Eric, tell me how you think this is relating to you not wanting to see Jordan."

"I didn't say that I don't want to see Jordan."

"You didn't have to."

Young Eric accepted that and sat quietly for a few moments. "I guess it has to do with the shame I feel, I don't know how to answer your question."

"Try."

"Can't you just look the answer up in one of your psychology books?"

His grandfather smiled. "I don't have to. I already know the answer. I want you to search your heart and tell me why you think you want to avoid speaking with the girl you love."

He blew out a breath. "Because, Granddad, I'm supposed to be this big strong guy, this man I guess, who is supposed to protect her, to love her, to take care of her, but put me in a closed space and I fall apart like some wimp. How am I supposed to lift my head up and look her in the eye? How?"

Eric senior nodded his head. "Good. That's an honest answer. Very good, young Eric. Listen, son, we all, all of us men, and you *are* a man, we all have weaknesses. We all have fears. All we can do is strive to do our best. You held it together in that cell by doing what came instinctively to you. You prayed, you breathed, you listened to God. Tell me, did God say anything?

Did He answer you? Did you hear Him?"

"Yes, sir, He answered and yes, sir, I heard Him." He went on to tell about the pacing of the dark cell seventy-two times.

"That is beautiful, Eric, on so many levels. Do you understand the significance of seventy-two?"

"No, sir, do you?"

He nodded. "Think about it. It'll come to you. But Eric, here's one of the beautiful parts; even through your fear you listened, heard and obeyed the voice of God. You heard it and believed you heard it plain enough to walk around that cell seventy-two times. An incredible act of faith. And the moment you finished, the door opened. Do you not see how beautiful that is?"

Eric looked down. Sighed. "Then why do I still feel such shame?"

"Because we are always hardest on ourselves and our egos don't want us to admit that we have any weaknesses. I'm proud of you, Eric. Just think about what I've said."

Young Eric suddenly took out his phone and sent a text to his Uncle Mark.

~~Don't let me forget to ask you about two guys I sort of met in jail.

~ Will do. How far out are you guys?

~~About ten minutes away from the house.

~ See ya soon.

~~ You're at the house?

~ Yes, and JoJo too. He's sick with worry about you.

Young Eric put his phone away. "Sorry, I had to text Uncle Mark about something I promised to do so I wouldn't forget. Don't want to forget a promise I made."

"No, you don't want to do that," Eric senior said with a knowing smile. He'd learned that lesson well, when he was ten years old.

It wasn't long before they pulled through the gate and headed up the drive. All four men got out of the car, Eric senior, Eric III and the two agents. Young Eric looked up at the door and knew Jordan would come running out any second. He looked at his grandfather. "I need a few minutes." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and headed out toward the center of the giant green lawn.

Within only a few seconds the front door did open and Jordan started out but saw young Eric walking away. She looked at Grandmaster Kino. He smiled at her. "Give him a few minutes. He's trying to get his head right."

She went back in the house to give him space, but headed to the living room window that looked out over the beautiful green expanse and watched him as he walked. He was wearing the clothes he'd had on last night. His head was bowed. He interlaced his fingers then placed them on top of his head, then pulled his hands apart and spread them wide, and then, he dropped to his knees. He was obviously in turmoil. She watched him for some time,

waiting for him to come back to the house. Finally, JoJo joined her at the window.

She glanced up at him. “How much longer do you think he’ll take?”

“Not sure. He’s obviously upset about something.”

“Ya think. Maybe about having to spend the night and most of the next day in jail because of the man I brought into his life. Do you think he’s thinking of a way to break up with me?”

JoJo looked down at her, surprised. “Seriously? He’s in love with you.”

“I know. But maybe he’s realizing that my life is way too complicated and he just doesn’t want to deal with it.”

“Well, ya know, Jordan, that would be very insulting to him if he thought you really believed that. If you think that he would be so lazy, or cowardly, that he would leave the woman he loves because things are a little difficult, then you don’t think much of him.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t really think that about him. I’m just feeling responsible. And maybe– a little unworthy.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t really think that about him, and Jordan, please know that you are totally worthy.”

Grandmaster Kino joined the two of them at the window. “Still out there, huh?”

“Yes, sir,” JoJo said.

Jordan looked up at the man. “I know you said he needed time, but do you think I could go out there anyway and just talk to him? It’s been half an hour already.”

Grandmaster Kino smiled kindly. “I’m counting on you to do just that.”

Jordan smiled and hurried out the door. She moved quickly toward him, but slowed as she got closer. Finally, she came up and quietly knelt down beside him. “Hey, Three,” she said softly.

He looked over at her. Sighed and then smiled. “Hey, baby.”

She immediately got emotional at the endearment. “So, I know you said you needed a few minutes, but, like, it’s been thirty minutes, and I’m a little worried.”

His eyes opened wide. “Thirty minutes? Really?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry. I was praying and I guess the time flew by.”

“So, are you okay, Three?”

He smiled at her. “Are you?”

“Yes. I finally stopped throwing up. Well, I think I have.”

He turned his body so that he could face her. He cupped her face. “I’m so sorry, Jordan, that you had to go through that all over again.”

She shrugged. “I’m sorry that you had to spend the night in jail because of the horrible man my mother married. I feel so guilty that I brought him into your life.”

“It’s not your fault.”

"So, was it terrible? I mean, being in jail."

He frowned. Looked deep into her eyes. "I need to tell you something about me."

"Okay."

"The reason I dropped out of school, the reason I stopped pursuing becoming an astronaut, it's embarrassing really, but if you're gonna love me, I feel like you need to know that I'm not the big strong guy you think I am."

She wrinkled her nose. "I highly doubt that."

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "I dropped out of school because I've developed a psychological problem, a phobia, and it seems to be getting worse and it has become very debilitating for me."

"Okay. What is it?"

"It's claustrophobia." Before she could comment he forged ahead. "The symptoms are kind of like a panic attack. The physical symptoms are sweating and shaking, that part is really bad. And a rapid heartbeat and trouble breathing or hyperventilating. Then, there's the emotional symptoms, like, an overwhelming feeling of anxiety or dread. And of course, having an intense need to get out in the open. And the thing is, even though you understand intellectually that the fear isn't rational, you can't overcome it. Like last night, I knew I wasn't gonna die in that cell, but I fell completely apart. I didn't handle it well. I cried. I prayed. My body wouldn't stop shaking. It was ridiculously pitiful."

"Oh, Eric," Jordan said softly. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

He nodded. "Right. And I expected the sympathy. And so, now that you know, and now that you feel so sorry for me, do you see how that makes me feel?"

She sat quietly, going over everything in her mind. Finally she looked up at him. "So, you think I won't see you as the strong guy I thought you were because you're claustrophobic?" She shook her head. "Eric, remember a week or two ago when my stepfather showed up and grabbed my arm and I completely fell apart? Remember, I was feeling kinda weird and you told me, you said, 'Jordan, just because of this little episode, I want you to know that I don't think any less of you, that nothing has made my feelings change.' You said that you loved me before it happened and that you still loved me. Did you mean all that?"

"Of course."

"And you expected me to accept that and believe you, that it didn't change how you felt, you still respected me, you still thought I was a strong girl, you still loved me. I was supposed to accept that?"

"Yes."

"Then you need to accept that your little, or big phobia, doesn't change how I feel about you, or how I see you, or my respect and admiration for you. Are you freakin' human? Yes. You mean you're not perfect? Wow, big deal. Are any of us? Even thinking of you suffering in that cell, you are still the

most amazing guy I've ever known, and I am so stinkin' in love with you that it's killing me sitting here next to you thinking that you were maybe gonna break up with me."

"What? No! How could you think that?"

"How could you think that I am so shallow that knowing you have a common phobia I would change how I feel about you?"

He rose up off his haunches, took her face in his hands. "Jordan, you're right. Please, forgive me."

"Yes, I will, if you'll just go ahead and kiss me."

He kissed her, passionately, with all the emotion that he had pent up over the past twenty-four hours. He ended up pushing her onto her back in the soft green grass. He kissed her several times and finally raised up and looked at her.

In the living room, at the window, JoJo and his grandfather smiled.

"Mission accomplished," JoJo said.

Eric senior nodded.

Out on the front lawn, Jordan reached up and touched the bruises on young Eric's cheeks and under one eye, and the small cut on his lip. "I watched that fight. You were amazing."

He sighed. "Just fighting for my life."

"Does it hurt?"

"A little. I haven't looked in a mirror. I'm sure it's very attractive," he said sarcastically. "And I definitely need a shower."

"Well, the face actually *is* attractive in a rugged he-man kind of way. The needing a shower part, I'll agree with you on that."

He chuckled. "I guess everyone is waiting on me to come inside."

"I think so."

He stood, reached a hand out to her, and pulled her to her feet. Smiling, he stared at the girl he loved. Her long blond hair blowing in the breeze, her face tan from playing ball every day, her gray eyes with the long dark lashes sparkling, her beautiful smile shining, her killer body, well, killing. He looked at her surroundings, the field of green, the fountain and flowers in the distance, the blue sky above, the wide open space. He drew a deep breath. It was such a contrast to what he was feeling just a few hours ago. He was relaxed and anxiety free. "Thank you, Jesus," he whispered.

They turned and went inside.

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Toby Nash, aka Tobias Smith, looked around the dining room table. It hadn't happened nearly enough times, to have these dear friends sitting at the same table. They'd been here only a handful of times over the past twenty years. So today, Toby was relishing the moments. He'd been reminded, after what happened to Ricky's father last month, that life can end very quickly, and he needed to live in the moment, appreciating every second. He let his eyes roam over the group.

Of course, there was his own girl, his Princess Caroline, and Grace and Brody. And then there was Ricky, and his girls, Bree, and Taylor. Then Logan, a hugely talented young man, the adopted son of Bree's brother Mark. And Gabriel Tanner. A remarkable young man, who was taking the world by storm who was the son of Toby's good friends, Keegan and Lizzy. Lizzy, made her first album recording on Toby's label and won a Grammy simply because she had the sweetest voice in the whole wide world.

Toby's eyes met Ricky's and Ricky smiled. "Capturing the moment?"

Toby grinned. "That's why I like you, Rick, it's like you can read my mind."

"That's just because you and I think alike."

Caro and Bree looked at each other and smiled.

"So, what other stories can you tell us?" Taylor asked.

"Surely, you've had enough stories about our family," Grace put in. "It's your turn to tell us a story from your family."

Taylor frowned. "Nothing interesting."

The people at the table giggled. She certainly wasn't narcissistic.

"Tell her the one about the horse," Ricky teased.

Caroline almost choked on the water she was drinking.

"Which one?" Toby asked with a gleam in his eye.

Ricky's eyes opened wide. "There's more than one?"

Toby shrugged. "I am a country boy."

"Well, I'm talkin' 'bout the one that brought Grace into the world."

Grace giggled.

Brody chuckled.

Bree hit her husband's shoulder. "Ricky Kino, you stop."

"What?" Taylor asked. "What horse?"

Gabe smiled. He'd heard the story from his own father.

"The horse is Thunder," Toby said.

"Thunder that you showed us earlier? That giant horse?"

"Yep. He's a good boy. Actually, he's an old man now. Almost twenty-eight. Beautiful stallion."

"He's a big, beautiful stallion alright," Caroline said.

Gabe chuckled. "And she's not talkin' 'bout the horse."

Everyone laughed. Brody nodded in approval.

"Huh? What's so funny?" Taylor asked.

"Go ahead, Ricky," Bree ordered. "I want to hear you tell your sweet, innocent daughter about Thunder."

"Yeah, Rick," Toby laughed. "I wanna hear how you tell it, cuz like, I got in trouble the way I told my daughter."

Ricky frowned. "Okay, hmm, well, Taylor, um, Miss Caroline here is not quite as sweet and innocent as you think."

Caroline and Bree both gasped.

"Ricky Kino, you better not pin that on Caro's head."

Caroline sighed. “Well, actually, I guess it was me who seduced him.”

Taylor’s eyes opened wide.

Bree took over. “Taylor, Grace was conceived while Toby and Caro were riding on a horse. Period. End of story.”

Taylor’s mouth opened in surprise. “But how— ”

Bree rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“The usual way,” Ricky said with a laugh. “Toby just had to get her turned a certain— ” He stopped to dodge the smack to his head from his wife.

Gabe blew water out of his nose and grabbed his napkin.

Taylor’s cheeks turned pink. “Okay.”

Caro looked at Ricky. “I will get you back.”

Logan and Brody were laughing.

“And then, when Caro got shot, and she was at the hospital, Toby bragged to the nurses about how she got pregnant,” Ricky continued.

“I didn’t brag.”

“He didn’t have to,” Caro added. “The visual is enough.”

“Miss Caroline, you got shot?” Taylor asked.

“She was held hostage and accidentally shot by a teenage girl. We didn’t know she was pregnant at the time. I came very close to losing the two most important women in my life,” Toby said softly.

“Aww, how sweet, Dad,” Grace said as she rose. “Why don’t we adjourn to the living room and do our thing.” She started clearing her dishes.

Everyone rose then, cleared the table, put their dishes in the dishwasher. The men cleaned the table while the ladies put food away and wiped off counter tops. In only a few minutes the work was done and they all went to the living room.

The house was situated in the woods, much like the Stewarts home in Pine Forest, Ricky thought. In the large living room, there was a baby grand piano and several guitars, some on stands, some in cases. The room had a giant wall of large picture windows and you could see the beautiful scenery of woods and a creek, and a nature trail.

“I love the view from here,” Bree said.

“We modeled it after Toby’s parents’ house up on the main entrance to the farm,” Caroline said. “I remember the first time I visited there, it looked like a giant glass house to me and I wanted our home to be similar to that.”

“Yeah, today Bree, you said you met your husband when you were eighteen,” Toby said. “I met my wife when she was just twelve, and I was fourteen.”

Caro looked up into her husband’s dark blue eyes as she remembered those first few days together. He was her strength back then. She’d been desperate to feel safe, and his strong presence had drawn her like a moth to flame. As she listened and watched him quickly tell the story of how they met, her heart throbbed. Oh, how she loved this man. The world revered him,

his fans screamed after him like he could walk on water, but he was hers. She was very blessed and very grateful that this man belonged to her.

Toby smiled at her. Leaned over and kissed her lips softly. "You okay, Princess?"

She nodded. "Time goes by so fast."

"It does indeed, darlin'." He nodded at Logan. "I see you have your guitar."

"Yes, sir," Logan said as he removed it from the case.

Toby sat at the piano.

Gabe and Taylor sat down on a padded bench that was right in front of the giant window. Ricky and Bree cuddled up on the large gray sofa. Logan went and got an armless chair from the dining room, placed it near the piano, took a seat and began tuning his guitar.

Grace was scrolling through her phone. "What shall we sing, Daddy?"

"You pick, darlin'," he said softly as he ran his hands over the keys, playing a little bit of several different tunes.

"I have a feeling this is gonna be good," Gabe whispered to Taylor.

Taylor nodded in agreement. "I have my phone ready." She raised her voice to address everyone. "Would it be okay if I go live at some point, for Gabe's social media?"

"Only if Gabe participates," Toby said.

Gabe sighed. "Okay, but I don't sing like Logan, but I guess I can carry a tune."

"Don't be so humble, you can hold your own," Brody said. "We saw your video from the birthday party."

"Why don't you start with the first song I ever heard your father sing," Caro said.

Toby smiled. "Feelin' nostalgic?"

Caro shrugged. "Maybe."

"What song is that?" Logan asked.

"*'Amazing Grace'*," Grace answered with a smile.

Toby told Logan the key and they dove right in.

Toby's voice was so rich and warm. When Grace's sweet soprano voice joined in, it was heaven. Then Logan joined with perfect harmony and Brody joined too. Caro sat back and smiled, wiping tears from her eyes.

Ricky and Bree tried to take it all in. They were listening to some of the most beautiful music they'd ever heard. It was like there were angels singing in the background. The harmonies, the richness, it was thrilling.

The song ended.

"Wow," Bree said. "I mean, that was so beautiful. Taylor, did you go live?"

"No, not yet, but I recorded it. And I agree, Mom, that was like, wow. Are we just the most blessed people right now to be able to hear this!"

"We are," Ricky agreed, his voice reverent.

"Gabe, I didn't see you singing," Toby said.

"Sorry, after the first verse, I couldn't remember the words."

"You have a phone. Look up the lyrics. No excuses."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Let's do *'Country Roads'*," Grace said.

"Okay. You come play the piano, I'll play guitar," Toby said.

"I don't know the piano part well enough yet," Grace argued.

"I do," Logan volunteered. He rose and handed his guitar to Grace, went to the piano, sat down and played a few lines of the song.

Toby nodded his approval with a big smile as he swung up one of his guitars and pulled the strap over his shoulder. "Awesome! Ready?" He looked at Gabe. "Got the lyrics up?"

"Yes, sir."

They played a short intro and the group dove into the song. Again, the harmonies were beautiful. Taylor went live. Immediately there were thousands watching. Taylor stood and walked slowly around the room, getting close ups of everyone.

"Take it Logan," Toby said on the second verse.

Logan sang solo. It still thrilled Gabe how smooth and effortless his voice was and he was so proud of him. The song ended.

"Okay, everyone. I'm going off for a minute, but when they decide which song they're gonna sing next for this little family sing-a-long, I'll be back. Isn't it so cool that we get to hear all these amazing singers for free! That won't last long, so watch for the notice when I go live again in a few minutes! Maybe we'll even get Gabe to sing a solo."

Gabe frowned at her. She laughed.

"Ya gotta do it now," Grace said.

"She's right," Taylor agreed.

"First, Grace," Brody began. "Sing us your rendition of *'Before He Cheats*.' I love to hear you sing that."

Grace laughed. "See, he's a nice brother every once in a while."

"It'd better be more than every once in a while," Toby said with a frown.

"Chill Dad. You know me. I'm always a gentleman."

Everyone laughed.

Grace sang her song, thrilling everyone. Then the whole group sang several more songs with even Ricky, Bree, Taylor and Caro joining in, and Toby moving back to his place at the piano. The set included *'Sweet Caroline'* in honor of Caro. They laughed because Caro bragged that hundreds of thousands of people sing that song to her every day during both football and baseball season.

"Okay, well, it's getting late," Toby said. "And you all have a big day tomorrow, so we'll do one more to end the evening. What'll it be?"

"Gabe hasn't sung a solo yet," Taylor complained.

"Gabe, do you know this one?" Toby asked, as he played a few chords.

Gabe smiled. "I think everyone knows that one."

"Good. You take the first verse solo. Then we'll each take a verse, and sing harmony too. Logan?"

Logan nodded. "Yep, I'll take the second verse and I'll sing all harmony on the chorus."

They assigned the third verse to Grace and then Toby got the last verse. Toby decided on the key.

"Taylor, you ready to go live?" Toby asked.

She nodded. "Hold on, let me give everyone a little notice." She went live. "Hey, everyone. So, this is gonna be the final song of the night because Gabe and I have to get some sleep for our big dance tomorrow. And finally, Gabe is gonna sing solo, on the first verse of this song, so everyone, hit that share button real quick and let's see how many we can get to join us on this livestream!" She looked up at the group in the living room. "Oh my goodness, we already have over twenty thousand viewers. Fantastic! Here we go!"

They began to play, Toby on piano, Logan on his guitar. Taylor zeroed in on Gabe's face, and he began to sing.

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"Hey, everyone," JoJo said as they were adjourning from the dinner table. "Apparently, Taylor has been going live on Gabe's social media because Toby and Grace Nash and *the* Logan Adams are doing an impromptu concert in the Nash's living room. Taylor just said that they're about to do the final number."

"Throw it up on the big screen," Mark said. "Everyone come watch and we promise to help clean up the kitchen afterward, Mom."

Shelley smiled. "Let's watch!"

"Taylor just said that Gabe is gonna sing a solo too!" JoJo said.

Shelley, Eric, Jeffy, Cam, Mark, Bella, JoJo, Joey, Breez, Jewell Perez, Josie and Jamie, young Eric, Jordan and the little ones all ran into the living room to watch the big screen.

The Nash's living room came into view. The music started and Gabe's face filled the screen.

"Oh, Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds Thy hand has made...."

Young Eric gasped. Jordan looked up at him immediately. "Three? You okay?"

He nodded as his eyes filled with tears and overflowed. "Tell you in a minute. Let's listen," he whispered.

They all listened as Gabe sang his solo. It wasn't bad. The chorus with everyone coming in was exquisite. Then Logan sang the second verse and blew them away. The second chorus had some of the most beautiful harmonies they'd ever heard. When Grace sang the third verse, they could

tell she'd definitely inherited her father's talent, and then when Toby finished it off, well, they knew he was still the one.

When it was over, Taylor spoke again. "So, we're about to sign off for the night, everyone. You guys are the best for signing in and joining us. Let us know what you think about these talented singers in the comments. And don't forget to hit the like button. And if you haven't subscribed, please do so. Then you'll get a notice when we go live again. And if my brother and family back in Cali are watching, we love you and miss you! Oh, and everyone, don't forget to tune in to *America Can Dance* tomorrow night at 8:00 p.m.! We'll see you then. Love you all! Byeee!"

The room was quiet a minute as they turned the TV off. They'd all noticed young Eric's reaction and were curious as to why.

"Well, that was amazing," Shelley said. "Logan was his usual amazing self. Bella, Mark, I bet you're proud of that boy."

"We are, and grateful for him," Mark said.

"My bro, he's gonna go big," JoJo said.

"He is," young Eric agreed.

"So, young Eric," Eric senior said softly. "We would all love you to fill us in."

Young Eric nodded as his eyes filled again. "Sorry. I didn't mean to grab the attention. It just took me by surprise. God is so cool." He drew a breath. "So, when I was in jail," he began, suppressing a shudder. "I was having trouble with the claustrophobia thing I was telling you all about at dinner." He stopped, to get his emotions under control. "Sorry, don't know why I'm so emotional."

"I do, but we'll talk about it later," his grandfather said.

"Yes, sir." Eric smiled as little Nate and Abe both came to him and climbed up in his lap as if to give him comfort. He gathered them close and went on.

"So, I was having trouble breathing and I started to pray again. It was after I'd been served lunch and I was thinking that somehow the meeting with the police chief had gone south and I was gonna have to stay another day and get out on bail instead of having the charges dropped. I was really not doing well and I was praying really hard. And I heard God's voice. He said, 'Sing.' And also, there were some numbers that came into my brain. At first— "

"What were the numbers?" Eric senior asked.

"Oh, well, they were 19145." He shrugged. I have no idea what they mean."

"Well, you may not know or understand what they mean, but never discount what God gives you."

"I wasn't discounting it. Just thinking maybe it was my own brain."

Eric shook his head. "No. You heard God's voice. Trust Him. Go ahead with the story, son."

"Okay, well, I thought it was silly, and thought maybe it wasn't God's

voice. But I asked, 'Sing?' And again I heard it. 'Yes, sing-19145.' I didn't know what to sing, but a song popped into my head almost immediately, and it was that song. *'How Great Thou Art*.' And I only sang a little bit, because I felt kinda silly. So I stopped singing. But then, I hear this guy call to me, asking me to keep going. I had no idea that anyone could even hear me. And then a second guy also asked me to keep going. They said it was helping them. I couldn't see these guys. We were all in solitary.

"Why?" JoJo asked.

"Why was I in solitary?"

"I know why you were. For fighting, or for defending yourself. But why were the other guys?"

"I don't know. We didn't talk long enough to find out anything else. But they said the singing helped them, so I finished the song. And as soon as I did, the officer came to let me out. That's when I got their names. They asked me to help them. One guy said he'd been there three days already." He turned to his Uncle Mark. "Those are the ones I wanted to talk to you about. If you can look into their cases. See what the deal is. I mean, I have no idea what they've done. But I know what I'd done. Nothing. Anyway, as I was leaving, the last thing I heard one of those guys say was, 'I've always loved that song.' It made me know I was supposed to sing and reach out to those guys, and now, the one song we catch from our family all the way on the other side of the country is that song. And we all know, it's not just a coincidence."

"That's right," his grandfather said quickly. "It's a confirmation. And Mark, if this guy has already been in there three days, I hope you have time to look into it quickly. I'll be happy to pay you for your services."

"Don't insult me," Mark chided his stepfather.

"Just saying, time may be of the essence."

Mark nodded at young Eric. "Give me the names and I'll get on it right now."

"Jamal White and Jordan Kingston. Also known as Buddy Kingston."

"Jordan? Really?" Jordan asked.

"Yep. And there are no coincidences."

"So, what does that mean, then?"

He shrugged. "Maybe that I need to remember his name, that I need to go the extra mile to help him. I don't know. But we will eventually."

Mark left the room and pulled out his phone.

"My babies," Shelley said. "It's bedtime. Everyone start saying goodnight."

"I don't wanna go to bed," Nate said. "I wanna stay wif Eric."

"And I wanna stay wif Jordan," Angelina said.

"Me too," Mark's and Bella's daughter Emily said cutely.

"Well, I hate to break it to ya, Nate, but I'm about to go to bed myself," young Eric said softly. "I have to train tomorrow."

His grandfather cleared his throat, raised his eyebrows.

"And," young Eric continued. "When your father or mother tell you to do something, you always need to honor them and obey them. Sometimes they tell you things that you don't want to do, but they always know what's best for you."

"Awwuuh," Nate complained.

"Nate," Eric senior said firmly. "Do as your mother asked or go to bed without saying goodbye to anyone. The choice is yours."

Nate frowned and then stared at his father for several seconds. Eric gave him time to make his choice. Nate sighed, turned and hugged young Eric. "Goodnight, Eric."

"Good choice, Nate," young Eric said with a smile. "I'll see you again soon. I love you."

"I love you too."

Young Eric set Nate on his feet and he went immediately to Jordan to hug her and say goodnight.

The other children had already started on their rounds.

While Shelley gathered the little ones, Jeffy, Breez and Bella headed in to start on cleaning the kitchen that hadn't gotten done due to the impromptu concert.

"Jordan," her mother said. "The kids and I also need to get on home. I have to be at work in the morning and they have school."

Jordan rose from young Eric's side and went to say goodbye to her mother. Everyone else came to tell Jewell how once again, the meal she helped prepare was delicious and they all joked about having her come to dinner at their houses and trick her into cooking for them.

Jewell ran her hand over her daughter's face. "Sweet Jordan, I'm so sorry for what Peter is doing. I'm so sorry I brought him into your world. Please don't let a bad decision on my part ruin your life."

"Mom, I'm okay. No more apologies. That is like the hundredth one today. I love you, Mom. And I'm glad you married Peter, because if you didn't, I wouldn't have my sister and brother, whom I love with all my heart. So, don't look back anymore. Look forward."

"I'll try." She sighed. "If they could just find him and put him back in jail."

"They will eventually. Don't worry. Everything is gonna be okay. Really."

Jewell sighed and nodded. She made her rounds as did her children, who didn't want to say goodbye to young Eric either.

JoJo eyed his cousin. Young Eric's face was not nearly as bad as it had looked in the photo that his Uncle Justin had taken. Of course, at that time, the blood was still all over his face, making it look pretty bad. Now that he'd showered and didn't have on an orange jumpsuit, it looked better. The swelling had already gone down and all the blood was gone.

Of course, JoJo and Logan had both known about young Eric's phobia,

and they'd both been extremely worried about him. And they both also knew what Eric had been through, as far as the treatment and the humiliation. It was just a body, they'd been taught. And bad people can and will do bad things to our bodies, punch them, shoot them, cut them, bruise them, batter them and violate them. We can't let them touch our minds, JoJo thought. He knew young Eric knew this, but wondered if he was suffering in any way. Because knowing, and what you actually feel can be very different when it actually happens.

While everyone else went around gathering children, saying goodnight, JoJo went to sit next to young Eric.

"How ya feelin', bro?"

Eric sighed. "Really, really tired. Got almost no sleep last night."

"Yeah, you and me both. Logan too."

"I figured you and Logan would be in communication."

"So, Eric, anything you wanna talk about?"

Young Eric nodded slowly. "So much, but there's no time right now, and I'm too tired to think clearly about things."

"Understood." JoJo put his hand on his cousin's shoulder. "Would you like to at least pray together?"

Young Eric looked around. Jordan had seen off her mother and siblings and had gone to help his aunts with the dishes. His grandparents were upstairs bathing little ones, praying with little ones, reading bedtime stories, going through the routine. His uncles were in Eric's study, working on getting info on the two cell mates, he supposed. Six-year-old Sophia had taken Kelstyn, Ledger and Em into the kitchen to color at the kitchen table.

Young Eric nodded at JoJo. "I'd really like that, Jo."

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James 1:12

"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jordan chatted with Three's aunts as they worked together in the kitchen. She was tired, really sleepy, and thought maybe there were still traces of the drug in her body. Breez and Bella were sisters and Jordan thought they were very sweet. Especially Bella, Logan's mother. Jordan knew the woman had been abused by her first husband, and Logan had to shoot his own biological father to protect her. She'd also been told to keep that information to herself. It made Jordan think about her sister Josie and how afraid she was of her own biological father. Hopefully, she'll never have to see him again.

"Jordan, you must be tired, sweetie," Breez said.

Jordan smiled at the younger of the two sisters. "I am."

Breez smiled. "Why don't you go get that gorgeous guy of yours and make him go to bed. Are you staying the night here?"

"Yes, ma'am. But I have to leave extra early because I have softball practice in the morning before class."

"I can't wait to come and see you play," Bella said.

Jordan grinned. "I would love you to come. We should have a pretty good team this year."

"So," Breez began. "When you and young Eric watched the videos earlier today, what was his reaction?"

Jordan frowned. "When he watched the video from the club, he didn't say much at all. Just kinda nodded his head. When he watched the video from the body cams of the cops, I could tell he was shaken up, so like, maybe reliving the moment. I mean, think about it. He's confused about what he did that was making them so intent on arresting him, and at the same time, I'm passed out in the front seat and he's probably worried about me. And then, the video from the fight in the jail, he was completely silent and still. So, I'm not sure. I haven't had any alone time yet to really find out what he's feeling about all of that. The footage from me when I left the hospital, all he did was give my hand a squeeze. The video of the sermons given by his mom and dad, he got pretty emotional. He did say that they were giving him more credit than he deserved."

"Hmm, so he's kinda down on himself," Bella said softly.

"Yeah, and I don't know what to do or say to make him feel any better."

"Just be there for him," Breez said. "He may not need you to do anything but just listen, understand and be there while he works things out

on his own. But he won't be on his own, because he's training with his grandfather, and if anyone can get through to him, he can."

Jordan nodded. "Thanks. I *will* take your advice and just listen." She looked around the kitchen. "What else needs doing?"

Bella shook her head. "We're pretty much done."

Jordan smiled. "Mrs. Kino sure is lucky to have two daughters-in-law like you."

"We're lucky to be a part of her family, but we don't call it luck. We're so blessed. Blessed to be married to two of the most wonderful men in the world, blessed to have Shelley and Eric as our in-laws, and blessed to have the opportunity to serve them in some way, because before all this happened this year, they were the ones always doing for everyone else. It feels good to be able to help them for a change."

Jordan smiled. "I just love this family."

"We just love you," Breez said brightly. "Young Eric has chosen well." She went to the table where her children and niece were coloring. "Hey, you guys, let me go see what your fathers are doing, and then be ready to put all this away, because we have to get home. It's past your bedtime."

Ledger yawned. "I don't wanna go home."

"Okay, fine. You stay here," Breez answered.

"Okay, fine," he repeated.

Jordan laughed. Then turned to go find Three. She stopped though when she spotted him. He and JoJo were huddled together on the couch, their heads bent, JoJo had his hand on Three's shoulder as they seemed to be praying. She shook her head in wonder. These people really lived their beliefs. Did all Christians do that? She already knew the answer to that, because most of the girls on her team believed in Jesus, but they didn't exactly live or act very holy. But, Jordan thought, everyone is in their own stage of belief and faith, and she shouldn't judge. But, she was thinking, she would ask Three what he thought about that.

She heard the rumble of male voices and turned as Cam, Joey and Mark Adams emerged from the hall that led to Grandmaster Kino's study.

JoJo and young Eric looked up.

"Okay, let's gather the fam for a little pow wow," Mark said.

"Eric's upstairs with Shelley putting the kids to bed," Bella replied.

Mark nodded. "We can wait a few minutes. Let's all go in the living room." He walked over and grabbed Em up. "Hey, baby girl, whatcha doin'?"

"I makin' a pitchor."

"It's beautiful. Can I have it?"

"No. It's for young Ewic."

"Oh, well, he's gonna love it."

Em smiled. "I make one for you too, Daddy."

"Okay, but let's move this coloring session into the living room."

They quickly relocated the children's coloring session to sit on the floor

around the coffee table. Ledger pushed his paper aside, went to his dad and crawled up in his lap. Joey held him against his shoulder and in only a few minutes he was sound asleep.

Jordan squeezed in next to Three.

"So, tell me about how the game went," young Eric asked.

"Not much to tell," JoJo said. "We totally dominated. Our tight end got hurt though. It's not too bad, but he'll miss this next game."

"What were your numbers?"

"Twenty-three for twenty-nine, seventy-nine percent, almost twelve yards average, three hundred four yards total, four passing TD's, and I rushed for one, but had one pick."

Young Eric shook his head. "Man, you just can't get it right, can you?"

Everyone laughed.

"Really, JoJo, that is phenomenal," young Eric said.

"We have a really good team this year. They're making me look good."

They all looked up as Eric and Shelley came downstairs.

"Good," Mark said. "Everyone have a seat, please. We need to talk."

"I'll begin," Joey said. "We got some stills from the video at the club and ran them through the facial recognition database, and got hits on both. We sent two agents to tag along with the police to pick them up. As of a few minutes ago, they're in police custody. Wish we could've gotten to them before the cops, but it didn't work out that way. Still, we trust the detectives who are questioning them, and we might have info on Perez as soon as tonight. If we get it, we'll go after him immediately. Fingers crossed on that one. Also, we got the to-go cup from young Eric's car and it matches Jordan's bloodwork. It was definitely Ketamine. Young Eric, your car is a mess. We're having it cleaned and it will be delivered to you by morning.

"Thanks, Uncle Joey."

"Next," Mark began. "Jamal White. Twenty-one. Just turned twenty-one four days ago. Student at USC, arrested for public intoxication. Guessing it was a birthday celebration of becoming legal to drink that went south. I'll get in to speak with him first thing in the morning. After I get his story, I'll be able to tell you what we can do for him. I'm guessing I'll be able to get it dismissed, because the state will have to prove that he was either a danger to himself or to someone else. Now, Jordan Kingston, not quite as easy. He was driving a stolen car and had possession of a firearm. Again, I really need to hear his side, and then we'll go from there."

"I know you need to speak to them, but can you at least get them out on bail, or bond, or however that works?" young Eric asked.

"Probably. Though, it will depend on their family situation."

"Well, let me be their family for now. I'll post bail."

Mark nodded. "Let me get back to you in the morning. Eric, you might have to give him a little time off of training to make a call or two tomorrow morning."

Eric senior nodded. "I think we can handle that."

"Okay, good. That's it for now, everyone. Take care, have a good week. Joey, you got anything?"

"Just need to confirm that Jordan, you're spending the night here tonight?"

Jordan nodded. "Yes, sir." She grinned. "I've been assigned Bree's old room."

Joey laughed. "You seem excited about that. What's the big deal? She's just my big sister."

Jordan smiled.

"Anyway, Agent Trout will be here at 7:00 a.m. to get you to your apartment and then to practice. He'll check with you about your schedule for the week."

"Thank you, Mr. Adams. You guys are awesome for doing this."

"For doing what? Keeping watch over young Eric's girl? Easy day."

"Before we dismiss," Eric senior said softly. "Let's have a family prayer."

Everyone immediately quieted and bowed their heads. "Miss Bella," he said. "Will you honor us?"

She looked up surprised. "Oh! Yes, I'd love to."

Mark smiled at his wife. He bowed his head and listened to her sweet prayer. You could feel her love and concern for everyone in the family. It was a beautiful prayer. Sweet, honest, and humble.

After that, everyone called it a night. It had been a long and event-filled weekend. They'd had to take care of business on the Sabbath day, but sometimes, you gotta do what you gotta do, and they knew Jesus was down with that and that He knew the intentions of their hearts.

Young Eric walked Jordan to her door and kissed her goodnight. She frowned. Even though they'd talked, and for a few minutes here and there he seemed like himself, she couldn't help but feel that there was something different about him.

She smiled up at him. "So, I'm staying in your mom's old room. Where are you staying?"

"Right next door in my dad's old room."

She smiled at that, hoping it was an omen. "Good night, Three."

He kissed her softly. "Good night, Jordan." He opened her door, ushered her inside, closed her door, turned and went to his room.

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Jordan slept hard for about two hours and then woke. Maybe it was because she'd slept almost the whole day, but she couldn't go back to sleep. Three had been really tired. She was sure he was sound asleep. Rising from the bed, Jordan walked to the glass doors that opened onto a balcony that overlooked the ocean. She wondered how many times Breanna Adams did this same thing. And when she did, was she thinking about Ricky Kino in the

next room? Even though she denied him for nine years like she'd said in her talk, Jordan wondered if she still thought about him, dreamed about him, desired him?

Jordan opened the door and stepped out. There was a breeze blowing in off the ocean, as usual. The smell of salt air reminded her of Three. She sighed. Everything reminded her of Three. It was impossible to sleep knowing how much she'd longed for him all day, and now he was right next door to her. Making the decision, she went back inside, through the room out the door and to young Eric's door. Stealthily, she turned the knob, opened the door and stepped inside.

"Jordan? Is that you?"

She closed her eyes, relishing the sound of his masculine voice. "Yes. I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No. Come in. I'm glad you're here."

"You are?"

"Yes. I need you." He raised the covers. "Come here. Please."

She came at once and scooted into bed beside him, immediately cuddled up close and snuggled up under his chin.

He sighed. "That's much better."

"Yes it is," she said softly.

His left arm came around her, pulling her even closer. He pressed his nose to her hair and breathed in. "Whatever shampoo you use, it smells so good."

"Well, it was what's in the bathroom. But I'll remember to buy that kind from now on."

He sighed. "This feels so good, so right, to have you beside me."

"You said you needed me. In what way?"

"In every way. And I do need you like, physically, though I think I've got that under control right now. I need you, well, emotionally I guess. It's like, being next to you, it heals me. It makes all the yearning go away."

"Three, when you say stuff like that, it makes me feel so happy. So content. I can't even imagine not having you in my life."

"I feel the same way, Two-Three. I know we're young. I know I need to give us some time to get to know each other better, and I intend to do just that. Still, baby, I'm gonna say this again. One day, I'm gonna make love to you. And because you know me, you know what that means."

"You mean about the part where sex is reserved for marriage?"

"Yes, that part. I'm gonna give you some time before I ask you, Jordan. But I have every intention of eventually asking."

"And you're gonna give me time because we're so young?"

"Yes. And because really, we've only known each other for three weeks."

"It seems like much longer. It seems like forever. Ya know, in your mom's talk today, she said your father knew almost immediately that he

loved her."

"Yeah, I know, and so, that makes me think that it's okay for me, so quickly, to feel so in love with you."

"But your mom was only eighteen and wasn't interested in being tied down to just one guy yet."

"Exactly."

"And I'm only a year older than your mom was."

"Correct."

Jordan sighed. "But there's a difference, because your mom didn't think she was in love with your dad. She didn't tell him that she loved him, because she was unsure and because she wanted to date around. Meet more people. Have fun. The difference is, I do know that I love you. I've told you so many times now. And I have absolutely no desire to date around and try out other guys. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no one better for me than you. I know it. And you probably think that too. You're just being cautious. You're being mature and responsible. I get that. So, I'm just saying, take as long as you wanna take. I'll be here for you. Because I love you, Eric Kino III, and I will continue to love you. Unless you do a Jekyll and Hyde type thing and surprise the heck out of me."

He shook his head. "I don't know how God thinks I deserve you, Jordan Brooks. I hope I can live worthy of your idealistic vision of me." He tilted her face up to him and kissed her gently.

"Three?"

He stroked her face. "Yes?"

"Will you teach me about Jesus?"

He closed his eyes to defend against the tears. He sniffed, then opened his eyes and allowed the tears to escape.

"Does that upset you?" she asked.

He laughed quietly. "No, baby, but you just made me the happiest guy in the world. The tears are just close to the surface after the past twenty-four hours. Yes, of course I'll teach you about Jesus." He sniffed again.

"Where will you start?"

"I think we'll start with His Word."

"His Word?"

"The Bible." He shook his head in wonder, looked up toward heaven. "Thank you, Jesus," he whispered.

"Well, it's late, and I know you need to sleep," Jordan said. "But just tell me one thing right now."

"What one thing?"

"I don't know. You decide. Just tell me one thing about Jesus."

"Oh, okay, hmm, well, I'll tell you two things. First, He's real. I mean, He truly existed on the earth and still exists. And second, He's all about love. Real, unconditional love."

"That's beautiful."

"Every single part of the story of Jesus is beautiful, from His birth to His Ascension and beyond. So beautiful."

Jordan put a hand to his face. "When you talk about it, your face shines."

He smiled. "Cool."

She frowned, touched her own head, and gave a soft groan.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. Jeffy said there would be some residual headaches. She gave me some tea for it, but it seems to be coming back."

"Would you like me to go make you some more tea?"

"Aww, Three, you're so sweet. No, I can deal with it."

"Okay, if you think so." He sighed. "So, tell me, when you're drugged, do you remember anything?"

"No. It's all a blank to me. Last thing I remember about last night was sitting in the car and asking you what was happening. And some lights were flashing in my face. Then when I woke up today, my mother was standing by the bed. And then, I promptly threw up. I hate throwing up."

He gave a soft laugh. "Me too."

"Well, at least when you do, it's because you're doing something noble like training for the Challenge."

Eric shook his head. "That's not so noble. Gabe's dad, Agent Tanner, he says training so hard until you throw up is nothing. It's the guys who throw up because they've just had half their leg blown off on the battlefield, and then crawl over to pick their gun back up and take out more bad guys until they pass out. Now that's noble."

"Wow, Three. That is a graphic scenario."

"Sorry. Just keepin' it real. Just sayin' that what I do is not that important."

"Okay, ya got me there, but still, you are pushing yourself, pushing your body way past comfortable, testing yourself, testing your stamina. It's beautiful. *I* think it is anyway."

"Thanks." He sighed and kissed her one more time. "Will you turn over onto your other side?"

She did, and sighed contentedly as he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close to spoon with him.

"And will you stay?" he whispered in her ear.

"You're not worried about putting out fires?"

"No. Feeling very much in control."

"Then I'm all yours."

"Thank you, Jesus," he whispered softly as he closed his eyes.

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September 30th, Monday Morning

UCLA, Los Angeles, California

Agent Trout shook his head at Jordan as she approached. She was

drenched in sweat, there was dirt on her face, her large softball bag was slung over her shoulder, she was limping slightly and she was not happy. Her cleats tapped on the pavement as she headed toward him after practice on her way to the locker rooms.

She looked him in the eye, something not many clients did, and gave a sigh. "Well, Agent Trout, I guess that was a sight to see."

He shrugged. "It wasn't so bad. Does the coach know what happened to you Saturday night?"

"I told her. Not sure what she's thinking. At this point I don't really care. I'm just so tired."

"I'm no doctor but it seems obvious to me that you're not fully recovered from the drug. You were pretty, uh, sluggish out there."

"Ya think? And who trips over first base?"

"Lots of people."

"Yeah maybe, but not bad enough to actually injure themselves."

"How bad is it?"

She shook her head. "Not that bad, really. Just hyperextended my knee a bit. I'll put some ice on it. I'll be okay. Sorry you had to witness that."

He chuckled. "Me too." He walked slightly behind her and to her left as she headed across the parking lot toward the building. He only caught a blur of someone running towards her, his arm raised.

Jordan shrieked as Agent Trout gave her a hard shove, pushing her out of the way. He turned just in time to block the arm coming down, grabbing the man's wrist, twisting, and the large knife clanked onto the pavement.

The force of the man's momentum, brought Trout down, but he rolled, used his fist and then elbow to knock him out, rolled the man onto his stomach, and looked up. "Jordan, you okay?" he asked, glancing around, looking for any other threats.

"I'm okay. What can I do?"

"Nothing, just stay right there." He grunted as he lifted up to remove cuffs from his belt. He secured the guy quickly.

The team members and other students gathered around.

Agent Trout asked them to stay back and when a student started to retrieve the knife he cautioned him to not touch it. He then pulled his phone and called Joey, who gave him implicit directions to not allow the campus police to touch anything and to wait for LAPD to arrive. He ended the call, and went to check on Jordan. She was sitting on the pavement, rubbing her shoulder.

"Are you hurt?"

"I think I scraped up my shoulder."

He knelt beside her and gently raised the right sleeve of her t-shirt. He nodded. "Yep, it's pretty scraped up. Road burn. Sorry. I must've pushed a little too hard."

"Uh, you saved my life, so, I'm thinking you pushed just right."

Trout stood and again asked everyone to stay back and in only a few minutes the police arrived on scene. After Trout spoke with them he watched to make sure they handled the scene correctly. He snapped off some pics for Joey. Pics of the perp, of the knife, of the scene and of Jordan's shoulder. He knelt back down. "Looks like you're gonna miss your morning class."

She sighed. "Maybe I can get a note from my Agent."

"Yeah, not sure if that'll hold any sway, but I'll be happy to speak with the professor for you. I can look very intimidating if I want to."

Jordan laughed.

The police finished their questioning of Jordan and eyewitnesses who were mostly her teammates and finally Jordan was allowed to leave. Agent Trout walked her to the building and then to the locker rooms. She went inside and changed and came back out, still limping.

"May I take the bag for you," Trout asked.

Jordan nodded and handed it over, and as they headed toward Trout's car, her phone buzzed.

"Hey, Three. No, I'm okay. I really am. No, you don't have to come up here. Agent Trout is right here. Hold on." She put the phone on speaker. "Okay go ahead. He can hear you."

"Agent Trout, thanks for being alert."

"Just doin' my job, Eric. You know that."

"Yeah, just thanks anyway. Is she really okay?"

"Well, I scraped up her shoulder pretty good when I pushed her out of the way. But it's not her pitching shoulder, so, there's that. She's limping, but that's from practice. She was struggling a little bit at practice. And I'll let her tell you the rest."

"Why were you struggling?" young Eric asked.

"I think I was dizzy, like, once I got my blood going when I started running around, I wonder if traces of the drug that were left in my body started circulating again. I felt light-headed and dizzy, like I was running in a circle and I tripped over first base in a very awkward way and I think I hyperextended my knee. I'm okay."

Young Eric shook his head. "You were gonna come watch the big show tonight at the house, right?"

"Yes, why?"

"Why don't you head there and rest?"

"Sounds nice, but I have a class this afternoon. I don't want to miss another class. I already missed this morning's class. I have to keep my grades up or I'll lose my scholarship."

He wanted to tell her not to worry about it. He'd pay for her college. But he didn't dare. He sighed. "Okay. Well, after your afternoon class what are your plans?"

"Go to my apartment, gather up my dirty clothes and do laundry."

"Okay, babe. Agent Trout, do you think there will be more threats?"

"Probably. This guy, he seems intent on causing trouble. Whether he's aiming more for Jordan or for you, it's hard to say. I don't know if Joey has told you yet, but the two guys who put the stuff in Jordan's drink, they picked them up last night and they talked."

"No, Joey has not spoken to me yet. Probably because he doesn't want to interfere with my training."

"Well then, I'm not gonna overstep my bounds," Trout said.

Young Eric heaved out a breath. "It doesn't matter who delivers the information. Just tell me. Please."

Trout sighed. "Okay, well, they talked. Perez is planning all kinds of things that mostly seem to be aimed at Jordan. They were supposed to cut her brake lines last week, but they weren't able to get to her car."

"Wow. Well, thank goodness you thought she should ride with you," Eric said.

"Yeah, and Joey said, starting this afternoon, another agent is gonna ride behind me. He thinks we need more eyes."

"The guys who talked, did they know where Perez is?" Young Eric asked.

"They knew only that he was driving a white Toyota. And we were able to pull video from outside the Chinese restaurant where the phone call was made when he phoned the police Saturday night. They saw the car but were only able to get half a tag number. Still, the car doesn't belong to him. And no Toyota has been reported stolen with a tag number that begins with 8JWX. Which means, it's probably being loaned to him."

"I don't understand why we can't find one guy, who supposedly doesn't have any money. How can he continue to hide? How is he hiring these guys to hurt Jordan? It doesn't make sense."

"Jason says he's smart but emotional. Smart enough to stay hidden, but emotional enough that he'll eventually make a mistake."

"Hopefully he'll make that mistake before he's able to hurt Jordan anymore. How much money did he pay those guys that talked?"

"That's also strange. He didn't pay them. And they refuse to talk about why they would do his dirty work for free. They did tell us that they had more assignments aimed at Jordan."

"You mean more than cutting her brake lines?"

"Yep."

"Like what?"

"Like tripping her as she goes down the large set of concrete steps outside the college cafeteria, or mailing her sickening, disgusting descriptions of what Perez is gonna do to her if he ever gets her alone. They intended to blow white powder in her face to make her have to go to a doctor to make sure she wasn't exposed to some terrible disease. And the scariest, if they ever find her alone, they were told to immediately grab her and bring her to him. So that he can, quote, finish the job."

Trout looked up at Jordan when she made the small sound. Her face had gone completely white. “Hey, Jordan, it won’t happen.”

“You don’t know that,” she said, her voice shaking. “He’s tricky. And obviously he’s gone full criminal. I don’t know how I can...” she began then stopped abruptly. “I, I don’t feel too good.”

Trout dropped the big bag and scooped her up in his arms before she passed out.

“Hello? What happened?” young Eric said.

“Sorry, Eric, she was about to pass out. Let me call you back.”

Jordan insisted she was okay, but Agent Trout carried her to his car, placed her in the front seat, and then drove back to gather her bag.

He handed her phone to her. “Here, ya go, Jordan. You probably need to call your guy back.”

She did.

“Jordan?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Sorry. I got dizzy.”

“Dizzy. Right. So, now– have you changed your mind or are you *still* thinkin’ about goin’ to that afternoon class?”

“Yes, I’m goin’ to class. Three, I’m okay. Sorry that I sort of fainted. I just don’t understand how I can inspire such hatred. Why does he hate me so much? I’m sorry, but it just got to me.”

“Well, I’m guessing I probably shouldn’t have told you what those men said,” Agent Trout added. “Lesson learned.”

“No. You absolutely should’ve told us,” young Eric argued. “We need to know. And I know Jordan would want to know that kind of stuff. Yes, it’s hard for her, but she needs to know what we’re up against. And he hates you Jordan, because *you* put him in jail, and now you’re trying to put him back in jail. But really, it’s because he can’t admit that he should have stopped drinking and gone back to work like a decent father and husband. People like that blame anybody and everybody except themselves, and, uh, oh, hold on a second, Jordan.”

Young Eric turned and nodded at his grandfather. “Yes, sir. Understood. Let me just say ‘goodbye’ to her. Hey, Jordan, I need to get back to work. Granddad was on the phone for a minute but he’s off now and waiting on me. You are still coming to the house tonight, right?”

“I’ll be there, Three.”

“Agent Trout, take good care of her.”

“I intend to,” Trout answered. “She’ll be at the house by 6:00.”

“Awesome. And, you’re welcome to stay for dinner if you’d like.”

He chuckled. “Thanks, but I actually have an, uh, appointment.”

“A date? Oh, uh, I’m being yelled at. Gotta go.”

Jordan giggled. “I can’t imagine Grandmaster Kino yelling.”

Young Eric sighed. “Well, it doesn’t sound like yelling, but to me, he’s screaming and because I’m still on the phone I’m guessing I have some ab

work or wind sprints in my near future. Bye."

Young Eric tossed his phone onto his bag, turned and came to his grandfather. "Sorry, sir. It's hard to hang up when the girl you love has had her life threatened."

Eric senior nodded and pointed at the 'captain's chair.' "Good try. Truly. I'm gonna need a hundred elevated leg lifts."

Young Eric's eyes opened wide. He'd thought it would be crunches, easy day. He didn't dare argue. He nodded, drew a deep breath, and headed for the apparatus.

While he was working on it, his grandfather spoke to him. "While you were on the phone I got a call."

Young Eric grunted and nodded.

"Jake has just arrived at *Camp Pendleton* and he's been given the evening free. So, he would like to come to our house to watch Gabe and Taylor and Logan."

Young Eric smiled. "Awesome," he responded breathing hard.

"Did you lose count?" his grandfather asked with a smile.

He shook his head. "Thirty-eight, thirty-nine." He breathed. "How long will he be at Camp Pendleton?"

"Two more weeks of training, and then he ships out to Afghanistan."

"I bet," he moaned, breathed. "I bet JoJo would like to see Jake."

Eric senior nodded. "I texted him, invited him and his family. Also invited Joey, and his family."

Young Eric didn't speak, only nodded as he concentrated on the last fifty. He grunted several times, had to simply hang for a few seconds to allow the burn to stop. The last ten were torture, but he finally ground it out and hopped down. He bent over to put his hands on his knees and immediately regretted it as his stomach muscles began to cramp.

"Stretch it out," Eric senior commanded.

Young Eric laced his fingers together and stretched his arms over his head, lifting his rib cage and breathing deep. He ended up going into a backbend, walked over, and straightened. Finally the cramping started to ease up.

"Grab a bottle of electros and meet me on the mat."

Young Eric bowed. "Yes, sir."

They worked for a while on sparring moves. Finally Eric senior said, "Let's put these into action." He looked around the studio for someone working out that might be a good match for young Eric but there was none. So, he went to the front and came back with Master Foreman who was a 7th dan.

"Eric, Master Foreman has agreed to spar with you for a few minutes before his next class."

Young Eric nodded.

"I'll ref," his grandfather continued. "Don't hurt him," he said with a

smile to Master Foreman. “No groin kicks, no throat or eyes. And, I know I just said to not hurt him, but really, don’t hold back too much either, or the exercise is useless.”

They bowed to Grandmaster Kino and then to each other.

“And fight,” Grandmaster Kino said.

The others at the studio immediately gathered around to watch. Eyebrows raised, Eric senior instantly realized there was something different about young Eric. He was fierce. He was so fast. He was intent and focused, and next thing he knew, Master Foreman was on his back. Grandmaster Kino allowed young Eric to proceed instead of stopping the fight, since the Challenge is no holds barred. He wanted to see if he would finish him while he was down.

Young Eric dropped to the floor, threw an elbow to the diaphragm. Master Foreman barely blocked it and when he did, young Eric was able to move to his rear and put him in a choke hold.

Grandmaster Kino stopped the fight. Had them both rise and start again. Master Foreman knew he’d better give it his all now, and he put young Eric down three times but didn’t finish it, and young Eric rose and landed a powerful kick to Master Foreman’s chest, then another to the back of his head. The man went down again.

Grandmaster Kino watched a few more seconds. Eric went immediately for the throat and had to stop when he remembered no throat. Master Foreman took advantage of that slip and kicked to young Eric’s head, putting him on his back.

Grandmaster Kino nodded and ended the fight. They both rose.

“Bow,” Eric senior commanded, then turned to Master Foreman. “So, what is your assessment?”

Master Foreman nodded. “I think he’s made a turn and he’s about to kick some major booty. He made me have to think, his kicks are strong. The one to the chest almost knocked me out because it took my breath. Good job, Eric.”

Young Eric didn’t smile. Only nodded. “Thank you, sir.” He bowed again.

“Thank you, Master Foreman,” Grandmaster Kino said as he bowed to him.

“My pleasure, sir. As always.” He bowed and turned to go teach a self-defense class for women in one of the smaller classrooms.

Grandmaster Kino glanced at the time. “It’s almost lunch time. Tell ya what, let’s grab some lunch and head home and finish your training day on the beach.”

Young Eric nodded and bowed. “Yes, sir.”

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Philippians 4:6-7

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and

supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Young Eric and his grandfather ended up heading home and eating lunch there with Shelley and the children. After lunch, Eric senior invited young Eric into his study while they digested.

"So, young Eric, how are you feeling?"

Eric nodded. "Feel fine."

"Any more thoughts about what you went through in jail?"

"No. Don't want to think about it really. Last night, I was feeling strange, but then Jordan came in my room and the feelings went away."

"Can you use a different word besides 'strange'?"

Young Eric sighed. Shook his head. "What if I say, 'no'?"

"Then I'll ask you to try again."

He looked down. Sighed. "Lonely maybe?"

"Sounds like a question."

"Okay, then, lonely," he said firmly.

Eric shook his head. "Not buying it. Try again."

"I don't know what else to say. I didn't want to be alone."

"Why?"

"Granddad, please. Can we not just let this go?"

"What do you think?"

He sighed. "What was the question?"

"Why didn't you want to be alone?"

Young Eric was silent for several moments. "I guess because I've gotten used to Jordan being around and I miss her when we're not together."

Eric senior studied his grandson's face, then slowly shook his head. "Try again."

"Why?"

"Because I know why and you know why and it will help you if you just come out and say it."

"I don't know why. I don't. If *you* do, then by all means fill me in," he said sarcastically.

Eric senior frowned. "Ya know, you're right on the verge of being disrespectful and I'm only gonna let that slide because I realize how desperate you are to get out of saying what you don't want to say."

Young Eric's eyes moistened. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Granddad. Really. Okay, I guess I didn't want to be alone because I was feeling—" He stopped, and muttered a curse, making his grandfather's brows raise.

"Just say it, Eric."

He nodded. "I was feeling– fear. I was feeling– afraid."

His grandfather nodded. "Good."

"No, Granddad. Not good. Ridiculous. Emasculating. I was lying in bed afraid of the dark. I'd been thinking about sleeping with the light on when Jordan opened the door."

"It's hard to admit that you're not Superman when your whole life you thought of yourself that way. Strong. Invincible."

"I don't think of myself that way. Haven't I been humble as I train and know that all those men are kicking my butt?"

"That humility is compensation. And we've talked about that. But Eric, we, and when I say 'we' I mean 'you,' need to put this fear into perspective. They put you in a tiny cell, in the dark, for hours. They also didn't bother to offer any first aid. By the way, they have been called upon to account for both of those things and the officers are being disciplined."

"Great. Now I'll look like a wuss to the rest of the world too."

"It doesn't matter how you look to the rest of the world. It only matters how you feel about yourself. Eric, you've transferred the fear of closed spaces to fear of the dark and brought it straight home and into your own space. You have to separate these things. And Eric, there is nothing wrong with being afraid of something. We all have fears. And it certainly doesn't make you less of a man."

"Oh yeah, so tell me, Granddad, tell me just one time when you were so afraid that you cried. Not afraid for someone else, but for your own self."

"Many times. But let me look back into my younger years. The year I met your grandmother was pretty rough. A man who hated me, sent eight guys to beat me up."

"That was James or Tommy Crane, right?"

"James, sent them. Tommy was one of them."

"You were afraid of being beat up?"

"Not really. It was what they did after they beat me up that scared me. They hung me up using duct tape onto the plate that holds a kicking bag. I knew there was no way out and no way to fight. He pulled his belt from off his waist and I knew I was about to feel real pain. And I had no idea if they intended to hurt me, or beat me to death. I was scared. And it hurt like hell, and the tears ran down my face."

"What did you do?"

"There was only one thing to do. Pray. And I did."

"Why have you guys not told me about this?"

"Part of that is because it was a very long time ago, years before you were born. And part of that is because we don't like to dwell on negative things. And another part of that is because I was ashamed."

"Why?"

"Because they were able to best me. Because they got to me due to me

forgetting to lock a door. I was distracted."

"Good grief, Granddad, you can't expect that you could hold your own for long against eight guys. And we all get distracted."

Eric senior smiled. "You see the way you immediately jumped to my defense? It's because it seems obvious to you that I was being hard on myself. And I was. I don't feel that way anymore. How long will it take you to stop being so hard on yourself? You're human, young Eric. But even though you are, you're one of the best humans I know. Strong, honorable, hard-working, highly intelligent and courageous. Yes, courageous. You've been traumatized. You'll get past it."

Young Eric didn't know what to say. He sighed deeply. "I hope so."

"I know so." He smiled. There were still other things to address, but this was enough for now. Somewhere between Saturday night and today, young Eric had turned a corner, like Master Foreman had said. Eric figured it had to do with his grandson having to truly fight while he was in jail. He hadn't been worried about accidentally hurting anyone. He'd had to fight for his life. Eric wasn't sure if he would even address it before the Challenge. He'd have to pray about that. "You ready to get back to work?"

"Yes, sir."

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September 30th, Monday Afternoon
Sky Nash Studio, Nashville, Tennessee

Taylor and Gabe smiled at each other in the mirror. They liked the outfits chosen for them to wear for their *Uptown Funk* number. Taylor had on some baggy dance pants, red, with all kinds of belts and zippers. They hung low, exposing her navel and her tiny waist. Her top looked like a shiny red sweatshirt that had the bottom ripped away to expose her midriff, and the shoulders ripped away, and the sleeves ripped away. It had sparkles all over it. It was actually sexy in a sloppy sort of way. Her hair was down and she wore a red ball cap. Gabe had on black baggy dance pants with the same zipper and belt effect, and a ripped up black t-shirt that showed most of his chest and abs. He had on a black ball cap. They both wore high tops.

They left the practice room and headed to the sound stage for the run through. They'd practiced hard and the run-through was almost perfect except for a few missed camera cues. They went to change and came back for a run through of the '*Don't ya Feel Like Cryin*' number with Logan. This time they were dressed in Rhumba-type clothing. Taylor wore a sleeveless, flowing, soft pink shimmery dress. Though the under dress was solid, the rest of the dress was completely see-through. Gabe wore black again. This time, dance slacks that sat low on his hips, and a see-through black button-down shirt that was not buttoned. Gabe didn't mind it except for the sprinkling of sparkles on the black shirt. When he asked if he could get a plain black shirt instead his wishes were immediately granted.

Logan's run-through had a few rough spots that were sorted out, and

after about thirty minutes they were allowed to go back to the dressing rooms and rest and eat before they had to get ready for the live show. Taylor used the time to make content for Gabe's media. Ricky and Bree touched base with young Eric and then Ricky grabbed a bottle of water and went to find Logan. His parents weren't here with him, and Ricky didn't want him to feel alone or nervous.

He found Logan pacing the halls, and he was obviously nervous.

"Logan," Ricky said.

Logan turned. "Uncle Ricky."

"Startin' to feel it?"

Logan nodded. "I'm almost never nervous before I perform, so this is weird. I guess because this could make or break me, singing on national television. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea since I don't have that much experience."

Ricky handed the water to Logan. "Drink that and let's talk about that experience, because I can't even count how many times I've watched you perform."

"Hasn't been that many."

"Well, I know when you were in high school I attended at least three performances per year, and I missed several of them. But let's go back further. There was the first time, in middle school at that talent show. And the solos in the chorus concerts. And then like every week in church, and then three other churches asked you to come and sing. You didn't seem nervous then. And you were much younger."

"Yeah, maybe that's it. I didn't realize then that singing was what I wanted to do for a living. I was just singing for the Lord. Now, like several people have pointed out, it's a huge opportunity for my career and one I could easily blow."

"Drink," Ricky commanded.

Logan took several swallows.

"Why do you want to sing for a living?"

"Uh, it's what I love to do."

"Why do you love it?" Ricky asked. "Search your heart. Why?"

"I guess it's because of those times when I was young and sang in church. I found I could sing in such a way that people said they felt the Spirit move through them when I was singing. I mean, how cool is that? I could feel it, and I was surprised that they could feel what I could feel. And then, I realized, the times I really felt the Spirit move me when I was singing, those were the times when the most people spoke to me after the performance, and they would tell me how I moved them. Of course, I knew I wasn't the one moving them."

Ricky nodded. "But you were the vessel. God was, or, is using you to bring His Spirit to people."

"Right, I get that. And that's cool. And I get that's what I really want to

do. Not just sing songs, but sing meaningful songs, ones that can change people's lives."

"Every song you sing can do that."

"'*Cry to Me'?"*

"Well, It's not such a bad song. It speaks to that loneliness that everyone experiences."

Logan nodded. "Yeah, but it almost sounds to me like it's encouraging a woman to turn to another man in her time of need instead of her regular guy."

"Okay, then why did you sing it at the girl's birthday party?"

He shrugged. "We saw it on social media, Gabe was singin' it, and we thought he could sing it to Taylor fairly well."

"Okay, that makes sense. But, well, what if you thought of the words in a different way?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if God is saying the words? I mean, think of the words as God speaking."

Logan thought. His eyes lit up. "When your baby leaves you all alone, and nobody calls you on the phone, don't you feel like cryin'? Well, here I am, honey, cry to me." He smiled. "Cry to the Lord. I love it."

Ricky nodded. "Psalm 18:6 'In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.' Fits perfectly, don't ya think?"

Logan nodded. "It does. And that helps, Uncle Ricky. But what if I mess up?"

"Don't concentrate on messing up or being perfect. Focus on bringing the Lord's message to your audience. Is your focus on getting high acclaim or on getting God's message out? You're not in this for the fame. You want to use your talent to spread God's love, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, focus on that. Ask God to help you touch the hearts of everyone hearing your voice. Let's do that right now."

Ricky put his hand on Logan's shoulder and began to pray.

Logan immediately began to relax, and the nerves went away.

"In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen," Ricky finished.

"Amen," came a deep voice.

They looked up to see Toby coming down the corridor with a kind smile on his face. "Jitters?"

Logan nodded.

"I was just coming to check on you and see if you were good, but it looks like your uncle beat me to it."

Ricky smiled. "As usual."

"So, since he's asked the Lord to be with you and help you, that's really all you need, because I know that you, Logan, are gonna go far in bringing

God to people through your music."

Logan nodded. "I hope so. I mean, every song I write, it's just a form of worship, or preaching. It's a way for me to convey how God makes me feel to others."

"That's beautiful, Logan," Toby said.

"Um, Mr. Nash, ya know when they're gonna speak to me right before I sing?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I could change what I say?"

"Yes, as long as you don't use profanity and also don't go over the thirty second time allotment."

Logan smiled. "No, sir, no profanity. I just wanna say that it's God asking the question in my song."

Toby smiled. "I'll approve it."

"Do you have the authority to do that?"

He laughed. "Nope, but I have a pretty good amount of influence over someone who does."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now that's settled," Ricky began, "I was about to have him go through some martial art forms to help him to ground."

Toby nodded. "Great idea. I was gonna tell him to run in place. Yours sounds much cooler." He nodded at Logan. "And while you're doin' that, breathe from the diaphragm. You will instantly relax."

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September 30th, Monday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

JoJo was just heading up the large, circular front porch steps when he heard another vehicle coming up the long drive. He turned to see a silver sedan with an Uber decal on the front. The car stopped and Jake stepped out, wearing fatigues and a huge smile. "JoJo!"

Jo ran down the steps and grabbed Jake's hand. "Jake, my man, it's so good to see you!"

He was pulled in for a giant hug. Then pulled back and looked into Jake's eyes. "Ya doin' okay?"

Jake nodded. "Doin' great. But missing my girl, uh, I mean, my wife."

JoJo laughed. "Yep, your wife. Isn't that just too crazy? You have a wife. So cool. Even if it does sting me a bit. How's Laynah doin'?"

"Sorry about the sting. Well, sorry not sorry. And she's doin' okay. Before I flew out here today, we spent all day and all last night together in a hotel in Jacksonville, North Carolina, and leaving her again was rough. But JoJo, she's so freakin' strong. And she's had to move back in with her parents because her mom is on bed rest with the twins."

JoJo nodded. "Well, let's go inside and see what's happening with the Kinos."

As soon as they entered, they heard Shelley call out to them. “Hey, you guys! We’re in the kitchen.”

“Hey, Grandma,” JoJo said as he kissed her cheek.

Jake also kissed her cheek. “Hey, Miss Shelley.”

She turned and looked at Jake. “My you look so grown up in your fatigues.”

Jake smiled. “Thanks. I didn’t have time to change. Or the energy. Just wanted to hurry and get here. I’m free until 0800 tomorrow morning.”

Jeffy came from around the kitchen table and hugged both boys. “Hey, guys. Jake, good to see you. You do look *very* manly in your fatigues.” She placed a hand on his face, frowned and pulled it away.

“So what are you guys doin’?” JoJo said loudly to the five children all sitting quietly at the table.

“Hi, JoJo,” Angelina said. “We is doin’ ar homework.”

“Really? I didn’t know you went to school.”

She giggled.

“We don’t,” Nate said with a frown. “But Jeffy was teaching me some stuff and they all wanted to pwetend they was goin’ to school and so, now we all have homework.”

“Hmm, what’s the assignment?”

“I have to do a bunch of multication problems. And they have to wite their names ten times.”

“Wow. Well, I’m looking at these papers and I have to say, you all are doing a great job.”

“And it’s okay that Nate’s bwain is made different fwom ours ‘cause he’s still our bwother and we still wove him,” Noah said.

“Yeah, but sometimes he is mean,” Abe said.

“I am not. You just don’t undastand.”

Shelley raised her eyebrows. “Be kind everyone. Nate we’re all glad you can do math, but the others are also doing very well writing their names, because most two-year-olds can’t do that. So, I’m very happy with what all of you are doing. Now, no more talking until everyone is finished with their assignment. Then you can go watch young Eric train.”

She smiled at JoJo and Jake. “They’re out on the beach if you wanna join them. Are your parents coming tonight?”

“No, ma’am. Mom’s not feeling too well. Morning sickness I guess. And I was supposed to tell you first thing that Uncle Joey is working late and Aunt Breez is gonna stay home. She’s tired.”

“I understand.”

The guys headed out and stood on the deck looking down at the beach. Young Eric and Grandmaster Kino were working on kicking techniques. It seemed they were working on a scenario if young Eric were to fall forward, and turning his fall into a Meia Lua de Compasso kick, using the heel for impact. They also were using some Muay Thai and TaeKwonDo. They

watched for a few minutes until young Eric sank to his knees in exhaustion, and then they made their way down.

JoJo stopped by the cooler, pulled out a bottle of water and handed it to young Eric as he approached.

Young Eric didn't speak, but accepted the bottle and drank.

When he caught his breath, he forced himself to stand and smiled at Jake. "Good to see you, Jake," he said.

Jake shook his hand. "I'd hug you but you're pretty gross right now."

Young Eric laughed. "Understood."

JoJo turned to his grandfather and bowed. "Hey, Granddad."

"JoJo." Eric bowed.

"Grandmaster Kino," Jake said as he too bowed.

"Jake," Eric said with a smile and a bow. "Good to see you, son."

Eric looked the two boys over. "So, though he's gross right now, can I talk the two of you into going a few rounds with him?"

JoJo nodded. "As long as he doesn't hurt me. I gotta play next Saturday."

Young Eric laughed. "I don't think you have to worry about that."

"Um, and I have to deploy in two weeks. He can't hurt me either," Jake said.

"And you can't hurt him, cuz he has to fight in the Challenge in about six weeks," Grandmaster Kino returned.

"Uh, he's a 3rd dan, right? Gettin' ready to be 4th dan, is what I heard. And I'm a 2nd dan. He'll pulverize me."

"Yeah, but you're a highly trained special forces operative. Your problem will be to fight him without killing him."

JoJo pulled off his shoes and shirt and tossed them aside. "I'm in. Come on, little Eric, let's see what ya got."

Eric senior smiled, as he thought JoJo is about to be surprised.

"So, what I say goes. Listen to me. I'll stop the fight if I think anyone might be in danger. This is not full fight. No hands are taped. No lethal punches."

JoJo nodded as he warmed up and stretched out. A few minutes later they squared off.

Grandmaster Kino nodded in approval as young Eric put JoJo down time after time. Sometimes with kicks, sometimes with takedowns. JoJo barely landed a punch, and Eric finally called the match.

JoJo shook his head. "Young Eric, I mean, man oh man, you've gotten tough. You are gonna kill it out there in November."

"He's not ready yet, but he's getting there," Eric senior said.

"And in your defense," young Eric added. "You haven't trained since football started back up in August."

"And in YOUR defense," Grandmaster Kino added. "You were going easy on him for that reason."

"Eric," Jake said. "That was impressive."

"Your turn," Grandmaster Kino said. "You in?"

"Yes, sir. I may be about to get my butt handed to me, but my competitive self won't let me turn this down."

He took off his shoes and socks and shirt and began stretching and warming up while young Eric rested.

Young Eric looked over his opponent. He was bigger than just a month ago when he'd last seen him. His chest was bulging with muscle. And he knew about the maneuvers they went on carrying over fifty pounds, so they were in shape and their legs were powerful. Block his kicks at all cost, young Eric thought.

Grandmaster Kino watched young Eric's face, knowing he was sizing up Jake. He nodded in approval.

When they squared off, they both held back. Young Eric blocked everything Jake threw at him, punches and kicks. Finally, young Eric spun and kicked Jake in the chest and Jake flew backward. He recovered quickly and now the real fight was on. Jake had to force himself to stop throat punches, but he still got in several hits, both with fists and feet. Young Eric did the same, but he was moving quick, like his father. Realizing that Jake might not be quite as fast as him, he worked on quick strikes and moves and finally found an opening and kicked to the forehead and Jake went down.

Eric senior called the fight. Young Eric immediately went to hold his hand out to Jake. Jake allowed him to pull him up.

"Good job, Eric," Jake said. "JoJo's right. You are gonna kick butt. I really wish I could see it."

"We'll make a recording for you," young Eric said.

"Jake," Grandmaster Kino began. "Don't feel like Eric bested you. He didn't. You were at a huge disadvantage."

"Really. What was that?"

"Well, we joke that you can fight young Eric but don't kill him, but really, it's not a joke. You're training in hand-to-hand combat is not to score a point; it's to permanently disable the threat. Eric took advantage of that. He knew you were focused on not hurting him."

Young Eric smiled. "That's why Cam won't spar with me. He doesn't want to even practice not killing. He can't get it confused with his real-life scenarios."

"Well, we Marines have to practice against each other without killing each other. But, it is different. Because even if we have to fight that close, we're still trying to fire a gun." He smiled. "And I do know that I'm at a disadvantage. I once asked my father how to subdue someone without hurting them and we decided it's almost impossible."

"Who were you trying to subdue?"

"LaynahBug."

They all thought a moment and then nodded in agreement.

He laughed. "Anyway, now I'm all sweaty and sandy. I'm gonna go in and see if I can get cleaned up."

"Me too," JoJo said.

As the two young men headed up to the house, Young Eric turned to his grandfather with a hopeful look on his face.

"You're dismissed," Eric senior said.

Young Eric bowed. "Thank you, sir." He turned, grabbed the cooler and headed up to the house. "I'll come get the equipment in a minute," he called back over his shoulder.

"I've got it. You go ahead."

"Yes, sir."

Eric Kino walked around picking up kicking pads and sweat towels and placed them in the large canvas bag that held a multitude of other training supplies. He lifted the bag and pulled the strap over his shoulder and then turned and looked out to sea as he often did.

Walking forward, he touched his feet into the water and looked west, to where he'd been born, to where God had sent a messenger to reveal himself to him. He wondered how many other people on the Earth right now had received similar messengers. Surely he wasn't the only one. There had to be others. Suddenly, Eric had a burning desire to find them, or to find at least one of them. Someone else who'd had the same experience. He decided he'd begin research on that very soon.

Turning away from his island, he headed up to the house. Once he stepped inside the glass doors, it was chaos.

Several of the children were crying. Nate was on the floor literally throwing a fit. Shelley was gathering pencils and papers and arguing back and forth with Angelina. Jeffy was standing, looking like she might break into tears any moment.

"What in the world is going on?" Eric demanded.

Shelley stopped arguing with her young daughter and turned to him. Her lips trembled but then she raised her chin. A defiant thing she did that Eric truly loved. "You ended training early."

"And?"

"I promised the children that when they finished their assignments I'd take them out and let them watch you train young Eric."

"I see." He looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Shelley, I didn't know."

She nodded. "I didn't think to tell you once I made the promise. It's my fault."

"No. It's not. No blame. This is a good thing." He drew a breath. "Stop crying and be quiet this instant," he said firmly and a little louder than he usually spoke in order to be heard over the roar.

The children all looked up at him, slightly startled. When Nate saw it was his father who said it, he started immediately to go back to crying, but Eric made a short staccato sound in his throat. "Aah," and Nate stopped

again. “That’s enough of that,” Eric said firmly. “Move your little butt and sit at the table with your siblings.”

When he didn’t move, Eric raised his brows. “Now.”

Slowly, Nate pulled himself up and went to his seat.

“Not a word from any of you until I speak to you.”

“But...”

“Not one word, unless you’d like to go sit in your room for the rest of the evening.”

Eric then turned and smiled at Jeffy. “Come here.”

She came to him. She was trembling. He hugged her. “You’re gonna have to do a better job of blocking that out. You let all of that in, didn’t you?”

“Not on purpose. It just hit me, and once it did, it was like an avalanche.”

“Deep breath, baby girl. And go sit down at the table too, because I want you to see how to handle this. Open yourself to me only.”

He then turned to his wife. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Kinda takes me back to when Mark and Joey were little. I had a hard time trying to get them to give me respect until you came into our lives.”

He nodded, then turned back to the children. “Listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you. First, your mother and I love you very much. Second, arguing, crying and throwing a fit to get what you want will *never* work. Not ever. Not only will it not work. From this day forward it will get you a punishment. I am very disappointed in you that you would treat your mother like this, yell at her, argue with her.

“But she promised— ”

“Nathaniel, I have not given you permission to speak yet. Until then you keep your mouth closed.” He looked at the others. “Your mother promised, but she wasn’t able to get word to me. She had no idea that I would end training early and I didn’t know that she’d promised. If you had behaved, and been kind to your mother, she would have told me the problem and we could have gotten young Eric back down there to help me train you a little bit. So, you see, it could have been fixed. But instead you chose to dishonor your mother, to treat her badly, simply because you didn’t get your way.

“Again, and listen very carefully, disrespect toward your mom will never be allowed in this house. You will be obedient to her. You will be kind to her. You will show her love and honor at all times, even when you don’t like what she’s saying. Angelina, is that understood?”

She sniffed and nodded. “Yes, sir,” she said in her adorable, tiny little voice.

“Noah?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Abraham?”

He sniffed. "Yes, sir."

"Emmanuel?"

Manny nodded. "Yes, sir."

Eric raised his eyebrows at Nate. "Nathaniel?"

The boy frowned.

Eric's lips pressed tightly together. "You'd better think real hard about what you want to do or say right now, Nate. I know your brain works differently. I know you have a logic that needs to be worked out. Let me tell you this right now so that you completely understand; your genius brain does not make you better than your brothers and sisters. Just ask Jeffy. It makes you different, but it does not make you better and it does not make you worse. It gives you an advantage sometimes, and sometimes it makes things much harder for you. You have to learn how to function in this world, and how to be kind, and how to have respect for others. You don't have to learn on your own, you have me to teach you, but you'd better learn that respect real quick, because I'm about to give you a long time to think about what I'm saying."

"But if I'm smarter than you, then— "

Shelley gasped. Eric put his hand out toward her. "It's okay."

"Nate, you really like young Eric, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because we bofe wike numbers."

"But how can you like him when you're smarter than him?"

"I'm not smarter dan him. He teaches me fings about numbers."

Eric nodded. "Yes, because you're very young, and he still knows a lot more than you. But one day, you'll pass him and you'll know more than him. Will you still like him when you know more than him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I wike him."

"Right. It doesn't really matter that you will know more than him. He's your nephew. Your brother Ricky's son, and you'll always like him. And I'm thinking you'll always love him."

Nate only nodded his head.

"Do you love your mother?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because, um, I don't know. I guess because she's so nice and she takes good care of us and teaches us stuff and gives us food and helps us and weads to us and sings wif us and pways wif us."

"Good. Mothers are awesome like that. They love their children and that's why they do all those things for them. Right now, your mom knows how to take care of you, how to cook for you, how to drive you around in the

car. Do you know how to cook or drive?"

"No."

"But one day, you will know all those things and then you won't need her to do them for you anymore. Will you stop loving her then?"

He frowned as the light began to go on. "No."

"Good. Okay, listen, everyone," he said, taking a few seconds to look at each child. "What I'm gonna say is important. I realize that you all won't understand everything I'm talking about, but I'd rather talk above you than below you. So just listen. And later, when we go to bed tonight, you can tell me if you understand what I'm talking about." He stopped and smiled as their eyes all blinked in unison.

"Every single one of us has different things that we're good at. I'm a good teacher. Your sister, Jeffy, she's a good doctor, a martial artist, dancer, healer. Young Eric is good with numbers, martial arts, singing, dancing, surfing, sports. Your mother is good at a whole bunch of things, martial arts, gardening, singing, dancing, loving. You're so young, we don't even know all the things you're gonna be good at.

"So for now, while you're a child, you will listen to your parents, honor your parents, and obey your parents, even though one day you will probably know more than us about some things. But not about all things. There is more to living this life than just being smart. So you have to learn how to get along with others, how to love, how to be kind, how to help and how to serve others. That's why we're here."

Eric stopped and looked at all the upturned faces and had to smile. "That's enough for today. So, Nathaniel, answer the question. Do you understand that you will honor and obey your mother, even when you don't agree with what she says?"

"Yes."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, sir."

Eric smiled. "Good. Now, because you all chose to be so disrespectful to your mother just now, we will not be going down to the beach and show you any martial arts. What you will do is help put away your papers and pencils and go up to your room and listen to Noah read his new book to you. You will be kind if he doesn't know a word and you will help him if he needs help. But first, you will each go and apologize to your mother, and give her a hug and tell her that you love her." He nodded. "Go."

The children moved quickly. He watched carefully to make sure no one disobeyed or was not repentant. When they'd all gone upstairs, Shelley smiled up at her husband. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. I mean, it made me angry to see how they were treating you, and I had to push that aside and find my logical self. It was a good exercise for me too."

Shelley giggled. "Of course you would see it that way."

He pulled her to him. "You okay?"

"I am. Just a little tired."

"Need help making dinner?"

"No, it's pretty much all done."

Eric sniffed. "Spaghetti?"

"Yes. And some salad. And some garlic bread. And some ice cream. It was simple and easy."

"I'm gonna go clean up. Been sweating out there on the beach. When the older boys come back down from their showers, get them to help you. I'm sure they'd love to help."

She smiled. "I will."

Twenty minutes later the three young men sat freshly showered at the kitchen table, after having set the table for dinner, and sat listening to Jake tell about what he did during his first deployment and then talking about how different the coming deployment was gonna be.

Young Eric glanced at his phone when it buzzed. He smiled.

"Good news?" Jake asked.

Eric grinned. "Yep. Jordan's here." He stood and went to the front door.

Jake looked at JoJo. "So, like, is this thing with Jordan getting pretty serious?"

"Oh yeah. I'd say they are totally in love. Eric has even mentioned a possible marriage to me, just in passing, but for him to even say the word is way serious. I think they've even discussed it."

"Wow. I mean, that's fast."

"From what I understand, you and Laynah were talking about it within a few weeks of you being home."

"Yeah, but we've known each other our whole lives."

"True." JoJo shrugged. "I get that, but ya know, how like, some things are just meant to be."

Jake nodded. "I do know."

Young Eric opened the front door and went down the steps to grab Jordan's overnight bag. He shook Agent Trout's hand. "Thanks again."

Trout shook his head. "Stop that. It's my job." He nodded at Jordan. "Miss Brooks. See you at 7:00 in the morning."

"Thanks, Agent Trout. Have fun at your– appointment."

"Yeah, thanks."

Young Eric took Jordan's hand. "Hey, Two-Three."

"Hey, Three."

He got inside the door, put her bag down, pushed her against the front door and kissed her. Softly at first, and then harder. She winced when he placed his hands on her shoulders.

He pulled away and raised the sleeve on her right shoulder. "That doesn't look real good."

"I know. It's pretty sore."

"I'm gonna ask Jeffy to look at it."

Jordan nodded, making Eric frown. If she didn't argue with him, then it must be hurting her pretty bad.

He smiled. "So, come on in and see Jake."

"Jake, the Marine guy who married the beautiful red-headed Laynah, right?"

"Yes. He's just here until the morning. He's gonna be at *Camp Pendleton* for two more weeks of training and then he's getting deployed."

"That's sad. How long will he be gone?"

"Don't know. Let's ask him."

They went into the kitchen. Jeffy was at the sink, washing cucumbers and tomatoes. JoJo and Jake both stood.

"Aunt Jeffy," young Eric said immediately. "Will you take a look at Jordan's shoulder sometime tonight?"

"Absolutely," she assured him.

JoJo moved forward and kissed Jordan's cheek. "Good to see you, Jordan."

She grinned. "I love being able to say that I got kissed by the USC QB."

He laughed. "Oh yeah. It's such a treat. That's why all the girls are lining up to date me. Not."

"Why is that, JoJo?"

"Because he won't give them the time of day," young Eric said.

"Oh. He's a snob. I get it now." She turned to smile at Jake.

"Jordan, you remember Jake Appel? He was at the birthday party."

Jake took her hand. "Nice to see you again, Jordan. So, you decided to give this guy a chance?"

"Or he decided to give me one."

"Stop," young Eric commanded. He rolled his eyes.

She shrugged. "So, tell me again, how do you guys know each other?"

"Our families are close," Jake said. "My mom and dad used to take martial arts classes from Grandmaster Kino when they were teenagers. That's how they met. Then, eventually my dad went into the Marines and he was in Afghanistan with Uncle Keegan, I mean, with Keegan Tanner."

Jordan nodded. "Who is Gabe's dad."

"Right."

"He's your uncle?"

"Not actually. They've lived next door to us in *Pine Forest* my whole life, so, he's Uncle Keegan to me. My mom and dad left Cali to go to Georgia to open the *Pine Forest Inn* and then, when Keegan Tanner had some trouble, my father invited him to come to *Pine Forest*."

Jordan nodded. "And that trouble you're talkin' about had to do with why Gabe was kidnapped last spring?"

"Right," Jake replied. "Anyway, Uncle Keegan reached out to my dad when all that happened, and my dad put him in touch with Jason Lee, and

that got the attention of young Eric's dad who wanted to step in to help Uncle Keegan. It's all a big long story, bottom line, we all started getting together. And now, it's like we're all family."

"Well, that part doesn't surprise me, because it seems that's what these people do, adopt people into their family."

Young Eric shrugged. "The more the merrier."

"Well, family," Shelley said. "Dinner is ready. Young Eric, will you and Jordan go get the kids?"

"Will do."

"And your grandfather."

"Yes, ma'am."

He grabbed up Jordan's bag and they headed upstairs.

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Proverbs 23:13-14

"Do not withhold discipline from a child;
if you punish them with the rod, they will not die.
Punish them with the rod
and save them from death."

Chapter Thirty

Jordan winced as she sat at the kitchen table and Jeffy tended to her shoulder. She'd washed it carefully and was now applying her own ointment to it, all-natural of course, made with raw honey and lavender and tea tree oils. She placed a clean cotton gauze square over it and taped it with paper tape.

"There. You'll need to keep it clean and moist. I'm gonna give you a little pot of this ointment. But, if you're here, I'll just take care of it for you. We'll need to change the bandage every day after your softball practices."

"Thank you, Dr. Kino," Jordan said.

"Please, call me Jeffy."

"I've tried to, but it comes out Dr. Kino every time."

Jeffy laughed. "You are just so adorable. I can absolutely see why young Eric loves you so much."

"He told you that?"

"Yes. But he didn't have to speak the words. It literally gushes out of him."

Jordan smiled. "I love him too."

"I know. How perfectly beautiful is that feeling, huh?"

"You don't think we're too young?"

"I fell in love with my guy when I was only fifteen."

"Really?"

"Yes. But it's a long story."

"Hey, everyone," Shelley called. "*America Can Dance* is getting ready to start."

Jordan and Jeffy hurried into the living room. The children had all been bathed and put in their pajamas. The dishes were done. Ice cream enjoyed. And young Eric held up his phone. "Okay, well, that was Taylor and Mom and Dad on the phone, and they say they hope you guys like it. They say it went great and they are very pleased and they will see everyone tomorrow, except Jake. But Jake, they send their love and prayers to protect you."

Jake smiled. "That sounds good to me."

"And you guys, don't anyone look at your social media, because Taylor says it's been blowing up big time since the eastern air time of the show three hours ago."

The show began and everyone got quiet. The hosts chattered away talking about the special guests they have on tonight.

"The social media influencers, Gabe and Taylor, which I'm sure most of you know is Gabe Tanner and Taylor Kino, daughter of Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams. They are gonna reproduce a couple of their viral videos tonight. And that brings us to our second guest, the nephew of Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams whom you all heard sing on the viral family birthday video, and also right here in Nashville a few nights ago. This is his national debut tonight, Logan Adams. We'll be seeing him a little later in the show."

They all watched patiently as the show went through its paces. And then, finally, the *Uptown Funk* music began to play and the group thrilled as Gabe and Taylor swung into action. They were amazing. Especially for two people who'd never taken dance lessons. It was obvious that Miss Caroline had transformed their number into a very professional piece. The studio audience went crazy when the number ended. And the Cali family also went crazy.

Young Eric and JoJo couldn't stop talking about how good Taylor and Gabe were and immediately were on edge waiting for Logan's number.

"I tell ya, that Gabe, everything he does is well-done," JoJo said. "Whaddya think Grandma?"

"I thought they were amazing. Awesome. Perfect. I'm so proud of both of them."

"I admit, I'm nervous for Logan," JoJo said.

"Well, don't be. It already happened," young Eric reminded him. "And they said it was fantastic."

JoJo nodded. "I wonder if Logan feels this way when I'm about to start a game."

"Uh, yeah," young Eric said. "We all do."

"I even do," Jordan said with a giggle. "And although he's already done it. I'm still nervous right now."

It was another thirty minutes before the second number was aired. The lights came up on Logan, playing his guitar, the camera zoomed in only on his fingers, at first and then pulled back until you could see his handsome face. And finally his whole body. Then he began to sing and they zeroed in on his face.

His voice was smooth at first, then got raspy when the song escalated. The camera shifted to Taylor being lifted by Gabe to begin their dance. He held her high over his head, then lowered her to his shoulder, spun slowly, and gently set her down. He moved behind her, his hand splayed across her abdomen as they swayed back and forth, and then lifted her again. They would come together, he'd dip her or spin her, then lift her and then start again. It was definitely sensual. Taylor's body was so perfect. Gabe was so strong. It was breathtaking. And all the while, the shots of Logan as he sang were laced through the dance. It was all very artfully done. And again the studio audience was on their feet, screaming and yelling for the number.

Young Eric smiled at Jordan.

Jordan smiled back. "Logan was freakin' amazing!"

JoJo nodded, in awe of his little brother. "I've gotta call him right now. I'll put it on speaker."

Logan picked up on the first ring. "Hey, bro. Thanks for calling."

"Why are you thanking me for calling?"

"Because you just won me a hundred bucks from Uncle Ricky. He said you wouldn't call right away. He said you'd take a while to think about what to say and then you'd realize it was pretty late here and you'd think I'd be in bed already and you'd wait until morning."

Everyone laughed.

"First, you're on speaker so don't say anything rude about young Eric. But really, listen I had to call you right away cuz I couldn't wait to tell you, Logan, that you were freakin' fantastic, bro! I mean, man oh man, you totally killed it."

"Thanks, Jo. Everyone here is saying the same thing. I was stupid nervous. But Uncle Ricky and Toby helped me calm down."

"I love what you said there in the beginning about it being God tellin' everyone to cry to Him. Love it. What's all that noise behind you?"

"It's a cast party."

"Sounds like you're having a blast."

"I am. Having the time of my life. Feels so good. You know, big important game over, no fumbles or interceptions."

"Yea, and you were thirty-five for thirty-five, threw for five hundred, and scored two yourself."

"Hah, I don't know about all that. It wasn't that good. But I'll make that my goal. All I know is, I feel great right now and I'm trending. Me!"

"Uh oh, don't let all this fame stuff change you forever."

"No chance. First I always have you to keep me humble. And second, my eye is on my mission for God. And really, I'm just so grateful that I didn't blow it."

"You did so much more than that. So, proud of you, bro. Wish I was there to share it with you."

"That's the same thing that Mom and Dad said. I think they're feelin' pretty guilty that they couldn't make it."

"Well, I hope you understand why they couldn't. If it makes you feel any better, I don't think they're gonna make it to my game this Saturday at Arizona State."

"Why would that make me feel better? Stop being ignorant, Jo."

"My bad. Well, a bunch of other people wanna talk to you. Here's Grandma."

"Hey, Logan. I'm so proud of you. That was perfect."

"Thanks, Grandma."

"Sorry to keep it short, but these little ones need to go to bed. Hey, kiddos, say good night to Logan."

"Good night, Logan!" They all yelled.

"Good night, guys, and goodnight, Grandma. Love you."

"Love you too, sweet boy. Here's your grandfather."

They continued to pass the phone around as everyone heaped praises on Logan. Shelley went ahead and gathered the little ones and took them upstairs, and Eric joined her after he spoke with Logan.

By the time Shelley and Eric came back downstairs they were passing the phone around talking to Taylor and Gabe. Finally, young Eric took a few minutes to speak with his parents before JoJo got his phone back.

Once all the excitement was over, JoJo and Jake went in to raid the refrigerator.

"Young Eric," his grandfather said. "Just a reminder that both you and Jordan have a very early morning."

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. We're just gonna stay up a little longer and then I promise I'll get to bed. I mean, who knows when I'll see Jake again?"

"Don't think like that," Shelley said.

Young Eric shook his head. "I just meant we don't know how long his deployment will last. But I see where your mind is at, Grandma."

Shelley wrinkled up her nose. "I guess you're right. Us moms tend to worry." She sighed. "Anyway, good night my sweet boy. Good night, Jordan."

Jordan stood and kissed the endearing lady on her cheek, then offered her hand to Grandmaster Kino. "Good night, sir."

He patted her hand between his. "Good night young lady. We haven't had a chance to talk, but let's do that soon. Tomorrow evening, since Taylor won't be allowed to play in her volleyball game, Jake has been so kind to arrange for young Eric and me to use the obstacle course at *Camp Pendleton*. I'm sure you could come along if you'd like and we could talk afterward."

"Oh, that sounds awesome, Grandmaster Kino, but I promised a friend I'd do something with her."

"Well, a promise is a promise. Maybe Thursday?"

"Yes, sir, that would be great. Thank you."

When young Eric finally had Jordan alone he pulled her close. "You've been unusually quiet tonight."

"I'm just tired, I think."

"Coming down after an adrenaline rush always wipes you out."

She snuggled in close. "Kiss me quick, before the guys come out of the kitchen."

He did. When he pulled back, he asked, "So, what do you have planned for tomorrow?"

"Well, practice in the morning, and it's a conditioning practice so that's like, yaay. And then I have two classes. And then after the second class I told Colton I'd go to a party with her."

"A party? Where?"

She smiled. "Don't worry. No frat houses. Just a sorority house is having an all girls party."

"Which house?"

"Delta Delta Delta. They're having like a girls thing. Lots of goodies to eat and they're gonna do a scavenger hunt, and the winner gets free tickets to see *Boots in the Park*. I'm pretty good at scavenger hunts so, Colton wants me to help her."

Young Eric sighed. "So, that's two things you didn't tell me when I asked you what you liked to do."

"I didn't say I liked to do scavenger hunts, because I don't. I'm just good at them. And what is the second thing you're talking about?"

"Country music."

She smiled. "Oh, well, yeah, who doesn't like some tough lookin' cowboy dude in boots with a voice that melts butter like Toby Nash."

He chuckled. "He's a little old for you."

"Yeah, but not the guys at *Boots in the Park*."

"Okay then. Buuut, let's talk about this scavenger hunt," he said, his lips pressed together. "Like, will the hunt take place inside the sorority house?"

"What? No, of course not. It'll be all over the campus."

He shook his head. "Then you must know that you can't do it."

"What?"

"Jordan, you are not gonna traipse all over that campus by yourself. Not unless you're gonna drag Agent Trout around with you. Have you spoken to him? Because I'm sure he would advise against this."

"No, I haven't spoken to him. There are no guys allowed. The whole thing is gonna be roped off though, so don't worry. Girls only."

"Oh, roped off. I see. Oh, well, that should stop some guy from getting to you," he said sarcastically. "Jordan, you cannot go to this thing."

"I already promised Colton. I can't *not* go. It'll be okay. There are gonna be signs up and everything, telling people that no guys are allowed inside the ropes."

"Jordan, please tell me that you realize how stupid that sounds."

"Are you calling me stupid?"

"No, no of course not, but just think about what you just said. I mean, that's like announcing a gun-free zone. That's the first place a criminal with a gun will go to commit his crime. They just walk right past those signs. And the guys out to get you will do the same. A few signs and ropes won't stop them."

She grimaced. "Well, maybe I could get Agent Trout to follow along just outside of the roped off area."

"He wouldn't be close enough to you to keep you safe and I bet not even close enough to keep eyes on you at all times. And I can't be with you because of this opportunity to go to *Camp Pendleton*. Jordan, you can't go."

"What do you mean I can't go?"

"It's simple enough. I mean, you can't go."

"I'll go wherever I want to go."

"Now you really do sound stupid."

She drew a sharp breath. "I cannot believe you just called me stupid."

"I didn't call you stupid. I said it *sounds* stupid. Jordan, please just listen. Do you remember how afraid you were just this morning? So afraid that you almost passed out, and you know what, you have a good reason to be afraid. Your stepfather wants to hurt you. He wants to do all manner of horrible things to you. Do me a favor and find that fear right now, please. Because if you find it, if you remember it, you'll realize that you absolutely cannot go to this scavenger hunt."

"I *can* go, and I *will* go. You have no right to tell me what I can and can't do. I haven't been able to spend much time with Colton lately. I promised her. I won't be alone. She'll be right beside me the whole time. She really wants to win."

"Dammit, Jordan, Colton can't protect you."

"Don't you dare curse at me."

"Sorry. Sorry." He blew out a breath. "Look, I'll *buy* you and Colton tickets to the *Boots* concert. You don't have to win them."

"Oh, that's just your answer to everything isn't it? Throw money at it."

That one hurt, he thought as he sighed. "Come on. That's not fair. I just want you to be safe."

"Eric, come on, how in the world could Peter know that I'm going to a scavenger hunt?"

"He could find out. He's known where you are other times, hasn't he? He's probably tailing you. And that's why you're not going."

"You can't tell me what to do."

"I *am* telling you, right now, and I mean it. You are not going. Period. I forbid it."

She stood. "I don't know who in the hell you think you are, but you can't forbid me to do anything."

"Jordan— I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It was just in the heat of the moment. Please, I'm asking you to reconsider."

"Oh, I'm reconsidering alright."

She turned and started toward the stairs, then turned back and rushed toward him. "And you know what?"

He looked up at her, waiting.

She stood there several moments. He looked at her hair down and flowing around her beautiful face. He saw the tears well in her eyes. Saw her bite on her trembling lip. "Never mind." She turned and ran up the stairs.

He sighed deeply and stood there stunned. What in the heck had just happened? Jake and JoJo came into the room, shaking their heads.

"Well, that didn't go too well," JoJo said.

Young Eric sighed. “I really blew it.”

Jake nodded. “Yeah ya did. She reminds me a lot of Laynah.”

“So, what are you gonna do?” JoJo asked.

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll call Uncle Joey and see if he can send a female agent. They’re stretched few and far between, but maybe there’s a chance. Or, maybe I’ll just ask Trout to break the rules and follow her at a close distance.” He shook his head. “Did I actually say, ‘I forbid it’? Have I lost my mind?”

JoJo jumped in. “Hey, what you lost, was your temper. And I kinda don’t blame you. How can she forget so quickly that her life is literally at risk?”

“I know right? This guy has big plans for her. He wants to hurt her. He wants to scare her. He wants to rape her. And who knows what else. He has even gone as far as to try to mess with the brakes on her car.”

“So, that sounds to me like he wants her dead,” Jake said.

“I’m gonna have to tell Granddad and get out of going to *Pendleton* tomorrow night. I’ll have to go follow her myself I guess. Because, ropes are not gonna keep the bad guys away, and they’re not gonna keep me away either.”

“Well, call Uncle Joey first,” JoJo said. “Then you can play it from there.”

Eric nodded. “I guess it’s not too late to call him tonight. I’ll do that and then go on up to bed. Not that I’ll be able to sleep.”

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Eric senior sat up quickly and grabbed his phone and walked out of the bedroom. It was his security at the gatehouse. “Yes?”

“Sorry to wake you sir, but we were alerted to the dining room glass door being opened. It appears Miss Brooks has decided to walk on the beach.”

“Thank you,” Eric said as he started down the hall. “I’ll have young Eric take care of it. Did you send Agent Brown to the back to watch her?”

“Yes, sir. He has eyes on her.”

“Young Eric will be out in a minute. Thank you, Agent Hill.”

“My pleasure sir.”

Eric senior opened his grandson’s bedroom door. “Eric.”

Young Eric sat up quickly. “What’s wrong?”

“Jordan has decided to walk on the beach.”

Young Eric picked up his phone. “It’s almost two. Good grief.”

“Any idea why she would do this?” his grandfather asked.

He nodded as he jumped out of bed and pulled on his jeans. “Yes, sir. Probably because I pissed her off.”

“We’ll discuss it later. Go get her, and maybe use this as a teaching time.”

“How?”

"I'll leave that to your discretion. But don't use anger."

"Got it," he said as he flew out of the room, down the stairs and out the back door. He saw her immediately. She was staring out to sea, her toes in the water. She was wearing a long pink nightshirt.

He went into stealth mode, snuck up behind her, clamped a hand over her mouth to cut off her scream. He put her in a headlock and dragged her backward. She tried to fight. Her legs were kicking, her nails scratched at his forearms. He dragged her out of sight of the house, pushed her down into the sand and the beach grass and pinned her down. Her eyes opened wide when she realized it was him.

He took his hand off her mouth.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"I'm trying to show you what could happen in only a few seconds. It doesn't matter how hard you fight, if a guy wanted to hurt you, he could." He raised his hand in the air. "Suppose he had a knife." He brought his hand down, mimicking stabbing her several times. "Or maybe he had a gun." He put his finger to her head and pulled the pretend trigger. "Or maybe he had other things in mind," he said as he worked his thighs between her legs.

She was sobbing pretty hard, so he stopped the demonstration.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she cried.

"Because I love you with everything in me. Because the thought that something bad could happen to you kills me. Because I never want you to ever experience what Peter Perez dreams of doing to you. I love you, baby, can't you see? And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I said earlier. I'm just so scared of something happening to you and I wasn't trying to understand your true needs."

She shook her head. "No, Eric, I'm the one who's sorry. I was being stubborn and stupid just like you said. I just hate that I have to live in fear. I hate that I can't even walk around my college campus with a bunch of other girls and feel safe. I feel ashamed of how he makes me tremble in fear. How I can't stop my body from shaking. I just wanted to— to, I don't know."

The light went on for young Eric. "I think I understand," he said softly as he moved off of her. "I think I get it. Wow, I should've realized. You weren't trying to be careless. You were, in your own way, trying to stand up to him. I couldn't understand how you wanted to walk around that campus knowing what you know. I thought you'd completely lost your mind. But you actually *were* afraid. You were so afraid that you passed out, and that fear didn't go away. You'd turned it into an act of bravery." He chuckled. "Or more like an act of defiance. I get it now. Still, if you understand all that, why in the world would you come down to the beach alone in the middle of the night?"

She sat up and then got on her knees. "I wasn't thinking that it's dangerous here. I was thinking about what your grandfather told me, that he felt this connection to the ocean and that just dipping his toes in the water

brought him connection to the island where he was born, the island where he'd had such an amazing spiritual experience. I was in my room and I couldn't sleep, and I wanted to like, pray. But, well, I'm not very good at it yet and I don't exactly know what to say, so I thought, if I could find that connection, maybe God would hear *my* prayers. Maybe He would help me. Maybe He will help us find Peter and put him back in jail. Maybe He would forgive me for fighting with you. Maybe He would help me find my faith and touch me the way He touches you. I was just trying to find God."

Eric grabbed her and pulled her to him. "Jordan, baby, I love you so much, and there is nothing better you could have said to me just now. You have touched my soul." He shook his head as tears formed in his own eyes. "I'm sorry you didn't feel you could simply come to my room and we'd pray together."

"I didn't come to your room because I didn't want to pray with you. I wanted to find God by myself. Just me and God."

He nodded. "Okay, I get that." His phone buzzed and he stood and pulled it from his pocket, quickly texted a response and put the phone away. "Granddad says security is waiting and asking us to go inside." He held his hand out to her. She clasped it and he pulled her up. He looked down at her nightshirt. It had little pink birds on it and it made him smile. It also had sand all over it and he tried to brush it off for her. She stopped him and did it herself. Then reached up and brushed the sand off his bare chest.

They turned quietly and headed back to the house. Inside Jordan expected to see Grandmaster Kino waiting with maybe a stern look, but there was no one there. Young Eric walked her up to her room and she was again surprised when he came into the room with her, sat her on the bed, went into the bathroom and came out with a washcloth and a towel. He wiped her face and neck, then knelt down in front of her and cleaned the sand off her legs and feet and dried her with the towel.

Then he quickly wiped off the remaining sand from his own feet. He motioned for her to get into bed. She complied. He unbuttoned his jeans for comfort, and climbed in beside her and took her in his arms.

"I'm gonna talk to Colton in the morning and tell her that I can't go to the party," she whispered.

"I think that's a good idea," he agreed. "If she just wants to spend time with you, there are things you can do and places you can go where Agent Trout can keep watch, as long as you give him a heads up."

"I'll ask Colton if there is something else we could do."

"Good. And Jordan, if she'd really like to go to that concert, I can get tickets. I can get them for just you girls if you prefer. Or I can get them for a foursome, and she can bring a date and we can double."

"That sounds like fun." She sighed. "I'm sorry for what I said. I mean, about you throwing money at a problem."

"Thank you, and you're forgiven. That one did kinda hurt."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it."

"Didn't you? Jordan, I know it may seem like that's what I do, but to me money is merely a tool, a resource that I have. I use it to help others and yes, sometimes to solve problems."

"How does your father feel about the money you spend?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, does he ask you to give an accounting?"

"I, uh, I'm not using his money. I have my own money."

"Oh. Sorry. But, I mean, you're not working, right? Or do they pay you to fight in the Challenge?"

He sighed. "I just filmed a movie this year. It doesn't come out until December, but I've been paid for it."

"Oh! Sorry. I guess I don't know how all that stuff works. So, like, did you make good money?"

"I did."

"Did you like doing it?"

"I did. It was great fun."

"Well, that makes it a perfect career? Right?"

"Maybe."

"You still want to be an astronaut?"

"No. I've begun to question many things about that. But, there are other careers in the field of physics. Though I would have to finish school, get my degree. I'm just not sure what I want to do. I'm waiting for God to answer my prayers."

Jordan nodded. "I know I said I wanted to talk to God on my own, but since you're here, will you pray with me?"

"Yes. You want to say it?"

"No, you say it. I'm still kinda shy about it."

"You know, it's just like talking to a person. Just tell Him what's on your mind. And then, always pray in Jesus' name."

"Why?"

"Because Jesus is like, the mediator between God the Father and mankind. He said, "No man comes to the Father but by me. And it says in 1 Timothy 2:5, 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.'"

"Wow, you even quote scripture?"

He chuckled. "I have a few passages that have always been my favorites. I remember that one because a lot of people ask the same question that you just did. I'll pray this time, and next time, you try, okay?"

"Okay."

"Close your eyes."

She did.

"Father, hey, it's Jordan and me, I know you know that, but I'm just praying like I'm talking to You face to face so that Jordan can understand

that talking to You is easy. She wants to learn about you Father. She wants to learn about Jesus. So, I pray you will touch her heart with Your Holy Spirit, so she can know how it feels and so she can begin to recognize Your voice. Father, Jordan and I are very grateful that we've been brought together. We ask your blessing on our relationship. Father, also, Jordan's stepfather is causing her all kinds of trouble. We'd like to dispatch him as soon as possible so that Jordan doesn't have to live in fear."

Trust.

"Thank you, Father. I will trust You, and I'll tell Jordan about this message. Please, bless her and protect her and her family."

Difficult times.

"Um, okay, well give us strength and courage and the faith we need to deal with what's coming. We pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen."

"Amen. What message were you gonna tell me?"

"Well, some words rushed into my head and I felt like God was telling us to put our trust in Him, and stop living in fear."

"How did God tell you that?"

"It's hard to describe, but as I was praying, the word 'trust' came into my brain. God is telling us to trust Him and let go of the fear. I think He also was saying that these are hard times, or maybe hard times coming. I'm not sure. So, let's stay in prayer and be ready for anything."

She nodded. "That's like a, uh.... I forget the word, but I mean, it's kind of hard to be ready for everything and then still let go and trust."

He smiled. "Do you mean a paradox?"

"Yeah, that's it."

He nodded. "Right? It does seem like that, telling us to trust *and* prepare. Yeah, it's usually a fine line God has us walk. Learning to do that is part of life."

Jordan yawned. "So, am I forgiven?"

"Yes, of course. Ephesians 4:32 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God has forgiven you.' Jesus asks us many times to forgive each other and to not judge others. So, yes, you're forgiven. Am I?"

She sighed. "Yes, of course. You were acting out of love and concern for me. I was acting out of, what did you call it? Defiance? So, you don't even have anything to be forgiven about."

"I got frustrated and angry. And I'm sorry for that."

"Okay, then I forgive you," she said cutely.

He chuckled. "Go to sleep," he whispered.

Sighing in contentment, she closed her eyes and slept in the arms of the man she loved.

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October 2nd, Wednesday Late Morning

Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

Young Eric got to rest while poor Gabe went to throw up. Not that they'd been working jointly all morning, but at this moment they had been. Young Eric grabbed some electro water and sipped and wiped the sweat from his face and smiled at Gabe as he emerged, looking a little pale.

"You okay, there bro?" young Eric asked with a smile.

"I've been working so hard at home, I thought it wouldn't be this bad."

"Yeah, I thought the same thing. I've only recently passed that stage."

Gabe shook his head. "Funny how life is. This time two days ago I was dancing with my girl and being pampered by a bunch of assistants. Today, I'm gettin' beat up by my brother from another mother– and father," he said with a grin.

Young Eric laughed. "I'm not beating you up. That comes later in the day. We're just practicing some kicks."

"Well, my kicks are barely making you flinch, and your kicks are knocking me on my butt."

Young Eric grinned. "You'll get there."

"Are you ready?" Grandmaster Kino asked Gabe.

Gabe stood at attention. "Yes, sir."

"I'm gonna let you rest by working on some sparring moves with me. Young Eric, you hit the squats. I want your legs so strong that you could break a board placed between your thighs."

"Yes, sir."

Young Eric went to do as he was instructed. He was thinking about what Gabe said. Yesterday was a strange day. First he and Jordan were very tired when they woke at 6:00, and with good reason, because they'd been up half the night. Eric trained all morning and then went to Camp Pendleton. Jordan took care of her business and then instead of the scavenger hunt, she and Colton went to a karaoke bar and acted silly while Agent Trout and Agent Ward looked on. Jordan told him later that some guys hit on her and Colton, and Colton told them that Agents Trout and Ward were their dates.

At Camp Pendleton, Jake, and a couple of his superiors, or sergeants or captains, and several members of Jake's Raiders team came to watch young Eric try out one of the obstacle courses. They were impressed that he was at least as fit as they were, though he had to admit, the course was challenging. And then, they handed him a rucksack, and that was the end of that. He didn't get far. That seemed to please them and gave young Eric incentive to accomplish that goal.

He surmised his grandfather was thinking along the same lines which was why he had him working on his legs.

Once they'd finished at Camp Pendleton, young Eric grabbed dinner at one of their favorite burger joints and instead of heading to his grandparents' home, he headed back to his own house because his family was finally back home.

When his parents and sister hugged him, he could tell they were wanting to sympathize with his jail experience. But he really didn't feel like sharing it with his mother or sister. His father seemed to understand and instead, came into his room later to speak with him.

He told his dad everything. Everything he felt. Everything he did. Every thought he had. Everything. His father had been arrested before and so he knew pretty much what he'd been through. Except his father hadn't had to fight. Not that he wasn't accosted. But he said he got out of it because of his charming personality. Young Eric guessed he needed to learn how to do that. His father had also not been put in solitary in the dark. He told his dad about the seventy-two laps around the cell and about the number 19145 and the song. His dad said he'd have to ponder that for a while.

Young Eric sighed as he finished loading more weight and pushed out another set of squats. This morning, he'd taken time to speak with Taylor and let her know how proud he is of her. She was so much more than a good dancer. She was a good, strong girl, so honest, so naive, and so in love with the guy across the room. They were young, and Eric wondered if they'd mentioned the 'M' word to each other. Perhaps in a 'someday,' kind of way. He'd done as much or more with Jordan. But he was about to be twenty-one, and Taylor just turned seventeen.

The whole family had several things to focus on right now. In a few weeks, on October 25th, they were planning a memorial for the murdered children and the surrogates. It was gonna be a huge event and they'd hired people to take care of most of the details and notices, invitations, and finding the families of the surrogates.

Then, just four weeks after that the Challenge would take place, and the day before the Challenge was the second ever Kino Mini-MART. This time however, would be different. Gabe's challenger had been chosen and was being trained by another martial arts school, *Williams Brothers Karate* located in San Francisco. So, in a way, this was gonna be much more important as far as the Kino reputation, and Eric wondered if Gabe realized it and felt the pressure.

Also happening, Jamie and Josie Perez were enrolled in *Kino Martial Arts* now and had their first lesson tonight. They would be attending every Wednesday evening and Saturday morning. The thought made a smile come to Eric's lips. He hoped to be able to attend and watch the kids but that may not happen until after the Challenge.

Taylor only had three regular season volleyball games left though she may have to miss a game if it coincides with the memorial.

JoJo still had seven more regular season games left, and then two more after that if they make the playoffs.

And soon will come the holidays and a bunch of babies that are all due around the same time. December. Same time as young Eric's own birthday. Not that it was any big deal. Yes, he was turning twenty-one, but still not a

big deal. He thought about when JoJo turned twenty-one this past June 11th. Just three days before his grandfather's and Gabe's joint birthday. JoJo didn't want a big deal made about it. He wanted to go to dinner alone with his father. The way he'd come into the world. Pretty much just him and his eighteen-year-old dad. JoJo had been conceived on his father's eighteenth birthday. His mother died of cancer right after he was born and his father had not known about the pregnancy, so he hadn't gotten to share in that very cool time waiting for JoJo to be born.

JoJo and his dad were a pair of guys kinda like, growing up together. That's what JoJo said. So, it was cool that they had a private little birthday celebration. Of course, that would not be heard of in young Eric's family. His mother and sister would be hurt if they weren't included in his own birthday celebration. Young Eric thought of his father and what they'd talked about last night. His father was his rock. He was strong emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually and he gave young Eric great comfort whenever they shared time together like they did last night. Of course, young Eric was also very close to his mother and sister and his love for them was immeasurable. Though he knew he could turn to either one of them for anything, he hoped he could also be *their* rock.

And there was someone he also felt extremely close to, and that was Jordan. He loved her with a powerful love. Just the thought of her made him smile. And then immediately he was reminded of the darkness that hung over her. He needed that to go away. He needed to put an end to Peter Perez.

Eric had been so deep in thought that at first he didn't hear his grandfather calling him. He shook himself. "Yes, sir?"

"Were you far away?" Eric senior asked with a smile.

"Oh, I uh, guess I was. Sorry, sir."

"No worries. Your mother has brought some lunch."

He turned his head. "Oh! Sorry, Mom, I didn't even see you come in."

His grandfather blessed the food and young Eric and Gabe dug in.

The four of them sat in a circle in the corner of the large studio. Young Eric hadn't expected it, and so stammered when Gabe asked him about being in jail.

"Oh, well, it was uh, I mean, it's not fun. My advice, stay out of jail."

Gabe chuckled. "I heard about your claustrophobia and I also heard that you were in like, a small cell in the dark."

Young Eric sighed. "I was." He tried to control the shudder.

Gabe nodded. "I don't know that I could take that. I like wide-open spaces."

Eric smiled. "Yep. Me too. It was difficult. I had to pray really hard." He went on to tell about being told to pace the cell for seventy-two times.

"Oh, wow, that is really cool," Gabe said with a smile.

"Whaddya mean? I mean, why do you think that's cool? Do you know the significance of seventy-two?"

"I think so. Don't you?"

"No. Granddad told me I'd know if I take time to think about it, but I haven't had time, so, just tell me."

"Well, you were in the dark, right?"

"Yes."

"Three days of darkness. Three days is seventy-two hours. You said the door opened as soon as you got to the seventy-second time around the cell. It just seems cool to me. God seems to love to do cool stuff like that. He gave you something to focus on because He knew you were suffering, so the counting of laps helped you to focus on something other than the fact that you were in a small cell in the dark. And then, after three, 'days,' of darkness," Gabe said, putting the word 'days' in finger quotes. "The door opened and there was light! I love that!"

Young Eric smiled. "Gabriel Tanner, you are brilliant, ya know that?"

"Aw, go on," he said with a laugh.

Grandmaster Kino smiled. "You are Gabe, and I'm proud of you for seeing that so quickly."

"Yeah," young Eric agreed. "That was like, instant. Good job. Granddad told me to think about it and it would come to me, but, I'm not sure that it would, and I've had no time to sit and meditate. I guess I should have."

"If you're not taking time to meditate after your morning prayer, you need to change up your wake time," his grandfather said.

He looked at his grandfather and nodded. "Yes, sir. You're right. No excuses. So— you knew about the seventy-two, do you also know about the 19145?

His grandfather nodded and pulled out his phone and opened the bible app. He scrolled through and looked at his grandson. "You said when you heard God tell you to sing, that's also when you heard 19145, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You asked, sing what? And 19145 and *How Great Thou Art* came immediately into your head, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, real quick, do a search for what scriptures that song is based on."

Eric went to grab his phone from his bag across the room and looked it up, then after a few minutes his eyes filled with tears. "Wow. It says there are several different opinions of what scripture the song is based on but the two most people agree on are Psalm 19 and Psalm 145. One nine one four five. Wow."

Gabe clapped his hands together enthusiastically. "See! Oh God, You are so very cool," Gabe uttered reverently.

"And really, young Eric," his grandfather went on. "It's even cooler than that, because God was showing you that he knows YOU, feels YOU, hears YOU and sees YOU, because He was communicating with you through numbers, because, well, what is it you say about yourself?"

Young Eric nodded and sniffed. "I say that I'm a numbers guy."

"Oh, this is beautiful," Bree said softly. "He was nodding at you in particular Eric. Letting you know that He sees you. You, as an individual person with your own wants, needs, and plan."

"Yes, and He was telling me that He was with me. With— ME!"

"Yeah, and so if God was with you in that jail cell, young Eric, then He is with you always, like, everywhere. What a freakin' beautiful message," Gabe said. "Makes me want to shout for joy!"

Young Eric was a little more reserved than the exuberant young man next to him, but he couldn't stop the tears that now ran down his cheeks. "You're right, Gabe. God is so cool."

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Isaiah 41:10

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you
with my righteous right hand."

Chapter Thirty-One

October 4th, Friday Morning
Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

By the time Jordan arrived at 10:00 in the morning to watch young Eric train, he and Gabe were already spent. Gabe was in the bathroom puking his guts up and young Eric was slumped on the floor, his chest heaving.

Jordan smiled with sympathy. She glanced at Grandmaster Kino who smiled and came to greet her.

"Hello, Jordan. How are you feeling today? Better?"

"Yes, sir. And thank you for that session last night. You're very kind to take the time you do, especially since it was so late after Taylor's game and then you still had to go to dinner."

"I'm not being kind, Jordan. I care about you."

"I believe you." She glanced at young Eric. "Workin' 'em hard today, huh?"

Grandmaster Kino smiled at her. "My intention is to push them way past what they think they can do. It's difficult. But in the end, it will pay off. And after lunch, the sparring today should be very interesting."

"Why's that?"

"I believe young Eric has turned a corner and I think having to fight while he was in jail was a big part of that. We'll see if I'm right."

Jordan nodded and pulled out her phone as it buzzed. She looked down at the screen. Her face paled and she looked back up at Grandmaster Kino.

She was breathing hard and Eric realized she was in distress. He put his arm around her to hold her up. "Come on, hon, let's sit you down."

He helped her over to a chair. Young Eric saw and immediately rose and came to her. "What's going on?"

Grandmaster Kino looked at Jordan for the answer. She handed him the phone. "I just got this."

He looked at the phone. It was a picture of Josie and Jamie as they were apparently walking into school, with the words, "Do you really think those rent-a-cops will keep me from my children?"

Eric handed the phone to young Eric so he could see. "Send that to me along with the senders information."

Young Eric did, and Eric senior was immediately on the phone to Jason.

"Good morning, Eric. Whatcha got for me?"

"Good morning, Jason. You're on speaker with Jordan and young Eric.

Jordan just received a pic of her brother and sister walking into their school with the message, 'Do you really think those rent-a-cops will keep me from my children?' Do you need her phone to trace it?"

"No, just send the information to me as a forward from her phone please."

"Got it." He looked up at young Eric.

He nodded. "Doing it now."

Gabe walked up. "Hey, Jordan! What's goin' on?" He said cheerfully.

Young Eric showed him Jordan's phone.

"Oh. Well, that's a mood-killer."

"We'll see what we can do, Eric," Jason said. "And of course, we'll warn the agents and let them know that they are not to leave the school today. And I think we'll need to have a meeting with the school and the agents and Mrs. Perez today."

"What if the kids go out on the playground or something and he grabs them," Jordan asked.

"Exactly," Jason answered. "We'll call your mom, she'll have to go to the school and speak to the principal asap. The agents will also attend that meeting and make the school understand how important this is. If I have to get the Hillcrest police involved, I'll do that too. Thank goodness Jordan had Mark get Perez' visitation rights revoked and get a restraining order. Perez probably doesn't know that, but if he attempts to get near the kids, he'll discover it real quick."

Jordan nodded. "And then he'll be even more pissed off."

"Too bad, and so what," Gabe said.

Jordan sighed. "Why is he doing this? I mean, I know I said it before that he's like, gone full criminal. I mean, he was once a good man, I think. He was responsible, he went to work, he was good to my mom. At least he was for a while. And I watched him with the kids, especially with Jamie. He played with him and laughed with him."

"But not you?" young Eric asked.

She shrugged. "I didn't expect him to. I wasn't his. But then everything changed when he lost his job. Everything about him changed. I don't understand."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "I know it's hard to understand. And as much as we want to hate this guy, we have to see it from God's perspective. Look at it as a battle between dark and light. He was not a bad guy until he lost his job. And you said, after he lost his job, he started drinking heavily, right?"

"Yeah, oh, I mean yes, sir. That's when things got bad."

"His drinking put a crack in the armor of what might have once been a good man. You get that crack in your armor and the dark forces, the demons, Satan's minions, they start in. It's just a whisper at first. They whisper to him, then they attach themselves to him. Now, when you, a being of light,

one of God's own children, come around, the demons whisper to him and tell him you're bad. They actually want him to end you, because the darkness hates the light. It's as simple as that.

"Though he may have tried to fight them off, a person can't do that if you're drinking or bitter or angry or have resentment in your heart or have no relationship with God. And, Jordan, Peter Perez had no relationship with God. He may have once been a good man, but he had no relationship with God. He had bitterness and resentment in his soul. And then, any rationality left him when he grabbed you that day out by your car. He realized immediately that he'd messed up, because he knew you, even as a child, had already put him in jail once for attempted rape, and he knew you would report him breaking the terms of his parole, and send him back to jail. He knew you would make sure he can't ever touch you again.

"And all of this happened because when he lost his job, he lost his self-worth, and that's how Satan gets in and steals away your soul. That's why we can't let our worth be attached to things, like our careers, our wealth, our looks, fancy cars, fame. None of those things should determine how we feel about ourselves. *Only* our connection to God should determine that. If we're connected to God, through our Savior, then none of those things I just mentioned are important. We know we belong to God, and the joy in knowing that, cannot be destroyed by the loss of our job. We are lights to a world of darkness. You are a light, Jordan, and the demons attached to Peter are trying to put out your light."

She shook her head. "I don't know if I'm much of light."

"I do," young Eric said. "I saw your light the moment I met you."

"Jordan," Grandmaster Kino said softly. "Just the fact that Peter wants to hurt you, to maybe kill you, tells me that your light is bright. When Jesus was walking on the Earth, He came upon a crowd of people and a few of them were demon possessed. And through the mouths of the men they possessed the demons cried out and asked Jesus if He was there to end them. They immediately recognized Him as the Son of God and they were instantly afraid of him. In like manner, the demons attached to your stepfather saw your light, knew you were a daughter of God meant for great things, and they used Peter to try to put out your light."

Grandmaster Kino sighed. "So, I'll pray for Peter Perez, but what happens to him is between God and him. I'll pray for him, but I won't compromise with evil, and we will protect you, and God will protect you and your family. It seems like all of this is complicated. But really, it's all just a battle between the forces of darkness and forces of light. But don't worry. The forces of light, being God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Angels of light, and God's children, like you and me, we're stronger than the forces of darkness."

Jordan frowned. "Then, it's sad, really. Sad that Peter is lost," Jordan said softly.

"Maybe he's lost. Like I said, it's between Him and God. I can't make

that judgment. But I have to say, the compassion you just showed toward a man who is trying to hurt you, that is the light of Christ in you, Jordan. And I'm really honored to have you in our lives."

Gabe smiled. Young Eric smiled, and his eyes glowed with the love he felt for his girl.

"Well, let's get these guys back to work so they can battle all of these dark forces like the warriors of light they are," Eric senior said."You guys use the Kino form to warm back up. Jordan and I will just sit here and watch and I'll point out to her all the mistakes you make."

"You mean the mistakes, Gabe makes," young Eric quipped.

"We'll just see about that," Gabe returned.

Jordan smiled at the banter. How she loved this family.

The two young men trained for another two hours before they stopped for lunch, which was brought in by the *Simply Clean Superb Subs* people. Arriving at the same time was Shelley with the five children, and Jeffy and Cam.

Also filing into the studio were three masters and three black-belt students from other Kino schools. Jordan looked up to see Joey and Breez Adams and their three children, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. And then Logan Adams walked in and right behind him, Three's parents. It seemed like today's sparring was gonna be a big deal.

Master Foreman locked the studio doors with the usual sign in the window that read: *Private Training Session Today until 5:30 p.m.* Also as usual, his own students who were already in the building were allowed to stay if they wanted to witness what was going on.

After lunch was enjoyed by all present, and digested, the sparring participants began to warm up, stretch out and get their hands taped.

Gabe would go first, warring against the three black-belt students who'd been brought in, and then against Logan, and then young Eric.

Young Eric would then go against the three Masters that had come in, and then against his Uncle Joey, the current Challenge champion, and finally, against his own father.

Gabe fought well against the three young black belt students. He put them down quickly with no real problems. That was as expected. Gabe didn't win that first Mini-MART by accident. In the match against Logan, Gabe held his own for a few minutes, but Logan finally put him down. That too, was as expected, since Logan was a 3rd dan. Gabe's fight against young Eric though did not go as Gabe expected. He had no chance. None. He couldn't land a punch or a kick and young Eric put him down easily and quickly.

Grandmaster Kino quietly nodded in approval.

Young Eric helped Gabe up and mussed his hair.

"Geez, Eric, you've turned into a beast," Gabe complained.

"You'll get there," young Eric encouraged.

Young Eric was given ten minutes to rest, hydrate, stretch out again and

present himself as ready.

Everyone watching became silent as young Eric dispatched three masters in a row. Not easily. Not quickly. But it was obvious—Eric had turned a corner. He was fierce. He was blindingly fast. He was confident. When he made contact, it was powerful. His blocks were quick and precise. He put the first one on his back. After the third one, everyone knew it wasn't just a fluke. Each master bowed to Eric and congratulated him with a smile and a proclamation that he was gonna really kick some butt in the Challenge, though no one dared to predict the winner.

When young Eric looked up to see his Uncle Joey walk onto the mat and start stretching, he nodded. It was time to see if he really had improved. He didn't feel the usual dread he felt when he faced his uncle. At least there was that.

He drank some water, stretched out his hamstrings, and moved forward. He remembered the warning given to him last time he faced his Uncle Joey. "Block."

Oh, he was gonna do that and more. At least he thought he would.

Still, even though he did block many of the punches coming in, within the first minute of the match he'd been punched in the face twice and kicked in the back of the head once, which put him on his face. He rose to his knees, drew a deep breath and stood back up.

His uncle looked him straight in the eyes. "You should've known that was coming, Three."

Grandmaster Kino smiled at the use of young Eric's nickname. It was a mind game Joey was using. A perfect mind game.

Young Eric's brow furrowed at the use of the pet name usually only Jordan called him. Joey came at him and punched him in the face again. "Come on, Three," Joey said. "Block."

Young Eric focused, and blocked for the last thirty seconds of the round. He went to his grandfather.

"He's toying with you, Eric. He used your nickname to make you think about Jordan, and that distracted you."

Young Eric nodded. "Well, that wasn't very nice."

Eric senior laughed. "The guys you're gonna fight won't be very nice either."

Young Eric nodded again. "Got it." He rose and went back out.

The rest of the match, Joey hit him several more times, but young Eric got in three punches and two kicks himself. The last time he'd fought him he'd only connected once. So, he was improving.

He was exhausted, so when he faced his father on the mat, he realized he wasn't gonna last very long.

His Uncle Joey was known for his speed, and had been trained by Ricky Kino, who was also known for being "quick like lightning" in his strikes and kicks. Young Eric fought hard against his father. He actually got in a few

punches, and one giant kick to the back of his father's thigh, which made him go down briefly, but that was it. His dad jabbed at young Eric's jaw and connected. Eric saw stars and sunk down. Grandmaster Kino called the fight.

Young Eric remained on the floor on his knees while his grandfather thanked everyone for coming and participating. Little Nate came running to him and put his little arms around Eric's neck.

"I'm okay," young Eric said softly, assuring the little guy as he hugged him and patted his back.

Jordan came and offered him a bottle of water, which he accepted with a smile.

"You were awesome today," she said softly.

He nodded. "I feel like I'm gettin' better. A few more weeks, and I bet I put Uncle Joey down."

"That would be fun to see. What about your Dad?"

He grinned. "Not sure if I can do that. Mostly because, well, he's my dad. There's this inner thing, it's hard to punch my own father."

"It doesn't look like he has any problem punching his own son."

Young Eric laughed. "Well, it probably is hard for him, but like we keep saying, he knows it's all for a good cause."

He rose. "I'm gonna go shower. And then, wanna grab some dinner?"

"I guess, I mean, if you really feel like it."

"Of course I do. Why do you say that?"

She shrugged. "Well, I mean, your nose is bleeding and I'm pretty sure you're gonna have a black eye."

He laughed. "If you can stand to look at me, I'm game."

"Okay then."

Young Eric hit the shower. Gabe was also back there. "You okay, GT?" young Eric asked him.

"I'm tired. But hey, my face doesn't look as bad as yours."

Eric chuckled. "Truth. Uh, so, Jordan and I are gonna go grab some dinner. Wanna come?"

"Uh, no. And I'm pretty sure you don't really want me to come either. Besides, Taylor is waiting for me to come have dinner with her and your parents."

Eric shrugged. "Just being polite. But if you'd wanted to come, I'd have no problem with it. Just sayin'."

Gabe smiled. "Thanks."

"So, you and my sister, things going pretty good there?"

"Yes."

"She says she's in love with you."

"Well, I'm glad about that, cuz I feel the same way. I mean, I'm in love with her."

He laughed, then got serious. "She's a great kid, Gabe, but ya know, she is a kid."

Gabe shrugged. "So am I."

"Yeah, but you're a kid with a lot of life experience. A lot. You've been kidnapped. You've had your throat slit. You've been shot. More than once. You've been stabbed. You've killed two people and you've like, died yourself and come back to life. You've graduated from high school and you're now an enrollee agent at Ameritech. That makes you much more like a man compared to Taylor being just a naive little girl."

Gabe stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. "So, what is it you're trying to say? You don't want me to be with your sister?"

Young Eric shook his head. "No, I'm not saying that. If she has to have a boyfriend, I'd want that guy to be you. I'm just saying, remember, she's innocent. She's inexperienced in life and she has a tender heart, so, don't hurt her."

"Never. I would never hurt her. Never. I love her, and if I were older and had my life together, I'd ask her to marry me. But I'm thinkin' your parents wouldn't be too happy about that. So I'll wait. I'll wait until I can't wait anymore."

"How about you wait until *she* can't wait anymore. No matter how long it takes."

Gabe nodded. "Copy."

"Excuse me?"

"Uh, I mean, good copy, sir!" he replied loudly.

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October 5th, Saturday Afternoon

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric and Gabe had trained all morning and were given the rest of the day off. Usually, they would be going to JoJo's game if it was a home game, but it was an away game. And usually, for an away game, they would have left the day before and traveled to whereever the game would be, but because they were in training, they didn't travel and so they had the rest of the day off.

This Saturday, the game was at Arizona State. At first, Mark was gonna miss his son's game and stay home with Bella, because she was having a rough go with her pregnancy, which was the same reason they didn't go to Nashville to support Logan.

But Bella insisted Mark go support his son, and Logan go and support his brother. Breez promised to watch after her sister. Then it was decided that Breez and the three little ones would just stay at Bella's house with her, and help take care of Emily too, and so Joey was also encouraged to accompany his brother Mark and go see his nephew JoJo play ball.

Usually, Eric and Shelley would also be at a game, home or away, but now that they had five little ones, they were becoming homebodies. This particular Saturday, they were screening women who might be a fit for their

household in helping Shelley with the added chores, including the laundry. They were also looking for good babysitters, with the right energy, ethics, and demeanor.

Young Eric had moved back home to the South house, as they called it. And currently they were out at the pool. It was a warm eighty-three degrees, the sun was shining and the sky was a clear blue. Jordan had told him she hadn't been swimming in a pool very many times, so he invited her and her family to come over, swim, and have dinner.

Currently everyone was either jumping off the diving board or diving, or flipping. Young Eric did a double back with a twist and landed neatly in the water.

"Show off," Jordan yelled.

He laughed.

Not to be outdone, Gabe did a reverse 1½ tuck.

Taylor got up and did a beautiful jackknife, toes pointed, legs together.

Jamie jumped off the board as high as he could and spun in a circle.

Josie simply jumped into the water.

Jordan stood at the end of the board and measured the distance to the water. Only a couple of feet, but she didn't want to take her turn. Young Eric went up to join her on the board. "Do you know how to dive?"

She shook her head. "I see how it's done, and it doesn't look so hard, but now that I'm up here, it seems pretty scary."

"Okay, so, since you've never done it before, it might be easier to learn off the side of the pool." He took her hand. "Come on, let's just jump in and then I'll teach you from the side."

She gave him her hand and they jumped together.

While Eric taught Jordan to dive, Gabe and Taylor played games with Jamie and Josie. At one point, Jordan looked up at a sound she'd almost forgotten. It was Josie laughing and being silly. She seemed to respond really well to Gabe and Taylor. Especially Taylor. Taylor was a light, like Grandmaster Kino talked about. She was so loving and kind and she seemed to know just what Josie needed to bring her out of her shell.

Jordan wasn't as concerned about Jamie who was more exuberant and outgoing and seemed to be well-adjusted. She turned in the water when young Eric placed his hand on her stomach and pulled her to him. "You ready to try again?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Just wanna stay right here in the water with you."

He smiled. "I like that idea." He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist and leaned back to float in the water.

Young Eric looked at her floating there. The water sloshing around her. Her blond hair floated out around her face. Her eyes were closed. Her cheeks and lips pink. Her stomach muscles ripped. He tried not to look too long at any other parts of her body, but, he *was* a guy. He sighed heavily. She opened

her eyes.

"Whatcha thinking about, Three?"

He smiled. She knew exactly what he was thinking about.

"I was thinking about doing this," he said, as he shoved her beneath the water.

She came up quickly though and grabbed his head and tried to pull him under the water. He allowed it, but only so he could pull her down with him. He held her close and put his mouth to hers before he let her up to get her breath.

She darted away and swam toward the shallow end of the pool.

Ricky and Bree stood at the kitchen window watching the children play in the pool. Not that young Eric was a child. Gabe neither. Currently Josie and Jamie were throwing a ball back and forth across the water. Young Eric and Jordan were sitting on the side of the pool, their feet dangling in the water. Gabe and Taylor were standing off to one side, their heads close together as they spoke to each other.

It was Taylor's scream that got their attention.

"Be still," Gabe commanded sternly.

"Go away, go away," she yelled, trying to run away from him.

He jerked on her arm. "I said let me see," he said and reached up and touched the edge of her bathing suit top, pulled it slightly out and bent his head low to her breast.

"No," she said, pulling away.

He grabbed her again.

Ricky stepped out of the glass doors. "Gabe."

He looked up, "Yes, sir?"

Ricky's eyebrows rose.

Gabe looked back at Taylor and his face paled. "Oh, uh, it's not what it looks like, sir."

"In my study please. Now."

"Yes, sir," Gabe said, blowing out a breath.

Taylor went running into the house, yelling for her mother.

Jordan smiled up at young Eric. "You know a bee stung her, right?"

Young Eric nodded. "Yep."

"Are you gonna go speak up for Gabe?"

He grinned. "Nope."

She laughed. "You are so mean."

"Yep."

In the study, Gabe sat on the edge of the leather chair so his wet bathing suit wouldn't ruin it.

Ricky sat behind his desk. "You wanna tell me why you were pawing at my daughter's breast?"

Gabe swallowed. "I wasn't pawing at it, I mean, at her."

"Your fingers were under her top."

"It was a bee. I think it stung her. I swear. She screamed and tried to get away from the *bee,* not from me. But it was already gone and I wanted to see if I could get the stinger out."

Ricky tried to suppress his smile. "Bee or not, you seem awfully familiar with putting your hands on my daughter."

"Oh, no, sir. I'm not familiar at all. I've never touched Taylor's breast. Really. I swear. Mr. Kino, I promise you, I've always been respectful of Taylor."

Ricky grinned. "I know that, Gabe. I'm just messin' with ya."

Gabe let out a deep sigh, then looked up at him. "Why would you do that?"

"Well, at first, I really did think you had your hands on my daughter, but then I realized what that was probably all about and decided to entertain myself by watching you squirm."

"Well, I'm so happy that I can be your source of entertainment."

Ricky laughed. "It's not just gonna be mine. It'll make a great story at the next family dinner."

Gabe chuckled.

"You don't mind a laugh at your expense, do you?" Ricky asked.

"No, sir. I don't. Not at all. Have at it."

"You're a good kid, Gabe. But listen, really, while I have you in here. I want to tell you that I think it would probably be best if you don't stay here."

Gabe frowned.

"On the weekends is okay. But I think it best if Sunday night through Thursday nights, you stay at Dad's house."

"Have I done something that makes you think you can't trust me with Taylor?"

"No. Not at all. But I was young once. I know how tempting it is to go down the hall and slip into someone's room. Either tempting for you, or for her. I don't think it's wise that you actually live here in the same home as your girlfriend."

Gabe sighed. He certainly wasn't gonna argue with Taylor's father. "I understand, sir."

"But come and stay every weekend."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Gabe, I sense that your feelings are hurt."

He looked up at the man, a man for whom he had true respect and admiration. "I guess they are, though I understand that you're saying this for my own good and not because I've done something wrong. It does feel kinda weird to get thrown out of the house though."

"You're not being thrown out. Think of it as more suitable arrangements for a boyfriend and girlfriend. My daughter is madly in love with you. She's already spoken about wanting to live with you."

"She has?"

Ricky frowned. "I guess I shouldn't have told you that."

"Well, it doesn't surprise me."

"You just acted surprised."

"Surprised that she told you."

"She didn't. She told her mother."

Gabe only nodded because he was not quite sure what to say.

"Have you and Taylor spoken about living together?"

"Oh! No! No, sir. We wouldn't do that. If we live together it would be because we're married."

Ricky frowned. "Have you two spoken about getting married?"

Gabe shook his head. "Not really outright. I mean, uh, I think she's the one. I can't see ever loving anyone the way I do Taylor. She's perfect in every way, but I know we're young and she's not even out of high school. I gave her a promise ring, just so she knows that I'm gonna be waiting for her to like, grow up."

"And what if she finds someone else?" Ricky asked.

Gabe nodded. "I've thought about that. I realize it's a possibility. I'll deal with it if it happens. And if that happens, I'll accept it. I won't cause her any grief or heartache, I mean, if you're worried about that. Whatever God's will is for me and her, is what I want. If we're supposed to be together, we will be. I'll wait. But just so you know, Grandmaster Kino, I do love her, and I do want to marry her and I will wait until I have your permission and until she's ready."

Ricky nodded with a smile. "Spoken like a man."

"Thank you, sir."

They both looked up at the knock on the door.

"Come in," Ricky said.

Young Eric peeked in. "Um, Jordan made me come in and make sure that you know that Taylor was screaming because a bee stung her."

Ricky grinned. "Jordan made you, huh?"

Eric shrugged. "She really likes Gabe and was worried about him."

"And you weren't?" Ricky asked.

Eric smiled. "I love Gabe like a brother, so I guess that's why I was enjoying seeing him squirm."

Gabe gave a short laugh. "I'm learning that having brothers is no different than having sisters. Thanks a lot."

Young Eric chuckled. "No prob, little bro."

"Be nice," Ricky chided his son. "It's possible that Gabe here may one day truly be your brother. Or, brother-in-law I guess."

"I figured that out, Dad, a long time ago. Oh, and I have a message from Mom. She and Mrs. Perez are cooking up a storm and dinner is almost ready, so, you probably need to go change into dry clothes."

Gabe nodded. "Will do."

Young Eric closed the door and Gabe looked up at the man who one day may be his father-in-law. "So, I'm guessing I'll be moving in over at the elder Grandmaster Kino's house after church tomorrow?"

Ricky nodded. "Yes, unless you'd rather go find yourself an apartment or house for rent."

He shook his head. "I'm definitely not ready for that."

"Good, because my father and Shelley love you and are very much looking forward to you staying with them."

"Yeah, because they don't have enough kids staying at their house."

"The more the merrier," Ricky chimed. "So, that's all for now. Go get changed."

Gabe nodded and rose.

"And Gabe?'

He looked up.

"Bree and I, we love you too."

Gabe swallowed. "Thank you, sir. The feeling is mutual."

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For the next few weeks they settled into a rhythm or routine of sorts. They all attended church together, including Jordan's family. They had Sunday dinners together at the elder Kinos.

Young Eric with his father, and Gabe with Grandmaster Kino, began their days on their respective beaches at 6:00, and then were at the studio or at the Kino Estate by 7:00 to train. He didn't see Jordan until Taylor's volleyball games and then on Fridays when he sparred.

This past Tuesday, AND Thursday, everyone attended Taylor's last two regular season volleyball games. She rocked it, and they were all looking forward to the playoffs the next week.

Friday training was a good day. The sparring went well for young Eric. His Uncle Joey was only able to connect with him a few times. Gabe too was doing better, and he didn't get sick at all.

On Saturday, USC played Washington State at home, but it was an early start time at 3:00 p.m. instead of 7:00, so young Eric decided he would go down to watch Jamie and Josie in their martial arts class, have lunch with Jordan's family at their home and then they'd attend the game. Mrs. Perez had declined the game because she wanted to get some housework done since she'd been gone a lot lately, going to church and dinner with the Kinos. Josie also declined because she'd been invited to a birthday party, but Jamie was all in.

On his way to Hillcrest, young Eric had gotten into the habit of stopping by the Village Mart convenience store and gas station just off the main highway. They sold fresh flowers, and he enjoyed seeing Jewell Perez' face light up when he handed her the flowers. He'd stopped so many times now that he'd struck up conversations with a homeless man who camped out beside the store during the daylight hours. He'd bought him and a few others

lunch or dinner several times now, and today was no exception.

He left the store with his flowers and headed to the house. Jordan, as usual, answered the door before he could even knock. She smiled her beautiful smile and stepped back to allow him entrance. Young Eric turned and smiled at the two agents. One parked in the driveway, and one parked in front of the house. Two more agents were parked a little farther down the street and were walking the neighborhood, keeping eyes out for any suspicious activity.

He went straight to the kitchen where he knew he would find Mrs. Perez and presented her with the flowers and kissed her cheek. He loved the way she giggled and blushed. It reminded him so much of Jordan.

He then turned to his girl, pulled her close, tilted her chin up and kissed her softly. "I missed you."

"You just saw me yesterday."

He whispered in her ear making her blush with his words.

"I missed you in my bed. I hope my parents go out of town again soon."

She didn't know what to say, because she totally craved sleeping with him. It was truly like she'd told those reporters. He didn't have to drug her, she'd go to his bed willingly and often. Still, she knew he meant only to sleep. But the thought of becoming his wife in every way made her giddy. And he'd told her that would happen one day. She sighed.

The kids ran from their rooms. "Hey, Eric! Come on, Jordan, we're gonna be late!"

They hurried out the door. Eric put Jordan, Josie and Jamie in his car and took them straight over to the studio. This time, Master Cook knew Eric intended to stay and watch class and they were very welcoming to him. Young Eric usually felt a little uncomfortable that they treated him like he was some kind of celebrity, but they were giving respect to his name, he knew that, and his father and grandfather had definitely earned that respect. Hopefully, in a few weeks, young Eric himself would prove worthy of that respect. The Challenge was November 9th, and today was October 12th. Not much time left.

They walked into class and Master Cook again called his class to order.

"Attention. Class, some of you may have been here when Master Kino stopped by to visit us a few weeks ago. It was the eleven o'clock class that he visited. So, for those of you who haven't been introduced, let me introduce you to Master Eric Kino III. He's here just to observe class today."

The class bowed reverently. Young Eric returned the bow.

Master Cook nodded at Jamie and Josie. "You may take your places."

The children scurried to get in line.

"Also with Master Kino, is his girlfriend, Miss Jordan Brooks."

The class bowed, and Jordan also gave a slight bow.

"Jaylen and Drew, would you please grab a couple of chairs to place here near the front for Master Kino and his girl?"

Two teen boys quickly bowed. "Yes, sir," they said in unison and hurried to do as asked.

Jordan had to smile. This show of respect was absolutely instilled in the Kino family. She could see that they practiced what they preached in their schools.

Jordan was intrigued with how Master Cook ran his class. Except for the few teen black belts, most of the students were beginners, and most of their parents were sitting in the back of the class. Some were out in the reception area.

Master Cook was a little less formal than Grandmaster Kino. He obviously had a good relationship with his students. They responded well to him, and that included Josie and Jamie.

Young Eric recognized that Master Cook was running the students through a yellow belt test, though the students didn't know it. Eric saw that Jamie was passing with flying colors, and Josie was not.

This was the way his father and grandfather sometimes promoted students. They tested them without knowing they were being tested and then simply presented them with the belt. Sometimes they had group belt tests and group promotions. They were very strict about one thing: students were expected to be happy for classmates who advanced and never resentful. Eric was curious to see how the class would take the news.

They went all the way to lining up at the end of class. Standing at attention, they said the Kino Student Credo. Young Eric stood and said it with them.

"I will train diligently, do my best, and never give up.

I will honor and respect my teacher, my school, my fellow students, and my fellow man.

I will handle myself with integrity.

I will be honest with the world and with myself.

I will search for and follow my true path to the best of my ability," the students repeated loudly.

"At ease," Master Cook commanded.

The students spread their feet slightly apart and placed their hands by their sides.

"Some of you have never seen martial arts before, have never watched a martial arts movie, and are just beginning. There is no shame in that. Instead it is an honor that you have chosen to do something that will enhance your life, and the lives of the people around you. Some of you are just beginning in a formal class but have been intrigued by the martial arts for years. There is also no shame in that. Some of those people are in our class, and they have been working hard for years. We actually have three people who I will offer a yellow belt to today. For those of you I don't name, will we feel sad or ashamed?"

"No, sir," the students yelled.

"Will we be excited and happy for the ones who have finally, after years of loving the martial arts, made their yellow belts?"

"Yes, sir."

He smiled. "I'm very proud of you all for that. For the ones who don't receive your belt today, will you come to class and continue to work very hard toward your goals?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm very proud of you for making that promise. So, today, since we have a special guest with us we will ask him to place your belt on your waist. When I call your name, step forward."

Master Cook's wife handed three folded yellow belts to Eric.

"Randal Fetter," he said.

The boy's eyes opened wide and a huge smile spread across his face. The black belt boys applauded, letting the other students know it was okay to do so. The parents in the back also applauded.

Eric smiled warmly and motioned for the boy to approach him, because he seemed like he wasn't sure if he should.

Eric knelt down, removed the white belt and replaced it with the new yellow belt and tied it snugly.

"Congratulations, Randal," Eric said to him. "Good job. Okay, you can go back to your place."

"Kristie Byre," Master Cook said.

The girl very seriously came forward to the applause and stood in front of Eric. He very seriously placed her belt on her. She looked up at him and smiled. He smiled back. "Good job, Kristie. Keep up the good work."

She nodded and went back to her place.

"And finally, Jamie Perez."

He pumped his fist. "Yes," he whispered, making the parents laugh.

He came to Eric and grinned up at him, his eyes moist. Eric placed a hand on his hair. "Good job, Jamie. I'm proud of you." He put his belt on him while everyone applauded.

"Attention," Master Cook said sharply.

The class stood erect, waiting to be dismissed.

"Master Kino, would you like to say a few words?"

Eric bowed to Master Cook.

"I'd love to." He turned to the class. "I've really enjoyed watching you today. I can see some real talent in this class and I see some people that are working very hard and focusing and trying. I'm so proud of that. I also can see that Master Cook is an excellent teacher. Listen to him. Honor him. He came a few weeks ago to help me train for the Kino Challenge, and I'm grateful to him for what he taught me. Do what he says and I know he'll teach you what you need to know to get your black belts. I'm also proud of the way you were happy for your classmates who advanced today. If you didn't advance today, I know you will be advancing soon. Don't quit. Don't

give up. Try hard. If you don't have to work hard at something, it's not as impressive when you achieve it." He smiled and bowed to them.

"Uh, Master Kino," Master Cook said. "Some of the parents here, actually most of them, didn't see you last time you were here when you did your form. Will you do it for them? It would go a long way to show them what can be achieved."

Eric smiled. "Yes, of course."

Master Cook had the class sit around the perimeter of the class area as Eric removed his shoes, bowed, and moved to the center of the mats.

He did the Kino form, the one that included pretty much every form from white belt to black belt taken from different styles of martial arts. It included some flips and jumping spinning kicks and that always impressed kids. When he finished, he bowed, waited for the applause to stop, bowed again and left the floor.

Master Cook thanked him, called the class back to attention and dismissed them.

Eric went to the front to sit and put his shoes and socks back on. While he did a few of the parents came to speak with him.

One of the mothers smiled and held her hand out for him to shake. "I'm sorry for what you had to go through when they arrested you," she said. "I just wanted to let you know that you have all of our support. We know what kind of people the Kinos are, and we knew you didn't do what they accused you of."

Eric nodded. "Thank you very much." He hadn't expected anyone to address his arrest and he was a little taken aback.

Jordan put her hand on his back to let him know she understood. They left as quickly as they could.

Back at the house, while Jamie and Josie helped to set the table, young Eric and Jordan sat on the sofa, talking.

"Are you okay?" Jordan asked.

He nodded. "Feeling strange. Don't know why I didn't expect anyone to mention it. It's makin' me feel a little sick, like it brought it all back to me."

"I get it."

He drew a deep breath. "Gotta shake it off. Sorry. Guess I'm looking wimpy."

She laughed. "There is nothing wimpy about you, Three."

"Well, there IS something wimpy about me."

"That's not what it is. It's a phobia. It's not wimpy. Am I gonna have to sic your grandfather on you?"

He laughed. "No, no, please don't."

A few minutes later they were called in to eat. Lunch was delicious as usual. And Jewell let them know that Ricky Kino had spoken to her again about opening a restaurant and they were actually throwing around ideas.

They want to start small, see how that goes and then move ahead from there.

After lunch, Jordan, Jamie and young Eric left for the game, followed by two of the agents while two stayed to watch over Jewell and Josie.

The game against the Washington State Cougars was a battle, but USC pulled it off. All the announcers and ESPN guys were touting the Heisman candidate, JoJo Adams, for his leadership and skills, and quickness on his feet. Things were looking good. They were still undefeated, and needed to stay that way to make it into the playoffs. Especially when there were three SEC teams in the top ten. Right now USC was ranked #6. The best they'd been ranked in years.

The next morning everyone went to church again except Mark, Bella and Emily, though JoJo and Logan did go, and then Sunday dinner was again held at the elder Kinos' estate.

The following week seemed to follow the same script. Until it didn't.

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Colossians 3:12
"Therefore, as God's chosen people,
holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion,
kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Chapter Thirty-Two

October 19th, Saturday Noon
Perez Home, Hillcrest, California

Jordan grabbed the basket and Josie grabbed the other basket and they headed out the door. They went to the first car, the one in the driveway. Agent Brown let the window down.

"Hello, ladies."

"Hey," Jordan greeted with a smile. "This is from Mom."

"She is so nice, always thinking about us."

"She loves to cook, and she feels bad that you guys are always having to be out here looking after us."

"Hey, this is a cush job right now."

"I'm sure," Jordan said. "Anyway, hope you enjoy it."

She handed him half the contents of the first basket and then headed to the next car. Once the food had been handed out to all four agents in four different cars, they headed back in.

Jordan helped her mother straighten up the kitchen.

Her mother looked her daughter over. "You seem very happy."

Jordan smiled. "I guess I am. I mean, Three, he makes me happy."

"He's a good man."

Jordan nodded. "In a few months he's gonna be twenty-one."

"Really? When?"

"December 14th."

"Hmm, and you will be twenty in February. That means he's only about a year and two months older than you," her mother said with a smile.

"Yep. What are you smiling at?"

"I'm not sure I should say, but Jordan, let me ask you, are you thinking that he may be the one?"

"The one to what?" Jordan said innocently, though she knew exactly what her mother meant.

Jewell giggled. "The one you're gonna marry."

Jordan shrugged. "Ya know, I used to think that I didn't care about ever getting married, having babies, having a family. But I'll tell ya, Mom, if Three were to ask me to marry him, I wouldn't even hesitate."

Jewell clapped her hands together. "Oh, I had a feeling you were thinking like that. And I don't blame you, because he's about the nicest young man I've ever met."

"I'm so glad you said that, Mom. I mean, that you like him because he's so nice and not because he has money."

"Don't get me wrong, Jordan. I like that he's well off and he can give you a life you deserve. I like that he can take care of you financially."

"Okay, I guess I get that. But I'd love him and I'd marry him even if he was flat broke."

"I know. And that makes this just perfect." Her mother pinched her cheek. "I'm so happy for you, my girl."

She smiled. "Thanks, Mom. Well, I'm gonna go get ready because he'll be here any minute."

Jewell smiled. "Oh, I wonder what color flowers he'll bring me today."

Jordan laughed. "You're getting spoiled.

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Young Eric smiled as he drove south on the Pac Coast Highway. His life had become almost dreamlike. His training for the Challenge was finally going really well, and he was showing signs of actually becoming a champion. And he hoped so, because apparently, the world was very excited about Ricky Kino's kid taking on the Challenge and it was already completely sold out.

Young Eric's cousin/brother JoJo was probably gonna win a Heisman this year, and maybe the national championship if they keep on winning the way they have been. He was playing at Arizona today, but Bella's pregnancy was becoming a struggle for her and his father and mother stayed behind this time. Jeffy insisted that the problems would pass. The only one in the family who'd been able to travel to go watch him was his brother, Logan. Everyone else promised to watch him on TV.

And thinking of Logan made young Eric grin. The video of him singing at a Nashville restaurant with Grace Nash before he ever sang on TV went mega viral thanks to Gabe and Taylor. After that, Logan hit it out of the park on television, and now he was already getting record offers.

All of that was awesome, but the main thing was, Eric was totally in love with the most beautiful and amazing, down to earth, sweet girl. *And* she loved him. Him. Not his money. He'd spoken with both his father and his grandfather and they both agreed that there was no rule that he couldn't marry young, especially when he felt strongly that God brought them together. Still, his parents, grandparents and uncles and aunts told him he needed to figure out what direction he wanted his career to go, and what his plan was to support his family once he married. His family. Just the words sent a thrill straight into his heart. Jordan was *his family*. And eventually, a child or two or twelve would be part of that family.

His sister was already in love with Jordan. She thought of her as a sister. There were almost no obstacles. Smiling, he decided he wasn't gonna press anything. He was gonna go pick up his girl and take her to play putt putt, and then go bowling, and eat total junk food. And then go to his house and watch

JoJo's game. A perfect day. Agents Trout and Ward would be with them, but they were cool. No one had heard anything from Peter Perez since he'd sent Jordan that picture of Jamie and Josie two weeks ago. Maybe he'd given up. But until he was caught, Joey and Jason felt the agents were necessary.

Young Eric pulled into the gas station and started inside.

"Hey, man," the homeless guy said as young Eric passed him. Eric stopped, smiled. "Hey, guy! Whatcha in the mood for today?"

"Ya think one of those pizzas would be too much? I'd like to share it with my new buddies."

Eric looked at the two other guys sitting along the side of the building. They looked up at him with hopeful eyes.

Young Eric nodded. "Sure. No problem. I'll be back in a minute.

Eric went ahead and bought three pizzas and drinks to go with them. He'd been thinking he needed to do more than just buy these guys a meal. He needed to talk to them and find out how they became homeless. What happened in their lives to bring them to this point. He decided he'd try to arrange a firm time to come back and have a long talk with them, if not all of them, at least with the one he'd been feeding for weeks now. He hoped he could do something that would set him on the road to recovery.

Young Eric picked out a bouquet of yellow and orange mums and laid them on the counter with everything else.

"I know you been feeding those homeless people. If you don't stop, they won't go away," the man behind the glass said.

Eric nodded. "Tell ya what. I'm gonna come back and get them and take them to a different location sometime this coming week. Until then, can ya just try to be kind, or if not kind, just deal with it a few more days?"

"You just see that you do what you said, or I'm calling the cops and having them cleared out."

"Right." He paid for the stuff and left the store, turned right and went to the side of the building.

He handed out the pizzas and drinks to the men.

"Oh, thanks, man, God bless you. Thanks so much," the one he'd been feeding awhile said.

"My pleasure. So, whaddya say I do more than just get you guys a meal? Whaddya say you meet me here, this next Tuesday afternoon about three o'clock? Can you do that? We'll just have a talk and see how we can help you to maybe get off the streets."

"I don't know if you can help me do that, man. I been on the streets a long time. I don't think anyone can help."

"Well, we won't know until we talk about it, right?"

The guy nodded, tears in his eyes.

Young Eric pulled out his phone, went to his calendar to Tuesday. "Let me get your name."

"It's Nick. Nick Sutter."

Eric put the name into his phone.

"Okay, Nick Sutter, see you then?" Eric looked at the other two guys. "You guys wanna be in on this?"

One of them rose. "Aw, man, can I give you a hug?"

Eric smiled. "Sure."

He only flinched for a second when he felt the needle go into his neck. At first he thought the guy had accidentally scratched him with his long nails. He was vaguely aware of the van that pulled up behind him and the two homeless men pushing him backwards into the van. Then everything went black.

Nick Sutter blinked several times wondering if he really did see what just happened. The nice guy that bought him food just got taken away by the two guys he thought were his new buddies. He looked down at the ground. The guy's phone and the flowers he always bought lay next to the curb. He's gonna want his phone for sure when he comes back. Nick reached down and scooped it up and shoved it into his jacket pocket. He'd save it for him. He then gathered up the flowers, tried to straighten them up, and laid them against the wall.

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October 19th, 1:30 PM, Saturday

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky Kino let go of his wife's hand as they walked along the beach, and pulled his phone from his pocket. He glanced at the caller ID, his brow furrowed. He put it on speaker. "Hey, there, Jordan. You okay?"

"No, sir, I don't think so."

Ricky stopped walking. "What's wrong?"

"It's Eric. He's late. Mr. Kino, he's never late. I mean not ever. Something's wrong, I just know it. You have to believe me, he would never be late and not at least call me."

Ricky nodded. "No, he wouldn't. Where are you?"

"I'm at home."

"What time was he supposed to be there?"

"He said he'd be here just after noon."

"Afternoon or after the noon hour?"

"Just after the noon hour. He's over an hour late, and I've tried to call him and he doesn't answer. But he lets me track his phone and it says he's at the convenience store."

"What convenience store?"

"There's a store a few minutes from my house, on the corner of the Pac Coast, and he likes to stop there and buy flowers for my mom. I tracked his phone and it says he's still there. But he's been there for over an hour. I'm wondering, if he dropped his phone and he's gone looking for it. Maybe I should go up there and see."

"No. Stay where you are. Are the agents there with you?"

"Yes, sir, they're out in front. A few of them are walking the perimeter, and the other two are in their cars."

"Okay, Jordan. Stay put. I mean it."

"Yes, sir."

"I have to make calls. I'll get back to you soon."

"Yes, sir."

Ricky hung up and looked at Bree who had tears in her eyes and total shock on her face. "Okay, babe, I'm gonna need you to hold together while I get the ball rolling, okay?"

She nodded her head.

He pushed several buttons on his phone. "Yeah, Rick," Jason said. "Yeah, Ricky," Joey said.

"Jason, Joey, I have you on conference. Young Eric is missing. He's over an hour late showing up at Jordan's house. Ping his phone, Jason. Jordan says it's been at the convenience store he likes to stop at to buy flowers for her mom for over an hour. You have his car on GPS, right?"

"Yes, hold on." He clicked a few buttons. "His car is at the store."

"Hold on," Joey said, then came back after a minute. "Okay, I've sent Agent Trout over to find the phone."

"Jason, what are we looking at?" Ricky asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Obviously someone has him. Probable suspect is Perez. We'll need to get video from the store, talk to people. I'm gonna need a quick warrant. And I'll have to work with police and FBI on this one. Hold it together. I'm headed down there myself right now. Joey, except for Trout, don't pull the agents from the family."

"Got it," Joey said.

"Ricky," Jason continued, "call the...hold on." He came back after a few seconds. "That was your dad. Jeffy knows and she had him call me. He's waiting for your call."

"Alright. But I'm coming down there to...."

"You stay where you are," Jason ordered. "There's nothing you can do. Except pray. And call Jordan back. Better yet, you call your dad, have Bree call Jordan."

Ricky looked at her. She nodded and pulled out her phone.

"And tell Bree that I'm having the agents escort Jordan and her family up to your house. That'll give me one less worry, so tell Bree to have them pack up quickly."

Ricky and Bree made their way back up to the house.

Gabe and Taylor were in the kitchen making a late lunch. Ricky went straight to his study. Bree came in and sat down at the kitchen table, called Jordan, and laid the phone on the table.

"Mom, what's wrong? What's goin' on?" Taylor asked.

She held up her hand. "Just listen," she said softly.

Jordan answered on the first ring. “Mrs. Kino? Did you find Three?”

“No, Jordan. Jason believes he’s been taken.”

Taylor gasped and almost fell, but Gabe caught her and sat her down. He put a finger to his lips. He needed to hear what was happening.

Jordan sniffed back the tears she’d been crying for the past fifteen minutes. “It’s, it’s Peter isn’t it?”

“That’s what they believe. They’re getting the FBI involved. They’re pulling video from the store and probably from any camera in the area. Agent Trout was sent there and we should hear from him any minute.”

“What are we gonna do? Oh, God, please, You have to help him. Mrs. Kino, Peter will kill him. He’s completely capable of it, I just know he is.”

“Okay, well, we’re not gonna talk like that, that’s the first thing we’re not gonna do. Jordan, listen to me. Jason wants you and your family to pack up your bags, grab everything you might need, and the agents are gonna bring you up here to our house. Do that now. Maybe by the time you get here, we’ll know more. Jordan? Do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m doing it right now. Please call me if you find out anything else, okay?”

“I will. Now get going.” She ended the call and immediately Taylor threw her arms around her mother.

“Oh, Mom, I’m so scared. What do you think is happening to him? Do you think they’re hurting him?”

Bree broke for a minute, then sniffed back the tears. “I don’t know, but let’s not speculate. God will bring Eric back to us. I just know it.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I really do.”

“I’m gonna poke my head into Mr. Kino’s study and see what’s happening. I’ll be right back,” Gabe said.

He quickly headed down the hall to the study, didn’t bother to knock and poked his head in. Ricky looked up and waved him in.

“Yes,” Jason said. “And Trout is talking to the homeless guy right now. Justin has already gotten warrants to pull the video from any place in the area, the FBI is already on the way and should be arriving on scene within the next twenty minutes. I’ll be there in about ten minutes. I’ll call you when I have more. Stay put, Rick.”

The call ended. Ricky sighed, looked up at Gabe.

“Any more news?” Gabe asked.

“His car is there at the store, parked on the left front corner. Agent Trout is speaking to a homeless dude who says he saw Eric today. We’ll have that information soon.”

Gabe nodded. “I’m gonna go take care of some things, but before I do, uh, whaddya say we hit the floor?”

Ricky looked up, nodded. That was exactly what he needed to do. He rose. “Let’s get the girls.”

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Young Eric moaned as he came to. He was in a van. His hands were cuffed, but at least they were in front of his body. His legs were free, which meant he had a chance of fighting these guys off, though he needed to time it right. The problem was, he wasn't quite sure when the right time would be. He looked up to see the two homeless guys, grinning at him.

"Guess you didn't see that coming," one of them said.

"Yeah, good one."

"Is he awake?" someone said from the front of the van.

"Yep."

"Well, fix that."

The guy pulled a needle. Young Eric immediately kicked the guy's arm, but he held onto the needle. The other guy jumped on young Eric, straddling him. Eric raised his cuffed hands and came down on the guy's head. He slumped over. Suddenly, two other guys were on top of him, wrestling with him when he felt the prick of the needle again, this time in his shoulder. He struggled for only a few seconds before he went dark again.

The next time he opened his eyes he had no idea if it was day or night. He was in a large room. The floor was dirt. The walls were concrete block. There were no windows. He got the idea that he was underground or in a basement under a large building. The ceiling was high, maybe twelve feet. He was sitting in a chair, the only piece of furniture in the room other than a large wooden box that looked like it may hold something like weapons. The chair he was seated on was metal. He looked up over his head to see his hands. They were still cuffed, but now the cuffs were attached to a padlock that hooked through a large steel circle bolt embedded in the concrete block behind and just above his head. He jerked his hands several times to see just how sturdy the bolt was, and found it to be immovable.

His clothes had been removed. He only had on his boxer briefs and he was slightly chilled. He looked down to see that his legs were now securely duct taped to the legs of the chair. He'd messed up. He'd shown his cards too fast. Maybe if he hadn't, his legs wouldn't be taped down so securely. He was in big trouble. And he wasn't sure if he'd survive this little episode. He tried very hard to not think about the fact that he couldn't move his arms or legs. That was the phobia trying to creep its way into his brain. He breathed. At least he was in a large, lighted room. He drew another deep breath and shook his head. Jordan is probably hysterical by now. And his family. His mom. Taylor. And his father. The thought of them made his eyes fill with tears, but he swallowed them back. Damn, this was gonna be bad. He closed his eyes. "Father, I sure do need Your help right now," he whispered. "If You're still listening to me, I'm the numbers guy, remember, from a few weeks ago? Will You help me out of this one? In Jesus' name."

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It was almost time for the teams to come out on the field and warm up

when Logan decided to scroll through his social media. He'd been looking to see if there was anything new concerning himself and his viral videos, but what he saw made his heart stop.

"Eric Kino, the son of Ricky Kino has been abducted," was the headline. Then there was a blurry video of Eric being injected with something, shoved into a van and driven away.

Hands shaking, Logan immediately called his father.

"Logan, I'm guessing you just heard," Mark said.

"Yes, I saw it on a breaking news bulletin, and were you not gonna tell me?"

"Yes, I was. We've been a little busy but I was just getting ready to call you. Does JoJo know?"

"He's still in the locker room. They should be coming out onto the field to warm up any minute."

"Good. Then maybe he won't see it before the game," Mark said.

"Dad, JoJo wouldn't choose a game over his brother."

"I understand that. But what can he do about it if he finds out now? Nothing. And that would make him feel worse."

"He'd still want to know."

"Well, there's no way to tell him now. Unless you go speak to his coach, and you know what he'll say."

"He'd say to wait until after the game."

"Right."

"Dad, I'm just sick. It doesn't even feel like it's real. How's Aunt Bree and Uncle Ricky?"

"They seem to be holding it together."

"Okay, good. So, can Uncle Joey get us some private transport? I mean, so we can get home the minute the game is over?"

"I'll arrange it."

"Has there been any communication from whoever took him?"

"Not yet. The FBI is set up at Rick's house. We're ready."

"How long has it been since he was taken?"

"About five hours."

"Where was that video?"

"You saw that?"

"Yes, it's all over social media."

Mark shook his head. "I don't know how that got leaked already. It was at a gas station near Jordan's house. He spoke to a homeless guy. Two other guys posing as homeless injected him with something, pushed him into a van and took off. Could not get a license plate from that video, but we're looking in the area for other cameras."

Logan's phone buzzed. "Uh oh, Dad. JoJo is calling me. I gotta go. Get us that transportation. Love you."

He switched over. "JoJo."

"What the hell, Logan. I just glanced at my phone. It's blowing up. Were you not gonna tell me?"

"I was not. I just found out. I was on the phone with Dad when you called. He told me to let you play."

"You don't really think I can play when our brother is going through who knows what?"

"No, I understand. I don't know what to tell you. I feel the same way. I don't see how you could play, but I don't see how you can look into the eyes of your teammates who are all depending on you to take them to the playoffs. You are between a rock and a hard place and I don't know what to tell you. Dad seems to think that you should play, but I know he'd understand if you don't."

JoJo cursed softly. "Coach is asking to see me. Gotta go."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know."

"Uncle Joey is gonna arrange some special transportation to get us home quickly. As soon as the game is over."

"Okay. Call you back."

Logan hung up the phone. Closed his eyes and began to pray.

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Jordan had been wandering around the Kinos' home, listening to conversations. The FBI was setting up in the large dining room. Jordan's mother was making sure people were fed. Taylor had been inconsolable and taken to her bed. Gabe was making phone calls. Josie was doing her best with Jamie who couldn't stop crying.

Grandmaster Kino had come and was doing his best to keep everyone calm and centered and thinking positive and being a support to his son. Jordan learned that Ricky Kino too had been abducted a long time ago, before he'd married Breanna Adams. He'd been tortured and released. Now, his son was going through something similar. But no one knew the goal of the abductor. Was it just to torture? Or was it to take young Eric's life?

Jordan made her way upstairs, thinking to go into her room and try to pray like Three had taught her. But there was his room, right across from the one they always assigned to her, and it beckoned to her. She turned the knob and slowly opened the door, like he might be there and she might be disturbing him.

She looked around. His bed was made. Of course it was. Everything was neat and tidy. She went into his bathroom. There was a towel hanging on the inside door knob. Unbelievable. She lifted it and hugged it to her chest. He'd probably used it when he showered this morning. Probably dried his hair and then wrapped it around his waist. Probably stood in front of this mirror and shaved. His razor actually lay on the counter next to the sink. She picked it up and looked closely at it, to see if there were any tiny black hairs in the crevices. There was some aftershave and she took the top off and sniffed. Her

eyes filled with tears. She put it down and left the bathroom.

She sat on his bed. “Three. Please come back to me,” she whispered.

She turned and knelt beside the bed and tried to pray. “Hey, God, it’s me, Jordan. I guess You probably know what’s goin’ on. I’m not gonna be rude and ask You why it’s happening. But I am gonna ask, I’m gonna beg You, please God, please bring him back to me. Please don’t let him die. I’m gonna marry him, God, and have his babies and help him raise a beautiful family, people that are what Three always calls, warriors for God. For You. So, how can we do that if he doesn’t come home to me? Please, please, please, dear God, oh, uh, Three calls You Father, so please dear Father, bring him back to us. We’re all hurting so much. We all love him so much. I don’t know how I can live without him. Please don’t let him be hurting or suffering.” She stopped as that thought made her shudder. She sniffed. “Okay, Father, so, I guess that’s all for now. Amen. Oh, no, wait, I mean, Three said to always pray in Jesus’ name, because Jesus is the mediator, so I’m prayin’ Father, in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

She sat there on the floor and let the tears fall and the grief consume her and then crawled up on his bed and laid her head on his pillow. It smelled like him. She closed her eyes and tried to visualize him opening that door and walking into the room, with his beautiful smile and shining eyes, filled with the love he had for her.

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Gabe walked as he spoke on the phone. He’d called everyone he could think of. Everyone back in Pine Forest. His friend Peyton up at UGA. The Nash family. And now he was placing a call to one of the most powerful people he knew, Isla August. She answered immediately.

“Gabe, I heard about Eric Kino. How is Taylor?”

“She’s not well, Isla. She’s gone to bed and I’m gonna go back up and check on her in a few minutes.”

“So, you’re there at their house?”

“Yes. It’s a nightmare. I think I’m beginning to understand what everyone went through when I was taken back in the spring. It’s horrifying to love someone and not know what’s happening to them.”

“So, what can I do?”

“Well, I was calling you because I was hoping we could start a prayer chain.”

“Absolutely. But, I really think that you should do a video, explain the situation and say a prayer first, and then invite everyone to continue praying for young Eric. Or we could even do a zoom call like we did when you and Grandmaster Kino were in the hospital. However you’d like to proceed.”

“Well, you’re the pro, how do you think I should proceed?”

“Okay. I think you should go live right now, on both my channel and yours, give people a chance to see that you’re live, and then invite everyone to pray with you. Then tell them a time that you and hopefully the rest of the

Kino family will do a Zoom call, and we'll post the link and pray again at whatever time you say. We'll ask people to piggyback onto your Zoom call."

"Sounds good. Um, before I go live right now, I need to ask the family when to do a Zoom. Hold on, for just a sec."

He walked into the living room to find Ricky. He was busy comforting his wife who'd obviously been crying. "Uh, Mr. Kino, sorry to bother you, we're gonna do a Zoom prayer meeting, and I need a time to tell Isla."

Ricky nodded. Looked at his watch. Cleared his throat. "Let's say seven Pacific Time tonight, which is only an hour away, and then, since it's so late tonight, we can do it again tomorrow at noon Pacific."

"Thanks. Isla, did you hear that?"

"Yes, are you ready to go live?"

"Let's do it."

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Young Eric raised his head when the door opened. It was one of the fake homeless guys. He held a bottle of water. "Boss says to have you drink some water, cuz he don't want you dead yet."

Eric watched him uncap the bottle. It was a fresh, unopened bottle. He allowed the man to put the bottle to his mouth and he drank as much as he could, because he didn't know how long it would be before he was offered water again.

"So," Eric said after he'd had the water. "Who's the boss man?"

He grinned. "He said you would ask that and he said to tell you it is who you think it is."

"Perez. And do you know what his plans are for me?"

"I know some of them." He laughed. "At one point he talked about castration. But I think he vetoed that one."

Eric swallowed.

"Got to ya, huh? I know, right? But really, I know he's gonna come in here in a little bit, some time tonight, and make a video of you to send to your family first thing in the morning."

"How about some food?"

"He didn't say nothin' about no food."

"When is he coming in?"

The guy went to the door and smiled. "Soon."

"Wait. What time is it?"

"It's like about seven."

"Can I use the bathroom?"

"He didn't say nothin' about that. You can ask him when he comes in."

Eric's mind scrambled. A video. Proof of life video maybe? Or just a video to flaunt that he had Eric's life in his hands. The time crawled by and Eric finally succumbed to sleep. He wasn't sure how long he'd slept when the door opened again and in walked Peter Perez, a sly smile on his smug face, flanked by three other men.

"Well, hello there, Eric Kino the Third," he quipped happily. "It's been awhile since we last spoke. As a matter of fact, last time I spoke to you, you were threatening me. Funny, you don't look so threatening now."

"Take off the cuffs and try sayin' that."

Perez' eyes narrowed. "You won't be so cocky in just a few minutes."

Eric had nothing to say to that because he was sure that was true.

"As you can see, we're makin' a little video, so be sure and smile pretty for the camera. We gotta show your family that you're still alive. But we can't just show you lookin' all nice and comfy. So, we're gonna have to rough you up a little bit." He stepped back with a smile and nodded at one of the men.

The man stepped forward and backhanded young Eric across the face. Eric's head turned violently with the blow, but he turned back and glared at Peter. The man hit him several more times. When the one guy stopped hitting him, Perez stepped forward and examined the handiwork. One of Eric's eyes was already swollen shut. His nose and mouth were bleeding. He was breathing heavily.

Perez frowned. "Needs something else, don't ya think?" he asked.

The three men all nodded their heads.

Perez drew a large hunting knife from his side, held it to one side of Eric's chest and sliced.

Eric grunted in pain as Perez sliced open a wound in the left side of Eric's chest. Blood ran down his torso. Perez nodded. "Oh, I like the way that looks."

The guy making the video held the phone close to Eric's face. "Anything you wanna say, Kino?"

Eric drew a breath, looked into the camera. "I'm okay. I'm thinkin' head south."

Peter punched him in the mouth for that as Eric winced.

"You thinkin' they're gonna come rescue you? Think again. They'll never find you. Not unless I want them to find you. And I only want them to find you when they've paid the ransom."

Eric looked up. "The ransom?"

"Yeah, we're gonna get ten mill out of your hide."

Young Eric began to laugh. "You're doin' this for money?" He laughed again.

"What's so funny?"

"You shoulda done your homework, Perez. My family doesn't pay ransoms. Not for anyone. Not ever."

"They'll pay to get you, the one and only son back."

He laughed, shook his head. "No they won't. One and only son or not, they'll never pay a ransom. Because if they do, everyone in the family will be in danger. You won't get one dime. But I'll tell ya what you will get. They'll hunt you down. They won't stop and they will put an end to your

sorry life."

Perez reared back and punched Eric in the stomach, doubling him over. "We'll just see about that."

He turned to leave the room. "Take him to the outhouse. And do not let him get away."

Young Eric's heart soared. This may be the chance he needs. But they chained one ankle before they untaped his leg, and then moved it close to the taped leg and chained the other ankle before it was untaped. Then, one of the men held a gun to his head as they uncuffed him and then cuffed him again behind his back this time.

They walked him out of the room. There was a long corridor and four more rooms before they emerged from what seemed to be like a cave. He turned and glanced back at where he'd just come from. Not a cave. It was an old mine of some kind. Just the thought that the room he'd been in was way back in an old mine shaft made him shudder. He hobbled slowly as he was escorted to a small outhouse. He was actually grateful that they allowed him to use it and not have him sit in his own waste back in that room. When they took him back, he looked around him, at the sky, at the hills in the background, at the sun. Because it might be the last time he saw it, in this life anyway.

Once he was back in the room, they were just as cautious about attaching his wrists to the wall again, and taping his legs to the legs of the chair once again. He sighed. He'd have to wait for another opening. He looked down. The blood on his chest was beginning to dry. He hoped he'd be out of here before the cut got infected. He thought of the sharpness of the knife and the castration comment and realized he should be very grateful that so far, his manhood was still intact.

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"She's in here," Ricky said quietly. "Let me have a minute to talk to her," he whispered to Mrs. Perez. He went into young Eric's room and gently shut the door behind him. He sat on the side of the bed. "Jordan," he said softly. She startled and sat up. "Oh, I must've fallen asleep," she said. "Have you heard anything yet?"

He shook his head. "Not yet."

Her eyes filled as they had been doing all day. "Mr. Kino, do you think we're gonna get him back?"

He sighed. "I think we are. I just don't know what condition he'll be in."

She nodded. "My stepfather, he can be a very cruel man. I'm so sorry I brought him into your lives."

"That's the same thing your mother keeps saying. Jordan, you are not responsible for the evil that another human being does."

"But if I hadn't come into Eric's life, he'd be fine right now."

"Eric feels, and I agree with him, that God brought the two of you together. That you and he are supposed to be together. It's because of that,

the dark forces are trying to keep it from happening. But, Jordan, we won't let them win. And neither will God. They won't win. We just have to trust Him. God loves Eric. And whatever God's will is for Eric, is what Eric wants. So, we will trust, that God's got this."

"Your faith is so strong."

"Not all the time. But when things get tough, that's the opportunity to show God, that we do trust Him, that we are willing to accept His will for us. And when we show Him that, when we let go, that's when things change. Now, we're about to have a family prayer. Will you join us?"

"Yes, sir, of course. I'm sorry I fell asleep in here. I just felt the need to be close to him. I love him so much."

"I know you do. And I understand you needing to feel close to him. Everyone was worried. They couldn't find you."

"I didn't mean to worry anyone."

"I know. Come on." He stood and held his hand out to her.

She took it. He stopped, looked around his son's room, feeling his spirit, his energy, and he nodded. "God's gonna bring him back to us," he said softly.

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The black SUV drove up to the south Kino estate in the wee hours of the morning. JoJo and Logan emerged and went inside, hoping that somehow, everything had changed. But it hadn't.

Eric was still missing. No one had yet heard from his abductors. Everything sucked. JoJo had spoken to his coach, told him he couldn't play. The coach had asked him to try, for the sake of his teammates. So, he tried. He'd tried hard. The results were he fumbled the ball and threw two interceptions. He completed eight for sixteen and they lost the game. It was devastating for him and his teammates, and he was pretty sure they wished that coach had simply put in his backup.

No one blamed him. They all seemed to understand. He just had not been able to push aside the fact that a member of his family was missing and probably experiencing some hellish drama. He couldn't focus. He lost it. And probably lost the Heisman and the season all at the same time. And he didn't really care about any of that, because he'd trade it all to have his cousin/brother back safe and sound.

Mark rose when the boys came in and greeted them at the door with a solemn hug. "Boys, everyone is in the den, except for a few."

"Who are the few?"

"Jamie is asleep in a room upstairs. Josie is asleep in the room Jordan usually occupies. And Mrs. Perez has just gone upstairs to her room. She's having a hard time because she's feeling responsible."

"Ridiculous." JoJo said.

"Exactly," Mark answered. "And of course, your mother, Breez and Shelley are all at their homes taking care of the little ones."

He started walking back toward the den and they followed their father. "FBI guys are occupying the dining room," Mark continued, "but they've gone home until the morning."

At the entrance to the den they stopped. Ricky and Bree sat at the game table, their heads close together as they spoke softly to one another. Taylor, Gabe, Jeffy and Cam sat on a sofa. Eric senior, Justin and Lori sat together on another sofa. Joey was pacing as he spoke on the phone with Jason and looked up to see that the boys had arrived. He waved. Jordan sat on the floor in the corner by herself.

"Jeffy had an episode earlier," Mark informed the boys quietly. "She suddenly cried out, holding her chest and stomach too. Eric has asked her to stop opening herself but she insists. She says she sees dirt. A lot of dirt."

"Well, that doesn't tell us much," Logan said.

"Maybe not, but it's a start. She's never been wrong."

Jeffy turned around to see who was in the entrance. She stood and came to the boys and hugged them. "Hey, guys. JoJo, I'm so sorry about the game."

He shrugged. "Thanks."

Gabe and Taylor also came to greet them.

"Sorry about the game, JoJo," Gabe said.

"It happens," he replied. He leaned over and kissed Taylor's cheek. "Are you keeping positive thoughts?"

"I'm trying," she said as her eyes filled again.

Logan stepped forward and hugged her. "He's gonna be back."

"How do you know," she whined.

"I just feel it."

She nodded and sniffed.

"So, why is no one speaking to Jordan?" JoJo asked.

"She asked to be left alone."

He shook his head. "Nope. Young Eric would not want me to do that," he said, and headed her direction.

"Hey, Jordan," JoJo said as he sat on the floor next to her.

She looked up at him, her eyes bleary. "Hi, JoJo. Aren't you supposed to be at a game?"

"Yeah. Been there, done that. Played like crap. Lost."

"Oh. Well, sorry. I know that's a hard thing."

"Not when it's in perspective."

"Right. Hey, listen, JoJo, I really don't feel like talking to anyone right now. I just wanna be left alone."

"Yeah, Gabe already told me that. But that's not gonna happen because Eric would not want me to do that, so here I am."

Jordan eyed him. "You and Three, you're pretty close, right?"

"Yes. We were born about six months apart. Grew up more like brothers than cousins. We're very close."

"Then how can you be so calm?"

"I'm not, on the inside. But to honor him, I'll show strength for you and for his family. It's the least I can do for him. I fell apart enough to blow the game, blow our season and blow my chances at the Heisman. That's probably all he'll allow without him kicking my butt when he gets back."

"If he comes back," Jordan whispered.

"Don't think like that. He will be back."

"Just be honest," she murmured.

"Okay, well, honestly, he's probably goin' through some pretty bad stuff right now. He's probably in pain. Probably uncomfortable. Probably worried about you and his family. Probably even worried about me and Logan. I guarantee you he's praying, he's tellin' God that he's willing to do whatever God wants him to do. But he's also asking God to let him come back to you, so he can... uh, never mind."

"So he can what?" Jordan asked.

"Nope. I shouldn't have said that. And to show you that I believe he's coming back, I'm not gonna finish that sentence because he really will kick my butt." He smiled at her. "I'll tell you this, Jordan. I've never seen young Eric so happy as I've seen him over this past month since he met you. You make him absolutely giddy."

Her eyes filled again. "Oh, JoJo, I love him so much."

He put his arm around her and let her cry on his shoulder. "I know," he said softly as he patted her back. "I know. I do too."

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Isaiah 40:31

"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and
not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mrs. Perez was in the kitchen by six in the morning, cleaning up dishes and glasses from overnight kitchen raiders and preparing breakfast for anyone who felt hungry enough to eat.

The FBI also arrived early.

Some of the family members had gone to take showers, encouraged by Eric senior to do things that are basic. He said it would help maintain healthy minds during a time of extreme stress.

Eric senior, Mark and Joey had all spoken to their wives and children via FaceTime, and had family prayer over the phone.

Then, the family that was present in the south Kino home had gathered together to pray.

Everyone's stomach was in knots hoping and waiting for any kind of attempt at contact. It finally came in at 8:00 AM.

"Hello," Ricky said quietly.

"Is this really *the* Ricky Kino?"

"Yes. Is this really *the* Peter Perez?"

Peter laughed. "I always heard you were funny. So, you know I have your kid. Let's get right to it. Here's my demands. Ten million dollars delivered in twenties and hundreds."

"How do I know he's even still alive?"

"I'll send you a video."

"Ten million dollars is a lot of money to get together."

"You're just trying to keep me on the phone. It won't matter. I'm on a burner phone and I'm fifty miles away from where we have him."

"Then you won't be able to prove to me that he's alive. Because if your video doesn't show him holding a piece of paper under his chin with the words 'Jesus is Lord' written on it, then I'll know it isn't a current video and he could already be dead."

"Dammit, Kino. You're puttin' your son's life in danger."

"It's already in danger. So, that's the way of it. You show me the video, we'll work from there."

"I ought to kill him right now."

"But you won't because you want your money. Go ahead and send me the video you already have, and then go back to where he is and send me what I asked for, and then we'll talk about the money."

The FBI was nodding their heads, so Ricky hung up.

A few minutes later Ricky received the video. He immediately clicked on it and his heart dropped.

"Send that to us, please," Special Agent Williams said.

Ricky sent itaylor and Jordan all made a slight to them and to Jason, Joey, and Cam, then rose and went to the den.

"We have a video. You'll want to see it, but Jamie and Josie, can I get you two to go down to the game room for me? I don't want you to see it. It's a little bit grown up."

"Yes, sir," they said quickly and left the room.

Ricky looked at everyone else. "Brace yourselves. It's not pretty. If you think you may not want to see it, it won't make you look bad if you go ahead and leave the room. Taylor? I'm not sure you should see this."

"My brother is going through hell. I'm gonna go through it with him."

Ricky nodded. "If I recall, Taylor, that's the same thing you said about Gabe's video."

Gabe put his arm around her.

JoJo pulled Jordan to her feet, led her from the corner to stand behind the sofa to watch the video. He stayed right next to her, to offer support.

Ricky cast the video up on the large screen.

They watched as the video came on and three men walked in front of the guy videoing. They were in a hallway, or more like a wide corridor made of concrete block. The three men entered the large door at the end of the corridor and young Eric came into view. He was seated against the far wall on a chair, his wrists cuffed above his head, the cuffs secured to a concrete-block wall. Jordan reached out and gripped the back of the sofa.

It was Perez who spoke.

"Well hello there, Eric Kino the Third. It's been awhile since we last spoke. As a matter of fact, last time I spoke to you, you were threatening me. Funny, you don't look so threatening now."

"Take off the cuffs and try sayin' that."

Ricky's lips pressed tightly together.

Perez went on. "You won't be so cocky in just a few minutes. As you can see, we're makin' a little video, so be sure and smile pretty for the camera. We gotta show your family that you're still alive. But we can't just show you lookin' all nice and comfy. So, we're gonna have to rough you up a little bit."

They watched as Jordan's stepfather stepped back away from young Eric and another man stepped forward and immediately backhanded him. Eric turned and glared with rage at the guy. The man then hit him five more times, every time, in the face.

Perez then moved forward, grabbed Eric by the hair and lifted his head to look at him. He nodded. Eric winced a bit and his breath was labored. Young Eric's eye was swelling. He was bleeding from his nose and mouth.

Bree, Taylor, and Jordan all made a slight sound. A wince. A whimper.

A sniff.

Perez spoke again. "Needs something else, don't ya think?"

He immediately drew a hunting knife and zinged it across Eric's chest. Eric gave a slight grunt as blood ran down from a straight shallow cut across the left pectoral.

"Oh, I like the way that looks."

The camera zeroed in on Eric's face.

"Anything you wanna say, Kino?"

Young Eric looked directly into the camera lens. "I'm okay. I'm thinkin' head south."

Eric was punished for that with Perez' fist.

There was a soft sound behind the sofa and JoJo turned and caught Jordan. "Okay, hon, I got you."

Ricky paused the video.

JoJo scooped her up. Everyone except Bree vacated one of the sofas and JoJo laid Jordan down, her head on Bree's lap. Bree softly ran her hand over Jordan's head. "It's okay, hon," Bree said as she sniffed back her own tears. "He's gonna be okay."

Jordan curled into a ball and stayed there on Bree's lap.

"Everyone ready?" Ricky asked.

Everyone nodded.

He restarted the video.

Perez was speaking. "You thinkin' they're gonna come rescue you? Think again. They'll never find you. Not unless I want them to find you. And I only want them to find you when they've paid the ransom."

"The ransom?"

"Yeah, we're gonna get ten mill outta your hide."

Young Eric laughed. "You're doin' this for money?" He laughed again.

"What's so funny?"

"You shoulda done your homework, Perez. My family doesn't pay ransoms. Not for anyone. Not ever."

"They'll pay to get you, the one and only son back."

"No they won't. One and only son or not, they'll never pay a ransom. Because if they do, everyone in the family will be in danger. You won't get one dime. But I'll tell ya what you will get. They'll hunt you down. They won't stop and they will put an end to your sorry life."

Perez punched Eric in the stomach. "We'll just see about that."

He turned toward the door. "Take him to the outhouse. And do not let him get away."

The video ended.

No one spoke for a full minute.

Finally, Jeffy did. "Run that back, in slow motion."

Ricky tried but couldn't.

"No, not with the remote," Gabe said. "May I see your phone?"

Gabe's fingers worked quickly over Ricky's phone and the video started again in slow motion.

Jeffy stood. Moved close to the TV, studying the scene closely.

"Well, the floor is dirt, but I saw more dirt than that. Lots of dirt. Piles and ridges of dirt."

"Like dunes?" Joey asked.

"Yes, but not quite. Not sand. Dirt. Darker than sand."

"He said take him to the outhouse. So, obviously, they're out in the middle of nowhere. No plumbing," JoJo said.

"Wait. Back it up. What's that?" Mark asked, standing and pointing to a blur a few feet away from where Eric was sitting.

"Everyone looked closely."

Eric senior moved close to the screen. He turned to look at the group, his expression one of dread. "It's a pine box," he said softly.

"A box of what?" Logan asked.

"Weapons?" JoJo asked.

"Dear Lord Jesus," Ricky muttered softly when he realized what it was. "No. It's a pine box. Currently completely empty. And see that?" Ricky went to the screen and touched what looked like a light-colored stick coming out of the box. "It's tubing. Tubing to give him air."

The light went on in everyone's brain.

"Oh, no, oh no, oh no," Taylor said. "They're gonna put Eric in that box? They're gonna bury him? No, oh please, Daddy, help him. You have to help him!" She stood and ran up the stairs to her room.

Ricky felt the panic in his own chest surge up, knowing how bad young Eric's phobia was. He thought the jail cell was bad. This was gonna be bad. Real bad. He began to pace the room.

"Okay, everyone," Eric senior said calmly. "We can't panic ourselves. Obviously, young Eric doesn't realize yet what that's for. If he did, his expression would have been much more fearful, when it really wasn't fearful at all. Don't let his fears take you over. Jeffy, think. Is there anything else you get?"

She opened herself. Sat down on the floor. Cam sat next to her and motioned for everyone else to gather around her.

Jeffy moaned. "He's cold. He's shivering. He's hungry. It's damp. He's tired but he's afraid to sleep. His fingers are tingling and he's moving them to try to keep the circulation going. He's having some claustrophobic symptoms from being restrained but he's fighting it off. He's praying. He's been praying all night. Someone just came into the room. Someone is giving him water to drink. Young Eric is speaking to him in Spanish. Asking him to release the cuffs from the wall so that he can hold the bottle himself. *Ya don't have to take the cuffs off. Just let me hold the bottle. My legs are secure. I can't go anywhere.* The guy is complying. He's releasing the cuffs from the wall. He stepped way back. He's afraid of Eric. He handed Eric the bottle

and also a tortilla. A rolled up tortilla. Two of them." She looked up. "They're in Mexico."

"Are you sure?" Ricky asked.

"I'm positive. They're in Mexico."

"Well, if Perez is staying in Mexico that explains why we've not been able to locate him," Joey said.

"How did they get Eric across the border as a hostage?"

"It's not that hard," Cam said. "Especially not here in Cali."

Joey got on the phone, gave Jason the information.

"Put me on speaker Joey and let me give a quick briefing," Jason said.

Joey did. "Go ahead, Jason."

"We know where he was taken from. The homeless guy, Nick Sutter, who had Eric's phone says Eric asked to meet with him on Tuesday. He was gonna try to help him get off the streets. The other two guys had been hanging out there at the store with him for a few days. They spoke to each other in Spanish, but spoke to him in English. Obviously, they'd been tailing young Eric, maybe for weeks.

"Facial recognition software has them as parolees from Chino. Same prison Perez was held. Both are illegals. From the video we all just watched, one of the pretend homeless guys was the one who hit Eric. The second guy from the gas station could have been the one holding the camera, so we know there are at least four guys including Perez. But there could be more. If Eric is able to get free and fight, he'd have a battle on his hands.

"Perez was in San Diego when he made the call a little while ago. He said fifty miles, so we're looking at a sixty mile perimeter from where he was. If we head south into Mexico, well, it's a large perimeter. However, looking for places with lots of dirt, there are hundreds of old abandoned gold mines all throughout the Baja, all within the search radius. Don't give up hope. We'll find him.

"Ricky, you'll have to convince Perez that you absolutely intend to pay the ransom. That's the only way to keep him alive. And we'll keep him out of that box by you continuing to ask Perez to send more video in a shorter time period. They're not gonna video him in the box."

"Got it," Ricky said quietly.

Jordan sat up and hugged young Eric's mom. "How can you stay so calm," Jordan asked her.

Bree smiled. "I'm not calm. I'm just trying to show God that I trust Him to bring my son back to me."

"And what if He doesn't?"

She drew a deep breath. "Then, it will mean that instead of coming home to us, it was God's will that Young Eric come home to Him. But, when I say those words, they feel wrong, so I don't feel like it's God's will. There's a reason God brought you and Eric together and it wasn't so that he could make you fall in love with my son and then jerk him away from you.

This is the forces of darkness trying to tear our family apart, trying to make you doubt God before you ever come to really know Him. Don't doubt, sweetie. He'll bring our Eric, your Three, He'll bring him back to us. And what Eric is going through, it will make him stronger than ever. That doesn't mean that it doesn't break my heart to see someone hurting my baby. It does. It hurts so bad and I know it's hurting you. But if I fall apart, who does that help?"

Jordan nodded. "And this family is always about helping others, even in your own time of trouble, right?"

"Even then. And young Eric would agree with that. So, in Eric's absence, we'll honor him by staying strong and helping the people he loves. And you, sweet girl, are the person he loves the most."

"And you are too, so what can I do to help you?"

She smiled. "Let's see that all these people take some nourishment even though they don't feel like eating. At least let's get them to stay hydrated."

Jordan rose. Gave a timorous smile. "Yes, ma'am. I can do that."

Bree rose and they headed to the kitchen together to join Jewell and see what could be done.

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Young Eric drew several deep breaths. He'd made it through the night. He knew it was morning because he'd been given water and a couple of tortillas and allowed to go to the outhouse. Once again, he looked up at the sun, he thanked God for another day that he was still on the Earth and that meant an opportunity to reunite with the people he loved. Eric asked the one guy, the one who brought him his food and water if he could keep his hands down because his shoulders were aching. The guy had refused, but almost kind of apologized. He tried to explain that Perez would be very angry if he came back and Eric was not restrained properly.

Eric tried to fight it, but the other two guys were there, and one of them seemed to derive pleasure in pointing his gun at Eric's head whenever the opportunity arose.

Just now, he'd had a claustrophobic panic attack creep up on him, which was the reason for the deep breathing. He closed his eyes and prayed again and the feelings calmed. His head jerked up however, when the door crashed open, slamming against the concrete wall and Peter Perez flew into the room, and came straight to Eric, his face in a red rage. Behind him, was the water guy, videoing.

He grabbed Eric by the hair and shook him. "I should kill you right now." He slammed Eric's head against the wall.

Eric was stunned by the hard knock, and his eyes closed as he started to lose consciousness.

Peter backed away. "Throw some water on him," he ordered.

Another guy stepped forward and poured a bottle of water over Eric's head.

Eric revived and looked up, sputtering. He shook his head to get the water out of his eyes. "What's the matter, Peter? My father say something you didn't wanna hear?"

Peter drew his knife, stepped forward, grabbed Eric by the hair again and placed the knife against his throat. He stayed like that for almost a full minute. Finally, he seemed to get control, stepped back and sheathed the knife. He drew a deep breath and smiled. "If you mean did he refuse to pay the ransom, the answer is 'no.' What he did was ask for a different video that shows you're alive, but with this sign under your chin, which means I'll have to drive another two freakin' hours to go send the video." He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it and held it out.

Eric read the paper and smiled. "He is indeed and hallelujah."

Peter moved forward. "I should just slit your throat right now, what would you think about your Lord Jesus, then?"

Young Eric shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time someone died because of their testimony of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Peter snarled and zinged the knife across Eric's chest again, right under the first cut, then smiled with pleasure at the grunt from his captive. "I'm not letting your hand loose to hold that paper, so lift your chin."

Eric complied and held the paper with his chin.

Peter backed up. "Smile pretty you..." He then let loose a long string of ugly curses.

Eric looked into the camera again. "Come and get me, Dad. Not that I'm not having a blast with the seven dwarfs here, and I mean that in every aspect of that cute little movie, but I'm ready to come home. The food sucks in this restaurant. I need some good *American* cooking. If someone were to open a burger and fry joint in this place, it would be a *gold mine*. Oh, and tell Jordan I agree with her. Her stepfather is a total jerk."

Peter punched Eric in the stomach again. He grunted and pretended to fall forward and pass out. He could see the punch coming for miles, and was easily able to tighten his abs and deflect the punch. If Peter thought his stomach punches were getting to Eric, he might continue to hit him there instead of in the face, and that would be a good thing.

Eric didn't lift his head again until he knew he was alone. He hoped he'd done enough to achieve a rescue.

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The mood was subdued. They'd held a giant prayer circle Zoom call at noon. Gabe, JoJo and Logan ran it. Gabe spoke for a few minutes. JoJo led the prayer. Then Logan spoke to close it out. Both Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams spoke briefly right after the prayer, to thank everyone for praying for their son. And asked them to continue to pray for him until he's found. Since the meeting, everyone at the house had divided off into small groups to chat, to pray, to pass the time as they waited for the new video. Ricky's phone finally pinged at 4:05 PM.

He picked up his phone, sent the video to the FBI guy sitting next to him and to Jason, and then went into the den. “The video came in. Logan, will you gather everyone and ask Jamie and Josie to either go downstairs or stay upstairs.”

“Yes, sir,” Logan said quickly.

In less than five minutes everyone was gathered and Ricky hit ‘play.’ They watched it through without any interruptions.

“What does he mean about the seven dwarfs?” Taylor asked.

“Well, he’s telling us that there are seven men there. And the dwarfs were miners, so, he’s also telling us he’s in a mine, like Jeffy and Jason were talking about. With the remark about the food he’s telling us he’s not in America, which means he is definitely in Mexico, again like Jeffy said. And he actually told us it was a gold mine,” Joey said. “So, did you send it to Jason?”

Ricky nodded.

“Did you speak to Perez again?”

“Not yet. He hasn’t called.”

“Well, when will he call? Or, when do you expect him to call?” Jordan suddenly asked impatiently.

“Any minute.”

About that time Shelley arrived with the children in tow. Eric immediately greeted his wife and children and Josie and Jamie immediately were placed in charge of entertaining them.

“I didn’t expect you,” Eric said softly.

Shelley looked up into his eyes. “I know, but I need to be here, for myself, for my grandson and for my daughter.”

Eric nodded. “Of course you do, sweetheart. I’ve been selfish. I’m here for my son, you need to be here for your daughter.”

He bent and kissed her softly. Shelley smiled at her husband and went to find Bree, who was sitting in the living room all alone.

“How’re ya holding up, sweetheart?” Shelley asked.

“Mom! Hi. I didn’t know you were here. I’m doing my best to be strong, for Ricky’s sake, for Taylor’s sake, and for my son. But Mom, I’m so scared. My heart hurts in a way I never thought it could. My baby, did you see the videos?”

“Yes, Eric sent them to me. He’s been keeping me informed, but I had to come, to be here with you.”

Bree couldn’t hold back the tears. “Thanks, Mom. I’m trying so hard to trust God. Logically, I think Eric is gonna be okay, but my heart won’t stop worrying.”

“It’s because he’s your baby. You see that little face, you have all those memories, and even though he’s a man now, you still see that little boy.” She sat down and put her arms around her daughter and let her cry.

Meanwhile, the “any minute,” that Ricky told Jordan he expected Perez’

call, turned into an hour. But finally, the call came in. Joey stood in the entrance to the dining room listening.

"Hello," Ricky said.

"Kino. You have the video. It's time to put your money where your mouth is."

"I've been thinking about that. So, how are you gonna guarantee me that Eric will still be alive by the time I get you the money?"

"There is no guarantee."

"Then there is no money."

"You're playing with your son's life."

"No, you're playing with my son's life. Look, I want my son back. You want money. I don't mind giving away the money. I just want to know that my son is safe."

"And I just want to know that you really will give me the money."

"I don't ever lie. Not ever. I will get the money first thing tomorrow morning, because the banks won't open, even for me, on a Sunday. How do you want me to get it to you?"

"First, you will receive a text tomorrow at noon, asking if you have the money. You will respond with a thumbs up. Then you will receive another text telling you where to go. So that means you be in your car with the money by noon. Alone."

"Got it. And at that same time, I'm gonna want one more proof of life video. I'll give you a sentence to have my son repeat on the video."

"Dammit, Kino, I won't be where your son is being held."

"Then have one of your little minions make the video and send it to me, or to you and then you send it to me. If you don't, Perez, you won't get the money. Not one dollar."

"Ya know, your son assured me that you won't pay a ransom. So, why are you so willing to pay it?"

"My son is correct. I've always said I will never pay a ransom, that's true. But since my son has actually been taken, I've had to think that over. Maybe come to terms that I may have to do it. I understand that you're just out of jail, have no one to help you and have found yourself in a situation where you need money to live. Desperation causes a man to do desperate things. I understand that."

"Okay, then, so, you've had a change of heart. But I'm still not sure I can trust you. So, ya know what? I'm gonna take precautions to make sure you pay the money."

"What kind of precautions?"

"You'll see. You'll know before noon. You'll know that the money is well-spent. Just remember this. Pay the money and no one gets hurt."

"He's already hurt."

Perez actually laughed. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Okay, so pay the money, and no one dies."

"The money will be in my car beside me by noon."

He heard Perez curse. And then silence.

"Hello?"

Silence.

Ricky turned to look at Special Agent Williams. "Did we get him?"

Williams held up his hand to ask Ricky to hold on a moment. Finally, Williams shook his head.

Ricky cursed, then apologized.

Williams sighed. "They found the phone on a bench in a small park in the town of Escondido. He was able to slip away. We're looking for cameras now to see if we can find what vehicle he's driving."

Joey turned away and informed the family of what had taken place and then he got on the phone with Jason, who'd been monitoring the call. When Joey got off the phone, he gathered the family and reported everything that was being done.

"We believe Perez has been going back and forth to Mexico on a forged passport. We've been able to find video of him in a white Toyota, and more recently in a red Ford Focus. We cannot find any footage of the white van that young Eric was taken in, so we believe they changed out vehicles. We're not sure how Eric was moved across the border. Possibly in the trunk of a car, especially if Perez had become familiar to or with the border agents. However, they are now all being briefed and will detain him if he tries again."

"Which means, today, because he'll go back across now that he's made his phone call, right?" Jordan asked.

"Possibly. If the cog moves fast enough. Or unless he doesn't intend to go back. Which is a big possibility, and doesn't bode well for Eric."

Taylor began to sniffle at that news.

"Jason is sending our own agents down to cover every border crossing to monitor, but that may take an hour or two." He stopped. Sighed. "Jason is also working on getting permission from the Mexican officials to use our choppers over the northern CaliMex border to search out all the old gold mines for any recent activity, even something as small as tire tracks."

"Does it look like they're gonna allow that?" Mark asked.

Joey nodded. "Yes, thanks in part to our recent mission down there to help the Federales rescue those women. They've already made their search grids and are standing by."

"So, there's nothing else to do except wait," Ricky said softly.

"I'm gonna go crazy," Jordan said as she rose and began to pace.

Ricky sighed, stood. "Mark, You need to get home to your wife. She needs you. And there's nothing you can do here. I understand you wanting to show your support, but I know you got me, bro. I love you and I'd like you to go take care of your wife."

Mark knew better than to argue with Ricky when his mind is set on

something. And he could tell it's set. "I'm gonna do what you ask, Rick, but like you said, call on me for anything. Anything. We'll keep praying. But listen, I was gonna tell you, tomorrow, I have court and cannot get out of it. It's a case that's been put off almost a year and it's finally coming to trial and I can't let this guy down."

"I understand. We'll keep you posted." Ricky turned to JoJo and Logan. "Boys, you need to go home too. You have school in the morning, and football practice."

"No, Uncle Ricky. Sorry. I'm not going to school," Logan said. "I wouldn't be able to concentrate. I can't do it. He's my brother. I cannot handle school."

"But won't it help you to keep your mind off things?"

"No, and you know that. It will only make me stressed. I'm staying right here."

"Me too," JoJo said.

"But, JoJo, you're up for the Heisman and this is a big deal year for you. Every single game is important."

"Listen to me carefully. I don't care. I will not go back until I know Eric is okay. Period. There are things more important than winning a Heisman, or playing football. My priorities are straight. Family first. Nothing else matters. I already talked to Coach this morning."

"And what did he say?"

"He said I should do what I feel I have to do. And that he would do what he feels he has to do. So, whatever that means, I don't care. If people can't understand that Eric and I grew up together as brothers and that he's been abducted and beaten and who knows what else, then I don't want anything to do with them anyway. My answer is firm."

Ricky looked at Mark. Mark nodded.

"Okay then. Boys, stay. Joey? Are you going home to your wife?"

"Uh, I would be if I wasn't working, but I'm currently working which means I don't get a break. And Breez is used to my job keeping me away."

"You gotta sleep sometime."

"I will. On a couch, or I'll find a bed upstairs. Don't worry about me."

Ricky nodded and turned to his father. "Dad? I think you should go home and get some rest."

Eric senior smiled. He understood what Ricky was doing. Since he couldn't help young Eric currently, he was trying to reach out to help everyone else. He was trying to be strong. But he was covering up how he was truly feeling. "I actually will go home because I'm gonna take the little ones with me and Shelley is gonna stay with Bree for a while. But call me the moment you find out anything. Anything at all."

"Of course, Dad."

"And Ricky– son, I know all too well how you feel. It might help to go out on the beach and run. Go barefoot. Ground yourself and talk to God.

You're holding everything in."

"I have to be strong for my wife and daughter, and for my son."

"Yes, and you're human. You too need comfort, and by the way, so does your wife, if you catch my drift."

Ricky sighed. "I do, and so does everyone else here."

Eric smiled. "Oh, did I say that out loud?"

"Dad, go home." He turned to Justin and Lori. "You guys need to go home too and get some rest."

"I'm gonna go help Eric with the kids and Justin is working on legalities for this operation, so, we are leaving," Lori said.

"Jeffy? Cam?" Ricky asked.

Jeffy frowned at her brother. "I'm staying here. I need to be close. I feel like I can reach him if I stay here."

Ricky nodded.

"I'm leaving first thing in the morning," Cam said. "Jeff Davis and I will be on one of those choppers helping to look for young Eric."

"Mr. Kino?"

Ricky turned to look at Jewell Perez. "Jewell, please call me Ricky."

"Uh, yes, sir, but anyway, I was thinking that after dinner, I'm gonna go ahead and take Josie and Jamie home. I'm gonna go into work in the morning and see if I can get someone to replace me and then I'll come back here and help in any way I can. And I think Josie and Jamie will be better off if they go to school so that we don't have to keep sending them out of the room."

"I completely understand and I think that's a good decision."

"But Mr. Kino, I want you and Mrs. Kino to know, that we love Eric, very much. He is the most amazing young man we've ever known, and we'll keep praying for him and maybe, by this time tomorrow, he'll be home safe and sound."

Ricky closed his eyes a second and envisioned the scene. "I pray that what you say is true, in Jesus' name."

"Amen," everyone in the room said.

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Ricky did as his father advised and after everyone left, he went to run on the beach. The day Ricky himself had been kidnapped he'd been running on the beach. They took him by shooting him with sedation darts. They'd known it was the only way they'd be able to subdue him. Apparently Peter Perez understood the same thing about young Eric. There would be no way they could take him in a fight.

Ricky sighed. Everyone thought that Jordan was the one in danger. And then her siblings. But they didn't think Eric was in any danger. But Eric was the one with the money, and as it turned out, Perez wasn't as interested in revenge on his stepdaughter as he was in getting rich quick.

The images of what his son was going through were bad. But Ricky himself knew they weren't nearly as bad as they could be. Ricky had not just

been beaten. His chest and legs cut and burned, and the worst part, he still couldn't think about without shuddering. He shoved it out of his mind.

He ran hard. Ran for miles. Ran until he collapsed. He then fell down on his knees and cried, and once he'd cried all that he could, he began to pray. He poured out his soul. He asked for forgiveness. He asked for comfort and peace for his family and for Jordan and her family. He acknowledged that he wanted only to do God's will and begged for the courage to accept whatever was in store for them all.

When he'd stopped crying and stopped praying and lay on his back staring up into the darkened sky, he felt a calmness come over him. *"Peace, be still."*

Ricky sighed. "Will You bring him home to us?"

"If he fights hard, he will come home. He must fight hard."

"Can you help him?"

"Fear not. He is not alone."

"Thank you, Father," Ricky whispered.

He rose and jogged home. Inside he headed straight for the den but found only JoJo and Logan camped out. "Hey, guys," Ricky said softly. "Where is everyone?"

"Aunt Angel came to visit and then she left with Grandma. Aunt Bree said she was going to her room. Gabe is with Taylor in her room. She was crying again and he's doing his best to comfort her. Aunt Jeffy said she and Uncle Cam were gonna try to go get some sleep, but I don't know which room they took. And Jordan said she was going to bed."

"Thanks, guys."

"Uncle Ricky, he's coming back to us," JoJo said.

Ricky nodded. "I believe he is. Hopefully tomorrow is gonna be a good day. If you need anything, you know where to find it. I'm gonna go take a shower."

"Yeah, you look pretty gross."

Ricky forced a smile. "I bet."

He grabbed a drink from the refrigerator, downed it quickly, went down the hall to his room and quietly opened the door. Bree appeared to be sleeping. Silently, he went into the bathroom and showered. As he was toweling himself off, he heard Bree sniff, and then realized she was crying. He went to her side immediately.

He sat on the bed and put his hand on her shoulder. "Baby."

She rolled over to look at him. Shook her head. "I can't stand it."

He nodded. "I know. Me neither. But I was just out running, and crying and praying, trying to hear God's voice, and finally, I did."

She sat up and wiped her eyes. "What did He say?"

"He pretty much told me to calm down and said Eric would come home to us but he has to fight hard to do it. Well, I know my son will fight hard. And he said Eric is not alone."

Bree nodded and offered a small smile. “That’s good to know. Actually, that is really very comforting.”

Ricky nodded and placed his hand on Bree’s face. “Hold on my love. Let’s both of us take a deep breath and let go and let God.”

She drew a deep breath, blew it out.

He leaned down and kissed her.

“You smell good,” she said.

“So do you,” he replied.

She ran her hand softly over his chest. “Will you hold me?”

He realized he needed the release, just like his father had said, and so did his wife. He scooted into bed beside her. “I’ll do more than that.”

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Psalm 85:8

“Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

"I already looked in there. I can't find her anywhere," Taylor said.

"Okay, everyone calm down," Bree said. "Ricky, ask security if Jordan went out during the night. Taylor, you go search downstairs again. JoJo, you go look upstairs again. Logan, you search the front yard."

They all went to search but it was JoJo who texted everyone to let them know he'd found her. Taylor had looked in young Eric's room, but apparently didn't notice that the closet door was slightly open.

JoJo knelt down beside her, gave a quick thanks that she was okay. She was sound asleep on the floor of Eric's closet. She wore one of his shirts, and lay on a pillow formed out of a few more of his shirts. She truly looked pitiful and his heart went out to her. His brother would not want her to hurt like this but JoJo had no idea how to help her, mostly because he felt the same way, only he couldn't, or rather wouldn't, give in to grief. Not yet anyway.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Jordan?"

She stirred and her eyes blinked open. She slowly sat up.

"Rough night?"

Sighing, she nodded. Touching the shirt she wore, a long sleeve button down shirt that young Eric recently wore to church, she looked up at JoJo. "I guess this looks pretty silly."

"No, it really doesn't. It looks sad. It looks like the girl who loves my brother is hurting. And I'm really sorry that you are, but, Jordan, we really need to think positively. Eric is coming home. Probably today. You need to get up and get started on your day. Will you join us on the beach?"

"On the beach?"

"Yes. It's almost six in the morning."

"You guys are gonna work out?"

"It's not always a workout. Sometimes it's just the Kino stretch and warmup. Every time it includes a prayer. It's something that is very much a part of Eric's life, of all of our lives. Eric and I have done it since we were about two or three. Logan, since he was eleven. Little Em has started waking up and wanting to come down. My father started when he was nine because that's when my grandfather came into their lives. Grandma since she was thirty-five, and Granddad since he was fourteen and had just moved from Hawaii to Cali. Today, it's our way of honoring Eric in his absence. When Granddad was in the hospital we did it in honor of him. Back a few years ago

when that crazy doctor kidnapped our grandparents, we did it for them. We always do it. It's like drinking water or praying. Just something we do. To honor. To give comfort. It helps. Come watch. And then take a shower and get dressed and try to eat a little something. Please."

Jordan nodded. "Okay. Go ahead and I'll be right down. If it honors Three, then I'm all in."

JoJo smiled at her. "My brother has really good taste in women."

"He does, does he? How many women are we talking about?"

He smiled. "Just one."

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When Jordan walked down to the beach, what she saw made her feel very reverent. The first rays of sun began to sparkle on the water, turning the ocean from a steely gray to a vibrant blue. In a circle on the beach, all choosing to don a plain white martial arts uniform were eight hardbodies: Ricky, Joey, Jeffy, Cam, JoJo, Logan, Gabe and Taylor. They were moving in tandem, seemingly swaying to the rhythm of the ocean, doing the Kino stretch and then going into the Kino special form. They were breathtaking. At the end of the form they all simply sank down onto their knees. JoJo motioned for Jordan to come and join them, which she did. They went around the circle, each one offering their own prayers.

Jordan couldn't get over it. This family was strong. They not only moved together as one, but they thought as one, prayed as one, operated as one. Like minds. Like bodies. Like spirits. This must be what heaven is like. It was living proof that with a little effort on everyone's part, living a life that looked like a little slice of heaven on earth was possible. Even for humans. Though she was beginning to think that this family was not quite human. Maybe they were like, earth-angels.

When everyone had prayed but Jordan, JoJo softly nudged her. "Don't be shy. Just say what's in your heart."

She drew a deep breath. "Father, what's in my heart is not so pleasant. But I'm trying. If You know everything, then You know what is in my heart. I am terrified of losing the guy I love. I'm terrified to think about what he's going through. And I want You, God, to save him. To intervene and to bring him home. He wouldn't be where he is if he hadn't met me. So, please, God, don't let it be that me coming into Eric's life is the reason he leaves this world. Please. Please. Yes, I'm begging. This whole family has said that they will abide by Your will. Well, I don't understand that yet. I don't see how Your will could mean that Eric di— that Eric doesn't come home. So, help me to understand. And please bring him home to us. We love him so. Your son, Jesus, He went through a lot of pain and suffering. I get that. But surely You don't want Eric to do that too, do You? Anyway, I'm sorry if I'm being disrespectful. I don't mean it that way. I'm just trying to understand, and JoJo said for me to say what's in my heart, so, I did. Um, in Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," they all said loudly.

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The family had all showered and eaten breakfast prepared by Bree, Jeffy, and Joey, who apparently liked to cook. Everyone was dressed and everyone's nerves were on edge.

Ricky left for the main branch of his bank, though he knew he would be drawing funds from several locations with the help of the FBI and all guarded by Ameritech.

Jordan checked in with her mom who'd sent the kids off to school with two Ameritech agents and gone into work to see if she could find a replacement for herself so that she could help the Kinos.

The Ameritech agents would not leave the school, but would stick around keeping watch over things, making sure no one came to check Jamie or Josie out of school except their own mother.

They were slightly entertained by the Monday morning hustle and bustle of kids arriving at the school. Some on buses. Some being dropped off by parents, and some, simply walking. One kid was carrying a large poster board, obviously a school project. He dropped it and another kid stepped on it, seemingly on purpose.

It looked like a bully move to Agent Brown, so he went to rescue the kid, told the kid who stomped on the poster to move his big foot or he'd move it for him. He picked up the poster and wiped off the smudges for the kid and handed it back to him. The little boy smiled up at him. He patted his head and went back to the car.

Agent Wyatt smiled at Agent Brown. "You're such a hero."

Brown laughed. "Poor kid. Ya work hard on some stupid school project and some moron comes along and messes it up."

"Sounds like you have some childhood issues you need to work out."

Brown nodded. "I just might. Like, I used to beat up this kid who couldn't keep his mouth shut."

Wyatt laughed. "Noted."

They sat watching late comers run inside quickly. The morning bell rang, meaning, everyone should now be in homeroom. And then a man in a business suit carrying a lovely pink backpack, ran into the school.

The man headed down the main hall and when he saw an older child he asked, "Where's the fifth grade hall?"

"Um, it's down there, not that first hall, that goes to the cafeteria. But that last hall, all the way to end."

The man smiled. "Thank you so much, young man."

He turned and headed back to the last hall, got there, reached up and pulled the fire alarm and watched as teachers and kids came out of their classrooms in neat little lines. He followed them out the back doors onto the field of a large playground.

He walked along the line of fifth graders holding up the backpack. When he spotted the one he was looking for, he called her name.

Josie turned and looked to see who was calling her name. A man approached, smiling at her.

"Josie Perez?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have your backpack."

She shook her head. "That's not mine."

His expression changed. He didn't argue with her. Simply punched her in the jaw. The child fell unconscious. A couple of kids screamed. Teachers came running. But he'd already hefted her over his shoulder and headed toward the wooded area at the back of the playground. In only seconds Josie and the man were gone.

People were screaming. Kids started running back into the building. Someone said something about a gun and there was pandemonium.

Outside in the front parking lot, the minute the fire alarm went off both Ameritech Agents jumped from the car and headed in. But a resource officer stopped them. Told them they couldn't enter the building. They tried to explain to him that they had the school administrator's permission to be on the premises.

But the officer only shook his head. "Not during an emergency."

"Well, that would be the time you need us most," Agent Wyatt complained.

"You need to move, officer, and let us pass, or we're just gonna move you ourselves," Agent Brown threatened.

The officer fingered his gun then touched the mic on his shirt and called for backup. But at that moment, everyone was distracted by screams and kids running toward the front of the school. In essence, all hell had broken loose.

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Young Eric woke when the door opened and the guy who usually brought him water entered. Today he wore a smile and held up a McDonald's bag.

"Got something special for you today, mi amigo."

Eric blinked. He wasn't sure what to think about them actually feeding him. Was it a last supper kind of deal? Was it a gesture of goodbye? Or did it mean he needed to eat because he's gonna be around a lot longer.

The guy carefully unlocked one hand from the cuff and helped Eric lower his arm. He actually briskly rubbed his arm to help him get the feeling back. Finally, Eric was able to hold the bag in his hand. He pulled out two Arepas and quickly ate them, then a bag of fried potato rounds. There was also an orange juice. Eric ate and drank before he asked his question.

"¿Es la gran celebración?¿Por qué consigo comida?"

What's the big celebration that I get some food?

The guy looked apologetic again. "Vas a, uh, vas a necesitar tu fuerza." *You're, uh, you're gonna need your strength.*

Eric couldn't stop the sinking feeling, that pit in your stomach sickness

that came when you know things are about to get bad. He swallowed hard.

"What's about to happen?"

The guy didn't answer. Only shook his head then went to the door, opened it and called out. "¿Vienes o no?" *Are you coming or not?*

Two more of his jailers arrived, though not the guy who usually held a gun. He had no idea what that meant. They went about the chore of chaining his legs and then cutting off the duct tape that held them to the chair. When he resisted putting his hand back up to be cuffed, the other two guys used both their hands to wrestle Eric's arm into place. Once the cuffs were secure, they unlocked the padlock that held them to the wall bolt. Slowly he shuffled out to the outhouse, trying to take his time to breathe the air, feel the sun.

The day felt strange. Something ominous. The guys who escorted him usually talked, joked around with each other. But today, they were quiet.

"So, where's Perez? Is he hanging around here somewhere?" Eric asked.

"He's busy, but he'll be here soon. Why? You miss him?"

Eric didn't bother to answer his question. "So, why did I get a meal today? Why is today special?"

"You don't know?"

"How could I know?"

The men laughed. "Well today, your daddy is gettin' our money."

Eric frowned. That didn't sound right. Of course, he's probably just playing them. He was sure of that. But that means, an exchange will be taking place. So maybe they were about to move him.

He hoped something was gonna happen today because, he really wasn't feeling too well. He was weak. He felt like he was burning up this morning, while yesterday he was chilled. He wondered if the cut on his chest actually was getting infected because he was getting weaker by the hour. It would be nice to snuggle down into his own bed, have some herbal remedy tea, and sleep.

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It took almost an hour for the news to reach Jewell Perez' ears, news that her daughter Josie had been taken from the school. The perp, dressed in a business suit had taken her out through the back of the school, into a neighborhood where he was picked up by a driver. A woman out walking her dog saw the whole thing. An APB had been put out on the car, but so far there was nothing.

The news hit the Kino family about the same time as Jewell. Agents Wyatt and Brown took Jamie from the school, once they were cleared of arranging the kidnapping of Josie and were shown to be on the list to pick up the children. They picked up Jewell and headed back to the Kinos who surrounded Jamie and Jewell with their love.

Jewell went almost catatonic. Bree stayed near her, trying to help. After all, she knew exactly how she felt. Jordan and Jamie huddled together. Jordan's body was shaking. She couldn't take any more.

Jeffy said that both Jordan and Jewell were suffering from emotional shock and that everyone should not try to talk about the situation with them but let them go ahead and shut down. It was a bodily defense mechanism. Offer them something warm to drink. Hold them. Hug them. But don't try to speak with them.

Bree called Ricky to let him know what was happening. He was at the bank, gathering money and waiting for Jason to give him some good news.

"So, that's Perez' extra precaution. He said he was gonna take extra precautions to make sure I'll deliver the money. I guess he figures, I may let my son suffer, but not a little girl."

"That's actually sound thinking," Bree reasoned. "I mean, tell me you aren't more inclined to give him what he wants to get them both back."

"I don't know about him getting what he wants. But getting what he deserves, that's coming."

"What's the status on the choppers searching?"

"Well, we started with Jason's fleet of ten, but have had almost thirty other pilots volunteer their time and their helos to search, so, Jason and Joey have reorganized the grids and they're working them. It's just a matter of buying time now. Which I will do by not being able to get the currency as quickly as I thought. Which is actually the truth. The banks are scrambling to come up with that much in small bills. We still have a few hours before he'll text me and I will give him a thumbs down, and we'll go from there."

"Ricky, you don't think he'll like fly into a rage and just kill them, do you?"

"No. He saw dollar signs when he realized Jordan was dating Eric. Money is what he wants. He won't jeopardize that. I'm gonna need that proof of life video of Eric saying the words I give him to say, right before I supposedly make the drop. He'll give us that. And hopefully, we'll find them before that ever happens."

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Young Eric was pretty sure it'd been more than two hours since the morning visit. He was reminded of when he'd been in jail and after breakfast he'd expected to leave any minute. And it didn't happen. Right now he hoped something was happening. The guy said Eric needed his strength.

His head jerked up when the door opened. His guy walked in with a bottle of water and another McDonald's bag. He undid Eric's one hand, and put the bag in it. Eric immediately dropped it. The guy rubbed Eric's arm again, retrieved the bag and handed it to him. He held it and looked inside and then back up at the guy. He was smiling, as if he was proud of the contents.

The guy shrugged. "You said you want American food."

Young Eric pulled out a quarter pounder with cheese and some fries. "Well, thanks. But this is two meals in one day. And my second bottle of water. Where am I going? Like, you guys gonna take me out and leave me in

the desert?"

"You wish," the gun guy said as he appeared at the door.

Eric eyed him. Strangely, he was all dressed up in a suit and tie. "You goin' someplace fancy?"

He smiled. "Been there, done that."

The pit in Eric's stomach was growing. He ate the rest of his meal in silence. When he finished, another one of the dwarfs showed up at the door. "Let's do this," he said, a gleam in his eye.

They chained young Eric's legs as usual and cut away the duct tape. He'd grown used to the sting of the cut pieces of tape being pulled from his skin. They removed his cuffs from the lock and again, walked him out to the outhouse. He was growing more and more uneasy, but couldn't put his finger on it.

Then gun guy put his foot out in front of Eric thinking to trip him. But Eric saw it, and jumped the foot. The other two guys laughed.

"What was that for," Eric asked.

Gun guy shrugged. "Just for the fun of hurting you, you spoiled, rich little brat." He didn't try to trip him again, but just hauled off and punched him. Eric went down. The other two guys helped him up.

On the way back to the mine entrance, the gun guy tried again, and succeeded in tripping Eric. And while he was down, one of the other guys decided it would be fun to kick him a few times. Eric realized the two guys truly hated him, and it was obviously for the family he was born into because Eric had never met either of them before this episode in his life.

"Hey, amigos, vamos a hacer esto," the third guy said as he helped Eric to his feet. *Let's just get this done.*

They led him back into the room and he sat down on the chair. Not wanting to fight he lifted his hands in the air.

"Oh, no, not this time. Leave your hands down," gun guy said as he immediately began wrapping duct tape around Eric's arms, and then around his chest and arms. In only a few times around he could no longer move his arms at all. They were taped down like a silver mummy. They continued wrapping the tape around him, to make sure there was no way he could get out of it.

The claustrophobia kicked in pretty quick but he tried not to show it. You never let them know your weakness.

One guy bent to grab his legs and start taping them. He tried to fight them off, but they kept the chains on his ankles until they had his legs securely taped together, using every bit of duct tape on the roll.

Breathing heavy from his struggles, Eric stilled and spoke calmly. "So, what's going on, guys. You might as well let me know. I obviously can't fight you."

"Oh, you're about to know," gun guy laughed.

The other two men went over to retrieve the large pine box and brought

it to sit next to Eric. They opened two latches and Eric looked into the box, still thinking he would see weapons, rifles, something like that, but it was empty. His eyes opened wide when it finally dawned on his dulled brain. Immediately he bashed the closest person with his head, for it was all he had to fight with. The guy yelled and dropped down, holding his head. Eric fought, but all he succeeded in doing was looking like a worm wiggling all over the ground. The guy whose head Eric bashed got back up and the three of them struggled hard to get Eric into the box, but they finally succeeded.

"We're gonna bury you where no one will find you," gun guy said. "You're gonna die a long slow death."

Eric could barely catch his breath. "Then why the food and water, huh? Why? Was it to ensure I'm found before I expire?"

"Yeah, that's what Perez says. But he don't have to know that I'm not gonna take you to the coordinates he's giving your famous daddy. And believe me, Perez won't really care either. When I do tell him, he'll get a good laugh out of it."

They started to close the lid and Eric panicked. "Wait. Please. Wait. Don't do this."

"Hush little baby," gun guy mocked.

They closed the lid and latched it.

"No!" Eric screamed but knew that wouldn't help him.

He tried to fight the panic. Tried to calm himself but he couldn't. "I can't do this. I can't do this. Oh God, please, I can't do this," he whispered. He tried to move, tried to bang his head against the lid, but there was no room to even do that. His forehead was already touching the wood. He tried to draw his legs up to kick out the end of the box, but again, there was no room. He was in there tight. He was sweating, and felt the tears as they coursed down his face. "I can't do this. I can't do this," he cried. "Please God, help me. Please help me. Please." He was sobbing now. "I can't do it. It's too much. Just take me now. Father, pleeeeaaaassseee, just take me now. Take me. Take my life. I want to come be with you now. Please, God, take me now. TAAKE MEEE NOOOWW!" he screamed.

Eric, be still.

He quieted.

Be still and breathe.

He tried but the tears welled up again.

Shh, be still. I am with you. Listen to what I say. You will be free. And then, you must fight. Fight hard. Fierce like the lion as he tears his prey. Swift like the strike of the cobra. Fight.

*"*I will," he whispered. "I will."

At that moment the lid of the box was opened.

Now there were four men looking down at him.

"Looks like we jumped the gun," one said with a grin. "Perez says we can't put you away until we make one more video. He wants you back on the

wall."

They lifted him out of the box and he closed his eyes in gratitude. He looked for an opening as they tore away the duct tape from his arms. But the moment his right wrist was free of tape they clapped the cuff on it, and then before he was even free of the tape on his left arm, the moment his wrist was visible, they clamped the cuff on it. Then before they untaped his legs, they attached the cuffs back to the bolt in the wall.

Cutting the tape off his legs was always a slow process so they left one man to do it. And it was the food and water guy.

Eric tried to calm himself and use his brain. Which was hard because he felt sluggish and slow-witted. "What's your name?" Eric asked him.

"Joel," he replied.

"Joel, how did you come to be involved with Perez?"

Joel shrugged. "I needed the money. My cousin was in prison with Perez. He got me to help. They didn't tell me they were gonna hurt you. Or take you somewhere to die in that box. They just said they needed someone to take care of you while they arranged for the money to be delivered."

"And now, even though you see what's gonna happen, you're still gonna go through with it?"

He looked apologetic again. "I have no choice."

Joel finished cutting the tape away from young Eric's legs and stood. "I'm sorry. But they will find you. I'll make sure of it."

"Joel, I cannot go back in that box. I can't."

"I can't help you with that. I have to go get the other roll of duct tape to tape your legs to the chair, or I could be the next one to get buried. And it won't be in a box. Vuelvo enseguida." *I'll be right back.*

"Wait. Is Perez coming back before I get put in the box?"

"Perez is back. He's out in his car giving directions to someone who will be texting with your father. But then he is leaving because it will almost be time."

"When is he leaving?"

"Can't say for certain."

"Approximately. Another hour. Two hours?"

"He should be leaving in about an hour. I'll go get the tape."

Eric watched him go. His heart was pounding. His breathing labored. What was he gonna do?

Fight, Eric. Fight hard.

He swallowed. Nodded. His legs were currently free. Now is his only chance, because he was NOT going back into that box. He'd rather be dead.

Joel came back with tape.

"Just one more question," Eric said.

Joel nodded.

"Do you have keys to these cuffs in your pocket?"

"Si, I do, but I'm not gonna take them off, so you really must put it out

of your mind."

He bent down next to Eric's legs to start taping, but Eric moved like the cobra. In a swing of his legs he had Joel's head in a death vise. Joel used his fist to pound on Eric's thigh, but it had no more impact than a fly to Eric. He squeezed his muscles. "Do you feel how I can easily cut off your air completely?"

Joel grunted a small 'si.'

"Listen to me carefully. I can snap your neck in a split second or I can let you live and all you have to do to live is reach inside your pocket and put the cuff key in my hand."

"No, they will kill me."

"I'll kill you too, and then I can use my feet to get the keys from your pocket. I will kill you, Joel, because I'm not going back into that box. I don't want to kill you; I'd like to spare your life if only for the kindness you've shown me. But I will kill you. What is it gonna be?"

Joel hesitated, so Eric began to squeeze. Joel's eyes started to roll into the back of his head, and Eric loosened his grip. "Running out of time, Joel." He began to tighten again.

Joel reached into his pocket, pulled out the keys and reached up as high as he could and was barely able to place them in Eric's hand.

Eric grunted as he kept the pressure on Joel's neck and concentrated on unlocking both cuffs. His pounding heart calmed a bit when he finally did it. He immediately let Joel loose from his legs, but quickly put him in a headlock. "Sorry. This is just to give me some time." He squeezed until Joel lost consciousness, and then laid him on the floor and quickly taped his arms behind his back, and then his legs together and lastly, put tape over his mouth. Eric slipped stealthily out of the large door into the corridor.

There were four doors and he had no idea who or what was behind each one. And he felt like he had to clear his way. So, he opened the first door to his left. The room was empty. He closed it and opened the door on his right. Nothing but a couple of mattresses on the floor and some bedding. Just as he closed that door two of the seven dwarfs came running down the corridor at him. One had a gravity knife, the other seemed to be unarmed, but was very large.

The one with the knife charged right in, but Eric merely kicked a low kick into his knee at just the right moment and the guy cried out and fell to the ground. Broken kneecap. His knife fell from his grip and Eric only had time to kick it aside as the big guy came at him.

He was big but no match for Eric's speed or strength. Eric punched him a dozen times, and he fell. But when he did, he grabbed the knife from the floor. He swung. Eric dodged, until he was able to grab his wrist. He twisted, actually jumped into a flip and broke his wrist and took the knife. Unfortunately, the broken wrist didn't seem to stop him. He tried to grab Eric and put him in a headlock but Eric made his way to the man's back and as

he'd been taught, he ran that knife across the guy's carotid artery. Blood spurted. The man fell to his knees and then fell face-first onto the ground.

Eric stood there breathing hard, looking at what he'd just done. There was an ache, in his heart, in his stomach, but he'd been told to fight hard. And he did. He was not going back in that box.

He looked up to see two more come charging at him. One of them had no weapon, and the other was gun guy. The one with no weapon simply charged Eric. He was easy to side step, spin, and kick him in the throat. He was down, maybe for good, because Eric had not held back and he was pretty sure he crushed the guy's trachea.

The gun guy walked slowly up to Eric with a smile on his face. He had the gun pointed at Eric's head as he loved to do.

"Whaddya gonna do now, huh Kino?"

Eric moved closer. "The question is, what are YOU gonna do? Shoot me now and you'll never get your money. So, how do you think you're gonna subdue me? Huh?"

The guy stepped closer. Which is what Eric wanted.

"I could just shoot you right between the eyes right now, and that would almost be worth losing the money."

"Yes, or..." Eric moved with blinding speed and flipped the gun from the hands of gun guy into his own. "Or I could shoot you." He smiled. "Or we can walk back into that back room and I'll tie you up, or, uh, tape you up, and you can wait it out. That's your only option if you want to live."

The guy lunged and Eric pulled the trigger. The guy was surprised, that much was obvious. He sank down. Eric hit him square in the chest, and he couldn't help but think of his grandfather. He shuddered. But another guy came running into the mine, yelling. Eric guessed he heard the gunshot. Eric yelled for him to stop, but the guy came right at him. And Eric pulled the trigger again, but only hit him in the arm. He fired one more time and got him in the chest. The guy dropped.

Eric glanced down at the 9MM in his hand. Out of bullets. Three bullets? He only had three bullets? Going back to his original plan, he opened the last door on the left and it too had a mattress on the floor but nothing else. Then he opened the door on the right and what he saw stopped him in his tracks.

Sitting in the room was another wooden box, and in the back left corner of the room, curled up with her legs drawn up to her chest, sat a little dark-haired girl. She blinked up at him with her beautiful brown eyes.

"Josie?" Eric said.

She rose and ran to him, throwing herself into his arms.

"Oh, baby girl. Oh, sweetheart."

She cried. Squeezed his neck with her arms in a death grip. "Don't leave me," she cried.

"Oh, honey, I won't. I got you now. I got you."

He hugged her tight. “Listen now, we have to get out of here. You stay right next to me, you hear? And do whatever I tell you to do. If I say sit, then you sit. If I say run, then you run. Got it?”

She nodded. “But I don’t wanna run without you.”

“You do what I say and if I tell you to run, that means I’ll catch up to you. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

He stood and set her on her feet. “I still haven’t found your father, and I don’t know how many others there are. So just stay by me. I may have to fight for a minute. Listen, when we walk out this door, don’t look at anything but me. Got it? Don’t look around, okay?”

“Okay,” she whimpered.

They left the room and started toward the opening to the mine. He’d already taken care of six guys. That means Perez could be the last one. Or there could be more that he didn’t know about.

They slowly stepped out into the daylight. There was a car that wasn’t there earlier, parked directly across from the opening. About forty feet away. It appeared to be empty. Joel said Perez was gonna leave again, in about an hour. And that was about twenty minutes ago. So, where is he?

The next instant he found out. Perez jumped out from behind a piece of old machinery, his large hunting knife raised to strike. “Go over there and sit,” Eric ordered Josie.

“You are not gonna ruin this for me,” Perez said.

Eric smiled. “I’m thinkin’ I already have. You are not gonna be able to get me into that box by yourself, and all your little dwarfs are done.”

“You think some fresh-faced little punk like you can best me in a real fight?”

“I just bested six guys. I’m pretty sure I can take you on.”

Perez swung the knife in a wide arc. Eric jumped back. The blade skimmed across his abdomen, making only a razor thin line of blood. Peter swung again with the same results. When he swung again, Eric grabbed Perez’ arm, and bashed his fist right into Perez’ nose. The man fell to his knees and Eric simply plucked the knife from his grasp and tossed it aside. Eric then helped Peter Perez up, let him come at him, spun and kicked him in the face. Peter fell again. Eric helped him up again and backhanded the man. Perez sprawled across the ground, but refused to give up. He grabbed at Eric’s ankle and Eric toppled down on top of Perez. That was fine with Eric because he wanted to hit him again and he did. He punched the man again, and again. Feeling his nose crunch under the force. Feeling his cheek break. Each time Eric struck the man, he felt vindication for the harm Perez had inflicted on a young, innocent girl.

Eric maneuvered in behind him and put him in a headlock, intending to choke him to death, but Perez spotted the knife and grabbed it up. He tried to thrust it into Eric’s side, but Eric caught him and held his wrist. They

rolled over. Perez was able to work his other hand onto the hilt of the knife. With all his strength, Perez used both hands to try to press it toward Eric's heart. Though Eric was weakened from his ordeal, he gave a last push, flipped Perez onto his back and shoved the knife deep into his chest. Perez tried to move, to get up, but Eric held him there until he stopped moving.

Young Eric struggled to his feet, looking down at the man who'd just cost so many people their lives. The large knife protruding from his chest was a fitting end to such evil. Eric's eyes shifted to little Josie, a look of horror on her face. He went to her, blocking her view. Sat next to her. Put his arm around her.

"It's over, sweetie. All over."

Remembering what he needed to do next, he stood, went to Perez, and started checking his pockets. He pulled a cell phone from one of his pants pockets, and went back to stand near Josie.

He called Jason.

"This is Jason," Jason answered because he didn't recognize the number.

"Jason, it's me."

"Eric?" Jason's voice broke.

"Are you cryin' over me, Uncle Jason?"

Jason cleared his throat. "Eric, they got Josie. Have you seen her?"

"She's with me."

"Thank God. Where are you?"

"I don't know. A Mexican gold mine. I have no idea where it is. Can you trace this phone?"

"Yes I can. Hold on, we'll be there shortly. We got choppers everywhere looking for you. Are you safe? What's your status?"

"I just took out seven dwarfs. I'm sorry, Uncle Jason, but most of them are dead. I don't think there's anyone else."

"Okay, Eric, you did what you had to do. Listen, I gotta call your father. Stay on the line. I'm gonna patch you through."

"Hello, Jason. Choppers find anything yet?" Ricky said as soon as he answered his phone.

"No, not yet. But someone wants to say hi. Go ahead."

"Hey, Dad."

Silence.

"Dad?"

Ricky cleared his throat, sniffed. "Yes, son. You okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he has Josie," Jason added.

"Thank God. Where's Perez?" Ricky asked.

"He's lying in a puddle of blood about ten feet from me."

"Okay. We'll get all the info later. I don't want your mother or sister or girlfriend or brothers to suffer another minute. Jason, can you patch us

through to Bree?"

"Yes I can. Hold on."

"Hey, Jason," Bree said tearfully. "Tell me you know something. Anything."

"I know something. Go ahead."

"Hi, Mom," young Eric said softly.

Bree gasped, which got everyone's attention. She put her phone on speaker. "Eric? Is that really you," she cried.

Logan and JoJo looked at each other and then hugged each other.

Gabe and Taylor did the same.

"Yes, Mom, it's me," he said, his voice choking with emotion. "Is Jordan with you?"

"I'm here," Jordan said. "I love you," she said desperately, as if she wasn't sure she'd get to say it again.

"And I love you too," Taylor said loudly.

"I love you too. Both of you. And, well, listen—"

They heard some mumbling and then a soft voice.

"Hi Jordan."

"Josie! Oh thank goodness," she broke down and cried.

There was another shriek in the room followed by crying as Jewell and Jamie hugged each other.

"Eric saved me."

"Oh, baby girl," Jewell said. "Oh, Eric thank you."

"Listen I wanna talk to everyone, but not right now. I have to stay aware just in case I didn't get them all. So, Jason is sending a chopper to pick us up. I'll tell you all everything later. Jason are you still on the line?"

"I'm here."

"Listen, there's a bunch of dead guys, and I do NOT want to go back to jail because of some misunderstanding. So, I need the FBI and the Federales, and Ameritech as witnesses, to come here while I'm here and let me tell them exactly what went down. Can we make that happen?"

"We can."

"Good. I'm gonna hang up now. Not feeling too well."

"Are you injured?"

"Not too bad. A few little knife cuts. Might have a concussion. I'm dizzy and nauseated and I'm gonna just sit down here and try to keep my eyes open."

"Okay, well, don't hang up. You don't have to talk, but don't hang up. You should hear a chopper within the next ten minutes. Can you make it?"

"Yes, sir. And I got Josie here to take care of me."

Josie looked up at him and smiled.

"I know," young Eric went on. "Can Josie, uh," he stopped, drew a labored breath, "can she talk to her family while I just sit here?"

"Yes, they're still on the line."

"Josie?" Jewell said. "Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Oh, sweetie. I was so worried about you. Were you scared?"

"I was really scared. And that man that got me, he was so mean. And he hit me."

"Oh Josie, I'm so sorry. There are bad people in this world."

"There are good people too, Mommy, like Eric. He saved me."

"What about Peter, Josie? Where is he?"

"He's over there, on the ground. He tried to kill Eric with a knife."

"Oh honey, and did Eric beat him up?"

"Yeah. He beat him up real bad."

"Don't you worry, sweetie, he'll go back to jail and he won't bother you ever again."

"No, Mom, he won't go to jail— because he's dead."

Ricky butted into the conversation. "Sounds like some people are gonna need some counseling and I need to hang up and call Dad," Ricky said. "Jason, keep me in the loop."

"Call your Dad with the good news. I got this."

✞✞✞

1 Peter 5:10

"And after you have suffered a little while,
the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal
glory in Christ, will himself restore,
confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

Chapter Thirty-Five

October 21st 8 PM EDT, Monday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan Tanner put down his phone and looked around the den at all the anxious eyes of his daughters and wife with a smile. "Gabe says hello and he loves you and misses you."

"I want Gabe," Iris said softly.

Lizzy nuzzled her two-year-old's head. "I know baby," she whispered. "Me too."

"Da-ad, come on, how is Eric?" Rose demanded.

Keegan smiled. "Young Eric is resting comfortably in the hospital. One of the cuts to his chest was infected and he's being treated for that infection. He has a concussion and he had several knife cuts that were very shallow, all cleaned up and bandaged, no stitches needed. He's gonna be fine and they're actually gonna let him go home in a few hours. They want to watch him a little longer because of the concussion and the drugs found in his bloodwork."

"Which were?" Lizzy asked.

"Propofol and midazolam."

Lizzy shook her head. "Stupid idiots, they could've killed him."

"Yeah, no one yet has made mention that Peter Perez was smart."

"I'd be mad at him if he wasn't dead," Rose said. "But I guess I shouldn't judge."

"That's right, Rosey," Vi put in. "It's between him and God now."

"So Dad," Daisy began, "how is Eric gonna feel, I mean, about killing all those guys? Is he gonna have a hard time?"

Keegan sighed. "He's gonna have to work through some emotions and he might need a little therapy. Still, if enough people make him understand that he did what he had to do to survive and ended up saving little Josie's life at the same time, he'll eventually accept it. Like Grandmaster Kino likes to say, young Eric is one of God's warriors, and he had to do something hard, and he did what he had to do. Honestly, I'm personally really glad that he took out Perez and Jordan doesn't have to live in fear anymore."

"Me too," Rose said.

"That Jordan, what a sweet girl," Lily said. "I really like her. And now, from what Taylor says, she and Eric are madly in love."

"Well, that happened fast, didn't it?" Rose said.

"I guess when it's right, it's right, huh sweet girl," Lizzy said as she bounced little Iris on her knee.

"Yeah, unless you get fooled," Rose said bitterly.

"The right guy will come along for you, Rose," Keegan said firmly. "You just keep being you. God will send you a fine young man when the time is right."

"Heck if I wasn't three years older than young Eric I would've been interested in that," Rose admitted.

Lily giggled. "Wouldn't we all?"

"Yes, we would, or in JoJo or Logan," Daisy said with a grin.

Violet laughed. "Lily used to call them the three hotties."

Keegan only slowly shook his head.

"You guys know that JoJo kissed Laynah a few times?" Rose said.

"I heard it was the other way around," Violet put in.

"Well, that wouldn't surprise me," Rose laughed.

"Speaking of Laynah, how's she doing today? When I spoke to her yesterday she was pretty upset."

"She's a little better," Lizzy said. "She was worried about her mother because she was having some contractions, but they subsided. And of course, what was really bothering her was Jake finally shipped out. He left *Camp Pendleton* and he's now out of the country and she hasn't been able to call him and so that means that she has no idea what he's facing."

Everyone turned to look at Keegan.

He shook his head. "It's been a long time since I was there, ladies, but I hear it's not much better, maybe worse in some ways. Since we pulled out, the Taliban has grown stronger. Al-Qaeda cells have expanded. But Jake isn't there to battle them. He's there as an escort to help find several missing contractors and expats, some medical personnel, and such. They got trapped, and they need an escort to get them out of the country."

"Well, that sounds very dangerous to me," Violet said.

Keegan sighed. "I don't want you worrying Laynah, so you don't say anything to her, but yes, it's very dangerous. So keep Jake and his team in your prayers."

"We will," Daisy said softly.

"And keep Aunt Lisa in your prayers too. She's holding on, but if she's having contractions, she might not be able to hold on much longer," Lizzy said.

"Gosh, Mom, ya know, it's hard to love and care for so many people," Lily said.

Lizzy smiled. "Ya think?"

Keegan smiled.

"But," Lizzy added. "It's a lot easier when we place our trust in God. We have to truly let go of our expectations, and accept that God's plan will unfold just the way it's supposed to. Like when we were praying for young

Eric. I had to let go of the desperation I felt as I was begging God to save him. I actually felt him whisper, 'let go, Elizabeth.' And I did. I had to remember, if young Eric dies, then he will be in the arms of Jesus. A hard thought, but I accepted it. I let go of my will and let God's will be done. And when I did, I felt a peace come over me. I think letting go, not only helps us, but it helps God's plan to unfold."

"Elizabeth, my love, you never cease to amaze me," Keegan said softly.

The girls all smiled. They all knew that if they could find a guy even close to the man their father was, who could love them the way their father loved their mother, life would be heaven.

Violet had thought that maybe she had. She'd been dating Agent CJ Blackmon for several months now. He'd actually told her father that he loved her and hinted that he had intentions of marrying her. Every minute they spent together was exciting and new. She was definitely in love with him, and they were getting closer, but she wondered if maybe he didn't feel about her the way she felt about him. She wondered if maybe his definition of love was different than hers. She just wasn't sure. Maybe she needed to have a mother/daughter talk. Her mom always helped her to see things in a simpler way.

✞✞✞

October 21st 5 PM PDT, Monday Evening

L.A. Memorial Hospital, Los Angeles, California

Young Eric opened his eyes to see JoJo and Logan looking down at him. He blinked several times.

"Guys? Am I dreaming?"

"Yes," Logan said dramatically. "You're dreaming and it's the best dream ever because your brothers are with you."

Eric smiled. "No offense, bro, but if it was the best dream ever, it would be Jordan I'm looking at, and I wouldn't be in this bed alone."

They laughed. "So, are you having that thing, the thing Agent Tanner and Jeff Davis talk about?" Logan asked.

"That, I need to have sex thing? It's called something like primal post trauma horny something."

"Yeah, I don't think that's what it's called, but yeah, that thing," JoJo said.

Eric shrugged. "I might be. If she were to walk in that door right now, I might have to ask you guys to leave, hospital or not."

They laughed. "Bro, you know that's how Gabe was conceived."

"Yeah, I know. And I know that Gabe knows. And I also know that Mr. Tanner doesn't know that Gabe knows."

Logan frowned. "I was thinkin' about that the other day. I wonder how Gabe feels about that, you know, the fact that his parents weren't married when he was conceived. I mean, I know he was surprised by the information."

JoJo nodded. "He's our little brother and I think we need to ask him about that. Even if it's just to show that we care how he feels about stuff. I mean, my father wasn't married to my mother either, when I was conceived. So we have that in common. We should talk to him about it."

"Let's remember to do that," Eric agreed. "The cool thing is, our parents weren't perfect and still, they overcame and got back on the right path. I think that's pretty cool. Besides, the way I'm feeling right now, I think I can understand how it happened."

They got quiet a minute.

"So, tell us about it, Eric. How bad was it?" JoJo asked.

"It's really too much to tell right now. It's a long story and I'm really tired. But we def need to do a debriefing, the four of us. The brothers."

"By the way, speaking of Gabe. He was strong. He got the whole world to pray for you."

Eric smiled. "Of course he did."

"And the last one," Logan said, "the last Zoom prayer circle, it was scheduled for noon today, and it was just before noon that we found out you were okay. So, Gabe still went on the call, I mean, we all did, but Gabe handled it. He told everyone the good news about you and about Josie. And then he reminded people that when God answers our prayers, we need to remember to say 'thank you,' so he led everyone in a prayer of thanks. It was awesome."

"Yeah," JoJo added. "And then Isla told us about one of her followers who was in a car accident yesterday and clinging to life and so we prayed for him. And then Gabe congratulated all of Isla's and his own followers who were so dedicated and such great prayer warriors and said he was gonna make a new group on his site, and that you will be able to sign up to be a prayer warrior and that whenever they hear of someone who needs prayers, they will get a notification of who and why and a time to all pray. He said that the group on that Zoom call may not know it, but they are one of the most powerful groups in the world and he hoped they'd all sign up to be *Prayer Warriors*."

Eric smiled. "He never ceases to amaze me."

Logan glanced at his watch. "Wow, it's almost dinner time. And suddenly, I'm starved. It's so weird. When we woke up this morning we were all really anxious, really worried, really stressed man, no one could force themselves to eat. And now, I'm so freakin' happy and I wanna eat and celebrate."

"Yeah, a lot can happen in a day," Eric said softly.

"Well, I have to call my coach and let him know I will be at practice tomorrow."

"Oh, JoJo, I wasn't thinking. You didn't go to practice today? Did you play your game Saturday?"

"Yeah, but I shouldn't have. I played like crap and we lost."

"Oh man, I'm so sorry, bro. That's my fault."

"Yeah," JoJo said sarcastically. "It's your fault. Would you please stop gettin' yourself drugged and kidnapped and jailed and stuff like that?"

"I'll do my best."

"I'd appreciate that," Jordan said as she came in the door, her beautiful smile lighting up the entire room.

"Hey, Jordan," Eric said reverently.

"Hey, Three," she said softly. She looked at JoJo and Logan. "According to the nurse, one of you has to leave if I'm gonna be here."

JoJo laughed. "According to Eric, we both have to leave. Come on Logan, let the *man* do his thing."

Eric chuckled. "See you guys later."

They both squeezed his hand firmly and took their leave.

Jordan smiled sweetly. "I'm sorry, I couldn't come see you earlier. Your family was in here and I used the time to go see Josie."

He crooked a finger at Jordan. "Come here."

Smiling, she came close to his bed, leaned over and kissed him, and the tears came. "Oh, Three, I love you so much, and I was so scared."

"I love you too, baby. Don't cry." He smiled at her. "I have a mind to pull you into this bed with me. I need to be close to you."

"You can pull me anywhere you want," she said with a sigh. She studied him a moment. "How are you feeling?" she asked, taking note of the bandages on his chest and stomach.

"Better. I have a concussion from someone smashing my head against a concrete wall. I have a small infection in one of the cuts on my chest. I'm on some of Aunt Jeffy's meds in place of the antibiotics. The blood tests showed that I'd been injected with both propofol and midazolam. They're just keeping me for observation right now, but I'm going home sometime this evening."

"I know you're happy about that."

"Yes, I am, but, I'll be happier if you come stay at my house tonight."

She smiled. "Me too. Much happier. I can't stand the thought of being away from you." Tears formed again. "I thought I'd lost you. I thought me coming into your life was what killed you."

"What?"

"You know, because like, Peter wouldn't know you if not for me."

He sighed. "Everything happens for a reason, babe. You and I were meant to be together. God placed us together. And when the dark forces of this world saw that, well, they couldn't let two people of light get together and make more light, so they commissioned their minions, like Peter Perez, to do their work. You can't blame yourself. And you can't let the demons of this world scare you and keep you from doing what you know God wants you to do."

"And what does God want me to do?"

He smiled. "Well, my baby, that's a question that everyone asks. And I could easily answer that for you, but that wouldn't be right, because my answer would be a little biased. So, that means you have to pray more, develop that relationship with Him, and ask God specific questions. He'll answer you. He'll give you a knowing. Or an idea. A dream. Something. You just have to learn to know His voice. Lots of times, people pray and say God never answers them, but it's because they're not really listening. They're not recognizing the messages He sends. The more you pray, the stronger the signal gets." He stopped. Grinned. "Wow, I really went off, didn't I?"

She smiled. "That's okay. I love when you go off."

He chuckled. "So, how's Josie?"

"She's good. They checked her over. She also had a concussion."

"From what?"

"Oh, I guess you don't even know what happened. I mean how they got Josie."

"No, I don't. All I know is I opened that door and there she was. I did hear that she wasn't taken the same time as me."

"They took her from school just this morning. Some guy in a suit pulled a fire alarm and then followed Josie's class out the back door. He called her name. When she answered, he hit her in the jaw and knocked her out, threw her over his shoulder and took off. He had a car waiting for him in a neighborhood that runs behind the school. That punch to the jaw gave her the concussion. A mild one."

"Well, that guy in the suit, I took him out this morning. He won't be bothering anyone anymore."

"Good. He deserved what he got. Anyway, other than a concussion, Josie's good, at least physically. Grandmaster Kino says she's gonna need some therapy, because like, being grabbed and taken from her school, she's gonna have traumatic stress. And also because of the things she saw."

Young Eric nodded. "I'm sorry about that. I had no choice. It was a very gruesome scene. It was bad. That sweet little girl shouldn't have to see something like that."

"She's so grateful for you. You will be her hero for life. And Grandmaster Kino also said *that you* too are gonna need some therapy, even if you only want to just speak to *him*."

Young Eric rolled his eyes. "'Just speak to *him*.' He says that like he isn't the best person to help me. But he's the only person I would want to talk to about it. Well, and my father. But really, my father usually mirrors everything Granddad says anyway. I wonder if Dad realizes he's received a PhD in psychology by proxy."

Jordan sighed. "Three, let's get real a minute." She watched his eyes change, watched his face fall. "I mean, I've heard what happened. I heard that they tried to bury you. And I heard what you had to do. I heard."

He swallowed. "I, uh, don't really want to talk about it right now."

"I heard you killed five people."

"Yeah, I found that out when we went over the scene."

"Five out of seven," she continued. "All but a guy you had all taped up back in the room where they held you, and a guy who got his knee broken."

He only nodded. Blinked a few times as he remembered what happened just earlier today. It seemed like it was weeks ago.

"Yeah, when the FBI and Mexican police got there, I had to go back to the room and start the whole explanation. Every single thing that happened. Everything they did to me, and everything I did and why. I remembered kicking one guy in the throat while I was fighting. I remembered wondering if he was gonna make it. He didn't." He looked away as he remembered what he'd done.

"Three," Jordan said softly. "You did what you had to do."

He nodded. "I know that. I prayed. I asked God to help me, and He told me to fight hard. Fight hard. So I did. But it still doesn't change the feeling I have, which I really can't explain. I took a man's life. I took five men's lives. Me. Mr. Nice Guy. Mr. Think Positive." His eyes filled.

"What would have happened if you didn't?"

He blinked the tears back. "I don't know. I guess Josie and I would be suffering in our own personal hell right now, stuffed in a wooden box, buried under ground, not able to move, waiting and wondering if anyone would ever find us." He shuddered. "When they put me in the box that first time, it was only for a few minutes. A few minutes and I completely fell apart. I asked God to take me home. To end my life. I couldn't face it." He looked up at Jordan and shrugged. "Guess that kinda makes me a coward, doesn't it?"

"What are you saying? No, of course not!"

"I would rather die than to face that hell and maybe try to get back to you. That sounds pretty cowardly to me."

"When people are on fire, the only thing they're thinking about is to put out the fire. And we don't think they're cowardly because they want to put out the fire, do we? No. That's all you were doing, Three. You were asking God to put out the fire. I don't blame you for that. I'm not what you would call claustrophobic, but the idea of being in a tiny box and buried underground, that is a nightmare to anyone, and no one would blame you for wanting a speedy death rather than a long, torturous death. Please, Three, please wipe those thoughts from your mind. You are not diminished in my eyes in any way. You are brave, and strong, and good. You're good, Three. You're special. And I love you. And God loves you."

His eyes filled again. He drew a few deep breaths to clear the emotions. Then suddenly, he realized something and smiled. "Jordan, did my grandfather tell you that you need to get me to talk about what happened?"

She gave a soft laugh. "Um, maybe."

He laughed. "Well, good job on that, Two-Three."

✞✞✞

October 22nd, 1:00 AM, Tuesday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric knew he'd slept for a few hours. He lay there, being grateful to be in his own soft bed, with his arms down by his side, clean, warm and dry and if he wanted to, he could get up and go use the bathroom on his own. It's amazing, he thought, what we take for granted.

He sighed. He'd hoped Jordan would come slip into bed with him, but he'd fallen asleep. Maybe he should go to her. Making the decision before the night got away from them, he rose, pulled on some sweatpants and tread quietly across the hall, opened her door and peeked in. She wasn't in bed so he walked farther into the room to see if she was in the bathroom. Not there either. He turned and headed downstairs to the kitchen. Hmm, not there either. So, he tiptoed into the den. Not there either. His heart started to beat a little harder. He had to remind himself that Perez was dead.

He peeked out the kitchen window to see if she was on the beach, but she couldn't have opened the door without security knowing it, and certainly, he'd taught her a lesson about walking alone on the beach at night. So, where is she? He headed downstairs to see if maybe she's in the theater room, or—" He stopped when he heard the sound of metal clanging. Immediately he went to the workout room and breathed a sigh of relief. He walked in as she was just lifting the barbell from its cradle. He stood there and watched her push out twelve reps. He quickly eyed the weights.

She finished and sat up. "Hey, Three."

He nodded. "185. Not bad."

She smiled.

"But too much for you to be down here working out on your own."

She frowned. "Sorry. But I couldn't sleep and I needed to do something. I guess I have a lot of pent-up energy."

He frowned. "You could have come to me."

"I did. You were so sound asleep I couldn't bring myself to wake you up knowing what you'd been through and thinking you needed your rest."

He came forward, straddled the bench where she sat and sat down. "What I needed, what I *need*, is you."

"Well, you have me."

He pulled her forward. "Well, now that I'm here, can I get a proper kiss?"

She smiled. "You don't ever have to ask."

He took her face in his hands and sighed in pleasure. Just being able to touch her soft cheeks, to look into her eyes, when he thought maybe he'd never see her again, it was so wonderful. He touched his lips to hers. And the moment he did, his whole body surged forward.

He groaned, she moaned as they deepened the kiss. But the kiss was interrupted by a large growl coming from Eric's stomach. He pulled away with a chuckle. "I'm hungry. Wanna help me raid the refrigerator?"

"Sounds like fun."

He took her hand and they went upstairs to the kitchen. Eric went to the refrigerator. "So, you want good for you stuff or just good stuff?"

"Hmm, what's the good for you stuff?"

"Well, I could make you a sandwich. Or, we could cut up some fruit. Or I could scramble you up some eggs."

She frowned. "And what's the good stuff?"

"Well, there's some butter pecan ice cream, which sounds a little plain, but I always cover mine with chocolate syrup and whipped cream. Or, there's some white chocolate macadamia nut cookies and with a cold glass of raw milk, that is really good too."

"I'll take the ice cream," she said, licking her lips.

He smiled. "Good choice." Young Eric quickly dished out two bowls, brought them to the table with spoons and chocolate syrup and whipped cream. They sat at the kitchen table, side by side.

Eric smiled as Jordan squirted chocolate syrup over her ice cream until it was swimming, and then added a huge mound of whipped cream. She scooped up a huge spoonful and stuffed it in her mouth.

"Ummm, this really hits the spot," she purred.

He was so intrigued he couldn't speak.

She looked up at him. "What?"

He grinned. "Do you think ya got enough chocolate on there?"

She laughed. "Hmm, maybe not." She grabbed the syrup and squeezed more over top of the whipped cream.

He laughed. "Ahh, Jordan, you are adorable, ya know that?"

She giggled.

"So, why were you having trouble sleeping?"

She shrugged. "So many emotions running through my brain. I mean, Peter's gone, that's a relief, but it's also weird. It's like, he's always been there, like, even when he wasn't around, I could always feel his presence. Now he's gone. And now, I thought I lost you and here you are sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of the night, eating ice cream. How cool is that?" She giggled at her pun.

He shook his head. "When you make your dad jokes, I fall more and more in love with you."

She smiled up at him as she scooped up another big spoonful of ice cream. "What woke *you* up?" she asked with her mouth full.

"I don't know. But when I woke up, I realized you didn't come to my room and that made me very sad. I also realized that my arms weren't suspended over my head and I could actually feel them."

Jordan nodded. "Wow, I didn't think of that. I want you to tell me every single thing that happened. Every single thing you went through."

"Why?"

"I need to be able to understand what you went through. Because I love

you and I just need to understand."

"Well, I'm not sure that I really want to talk to you about it."

"You don't have to tell me it all at one time. Just a little at a time. Like, you just told me that you lost the feeling in your arms from them being suspended over your head. That's all you need to say this time."

He frowned. "We'll see. And you know what, Jordan? I want to know what you went through too. I wanna know from the moment you realized something happened and through to the moment I called."

"I was in so much shock, I'm not sure I can remember everything I went through. I'll tell you one thing, though. That JoJo, your brother, he stayed by my side. He made me eat and drink and shower and even join everyone on the beach. He said it was what you would want him to do, and even when I told him I wanted to be alone, he refused, because he had to honor his brother."

Young Eric smiled and his eyes filled again. It seemed he'd become an emotional wreck, but the thought of JoJo saying that, it touched his soul. "I'm, uh," he sniffed. "I'm glad he looked after you for me. He's a good guy. He was born six months before me. His mother died of brain cancer within a few weeks of his birth. His father, my Uncle Mark, didn't even know she was pregnant and had no idea he had a son."

"What?"

"Yeah. It was a strange time. His mother was like, a runaway and Grandma took her in off the streets, and she came to Uncle Mark's bedroom on his eighteenth birthday with the intention of relieving him of his virginity. Well, mission accomplished. There was actually a lot more to it than that, but it's a long story. Anyway, she left, went back to her home in Kansas, had JoJo, then she died, and her last wish was for her mother to take JoJo and give him to his father to be raised."

"Oh, bless her heart. I mean, her mother. She lost her daughter and then lost her grandchild too."

"Well, she didn't lose him. Mark and my grandparents, they said the only condition for them taking JoJo was that they, I mean JoJo's mother's parents, play a very active role in his life. And they paid for all of their expenses to come out here to visit whenever they wanted."

"Of course they did," Jordan said with a smile.

"And then when JoJo got old enough to visit them, he went to see them pretty regularly. And Mark pays for them to come and see JoJo's games whenever they can come. But I've gotten way off track. I was gonna say, when JoJo was brought to Uncle Mark, he was leaving to start college in Hawaii on a football scholarship. So JoJo lived with my grandparents for the first four years of his life. Grandma was the only mother type figure he's known, so he's really close to her. Anyway, since JoJo lived just a few minutes away, at my grandparents' house, we were like, always together. I spent the night with him on a regular basis, and he spent the night with me

here, on a regular basis. So, I mean, we really are like brothers. We're really close, though it may not seem like it because he's been like, 24-7 football for the past four years. And he's really close to Aunt Jeffy too, like a little brother to her, because she was only eight when he came to live with her parents."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. She's not that much older than you."

"I know it's hard to see that because her brain may as well be a hundred years older than me."

Jordan giggled. "I've said it before and I'll say it again, your family is really interesting. And it's weird to think, but they're not perfect, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, your Uncle Mark had sex before he was married."

"Yeah. It happens. And though he made a mistake, and talks about repentance and regret, he says JoJo was meant to be and the two of them are really close."

"Like you and your dad?"

"Oh absolutely. But Uncle Mark and JoJo are a lot closer in age. My dad was thirty-one when I was born. Uncle Mark was eighteen when JoJo was born."

She nodded as she finished her last bite of ice cream and then licked the spoon.

Young Eric watched her and felt his heart begin to race. He made himself settle down. She turned, looked into his eyes and smiled and then frowned. "What?" he asked.

She sighed. "I'm just looking at your face." She reached out and touched a bruise on his cheek. "As swollen as your eye was in that first video, I would've thought that you'd have a big shiner, but it doesn't look too bad. The swelling is down. You do have a bruise right here," she said as she gently touched his cheek right below his eye. "And you have a few scratches here," she said as she touched his other cheek and then his forehead.

He grabbed her hand, brought it to his mouth and kissed it. Smiling at her, he reached out and touched the edge of her mouth. "And you have some chocolate right here," he said softly. He leaned forward and kissed it away. Then pulled back and stared at her.

She sighed at the intimacy of the gesture and looked into his eyes. They were large, brown, and so kind, gentle, and compassionate. When he looked at her it seemed he could see into her soul. Her eyes shifted down to his mouth. His lips were full and perfect, his teeth straight and white, his smile beautiful. His jawline was very masculine, and he had two days' worth of beard. He'd probably shave that off in the morning, but for now, he looked very rugged and she didn't mind it at all.

He stood suddenly, picked up her bowl and put it in his bowl and put both spoons inside the top bowl and scooted them over to the side of the table. Then, he pushed the whipped cream and chocolate over next to the

bowls. Then he pulled her up out of her seat, turned her slightly, lifted her up and sat her on the table, pushing her chair out of the way.

She gasped when he lifted her and he put his fingers to her lips. "Shh," he said. "My parents' bedroom is right down that hall."

He moved forward, pushing her knees apart and stood in between them, then took her face in his strong hands and lowered his head.

He kissed her again, where the chocolate had been at the corner of her mouth. A soft tiny kiss. Then he kissed her bottom lip. Then her top lip, and finally, he took her mouth. Sighing, she reached her arms up around his neck and kissed him back.

The kiss was long, and heated, and Eric never wanted to stop kissing her. He wanted to do a whole lot more than kiss her. He wanted to show her just how much he loved her. He wanted to make her his. Completely his. He leaned forward and she gave a little squeal as he pushed her down onto the table and pressed close.

Jordan could feel his power, his need, his desperation. She could tell that he was on edge, even that he'd lost control a little. Whatever he needed, she was willing to give. Anything to help him overcome the trauma he'd just experienced. In honesty, her own trauma from the whole ordeal, between maybe losing the man she loved and losing her little sister, also needed to be soothed.

Ricky Kino heard something, sat up in bed, and decided to check out the house. He came down the hall and entered the kitchen. He shook his head. Jordan Brooks lay on the kitchen table. His son leaned over her, kissing her. Ricky watched for a moment or two, trying to decide if he should interrupt or just go back to bed. But then young Eric raised his head and placed his hands on Jordan's midsection, on her rib cage, just below her breasts. Ricky could tell his son was struggling, was contemplating his next move, should he or shouldn't he. Ricky had never been a coward and never shirked a responsibility. He decided to step in to help.

"Don't make a choice you'll regret," he said softly.

Young Eric sprang away from Jordan, who gasped, sat up quickly and got off the table.

"Dad!" young Eric exclaimed.

Ricky smiled apologetically. "Sorry guys. I heard a noise and came to investigate." He eyed the kids. Jordan's face was pink with embarrassment, and young Eric looked a little angry.

Ricky gestured toward the table. "You kids have a seat. Let's talk a few minutes."

It wasn't a question, it was a softly given command, and young Eric respectfully nodded his head, though he wanted to argue. He moved the bowls from the table and then held a chair out for Jordan who sat down.

Ricky smiled at his son and Jordan. "You might think my timing is bad, but I think it was perfect." He looked at Jordan. "Jordan, please forgive me

for being so bold, but I know you really haven't had much of a father's input since your own father passed away and I hope you won't mind if I give you a little counsel, from a completely loving, fatherly point of view."

She nodded. "No, of course I won't mind," she said warily.

Ricky then looked at his son. "Eric," he sighed a heavy sigh. "I realize that you are no longer a boy. You are now a man."

"I won't be twenty-one for a couple of months," he offered.

Ricky nodded. "I'm not talking about a number. I'm talking about what you've just been through, what you had to do to survive, how you came out on top. You've been thrust quickly and violently into manhood. Which may mean to you that you don't need, nor want my advice but I'm asking you to allow me to help you."

Eric sighed and nodded in concession. "Of course, Dad. I'll always want your advice. I always want to know what you have to say."

Ricky smiled. "I'm thinking you didn't feel that way just a few seconds ago."

Young Eric smiled and nodded, but didn't say anything.

"First off," Ricky continued. "I know what you're feeling. I know what it feels like to be taken from your family, to come close to death, to reconcile oneself to that death, to feel pain and fear. I get it. I understand some of, not all, but some of the feelings you're experiencing. There are actual physical, chemical and hormonal changes happening in your body. The Primal Post-War, Post Trauma Reaction Syndrome, is a real thing. How it affects you depends on your hormone levels, but for most military, first responders, police officers, they want, or more like they need, to do what you were just contemplating doing."

Young Eric's lips pressed together.

Jordan's brow creased in confusion.

Ricky nodded at her. "When people, usually men, but also some females, are faced with life and death situations and they survive, they sometimes feel an overwhelming need to have sex. For men, the drive is strong. Almost overpowering. I won't judge you, or blame you a bit, if after our talk here, you go upstairs and do just that. But hear me out first, okay?"

Eric nodded.

"I interrupted you two just now, because living in regret is a terrible thing. I love you both, and I don't want that for you. There are certain things we do, that we can't take back. Having our first sexual relations with the person we love is one of those things. I know I don't have to fill you in on God's commandments, His rules for our lives. And if you were to go ahead and break those rules, He would, of course, forgive you when you're truly repentant. It's not the sinning and the forgiveness though that I'm addressing.

"God gives us these rules not to restrict us, not as some power play, but because, in His infinite wisdom, He knows what is best for us and what will bring us the most joy, the most happiness. What happens between a man and

a woman is a beautiful thing. The intimacy is special. But if we do that randomly, or when we're not under the covenant of marriage, it takes away from its sacredness and makes it a common thing. The beauty is diminished. The act can still be gratifying and pleasurable, but the specialness is not there and the sacredness is gone.

"I know this from my own experience and I'm not proud of it. I have great regrets about it. Eric, I know that you know that your mother and I were not virgins when we got married."

Eric nodded. He'd been told that but he'd never been told the details, but apparently his dad was about to give him some of those details.

Ricky went on. "Women were always throwing themselves at me, because of the movies I did. I know you know that. I resisted for a long time. And finally, one night, at a time of weakness, feeling down, I gave in. Now, if I'd still been living at home, I mean at my father's house, it probably wouldn't have happened. But I thought I was some big man on campus and got my own place in Bel Air. I lost my virginity to a girl who only wanted to be able to say that she had sex with Ricky Kino." He stopped. Shook his head.

"Do you get that? I lost my virginity with a girl who meant nothing to me. I had a good upbringing. You have to know my father raised me to know right from wrong and set the example of an iron will, so there was no excuse. I simply was weak and I fell and the regret, I still feel it deeply. When you lose your virginity, it should be a special time. It should be with the woman you've vowed to always love. And if you wait until that woman is your wife, the joy you will feel on your wedding night is true bliss. That's why they call it wedded bliss." He sighed.

"Anyway, it gets worse. That girl, she wasn't the only one. I went down that road and completely lost myself. I'd been a Christian all my life but I chose to go down that road. I did because I was miserable. It was my friend Steve Reynolds, whom you know, Eric, who made me realize that I was miserable because I was in love with your mother. I always had been and always would be. In my heart, I knew that, but in my mind I thought she was unattainable. But Steve got through to me and convinced me that I needed to get my act together and go after the woman I loved.

"So, I went home. I had a long talk with my father, confessed to him what I'd been doing, and he set me straight. I repented for all of my indiscretions. I begged God for forgiveness and I felt so ashamed. My heart was so heavy. One of the reasons, maybe the main reason I felt so bad, was because I realized the whole world was watching me, and the whole world knew I was a Christian. So, how much harm did my indiscretions really cause? Who was searching and saw my example and wrote off Jesus because of me? That is a heavy weight. I had to make it right, so I had to let the whole world know that I'd broken God's rules. I willfully sinned. And I was sorry and I was repentant. This is something I never want either of you to feel or

experience, so, I'm hoping that by confessing these things to you, you can learn from my mistakes. But there is more to the story.

"As soon as I repented and felt like I'd taken on a new lease on life, your mom also arrived home from being away filming a movie on location. I was so happy to see her. We'd hardly seen each other at all in years. Maybe at a Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner. And even then, she wouldn't give me the time of day."

"Why?" Jordan asked.

Ricky smiled. "Well, I think I insulted her back when she was eighteen and she built up resentment from there."

Young Eric nodded. "That was when she asked you to take her virginity because she wanted to learn about sex and you refused because of your faith."

Ricky nodded. "Right. Way back then she wasn't a Christian, and she didn't understand it. We dated. She liked me but said she wasn't in love with me. I was immediately in love with her. But she was young and wanted time to date around and have some fun and get to know other guys and in that way get to know herself. She wanted me to have sex with her knowing that she didn't love me. I couldn't do it. I gave her the space she needed and since our parents got married and had a child together, she started labeling me as her brother. Or her step-brother. Either way, that label grew so that even if she did finally realize we were meant to be together, she felt like she couldn't stand the publicity of dating her step-brother."

"But everyone knew you weren't really related, right?" Jordan asked.

"Yes, but you know the press. They can be very cruel and compared us to Greg and Marcia Brady, from the Brady Bunch."

"Who's that?"

Ricky chuckled. "Never mind."

"It's a TV show where there's a blended family. They were step-siblings. I'll show you later," young Eric said with a smile.

"But what I'm getting to is that even though I'd just repented, I turned around and, well, I seduced your mother. I made the choice to do that because I couldn't think of any other way to get her to see me as a man and not as her brother. I'd made the decision to go after her and I was gonna do exactly that. I went after her with guns blazing."

"And I guess it worked," young Eric said with a smile.

"Yes, it did. And then I had to explain to your mom that we weren't gonna keep doing it until after she married me and that I needed to repent again because I wanted God's blessing on our union. That's when she began to really learn about God and Jesus and their plan for us. I mean, think about it. She may have never turned to Jesus if I hadn't repented again and told her about our needing to save it for the marriage bed. And your mom, Eric, she is amazing. Once she became a Christian, she went at it full force, because she doesn't do anything halfway. And now, she is so dedicated. I mean, you

heard her talk from a few weeks ago in Nashville. Your mother, my wife, she is amazing."

"I love the way you love her," young Eric said softly.

Ricky nodded. "I want the same thing for you and Jordan, whether you marry each other or someone else."

Jordan accidentally gave a slight gasp of indignation and young Eric reached over and took her hand and squeezed it, letting her know there won't be anyone else.

Ricky smiled and went on. "I don't want you to regret not doing things right. Because when you do it right, when you share that special intimacy reserved only for your wife, or your husband, it will glue you together for eternity. Because of what you share on your wedding night, it creates a bond that is almost unbreakable, that is— if you do it right."

Young Eric's eyes opened wide.

Ricky nodded. "Yes, I'm talking about caring for your wife's feelings and not just completing the act. Anyway, so what I'm saying is this, do it right. Wait. Resist temptation. Eric, I know what you and, actually, Jordan too, have just been through has been traumatic. You're feeling a certain way. You two be there for each other, but save the intimacy for that special time."

He looked directly at Jordan. "And Jordan, things are different for a man than they are for a woman. They get, um, aroused, much more easily than women do, and it's harder for them to resist temptation, so you, as a woman, can help him. I could see when I came into this room tonight, what he was contemplating, and I could also see that you were completely willing to give him whatever he asked of you."

She nodded and then looked down.

"It's okay. It's obvious you love Eric. It's natural for a woman who loves a man to want to please him, to want to give herself to him. That's how God made things. That's how He created us. But, you can help Eric by not being so willing. I heard what you said to those reporters a few weeks ago, that you would go to his bed willingly and often. I realize you said that to make them understand why he had no reason to drug you. Still, I felt like you were speaking honestly. So, I'm saying, you can help him by not being so willing. By discouraging him at times when you know things are getting a little too, uh, well, steamy.

"Ya know, a lot of girls get pregnant because not only are they willing to please their guy, but they're afraid to tell them 'no.' They're afraid that if they refuse, then the guy won't be interested anymore, and unfortunately, that's not a baseless fear. It's becoming pretty much the norm. Young ladies need to know that if a guy loses interest because she won't have sex with them, then that guy is not for them. That would mean he's only interested in his own self-gratification. Now, I know that's not the case with you and Eric. But looking at it from the male side of things, I ask you, don't make him have to shoulder all the responsibility. Help him. Tell him 'no.'"

Jordan nodded again.

Ricky glanced up at the clock. "Well, I've said what I wanted to say. You don't have to respond. And I fully expect you two to go upstairs and sleep together."

Both young people frowned in confusion.

"Yeah, this is where it gets into a gray area. I *should* tell you to go sleep in your own rooms. However, you've both been through an ordeal, especially you, Eric, and I totally don't want you to be alone when you can have the woman you love near you. I think you need that to help start the healing process. So, go, give comfort to each other. Love each other. Just don't *make* love to each other. Eric, I know you were angry with me when I first interrupted you. I hope you can forgive me. I'm your father, and I thought you needed some counseling."

Eric smiled. "I might've been angry for a second. But I love and respect you, Dad. I always want to hear what you have to tell me. And really, Dad, thanks for taking the time in the middle of the night. I know you haven't had much sleep over the past few days."

"No one has," Ricky put in. "But that's no big deal."

"And I wanna say thanks for one more thing, Dad. Thanks for recognizing that what happened to me, has changed me. I don't feel like an innocent little kid anymore."

"That's because you're not. You had to fight for your life. You did what you had to do. Still, don't let that change your outlook. Stay positive, stay focused, and keep your heart filled with love."

Eric smiled at Jordan. "That part is easy." He frowned. "I haven't even thought about the Challenge until you just said to 'stay focused.'"

"Well, about the Challenge. You can't train for at least a week to make sure your brain is healed. Then, you'll only have a few weeks to catch up. Do you want us to try to find a replacement?"

"You're kidding, right? After all I've been through? After how hard I've trained? I feel like I'm gonna crush it."

Ricky grinned. "I feel the same way."

"Dad, will you, like, will you stay by my side for the rest of training?"

"Why?"

"I—well—I don't know why I said that. I guess I just feel like I need you there."

"Okay, no problem." Ricky looked at Jordan. "I hope I haven't overstepped my bounds, Jordan."

"No, sir. I appreciate you including me in this discussion."

"Good. Then let me say one more thing. If you ever need to talk, like to a father figure, I can fill that gap for you. I know you're having therapy sessions with my dad, and he's the best, but I'm here, if you ever need me."

Her eyes misted. "Thank you, Mr. Kino."

"You're welcome." He stood. "I'm going back to bed. I know you're not

looking forward to it, but our family has a press conference tomorrow at noon. You guys try to get some rest. Eric, I want you to try to sleep as much as possible. No beach in the morning. Your brain needs sleep to heal. So, good night. Oh, and uh, you guys, do me a favor and wipe down that table before you go to bed."

Young Eric smiled and Jordan giggled. "Yes, sir," they both said.

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1 Peter 3:7

"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives
in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman
as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you
of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."

Chapter Thirty-Six

October 22nd, Early Tuesday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jordan awoke to the sound of Three grunting or moaning. She turned over to look at him. He was lying on his back. The gray light of dawn shone on his face. He was obviously under stress. His brow furrowed. His head tossing. She was a little afraid to wake him, but he sounded so pitiful, she decided to brave her fears. She reached up and touched his face gently.

"Three?" she whispered softly. "Hey, it's okay." She stroked his forehead. "Shh, it's okay."

His eyes blinked open. He was breathing hard, like he'd been running. He drew a deep breath, blew it out, and turned his head to look at her. "Wow, I had a dream."

She nodded. "I figured that was what was happening."

"I woke you up?"

"Yes."

"And then you woke me up?"

"Yes."

He smiled, thinking of the time she'd come in his room and he was so deep asleep in a dream that he pretty much attacked her in his sleep. "Were you afraid to wake me up?"

She smiled. "Yes."

He frowned. "I don't like that you're afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you, the regular you. But I *am* afraid of waking you up when you're having a bad dream. So, what were you dreaming?"

He frowned. "I don't think I wanna talk about it."

She remembered Grandmaster Kino had told her to get him to talk about his feelings as much as possible. "So, you don't trust me?"

He turned onto his side, brushed his hand over her face. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it means I'm thinkin' you don't trust me enough to tell me what you're feeling. What you're thinking."

"I see. Okay. Well, I'm not sure what I'm feeling or thinking. Maybe just reliving the horror of killing someone. I actually don't remember most of the dream. It seemed to be disjointed. Just different scenes. Pretty much, I think I was in the gold mine. I saw Josie. Then I was slitting that guy's throat. But in reality, I killed that guy before I found Josie. Then I was

stabbing Peter Perez in the chest, not just once, but over and over and he kept coming back to life."

"Wow. That *is* a nightmare." She shuddered as she imagined it.

"And now, you have those images running around in your brain. I don't think I need to share any more graphic dreams or memories with you, for your own protection. And I'm gonna tell Granddad to call you off."

When she didn't argue, he knew it was the right thing to do. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close and nuzzled her cheek.

She sighed. "This is nice. Normally, I'd be on my way to softball practice."

He frowned. "Are you going back tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I guess now that you're back safe and sound, I don't have any more excuses. It's weird. I don't usually have any problem taking care of my daily business. But all I want to do is be with you. Guess I'm gettin' lazy."

"It's not laziness. It's actually a part of shock and mourning. It's easy to fall into that. You've probably heard that when you're mourning someone's death, or, when you're simply depressed, it's hard to do even the simplest of things. Eat. Take a shower. Drink a glass of water."

"Yeah, that's how I was yesterday morning, when JoJo made me get up and go take a shower. I was also like that way back when, well back when all that happened with Peter. I couldn't do anything, which is why I actually missed a year of school."

He nodded. "Right. And really, if we're being fair, that was a little bit of what Peter was going through when he lost his job. I mean, I don't know how hard he tried to find another job, but if he tried and got turned down, depression probably set in. He might have been afraid. How is he gonna support his family? What is he gonna do? And then your mom had to start working extra jobs. He probably was feeling less of a man. But his mistake was he used alcohol to try to make the bad feelings go away. Once you start drinking, the demons start telling you that you're no good. You're a rotten human being. And you start to believe that and begin to act that out."

"How do you know so much about it?"

He smiled. "I had to do a high school project on the ills of drinking. Got most of my information from Granddad, but I also did a lot of research. Anyway, I'm back, and Josie's back, and we're all okay, and you no longer have to live in fear and so, everything is good and you can go back to school tomorrow and give your all at practice and in class."

She nodded.

Eric turned when his phone dinged. He grabbed it up, looked at it, then turned back to her.

"Message?" she asked.

"No. A calendar reminder."

"Of what?"

"I'm supposed to meet with Nick Sutter today at 3:00."

"Who's Nick Sutter?"

"He's the homeless guy I was gonna try to help."

"Oh. So, are you still gonna meet with him?"

He nodded. "Of course. The press conference is at noon. I should be able to make it with no problem."

"Your dad said you need to rest."

"I understand. But how much damage would it do to Nick if I say I'm gonna help him and then I don't show?"

"Yes, but what if you hadn't made it back by today?"

His brow furrowed. "Why ask a question like that? I am back, and thank goodness I can still meet with Nick."

She nodded. "So, what time do you have to leave for the press conference?"

"We."

"Hmm?"

"We. You're coming with me. You're part of this family. Your sister was also taken. And it was the man, Peter Perez, who was supposed to act like your father, who did all of it. I strongly believe that you should be there with me, by my side."

She blew out a breath. "Oookaay. I guess that's fair. But, like, why do you have to do a press conference anyway?"

"We don't have to, it's just good PR. A lot of people were concerned about what was happening. And a lot of those people prayed for our family and for yours too. And, there is a lot of misinformation out there, as usual. So, it's good to make a statement, answer questions and set everybody straight on what went down. And of course, since the people of our state and maybe of our country have their eyes on us right now, it's a good time to set a good Christian example and maybe spread the Word a bit. Every opportunity to do that should be taken."

She smiled. "You, and your family, you never cease to amaze me."

"Our family, Jordan. You are a part of this family."

"Am I really? Just because I'm your girlfriend?"

"You're not *just* my girlfriend. But let's not get into that right now. Let's get up, take a shower, have a prayer together, eat some breakfast and say hello to *our* family."

"Okay, but I just have one more question."

"Okay, what?"

"What does one wear to a press conference?"

He laughed.

✞✞✞

"I cling to you; your strong right hand holds me securely."
Psalm 63:8

✝✝✝

Again, don't worry! Circle of Life In Jesus' Name Part III picks up the very next day! So many amazing things take place within the span of a few weeks. Evil awaits around every corner, but God is so good all the time.

Dear Readers,

The Lord continued to pour out his love and wisdom on me, His lowly servant, and so Book #11, Circle of Life In Jesus' Name Part III picks up at the press conference, just a few hours after #10 leaves off. What happens after that? Well, some crazy stuff happens. We will continue to follow both the "west coast family" and the "east coast family" as they strive to live godly lives. Sometimes succeeding. Sometimes falling down. But always getting back up and back on the right path.

Rose Anderson opens the new Gabe Tanner Community Center. A stranger comes into town who will have a huge impact on the town of Pine Forest. Young Eric and his father meet a couple in desperate need of help, in need of family and in need of God.

New love blooms on both coasts. More importantly, we get a front row seat to watch as Jesus makes a way!

✝✝✝

Dear Father,

I am so grateful for the messages You gave me in the pages of this book. So many people wonder if You see them, like You saw young Eric in his jail cell. I pray that all who've read these pages find their own confirmations that You see them. I pray you will forgive us, heal us, acknowledge us and help our hearts and testimonies to grow a hundredfold. We love you Father God.

I personally am so very grateful for this mission You have set me on. When that Angel came to me and told me to write, and I irreverently replied, "write what?"... I had no idea that what You asked me to do would bring me so close to You, would give me such joy and fill me with so much conviction. On my knees, I praise You and worship You and I am so grateful for the calling You have given me. Thank You, thank You, thank You. This whole book series is titled In Jesus' Name because, Jesus, the only begotten Son, came to earth and taught us that no man comes to the Father but by Him. And so, I do everything in Jesus' holy and powerful name. And all of these words in every book of this series are written in Jesus' name, as well as this prayer. Because as always, I pray in Jesus' mighty name..... Amen.

✝✝✝

A Note from McCartney Green...

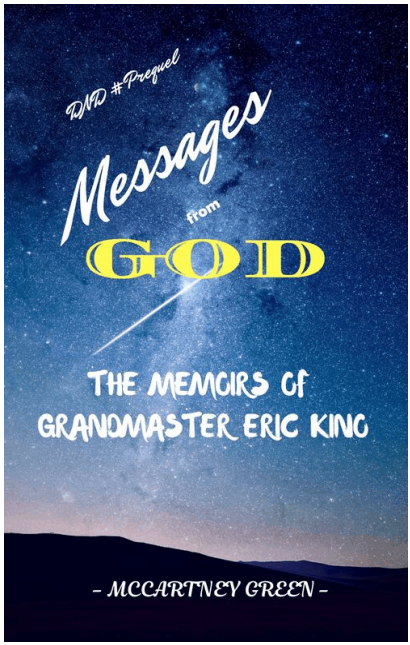
I will go where God leads me, I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

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 Tanner, 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."

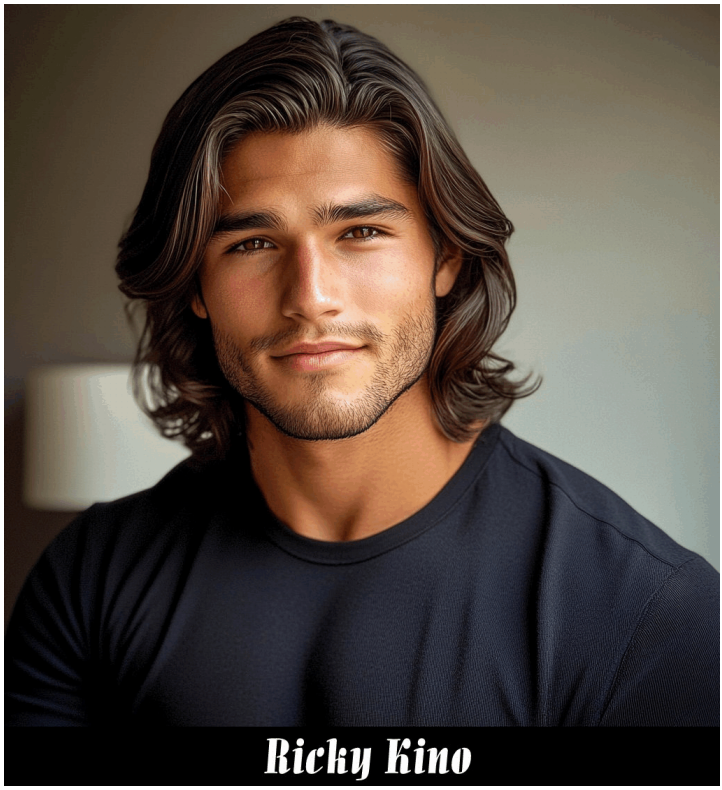
"I have read the first three books and I love them all. They are addicting! The problem is, I don't get enough sleep when I read them because I can't put them down! I am now having withdrawals because I don't have the 4th book. McCartney- you are great."

"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)"

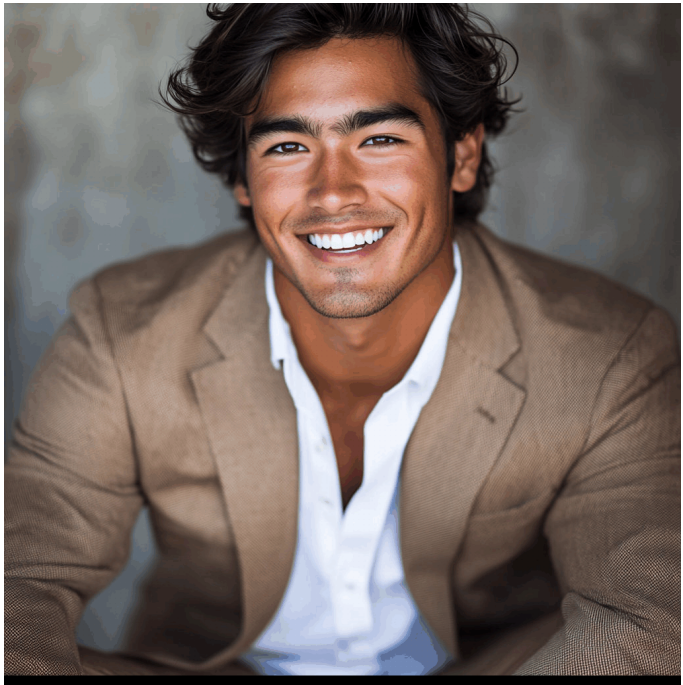
"Just wanted you to know I loved all your books. Now, I am doing something I only do with my all time favorites. I am going back and reading them again. Thanks for sharing your gift. P.S. You are the real deal!"

"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!"




Ricky Kino


Breanna (Bree) Adams Kino



Eric Kino III (Young Eric)

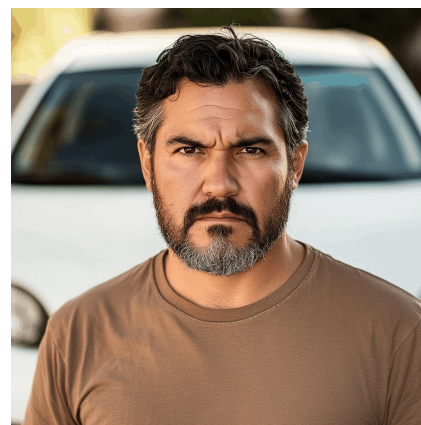


Jordan Brooks


Jamie Perez


Josie Perez


Jewell Perez


Peter Perez


Jackie


Colton

Continue with DND #11 Circle of Life - In Jesus' Name Pt 3

Sneak preview...

"We are not here to lie on soft mattresses or sit in
comfy chairs and be entertained.
We are here to serve God by serving His children."
~Grandmaster Eric Kino~

October 22nd, Tuesday just before Noon
Press Conference, FBI Field Office, Los Angeles, California

The Kino family waited inside the lobby of the FBI building. They were promptly briefed that Special Agent Williams would give a quick rundown for the press and then it would be opened to questions. Currently they stood quietly watching through the front window as techs set up a lectern and microphone, and camera men and reporters filed into the area just past the steps.

"Good grief," Jordan whispered. "How many news stations are there in LA?"

"It's not just LA," Bree answered her. "But there are approximately twenty-three local news outlets, and there are even more national news personnel, and print reporters, and then, there is the social media people, like Isla August. We gave Isla a pass, and several others who requested a pass whom we like to support because they are honest."

"This is all so weird. I feel like I'm in another world," Jordan said.

"I know what you mean," Gabe said. "But, you get used to it."

Young Eric looked down at her, smiled and squeezed her hand. She looked up at him. "You're awfully quiet."

He nodded. "Just getting my thoughts in order in case anyone asks me any questions, which I'm sure they will."

"Are you nervous?"

"No. Just like being prepared."

"You don't think they'll ask me any questions do you?"

"It's possible."

"Oh, I don't know if I can do this."

"Well, if they ask you something and you don't want to speak, just let me know and I'll speak for you."

She nodded.

"The main thing is that they see you right here, by my side, a show of solidarity for our family."

"Okay. How do I look?"

Taylor giggled. "You look cute as ever. My top looks better on you than it does on me."

Young Eric looked over at his father, who was unusually quiet. He was looking out the glass doors, scanning the area. Besides local police and FBI there were at least a dozen or more Ameritech agents who would completely encircle the family once they step outside. They were all in black, vested and armed, and they looked very intimidating. Uncle Joey was outside, looking things over, and looking very official in his black suit with the Ameritech seal embroidered on the breast pocket.

Eric thought about that seal. It was new, thanks to Gabe's ideas. It was a start to having Ameritech being recognized instantly, and bringing honor and pride into being an agent. The seal included an eagle, to represent the USA since that's where Ameritech originated, and in front of the eagle's midsection was the world. In one claw the eagle held a flag. Uncle Joey's flag was a US flag, but it depended on whatever country the agent is working in. In the other claw, were the scales of justice. A ribbon above the eagle had three words on it, love, strength and peace. Eric liked it and was impressed with how a few words from Gabe, was changing an entire giant company. They were changing the titles they called each other and changing ranks too. And they soon would have new dress uniforms. It was exciting.

His thoughts came to an end as the aide motioned for the Kinos to follow him and they all filed out onto the steps in front of the building. Immediately, there was a loud sound of cameras clicking away. Ricky and Bree stood on the top step. In front of them stood Gabe, then Taylor, Jordan and young Eric. Also on the steps were FBI Special Agent Williams, Ameritech Deputy Chief Joey Adams, and the police chiefs from the Los Angeles Police Department and the Hillcrest Police Department.

Special Agent Williams immediately stepped up to the mic and in a strong voice and a very no-nonsense attitude, he introduced himself and the other people behind him, spoke about how they all worked together, and then began to explain the case. He began with young Eric's abduction from the convenience store. He spoke of how they pulled the video, which he understood was leaked to the public and therefore knew that they had all seen it.

He went on to explain the facts in the case, the phone calls made, the videos, how they deduced from info Eric gave them on the videos that he was being held across the border and how they worked with the Mexican police, Ameritech, and private volunteers to search the northern Mexican Baja area mines. He then explained how little Josie Perez was taken from her school and brought to the place where Eric Kino, III was being held. Williams finally succinctly ended with a curt statement.

"Before we were able to find Eric Kino and Josie Perez, Eric was able to get out of his restraints. He was able to subdue his abductors and he discovered Miss Perez in a room. They left the mine together but were detained by Peter Perez who was the main conspirator. Mr. Kino was then able to overcome Mr. Perez and use his phone to call for help. Within ten minutes the Mexican police, myself, other FBI and Ameritech agents were there to assess the situation and

to gain custody of the abductors. We're grateful that this heinous act was able to come to a conclusion where the victims were recovered safely. We're grateful to Mexican authorities working with us and for the fine law enforcement personnel who collaborated on this case. When we work together, we are powerful." He nodded at LAPD chief. "I'll turn the time over to Chief Boyd."

There was silence as the Chief walked forward. "I agree wholeheartedly with Special Agent Williams, that together, we are powerful. We will now take questions." He pointed at one national reporter.

"This was obviously a harrowing experience. As a mother myself, I'd like to ask Breanna Adams her thoughts on what took place."

The Chief stepped back and Bree moved forward. She smiled and nodded. "It's been a difficult few days. We love our children so much, and we want them safe and alive. And when that safety is threatened, we have a choice. We can fall apart completely, or we can stay strong, stay in prayer, and ask God to protect them. We did the latter and we are grateful that we've been allowed to keep Eric with us. And I know I can speak for Jewell Perez, Josie's mother, who has become a dear friend of mine, that she feels the same way."

She immediately stepped away and the Chief called on another reporter.

"Was Eric Kino's arrest a few weeks ago related to the abduction?"

The Chief nodded. "It actually was. Peter Perez hired men to drug his stepdaughter and try to pin the blame on Mr. Kino."

"Can you tell us why he did that? And was that related to the attempted stabbing of Jordan Brooks?"

"Yes, the attempted stabbing was related. Mr. Perez had been incarcerated for the attempted rape of his stepdaughter five years ago. He seemed to build up some resentment for her during that time. Once he got out of jail on probation, he violated that probation by accosting Miss Brooks. He knew once he'd crossed that line, she would try to have his probation revoked and so he began to threaten her. Then apparently his attention shifted to Mr. Kino, and more appropriately, the Kinos' money." He looked around, pointed at a reporter from the LA Times.

"Thank you, Chief. My question is for Eric Kino. Is it true that you actually killed several men in order to get away from your abductors?"

Young Eric drew a deep breath. His father put a calming hand on his shoulder. Eric moved forward to stand in front of the microphone. As camera shutters clicked madly he nodded. "Yes, it's true."

"Did you actually *have* to kill them?"

"It was them or me. I was in survival mode. I fought with them. They tried to kill me. I came out on top of those battles, and I'm grateful for that. And I didn't know at first that Perez had taken little Josie. When I found her, I knew I had to do whatever I could to make sure we both get back alive."

"So, how many had you fought before you found Josie?"

"I'd fought six men. I killed four of them."

"I understand you killed five men. Who was the last man you killed?"

Eric sighed. “After I found Josie we got out of the mine where we were being held and Perez jumped me with a large hunting knife.”

“How did you kill him?”

Eric frowned. Ricky Kino stepped forward. “It’s been a hard time for Eric, having had to kill in order to save his own life and that of Josie. He’d rather not go into the details right now as it’s been traumatic for him.”

The reporter started to argue, but stopped when Ricky raised his brows at him and pinned him with a dark stare.

Chief Boyd pointed to another reporter.

“Thank you,” the woman said. “I heard you actually shot your abductors. Is that true?”

Ricky remained by his son’s side as young Eric spoke. “I shot the one who was trying to shoot me, and one other.”

“Where did you get the gun?”

“From the guy trying to shoot me,” he said slowly.

The Chief called on another reporter.

“Thank you. Will there be any charges brought against Eric Kino for the killing of any of those five?”

Special Agent Williams stepped forward. “There has been a thorough investigation at the scene and no charges will be brought against Mr. Kino. The case is closed.”

Eric and Ricky went back to stand on the steps and the Chief called on another reporter.

“Miss Brooks, can you comment on your relationship with Eric Kino?”

She looked up at Eric, her eyes wide. “What should I say?”

“If you want to answer, then tell the truth, but you don’t have to give details. And if you don’t want to answer, just say no comment at this time.” He smiled at her, touched her cheek. “Or I can answer for you.”

She swallowed. “I’ll do it. I’m not a coward.”

She went to the mic, drew a deep breath. “Eric and I have just recently started dating but we are very close. I think he’s an amazing guy. I’m proud of him for getting out of that mine and for saving my sister, and just this morning I told God ‘thank you,’ for giving him the strength he needed to get out of those handcuffs and fight those bad men. If he hadn’t, well, I can’t even imagine what would have happened.”

The reporter who’d asked about him being charged spoke up again without being called upon. “So, you’re saying that it’s okay with you that your boyfriend just killed five men?”

“Okay with me? Absolutely. Special Agent Williams just told you what they had planned. If Eric hadn’t taken care of business, he and my little sister would be sealed into little pine boxes and buried somewhere in northern Mexico, dying a long, slow, agonizing death. Do you have a sister, or brother or mother or father? Try to imagine the terror taking place if they were taken. Why are you trying to spin this against Eric? He did what he had to do to stay alive. If right

now, you were on fire, you would roll on the ground and scream and beg someone to help you put out the fire. And no one would fault you for wanting that fire out. Well, that's how it was. It was like he was on fire, and he did what he had to do to put that fire out. And I think you're out of questions." She turned abruptly and walked back to Eric's side.

The whole family was grinning at her. Taylor hugged her. "I knew you were one of us," she whispered.

"That'll make the national news," Gabe said softly with a chuckle.

✞✞✞

Continue the story in DND #11
Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name Pt 3

mccartneygreen.org

;) Pi anyone?

Pi is a reminder that what appears random is, in fact,
part of God's perfect order.

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