
WILL WORK FOR FOOD
Feed My Sheep
In Jesus' Name
McCartney Green
DND #12

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

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

Keeping Tabs for #12

Books #9, #10, and #11 take place during the same year.
Book #12 picks up the following morning, immediately after Book #11 ends.
This Keeping Tabs list is current as of early Monday morning, November 25th.

West Coast Family

Eric Kino Family
Eric Kino turned 70 on June 14th
Shelley Adams Kino turned 65 on Oct 27th
Emmanuel (Manny) is 2½ and will turn 3 on May 2
Noah is 2½ and will turn 3 on May 7
Angelina is 2½ and will turn 3 on May 10
Abraham (Abe) is 2½ and will turn 3 on May 11
Nathaniel (Nate) is 2½ and will turn 3 on May 27

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

Ricky Kino Family
Ricky Kino turned 52 in early May
Breanna Adams Kino turned 49 on August 27th
Eric III is 20 and will turn 21 on December 14
Taylor turned 17 August 30

Mark Adams Family
Mark Adams turned 40 on October 29
Bella Adams is 39
Joseph (JoJo) turned 21 on June 30
Logan turned 20 on July 17
Emily (Em) will turn 4 on December 11
[Mark and Bella are expecting their fourth child]

Joey Adams Family
Joey Adams turned 38 August 22
Breez Adams is 35
Sophia turned 7 in May
Kelstyn will turn 4 December 16
Ledger turned 3 on November 23

Wallace Family
Jeffy turned 28 March 15
Cameron turned 30 in June
Elijah Cameron Kino Wallace was born Nov 9

Lee Families
Justin Lee is 66
Lori Lee is 52

Jason Lee is 58
Angel Lee is 55

Deal Family
Jensen Deal is 29
Kimberly Lee Deal turned 26 in February
[Jensen and Kim are expecting their first baby]

Davis Family
Jefferson Davis turned 44 on November 8
MacKenzie (Mickey) Daley Davis will turn 43 on February 3
Daniel turns 13 January 8
Jeremy turns 12 January 10
Scarlett was born on November 24

Brooks (Perez) Family
Jewell (Perez) Brooks is 42
Jordan Brooks turned 19 July 18
Josie (Perez) Brooks is 10
Jamie (Perez) Brooks is 8

Keith Family
David Keith is 45
Carol Keith is 40
Melody turned 18 on April 26
Phillip turned 16 on March 3
Lyle turned 14 on May 5

East Coast Family

Coley Family
Senior Agent Christopher (Chris) Coley is 30
Marissa Daley Coley turned 29 on August 2
Christian Coley was born on November 25

Nash-Smith Family
Toby Nash Smith is 55
Caroline (Caro) Smith is 53
Grace (Gracie Nash) will turn 26 in February
Brody Smith turned 22 in July

Stewart Family
Charles Anthony (Chaz) Stewart III is 49
Lisa Lewis Stewart turned 46 on May 15
Charles (Charlie) will turn 15 on February 11
Matthew (Matt) will turn 13 on January 20
Aralyn will turn 8 February 9
Jonathon Jones and Lachlyn were born Nov 1
Maddie Lewis, Lisa's grandmother, was 87 when she left this world on June 18
**More of Stewart family are listed below under "Other Characters"*

John Appel Family
John Appel is 50
Jodi Appel is 48

Jacob Appel Family
Jacob (Jake) Appel will be 22 on February 28
Melaynah Stewart Appel turned 21 on November 22

Tanner Family
Keegan turned 49 February 8
Lizzy turned 42 on April 10
Heather will turn 25 on January 10
Rose and Violet will turn 24 on December 25
Daisy and Lily will turn 23 on December 19
Gabe turned 18 on June 14
Iris will turn 3 December 10
[Keegan and Lizzy are expecting twins.]

Nolan Sawyer, a Tennessee rancher and veterinarian, turned 28 on April 26. He is Heather's fiancé.

CJ Blackmon turned 28 in May. He is Violet's boyfriend.

Murphy Family
Rebecca Murphy is 36. She is the Director of Education and a teacher at the Gabe Tanner Community Center.
Peyton turned 18 in July
Lucas Murphy will turn 15 on January 9
Atlanta AAIC Andrew Dalton will turn 39 on Jan 5

Other Characters

Firefighter Special Operations Team
Jericho Jones is 28. He is the twin brother of Joshua Jones, a wide receiver for Miami Dolphins.
Jimmy Callaway is 28
Max Hooks is 27
Micah Ferguson is 26
Luke Jackson is 29
Jalen Shipley is 23

Mike Moreland, an advertising entrepreneur, turned 25 in September

Texas SAC Hart Akins turned 31 on November 12

Mayor of Pine Forest and his wife
Andrew and Adrianne Bradbury

More of the Stewart family:
Joe Carter, Lisa's father, is 62
Shirley Carter, Lisa's stepmother, is 60

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

Charles Stewart Jr., Chaz' father, is a rancher.
Patricia Stewart, Chaz' mother, is a retired cardiologist.

Tyson Stewart is Chaz' younger brother and the sheriff of Pine County. He is married to Jenny, 'from the hood'. They have no children—yet.

Cindy Stewart Clark is Chaz' younger sister.
She is married to Bo Clark.
Their daughter, Kylie, is 15

Dr. Stephanie Stewart-Ross is Chaz' youngest sister. She is married to Parker Ross.
Their son, Parker, is 12

†††

"The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?"

He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

John 21:17

†††

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."

Galatians 5:13

†††

"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

Matthew 5:42

†††

Ameritech Security Hierarchy

Chief Director
Jason Lee
Deputy Chief
Joseph Adams

Division Chief Directors and Senior Agents
Eastern Division—Keegan Tanner
Western Division—Jefferson Davis

SAC - Senior Agent in Charge
New York - SAC Chris Coley
Texas - SAC Hart Akins

Assistant Agents in Charge
Atlanta—Andrew Dalton
Los Angeles— Bentley Trout

International Division Directors
Australia—Senior Agent Henry White
Canada—Senior Agent Leonard Dixon
Germany—Senior Agent Franz Klose
Great Britain—Senior Agent Ron Willard
South Korea—Senior Agent Kang Minjum
Sweden----Senior Agent Leo Holm

Special Operations: Jason's Elite Tactical Teams (JETTs)
Director of Special Operations— Deputy Chief Joseph Adams
Deputy Director Special Operations—Senior Agent Cameron Wallace

Team Leaders
Senior Agent Cameron Wallace
Senior Agent Jon Sweet
Senior Agent Jensen Deal

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"John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

Luke 3:11

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"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Isaiah 58:6-8

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"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Philippians 2:3-4

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Special Note:

This book does not stand alone. At the very least, Books #9 through #11 should be read before reading this one. However, for the full impact—and I hope you want it—read Books #1 through #11 first. The benefits are coded in layers.

Chapter One

November 25th, 2:00 AM, Monday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

She could see herself. Though the room was in shadow, she could see herself sitting on the piano bench, as if part of her was floating in the air up in the corner of the studio watching herself as she sat at the piano. It was a classroom, a very large classroom. The ceilings were high, the walls insulated. She sat at the grand piano, working on a Bach piece. She was wearing her long skirt, the one with the tiny purple flowers on it. It was her favorite because it was light, and soft and feminine and it allowed her plenty of freedom of movement.

Her long, almost white, blond hair was taken up on the sides to keep it out of her face as she played. It flowed down to the middle of her back. Not straight, not curly, just a slight wave to it.

Her eyes were closed; her body swayed slightly. *He* was standing on the other side of the piano, smiling at her, nodding his head almost imperceptibly to the rhythm of the music.

"Beautiful," he murmured as he walked around to stand behind her. "Good," he encouraged. "Slower there," he instructed. She could see him easily from her place in the air up in the corner of the room. He was tall and slim. His hair was a gold color and curly and longish. He wore khaki-colored slacks, a gold cashmere sweater with a crisp collared white shirt underneath. When he smiled his eyes twinkled. He didn't look old enough to be a professor, but he was actually almost ten years her senior.

Placing his hands on her shoulders as she played, he spoke to her. "You're rushing. Slow down. Good. Much better. Right now, you're touching the keys. I want you to learn to stroke the keys. Stroke. Stop."

He lifted her right hand and used it to stroke softly over his own hand. "See? Stroke. Like you're making love. Stroke."

She swallowed and looked up at him. He smiled that beautiful winning smile and winked at her. "I'm gonna tell you a secret, Violet. I'm falling in love with you. I've tried to stop my heart from feeling, but when I'm close to you like this, I cannot deny what I feel. Please forgive me. I'm

weak and you are so bright in every way. Will you forgive me for my feelings?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Good. Now, let's get back to it. Try again. Stroke the keys."

She began to play again, trying to give him what he asked.

"That's a little better," he said as he placed his hands back on her shoulders. He began to rub her shoulders and neck. "Relax. Relax. Good. Ahh, Violet, do you know how good you are? I think you are the most talented student I've ever had the pleasure of teaching. Slow down, good."

The scene morphed to her sitting at the piano in his apartment. His fingers moved down from her shoulders to rub the muscles in her upper chest and she became very uncomfortable and stopped playing.

"Why did you stop?" he questioned softly, as he moved his hands to her upper arms. "Relax." He bent, placing his lips close to her ear. "Let the music take you, Violet." He moved, placing his body against her back and leaning over to place his hands on top of her hands. "Play together with me. Yes, that's right. Much better. See how we move together? See how there is a rhythm, one as old as time. Good."

She stopped, shook her head. "I'm—not comfortable."

"Don't be prudish, Violet. Do you want to get better? Where do you think music began? It came from something that thrummed inside the body from the beginning of time. Music is a thing because it is primal. I'm trying to get you to feel it deep inside." He placed his hand on her chest, just below her collarbone. "Right here. Feel your heart beat. Feel the blood as it rushes through your body into all the private parts."

She closed her eyes. Shook her head.

"Let me in, Violet," he commanded in her ear.

She shook her head and tears filled her eyes.

Suddenly she was back in the classroom and he retreated a bit. "It's okay. We'll eventually take this where we want to go. For now, just play. I'm not lying to you. You are the most talented and also the most beautiful student I've ever taught. And together, Violet, you and I will make the most exquisite music there is."

The scene switched again from the classroom to his apartment. Only this time she could see the piano bench in his apartment overturned, see him forcing her into the bedroom, see him pushing her down onto his bed and she screamed.

Rose sprang from her bed and rushed to her sister. "Violet? Vi, I'm here, sweetie. Wake up. It was a nightmare. Wake up, Vi."

Violet grabbed her sister by the shoulders and looked up at her.

Rose smiled at her and nodded. "You're okay. It was a dream. You're

right here with me."

They both looked up as their father opened their bedroom door.

"Daddy," Violet said, her voice choking with emotion.

He came in and sat on her bed and she pulled herself from Rose's embrace and threw herself against her father's chest.

"Daddy," she sobbed.

He wrapped her snugly in his arms. "Nightmare?" he asked in his deep, masculine voice.

Violet nodded her head, letting the safety of his voice, of his presence soothe her. When he was around, she was always safe. When he spoke, her troubles and fears simply melted away.

"Same one?" he asked.

Violet nodded again. "Yes." She sniffed, then looked up at Rose. "I'm sorry I woke you, Rosie."

Rose smiled. "It's okay, sweetie. You only took about ten years off my life."

Violet giggled and then sniffed again. "Sorry." Her twin sister could always make her smile.

Keegan Tanner pulled his daughter away slightly so he could see her face. "Violet? I think we need to do some more counseling. And maybe some trauma therapy from John again too."

Violet nodded. "I'll do whatever you want me to do, Daddy, because I want this to end."

"You haven't had one in a long time, Vi. Maybe it's because he's about to get out of prison," Rose said.

Violet nodded again. "Maybe."

"He won't be out for another year, Rose," Keegan said. "And we will not let him near you, Violet. You must know that."

She nodded. "I know."

"And, Vi," Rose began, "why don't you come shooting with me? Brush up on your skills. It will make you feel a little more confident."

Violet nodded.

"Everyone okay in here?"

They looked up to see two more faces peering into the room. Lily and Daisy smiled. "Violet?" Daisy said. "Another dream?"

"Yes, sorry, everyone. It was so real."

"It's okay," Lily said. "Anything we can do?"

"Yes," their father answered. "Everyone can go back to sleep. We have a big day ahead of us. Your brother's coming home. The Kinos are coming into town. We have only three more days to finish getting ready for the big Thanksgiving Dinner for five thousand people and your mom

is about ready to pop any day. With all that, we have to make sure everything is done. So, everyone go back to sleep."

Violet sighed. "Okay, but Rose, would it be okay if I sleep with you for a little while?"

Rose smiled, got back in her bed and raised her covers. "Come on, little sister."

Violet sighed, kissed her father's cheek and ran over to get in bed with her twin sister.

He smiled as he gazed at his twenty-three-year-old daughters snuggling together in the bed. His mind went back almost twenty years. Back when Rose was four, when he'd first met her, she never would have willingly shared anything with Violet. They'd grown up.

"Dad?" Rose asked. "You okay?"

He nodded. "I love you girls."

"We love you too," Violet responded.

Daisy and Lily came in to kiss their father's cheek and their older sisters' cheeks and went back to bed.

Keegan went out in the hall and softly closed their door. He headed back toward his bedroom to tell his very pregnant wife that everything was okay when he heard the tiny voice crying. "I want mommy."

Keegan sighed wearily and went to Iris' door and into her room. "Hey, baby," he said softly as he scooped her up and sat down on the bed with Iris in his lap.

"I want mommy," she cried.

"Mommy is sleeping, baby girl. But Daddy's here." He hugged her close. "I got you, sweetheart."

She sniffed.

"Shhh, go back to sleep now."

"I want Gabe."

"I know. Me too," he mumbled with a soft laugh. "Gabe is coming home after this sleep. So, you go to sleep, and when you wake up, you can help Mommy with breakfast, and then a little while after that, Gabe will be home. Okay? So, close your eyes. That's right." He stood with her and swayed back and forth, rocking her. "Shh, go to sleep, my baby girl," he crooned to her. "There now, that's a good girl. Shhh, sleep. Sleep."

He rocked her another five minutes and finally placed her gently back in bed. He tucked her in and headed back to his room. Lizzy was sitting up in bed.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Keegan asked.

"I'm fine. Just trying to get comfortable. Is everyone okay?"

"Yes. Vi had a nightmare, and she's okay, and then Iris woke up but

I got her back to sleep."

"Thanks, Keegan."

He smiled. "Thank you," he said as he got back in bed and scooted close to his wife.

"For what?"

"For marrying me. For not giving up on me. For giving me the happiest life a man could ever ask for."

She smiled and closed her eyes. "You're welcome, my strong, handsome man, but you may not say that after these babies are born. Because I'm gonna need a lot of help."

"Elizabeth, I'll do whatever you need, babe. I got you in this predicament, didn't I?"

She giggled. "Well, I believe it takes two."

Smiling, he touched her face. "Lizbeth, you make me so happy."

She sighed. "Right backatcha, Keegan. Right backatcha."

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A few hours later that same morning, Rose grabbed Violet's banana nut muffin and took a bite.

"Hey," Violet protested.

"Sorry, Vi, I'm in a hurry and don't have time for breakfast. I didn't think you'd mind since you kept me awake half the night."

Violet frowned. "I guess you win, but that is low, using my nightmare just to get my muffin."

Rose laughed. "They are worth fighting over. Lily is getting to be as good a cook as Maddie was."

"Yeah, she is," Violet said as she arranged the tray she was working on with two plates of eggs and bacon and toast and a mug of coffee and a cup of tea. "Well, I'm gonna take this up to Mom and Dad and get Iris up. Are you off?"

Rose nodded and pulled out her phone when it buzzed.

~~Good morning, RoseRose. Do you have time for coffee this morning?

She smiled at the message, but frowned as she glanced at the time.

"Is that text from Jericho?" Violet asked with a smile.

Rose nodded.

Violet smiled. "Whatever he asked, tell him 'yes,'" she ordered with a laugh.

Rose frowned, blew out a breath and started typing.

~I'm on my way to the Center. I have to open the doors for Mrs. Murphy. We were getting an early start. But I can always make time for coffee I guess as long as we're back before 8:00. I'll meet you out front of

the Center at 7:15.

~~That gives me forty-five minutes with you. Don't be late. Every minute is important.

She responded with a 'thumbs up'. Then looked at Violet. "Do I look okay?"

Violet made a face. "Your hair is in a ponytail, but you're so cute, even that looks good on you."

"You're just trying to compliment yourself."

Violet giggled. "But really, I mean, it's not like you're dressed up, or even casually feminine, but the jeans show off your gorgeous legs and flat stomach, so there's that. The button-down blouse, hmm, is kinda faded and old."

"I was gonna be doing some dirty work today."

"Well, do you have time to change?"

She glanced at her phone. "Hmm, not really. He'll have to take me like I am, I guess."

"Then why'd ya ask in the first place?"

Rose laughed. "Good question. Guess I needed a confidence boost."

"Oops, guess I failed again," Violet said.

Rose rushed forward and kissed her cheek. "You haven't failed me at all." She ran out the door.

Upstairs, Violet knocked on her parents' bedroom door.

"Come in," Lizzy said softly.

Smiling, Violet walked in with the tray but frowned at her father who was tying his shoes.

He stood and smiled at her. "Breakfast in bed?"

Violet shrugged. "I was just trying to be helpful. I thought you were sleeping in."

"I did. I'm usually in my office by now. So, this breakfast is helpful, hon. It saves me a lot of time. Thank you."

She set the tray on the table next to her mother.

"Looks delicious," Lizzy said.

Keegan grabbed up a piece of bacon. He looked heavenward, blessed the food quickly and stuffed the bacon in his mouth.

"Okay, well, I'm gonna go get Iris up and fed. Lily left for an early grocery run, Daisy is in her room updating the Center website and answering emails, and Rose just left to get the Center doors open for Mrs. Murphy."

Keegan nodded. "Thanks, Violet."

She smiled. "Happy to help, Dad. I'm so excited about this week. Gabe is coming home. Heather is coming home. The Kinos are coming.

The Nashes are coming. The entire town is working together as if we were one big happy family. What's about to take place, it is amazing."

"It's already taking place," Keegan said. "And I agree, it's amazing."

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Rose pulled into the parking lot of the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*. She got out of her car and looked up at the building that used to be an elementary school. It had been cleaned up, landscaped, the inside partially renovated, though there was still much more to do. The day was gray and cold, but the fall decorations in the front, flowers and hay bales and smiling scarecrows and large fall wreaths made the building look very warm and welcoming.

Walking toward the back of the school, she nodded with a smile. The giant white tents that had been set up in the back of the school were still standing and looking good. They would provide shelter for the overflow of people. Those tents today would be filled with tables and chairs. And then the ladies of the town would come and decorate those tables like they had the ones inside the building.

Rose walked back to the front of the school just as Rebecca Murphy pulled into the parking lot. Rose smiled at her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Murphy."

"Morning, Rose. You ready to work hard today?"

"I am! I'm gonna open the doors for you and then Jericho is coming to take me for coffee, but I'll be back before 8:00. Would you like some?"

"I would love some," Rebecca said with a smile. "Peyton and Lucas said they'll be here by 9:00 and will start on the tables and chairs for the tents. They have a bunch of their friends also coming to help. Peyton is really looking forward to seeing Gabe today."

"He's not the only one. I'm glad Peyton and Lucas are coming so early because I have a truckload of tables and chairs coming about 9:00 and they can help unload them," Rose said as they walked toward the building. Rose frowned. "Do you think we need more decorations out front? Something to make this look more inviting?"

Rebecca stopped walking for a minute and gazed at the building. "Well, once the men get finished putting up the twinkling lights today, it will make a huge difference. Still, I don't think you can ever have too many decorations. If some of the women want to work on that, it wouldn't bother me a bit."

Rose nodded. "I'll call Laynah and get her to take care of that."

They went to the door and Rose pushed some buttons to turn off an alarm then unlocked the main door and pushed it open. What happened

next was a blur. Someone rushed up between them. Rebecca was shoved backward and Rose went flying forward. The person, a young man, ran inside. He headed past the office area and down the main hallway.

"Stop!" Rose screamed at him. She pulled the gun from her hip and turned to Rebecca. "Are you okay?"

She nodded as she sat up.

"Call my dad, please. Tell him what happened. I'm gonna go see if I can find this punk."

Rebecca nodded. "Rose, please be careful."

Rose took off down the hallway.

Keegan picked up on the first ring. "Good morning, Rebecca," he said cautiously, wondering if Rose hadn't made it to the building yet.

"Keegan, a guy rammed his way into the building as we were opening the door. He pushed us down and ran inside. Rose went in after him."

"I'm on my way. You stay by the door. Do not go after Rose. Do you understand? And don't hang up," Keegan said as he grabbed his keys and nodded at his wife. "Lizzy, Rose is in trouble. Call Tyson for me, send him to the Center." He ran out the door. "Rebecca, are you still there?"

She sniffed. "Yes."

"I'm getting in my car. I'm on my way. Where's Dalton?"

"He said he was going in to the office early today so that he could help us later."

Meantime, Rose went down the west main hallway and peeked into the large cafeteria when she heard a noise that sounded like one of the tables being moved. Stealthily, she made her way across the large room and headed toward the kitchen area. Moving quietly into the kitchen, she heard loud banging and then saw him. He was hitting one of the fryers with a hammer.

"What are you doing? Stop that right now!"

The guy rose and smiled at her as the oil from the fryer gushed out onto the floor. His smile disappeared though when he realized she had a gun aimed at him. He moved forward. "I don't think you'll shoot me."

"Think again. Put the hammer down."

He charged her. She pulled the trigger. Her aim was true but it didn't seem to slow him down. He rushed at her and swung the hammer at her head. She ducked, but he tackled her and slammed her to the hard floor. She lost her grip on the gun and it slid across the oil-covered floor.

"Rebecca, was that a gunshot?" Keegan yelled into the phone.

"Yes," she whimpered. "Hurry, Keegan. Maybe I, I mean I think I need to go help her."

"No. You'll get in her way. Stay by the door. I mean it."

Rose tried to get out from under the guy and get to the gun, but he was too strong. So, she went for a throat punch, which stopped him briefly and she pushed him off of her. But he grabbed her again, slammed her onto her back and held a knife up in front of her face. “Got ya now.”

Automatically, she quickly jammed her knee as hard as she could up into his groin and he moaned and rolled away.

She rolled over and got to her feet, took one step and slipped in the oil and went down onto the hard floor. He was on her in a second. He brought the knife up and started down toward her chest.

Keegan pulled up in front of the building and jumped from his car. At almost the same time, Jericho pulled up right behind him.

“Hey, Mr. Tanner, how...”

“Rose is in trouble,” he yelled as he ran toward the doors.

Both men flew through the front door.

“She went down that hall,” Rebecca cried and pointed. “I think they’re in the cafeteria.”

Rose saw the knife coming down. She grabbed his arm with both of her hands and tried to keep him from stabbing her with the knife. Her arms trembled as he pressed harder. The knife was getting closer to her chest. She pushed against it with every ounce of strength she had. The point was getting closer. It touched her skin just below her collarbone on the left side. She whimpered as she realized she was losing the battle.

The point of the knife pierced her skin and started its inward journey. She cried out with the pain, then bucked her hips a few times, trying desperately to dislodge him, trying to do anything to keep this from happening. And then— he was gone.

Within seconds Keegan had the knife from the man’s hand, his head in a headlock, and the guy unconscious.

Jericho was kneeling beside Rose, Rebecca standing behind him. He took his shirt off and held it against the wound in Rose’s upper chest. “Mrs. Murphy, please go to my truck out front and grab the medical bag from the front seat,” he ordered.

Rebecca ran to do his bidding.

Jericho looked Rose over, checking for other injuries. “Rose, open your eyes, baby. You’re okay. You’re gonna be okay.”

She opened her eyes and looked into his.

“Good girl. I need to know if you’re hurt anywhere else.”

She shook her head. “I, uh, I don’t think so. That freakin’ idiot was gonna kill me!”

Jericho smiled. “I’m really glad we got here in time.”

“Me too. Ugh, this hurts,” she said, bringing her oily hand up to place

on the wound.

He grabbed her hand and pulled it down. “Hands off. Stay still.”

“Daddy?”

“Right here, Rosie. I’m just looking for some rope or something.”

“There’s some duct tape in that cabinet over there above that sink,” she offered.

He smiled. “Thanks.” He found the tape and secured the perp.

Rebecca came back with the medical bag and Sheriff Tyson and two members of the Pine Forest Police Department and a few other EMTs.

“Is she okay?” Ty asked immediately.

Jericho nodded. “Small knife wound, not very deep, it’ll need a few stitches and probably an antibiotic. Could’ve been a lot worse.” He turned and opened his medical bag.

Ty nodded as he went to speak with Keegan.

“Uh, Daddy,” Rose said as she grunted in pain. “Better check that guy, cuz I shot him. He might need some medical attention.”

“You shot him?” Tyson asked. He nodded at the EMTs to tend to the perp.

She nodded, her eyes closing. “Yes, sir. My gun is somewhere on the floor. He came at me with a hammer. He tried to kill me. I pulled the trigger. It didn’t even slow him down.”

“Are you sure you hit him?” Ty asked.

Keegan gave a short laugh. “Ty, you know Rose.”

Rose sighed as she closed her eyes. “Did I hit him...” she mumbled.

“What was I thinking?” Tyson responded with a smile. “Of course she hit him.”

“She hit him,” one of the EMTs answered.

Tyson nodded at Jericho. “Is she gonna need to be transported? If so, I’ll need to get another unit.”

“She’ll have to go to the hospital, but it doesn’t have to be in an ambulance. Either her father or I can transport her,” Jericho said as he removed her quilted jacket vest from her.

Rose blinked up at Jericho. “I’m really tired.”

He frowned. She was going into shock. “Rose, I’m just gonna open a few buttons on your shirt, okay?”

She moaned. “I pictured that happening in a much different way.”

He smiled at her joke, but realized she never would have said something like that, especially in front of her father if she was in her right mind. He quickly examined, cleaned and bandaged the wound, then checked her blood pressure and listened to her heart. He rose to speak with Mr. Tanner.

"Mr. Tanner, her blood pressure is low and she's gonna need stitches, but I don't think her lung was punctured."

He nodded, then knelt beside his daughter. "Hey, Rose, can you tell me and Uncle Ty what happened?"

"It was strange, Daddy," she said softly. "I came in here and he was using a hammer to break the fryer." She stopped and sighed. "I guess he succeeded. Don't understand why he wanted to do that. I told him to stop and he came at me with the hammer. He swung and missed and I shot him, but that didn't stop him. It's kinda all a blur, I don't know where he got the knife. I don't know if he pulled it from his pocket or what, but suddenly he had one. He knocked me down, or I slipped in the oil, I can't really remember, but he was trying to stab me in the chest."

"That part I saw with my own eyes," Keegan said softly.

"I'm sorry I can't remember. Everything seems fuzzy."

He nodded. "It's okay, sweetheart. There are cameras everywhere." He looked at Jericho. "Is she okay?"

"She's a little shocky. We need to get her to the hospital."

Keegan looked at Sheriff Tyson. "Call Daisy and she'll give you access to the security cameras. I need to talk to Lizzy before this puts her into labor." He looked at Jericho. "Let's get her out to my car."

Jericho took Rose's blood pressure again. She opened her eyes. "How am I, doc?"

He smiled. "You're gonna be okay. I'm gonna carry you out to your father's car and he's gonna take you to the hospital."

"Okay," she said softly. "I'm a little worried about myself. Are you sure I'm okay?"

"Pretty sure. Why?"

"Because I can't think of anything smart aleck to say, so I think there must be something bad wrong."

He chuckled. "Well, I'm sure you'll find the words."

"Instead, I feel like I just wanna cry, and tell you and my dad 'thanks' for showing up so fast."

"Trauma causes an emotional response, and your emotions are just proving what I knew about you all along."

"What's that?" she whispered.

"That you're not such a tough cookie after all. You're actually human. And things really can get to you."

"I'll deny that."

"Too late. I've seen through the facade."

She blinked and a tear ran from her eye. "I'm too tired to argue right now. Why am I so tired?"

"You expended all your energy trying to survive." He gently ran a hand over her hair. She smiled at the caring gesture and allowed her eyes to close once again. He then carefully scooped her up, cradled her against his chest and followed her father out to the car.

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November 25th, Monday Afternoon

Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport

The Ameritech jet carrying twenty-nine VIPs landed at the busiest airport in the world at 2:33 PM EST and headed toward the private terminal.

Joey was immediately on a conference call with Jason and Keegan being updated on situations around the world that involved Ameritech. They ended the call with personal questions for Keegan about Rose. Apparently, she was stitched up and back at work already. Which was good news.

The bad news was what came from the bad guy. He was alive. Rose's bullet hit him in the diaphragm. He was twenty years old. A drug addict who lived in Atlanta. He'd been hired to mess up the event planned by, in his words, "Gabe Tanner's sister," and also to hurt said sister simply because she was loved by Gabe Tanner. The guy said he was paid $5000 by a "slick dude in the backseat of a black SUV," who'd also arranged for the perp's transportation down to Pine Forest.

As Joey received the information, he glanced at Gabe across the aircraft. The kid was a great kid, tough, even lethal, as he'd recently demonstrated, yet as he sat, chatting with Taylor, a smile on his face, he came across as young and innocent. Gabe was not gonna be happy about this information. Keegan definitely was agitated. Joey finished his call as they got ready to deplane.

Gabe immediately looked up at him. "Was that my dad?"

Joey nodded. "Yes, and Rose is already back at work."

Gabe smiled. "Of course she is. She's tough."

Joey nodded. "Okay, everyone, listen up."

They all listened as Joey gave them the news. Gabe got quiet as he listened. His expression was heartbreaking to watch. Joey went on to say what was being done to find the guy who'd hired someone to hurt Rose, and who the possible and probable suspects might be.

When Joey finished, it was Grandmaster Kino who put everything into perspective. "Okay, everyone—Gabe, you especially—I know this is upsetting. First and foremost, let's be grateful that she's okay. I want you to remember that what we are about to do in Pine Forest is not just a little thing. It may seem insignificant, feeding a few homeless people, that gets

done every day, right? But we are in the limelight of the nation, really, of the world. God let us know last night, through Jeffy, that things were about to get rough."

"Right, and it's my fault things are gonna get rough, and it's my fault my sister was almost stabbed to death this morning," Gabe said quickly.

Grandmaster Kino smiled kindly and nodded. "Okay, did you get it all out?"

Gabe sighed and nodded his head.

Eric looked around at the group. "Who wants to address what Gabe just said?"

"I will," JoJo said quickly.

Eric nodded at his grandson.

"Gabe, brother, it seems like it's your fault, but really, I know, and I know you know, that you are not responsible for the actions of other people. Someone has a grudge against you probably because of some good you've done. There are bad guys in this world, and you fight the bad guys, we all fight the bad guys, and so the bad guys are gonna go gunnin' for us. We know that. We expect that. But do we let it stop us?"

Gabe shook his head. "No, of course not."

JoJo smiled. "This one may seem like it's on you this time, Gabe, my brother, but you know you're not responsible for what others choose to do. And it's not always gonna be you. Because as you know, everyone in our family has pissed off a bad guy at one time or another."

"True dat," young Eric said with a smile.

"Thank you, JoJo," Grandmaster Kino said. "So, as I was saying, God let us know things were about to get rough. So, we only have one choice really, and that is to lift up our heads, put on our armor and face this head on. The alternative would be to pack up our toys and go home, and I'm pretty sure not one of you would choose to do that. So, not only do we square off against this evil, but we do it with a joyful countenance. We put a smile on our faces and show the dark forces of this world that we, as God's warriors, will– not– be– deterred. We will not let this thing that happened to Rose dim our lights. We will let it make us shine even brighter, even stronger, even more determined than ever to do this thing. Last night, God told us to be ready. So, we will be ready. Be awake and aware. Be strong in body, mind and spirit." He looked around. "Is everybody on board?"

"Yes, sir," a few said softly.

"Let's have a prayer to put on the armor of God before we get off the plane," Ricky said quickly.

Eric nodded. "Gabe, you pray."

Gabe smiled and nodded. He knew Grandmaster Kino asked him to pray so that this lesson could be driven home. “Yes, sir.”

Gabe prayed mightily and they left the plane.

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John 3:19-21

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into
the world, and people loved the darkness rather than
the light because their works were evil. For everyone
who does wicked things hates the light and does not
come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.
But whoever does what is true comes to the light,
so that it may be clearly seen that his works
have been carried out in God.”

Chapter Two

November 25th, Monday Late Afternoon
Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport

It was the busiest week of the year at Atlanta Hartsfield Airport. The Kino entourage consisted of Eric and Shelley and their five young ones, Jeffy and Cam and their tiny Elijah, Mark and Bella, and their kids, JoJo, Logan and Emily, Joey and Breez and their little ones, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger, Ricky and Bree, with their kids, young Eric and Taylor, and then Jordan and her family, Jewell, Josie and Jamie, and last, but certainly not least, Gabe Tanner. Twenty-nine people.

They made their way through the secure portion of the terminal with no problem. Cam carried Eli in the baby carrier. The toddlers were either being carried or their hands were held tightly. Jordan clicked along on her crutches, and young Eric stayed right beside her. Unlike her younger brother and sister, Jordan had been quite panicked about flying for the very first time and young Eric was having fun comforting her and teasing her. The entire Perez, now Brooks, family couldn't believe the difference between Atlanta and Los Angeles, but Jordan was the most vocal.

"But I mean," Jordan kept saying. "There are trees, like, everywhere. It's so green."

Young Eric smiled. "Yep, and right now most of the hardwoods have lost their leaves. You should see it in the spring and summer. It's amazing."

"Oh, I would love to come back then! Do you think we can? I can't believe I just asked you that. I mean, it's very expensive to fly, but I know I'm not supposed to talk about that kind of stuff. It would be great to come back though. Wait, I'll be playing softball then. I won't be able to go anywhere, except when the team travels. Oh my goodness look at that," she said as she looked out the large window to see a jet take off.

Young Eric smiled as she went on chattering a mile a minute, obviously from nervous energy. He stopped walking and pulled her up against him.

She looked up into his eyes. "What? What's the matter?"

He grinned. "Nothing is the matter. I just have to tell you that I think

you're very cute right now."

Her hand moved to smooth down her hair. He chuckled, then quickly took her face in his hands and planted a big kiss on her lips. "Lord, I love you, Two-three," he said softly.

"Move it, you two," Logan said as he walked around them.

When the group got to the area where the secure part of the terminal ended, they stopped and were immediately surrounded by eight Ameritech agents from the southeast area of the Eastern Division. They recognized a few of them and greeted them personally.

They moved out into one of the main areas, but remained near the closest wall. It was a large open area and they saw bunches of people waiting for their loved ones or their clients to emerge from the terminal. Some held signs with a name of the person they were looking for, while others had welcome home signs and balloons and stuffed animals. They didn't get very far into the area when people began to point and murmur.

The lead Atlanta agent suddenly stopped. He looked back at Joey, who was one of his bosses, the second in command at Ameritech. "Excuse me, Deputy Chief Adams," he said firmly.

Joey walked forward to converse with him. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes, sir, something is going down in another area. We've been asked to wait here for a few minutes."

Joey nodded, glancing around, his sharp eyes scanning.

"Um, Deputy Chief Adams, it's an honor to meet you, sir."

"Thanks," Joey said. "And it's an honor to meet you too."

Cam handed Eli off to Logan and joined Joey, while the other males in the group put the women and children in a circle and surrounded them.

"Whatta we got?" Cam asked.

Joey sighed. "There's something happening in another area of the airport. We've been told to hold up. Keep your eyes open," Joey ordered.

Joey nodded at the agent. "What's your name?"

"Lead Agent Cunningham, sir."

Joey nodded. "Agent Cunningham, this is Agent Wallace."

Cam shook his hand.

"Um, *the* Agent Wallace? Like, JETT Agent Wallace?"

Cam and Joey both smiled and nodded.

"It's an honor to meet you, Agent Wallace."

"Thank you," Cam said casually, his eyes scanning.

"Can you find out what's happening and where, that's causing this delay?" Joey asked Agent Cunningham.

He nodded. "I'll try," he said as he began to speak to another agent on his earpiece.

Some people in the crowd about thirty feet away started forward, smiling and pointing at the Kino group. Joey shook his head and spoke to another agent. “Hate to be unfriendly, but no autographs today.” He nodded at the people approaching. “Let’s not let that happen.”

The agent spoke briefly and three of the agents in the detail stepped forward and halted the progress of the ones approaching. Whatever the agent said to them the people nodded, looked disappointed but then turned and waved.

“We love you, Ricky Kino!” one called.

He smiled and waved.

Then there was some screaming, at first, not clear enough to understand what was being screamed. Then everyone realized it was a girl screaming—a teenaged girl—in a wheelchair, with her fists pounding on the arms of the chair as she screamed “Gabe Tanner” over and over again.

Gabe smiled at her and waved, but she didn’t stop. He took a step in her direction, but young Eric grabbed his arm. “If you go, Uncle Joey is gonna fry you.”

Gabe smiled. “You know I gotta go do this. I mean, the girl is in a wheelchair and we just said we won’t cower in the face of danger, right? We’ll shine brighter, right?”

“You’re right as usual, brother. Be careful,” young Eric said.

Gabe moved quickly and trotted over to where the girl was screaming his name. Everyone else around applauded as Gabe came to her and knelt down in front of her wheelchair. One of the agents immediately went to stand at his back.

Gabe held his hand out to the girl, and her hands waved madly until she was able to control them enough to place one in his hand.

“Hey there,” Gabe said.

The girl was grinning from ear to ear. “I– don’t– talk– well,” she ground out.

“She has cerebral palsy,” her mother offered from where she stood behind the girl.

Gabe nodded. “What’s her name?”

“Vanessa.”

Gabe looked into her eyes. “Vanessa, take your time and tell me what you wanted to say.”

The girl’s eyes immediately welled with tears. Gabe smiled patiently as she spoke slowly. “I– always– listen– to you– on– your– website. I– love– you– and– I– love– God.”

“Ahh, Vanessa, that is so beautiful. Ya got me all choked up here.” He smiled to change the subject. “Hey, ya wanna say ‘hi’ to all the

people on the site?"

She laughed out loud and nodded her head vigorously.

He took out his phone and went live. "Hey, everyone, so, I just got back to the ATL and was so glad to make a new friend right here in the airport. Everyone, say hello to Vanessa." He pointed the camera at the girl, but kept talking. "Vanessa has cerebral palsy and has a hard time talking, but she loves God and she says she loves me and I just want to publicly say– that I love her too!"

Vanessa clapped her hands together with glee.

"Vanessa, is there anything you want to say to the..." He stopped and checked the count. "It looks like about eleven thousand people right now."

Vanessa took a breath. "I just wanna say that I love you all," she said slowly, trying to enunciate her words.

Gabe teared up, and then spoke into the camera. "Hey, you guys, let's let Vanessa know how much we love her too. And be ready this week, everyone. As Taylor and I join our families in the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* project we'll be going live on and off all week."

He smiled at Vanessa and rose to his feet. "I guess I'd better get back to my group over there."

"Is Taylor with you?" a teen boy asked, who was standing next to the wheelchair.

Gabe smiled at him, then turned and called to her. "Taylor, wave at the camera."

She stepped out quickly and waved and blew a kiss. Gabe zoomed in on her. He smiled. That was his girl. She was so amazing.

"Well, I have to get back," he said again. He took Vanessa's hand. "It was so nice to meet you, and please don't get mad but..." He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

She screamed, making Gabe and others nearby laugh. He pointed the camera at Vanessa. "Wave 'bye' to everyone." She did and he ended the livestream. He waved 'goodbye' to her again, shook her mother's hand and trotted back to the group.

Joey caught his eye. Gabe grimaced. "Um, am I in trouble?"

"Nope, Gabe, you're not. Just warn me, please, when you're about to do something like that."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Joey looked back to Agent Cunningham. "Anything?"

"Got it," the agent said to his contact. He looked at Joey, shook his head, his expression solemn. "Sir, there's a gunman in the airport."

"Give me details," Joey said as he and Cam stood closely together to discuss the problem. "Location?"

"He's in the ticketing area, but is starting to move down toward baggage claim. He has a gun in his hand and one in his waistband. He was looking for his wife who was leaving him. He has now claimed a hostage. A little girl, and he's threatening to kill her if they don't produce his wife."

Joey nodded. Looked at Cam. "Drinking binge?"

Cam nodded. "Let's do this."

Joey nodded and called Jason so he could contact airport security and let them know that Ameritech had a couple of special agents in the building who would take care of the problem. In only a few minutes they were given the 'okay' and had the airport police assigned to perform their parts. Joey then let the fam know that he and Cam were gonna go take care of business. A few minutes later Joey and Cam made their way around to *Baggage Claim* and started walking toward *Ticketing*. They were laughing and singing and falling down and helping each other up. Once the gunman saw two drunk men coming toward him a couple of police stepped out and told Joey and Cam to stop.

But Joey and Cam were having too much fun to listen to the cops. As the police told them to stop and tried to wave them away, they happily waved back at them. They got close enough to the man, made eye contact with him and asked him if he knew the song they were singing and tried to get him to sing with them. He tried to back away from them, jerking on the young girl in front of him.

"Hey, maybe she knows the song," Joey said jovially. He leaned toward her, now only about six feet from her. "Whaddya say, little girl? Do you know this song?" He started slowly singing the words to *Row Row Row Your Boat.*

Her eyes were big.

"That ain't the way it goes," Cam said loudly.

"Is too," Joey yelled back.

And suddenly, Joey jerked the girl and shoved her away, at the same time Cam took the gun from the man's hand and Joey took the one from his waistband. He was in a headlock and subdued in a few seconds. Joey scooped up the little girl. "You're okay now, sweetie. I got you. Let's go find your mommy."

The large group of police who'd had their guns trained on the man holstered their weapons and moved forward.

Joey handed off the child and he and Cam made their way back to the family as quickly as possible, offering a "you know how to reach me," to the head of airport security who wanted to make a long, big deal out of what had just taken place.

They collected the family, loaded into several Ameritech vehicles and

headed to Pine Forest.

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November 25th, Monday Late Afternoon
En Route ATL to Pine Forest

Young Eric and Jordan, Gabe and Taylor, and JoJo and Logan all rode together in one SUV. That vehicle was headed to the Tanner home. The other SUVs were headed to the Inn, right next door to the Tanner home.

Jordan couldn't stop talking about the scenery as they left Atlanta and headed south on I-75.

"Okay, I know I'm talking a lot, but you guys have to understand, I've never been out of California. I didn't realize Georgia was so different. First, it's really cold here."

Eric pulled his phone. "Well, it's a bit colder than it usually is. The low this morning was 33º. But the high today is in the fifties. So, it's not that bad."

Jordan nodded. "And just look at the trees. I mean, they are everywhere. You can't see past them."

Gabe chuckled. "I guess sometimes I take stuff like that for granted." He looked around. "And there's still a lot of trees that haven't dropped their leaves yet, so that's nice."

Jordan looked out the window. "And there's a lot of Christian names of things."

"What do you mean?" Gabe asked.

"That exit we just passed, it said, Mt. Zion Boulevard, and then the sign just past that, said Calvary Hill Baptist Church, and then there was Good Faith Mall, and look right there, Covenant Care Medical Group," she said as she pointed to a billboard.

Gabe grinned and shrugged. "Well, I guess they don't call it the 'Bible Belt' for nothin'."

"It's so weird. I feel like I'm in another universe."

"Too bad we're not gonna stop," JoJo said. "I think you'd get a kick listening to a waitress take your order."

"What do you mean?" Jordan asked. "What do they do?"

Taylor smiled. "They say, 'Hey there, y'all, how y'all doin' today? What can I get for you fine people today, bless y'all's hearts,'" she said in an exaggerated southern accent. "Hey, ain't you that Kino girl? Oh my Lord, you're so pretty, I mean, I cain't believe you really are as pretty in person as you are on the internet. Oh my, Jenny, come look who's here in our little ol' restaurant."

Everyone chuckled.

"It's not that bad," Gabe defended. "I mean, sometimes it actually is

like that, but she's exaggerating."

Taylor laughed. "Am I?" She giggled. "No, really, they are actually really charming, and really friendly, and I love going into a place and listening and watching. Southerners are cool."

"She has to say that 'cause our mom is a southerner," young Eric said.

"And grandma is too," Logan added.

"Yeah, they may be, but you can barely hear their southern accents at all," Jordan said.

"Do I have a southern accent?" Gabe asked.

"Yes," they all said quickly.

"But it's not real deep," young Eric added. "It's just the right amount to make the girls swoon."

Gabe grinned. "Well, both of my parents were raised in the south," Gabe explained. "My mom in Georgia and my father in Tennessee, though my father's parents were actually originally from Missouri, I think."

"So, how much farther is it to Pine Forest?" Jordan asked.

"Another good thirty minutes," Gabe said.

"And we're gonna go to your house first, right?"

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, pretty much everyone is at the Community Center right now, gettin' things set up. But Mom is at home, and I'm supposed to go straight there." Gabe looked at his "brothers," young Eric, JoJo and Logan. "Taylor's been to my house, but all these years and you guys never have."

Young Eric nodded. "It seems we're always so busy whenever we're here. So, I'm glad we get to see your home today. Taylor said it was really nice and that your father built it himself. Like he actually did the work."

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, but he had a lot of help from the Appels and some other townsfolk, and especially Uncle Chaz."

"I heard *you* had a lot of help from Mr. Stewart too," young Eric said.

Gabe grinned. "Me?"

"Yeah, like, when you were born."

"Oh, yeah, he delivered me."

"Really?" Jordan asked.

"It's a long story," Gabe said.

"We've got thirty minutes," she reminded him.

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November 25th, Late Afternoon

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lizzy slipped her shoes back on and rose from the bed just as her phone buzzed. "Hey, Jodi."

"Hey, Lizzy! So, are you getting excited?"

Lizzy smiled. “Yes. They’re about thirty minutes out.” She put the phone on speaker and went into the bathroom and set it down so she could brush her hair.

“And they’re going straight to your house or are they gonna stop by the Center?”

Lizzy checked herself in the mirror. She was a giant blimp in her own eyes, but the pretty soft teal-colored dress, trimmed in lace that she’d put on, helped to disguise how big and ugly she felt. “They’re coming straight here,” she answered.

“So, whatcha been doing?”

“Well, I just took a very long and wonderful nap. Keegan took Iris with him back up to the Center so it’s been nice and quiet. And now, I’m gonna head downstairs and get all the snacks I’ve prepared laid out so they can all feel welcomed. What is more welcoming than a table filled with goodies, right?”

Jodi frowned. “Well, don’t ruin their dinner, because we’re cookin’ up a storm over here.”

“Ruining dinner has never happened,” Lizzy said with a laugh. “Not for Gabe, anyway.”

Jodi laughed. “Okay, good. Well, I’m gonna let you go. Call me if you need me for anything.”

“I will, Jodi, as usual, but I already called on you about Rose today. I’m gonna try to get through the next thirty minutes all by myself.”

Jodi giggled. “Bye, sweetie.”

“Bye, Jodi.”

Lizzy stood at the top of the staircase and ended the call and started to move to tuck the phone in the side pocket of the pretty dress she’d put on. She missed the slot though and the phone went tumbling down the hardwood stairs. She grimaced. “That didn’t sound good,” she mumbled, thinking the fall for sure cracked the screen.

Sighing, she took one step down—and tumbled. She only let out a short yelp as she turned a complete somersault. Her hand reached out, trying desperately to grab the handrail, and she actually did. She came to a halt about halfway down the steps, upside down.

Moaning, she slowly untangled her feet and tried to hold herself up and get her feet swung around to the step below her. As she twisted, she cried out when a sharp pain shot across her lower back. She stopped moving, her breath coming fast. This is ridiculous, she thought. I can’t stay like this on these steps. If I can get turned around, I can inch my way down. Very slowly, she inched her legs around until they were in front of her. Finally, she touched her feet to the step, two steps below the one she

was now sitting on. She blew out a breath, feeling good that she'd accomplished that.

Now, she just needed to ease her bottom down one step at a time. She tried to do it, but the pain in her back was excruciating and immobilizing. Beginning to realize that she was actually in a real predicament, her eyes welled with tears. If only Keegan was here. For that matter, if only Iris were here, she could run down and get Mommy's phone for her. But she was on her own. At least for about thirty minutes until Gabe arrived. And really, thirty minutes was not long. She could wait.

Assessing her injuries, she knew her back was hurt. She also knew she'd hit her head. Reaching up to the right side of her head, she could feel the lump. Still, she was okay. But then the unthinkable happened. A very strong contraction began. It was not a regular contraction. It was strong, hard, long and now, she was getting worried and the tears spilled over.

She was distracted when her phone started ringing and she wondered who it was. If it was Keegan and she didn't answer, he'd probably come home, she thought, hoping that it was indeed her husband. Then, things got worse. Another contraction started and with this one, her water broke.

"No, no, no," she cried softly. "Please, Father, please help me," she prayed immediately. Could she deliver her own babies? She knew she could were she able to move. But with her back injured she wasn't sure if she could keep them from falling down the stairs. She sniffed. "Oh, please, Dear Jesus, I need help."

She lay still until the contraction was over and then caught her breath and tried to move down. The pain was so agonizing that she almost passed out. "Okay, okay," she mumbled to herself. "Stay calm, Lizzy."

She was now very dizzy and was having a hard time keeping her eyes open. And she was nauseated, which for her usually meant her blood pressure was dropping. I have to get down these stairs, she thought.

Drawing a deep breath, bracing for the pain, she forced herself to scoot down one step. She cried out and that was the last thing she remembered.

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The Ameritech SUV moved slowly down the blacktop so that they could point the Stewart ranch out to Jordan.

"That's the elder Stewarts' home," Gabe said, pointing off to his right at a large brick home with white columns sitting up on a hill on a large piece of land.

They came to a dead end and a dirt road. Gabe pointed again to the right at a metal gate. "Jordan, if you go through that gate and down that drive, you get to Uncle Chaz and Aunt Lisa's home. Uncle Chaz built his

home himself too. It's like, in the woods, and it's really nice."

"We'll have to take you over there this week, if we can find some time," young Eric said. "It really is nice."

"Is that where the barn is where Laynah got married? She said she was married in a barn."

"Yes, it's down the drive past their house," Gabe answered.

They turned left onto the dirt road, and went slow as they passed the large gate in front of the *Pine Forest Country Inn and Cottages*, normally just referred to as the *Inn*. Peering through the black iron gate on the left as they passed, they went a short distance and turned left into a drive and stopped at another big, iron gate. Gabe leaned out the side window and punched in the code and the gate slowly swung open.

"Guess you're happy to be home, huh?" JoJo said.

Gabe nodded. "Really looking forward to what I'm sure Mom has ready, which is her breakfast muffins and a huge glass of ice-cold raw milk." He smiled at Taylor and squeezed her hand.

The vehicle drove up to the front porch which was a huge, wraparound deal, true to southern origins, and Gabe waited for everyone to get out of the vehicle. He invited the driver in, but he said he had another assignment. They waited on Jordan and made their way up to the front door. Gabe punched in a code and swung the door open.

"Mom!" he called. "We're here." He dropped his bags by the front door and told everyone else to do the same.

When he didn't hear anything he shrugged. "That's weird."

He glanced in the kitchen which was in the front of the house to the left. Then he glanced to the right, which was the formal living room, and then he glanced a little farther down, toward the staircase on the left and his mouth dropped open.

"Mom?" He ran toward her. She appeared to be asleep on the staircase. "Mom?"

He felt for a pulse. Young Eric immediately got on the phone and called his dad.

"Dad, it's Mrs. Tanner, I think we need an ambulance."

"I was just about to call you," Ricky answered. "Jeffy is on the way. And we have help coming."

"Mom," Gabe said softly, his eyes glistening with tears. He was greatly relieved when she stirred and her eyes blinked open.

"Gabe," she blubbered. "I missed you so much."

"Mom, what happened? Are you hurt? Did you pass out?"

She shook her head. "I fell. And I can't move very much. I hurt my back. I'm stuck."

"Can we help you? Can we move you down?"

"I'm not sure. But I'm in labor and my water broke and I'm worried about the babies."

Lizzy tried to sit up, but the move made her cry out in pain.

"Okay, Mom, be still. We have help on the way."

"I dropped my phone. Call your dad."

He put his hand on his mother's forehead. "Mom, you're gonna be okay. You be okay, do you hear?"

"I hear, but I'm feeling very strange, Gabe. Weak. And like, I can't keep my eyes open. I missed you so much."

Gabe looked down at the steps and realized there was amniotic fluid and blood on the steps. "Mom, keep your eyes open and look at me."

She smiled and sighed. "Oh, the grass is so soft here."

"What?"

"The grass," she whispered. "It's so green and soft, just like you said. I just want to stay here."

"Mom, what are you talking about?" Gabe asked, his voice panicked.

Taylor looked at her brother, her eyes wide.

"Oh, Gabe, I see the tree. It looks just like you described."

Gabe's eyes filled with tears. "Mom," he said loudly. "You stay here with me, please. You can't stay there."

She sighed. "Bradley?"

"No!" Gabe yelled. He looked around at his brothers. He shook his head in complete disbelief that this was happening.

Logan moved forward and put his hand on Mrs. Tanner. "Help me, everyone," he said softly.

Taylor, Jordan, Young Eric and JoJo also put their hands on her and Logan began to pray. He asked for healing, he asked for a relief from pain, he asked for comfort, and then, in almost a panic he asked for Jesus. "Jesus, you know us, you especially know Gabe. Please don't take his mom away from him. Please, help her. Please. I mean, like before, when Grandad was dead, we always say Your will be done, and we'll abide by that, but we still wanna ask You to please help her. Help Mrs. Tanner, and help the babies too. Please, Jesus, please."

"Jesus?" Lizzy said softly and then let out a deep sigh.

Gabe's eyes blinked open wide. "Please, Jesus, please don't take her from us. Please," he whispered.

The door burst open and Jeffy came in. She went straight up the stairs and put her hands on Lizzy's chest, then on her head. She began to cry. "Oh, sweet lady," she murmured. She looked around. "Guys, I need you to move her down and lay her flat on the floor. Be very careful with her.

Keep her back in line with her hips. It's not broken, but she is injured."

JoJo frowned, knowing he could be of no help. He moved out of the way and the other three guys moved forward and carefully lifted and eased Lizzy's body down onto the floor at the foot of the stairs.

Jeffy looked up. "Taylor, run upstairs to the closet down the hall on the left and grab sheets and pillows. Hurry."

Jeffy immediately removed Lizzy's underwear and ushered the boys back. But they wanted to stay and watch and pray, so they and Jordan went to the stairs and sat down on the steps behind Lizzy.

Jeffy nodded at Gabe. "Gabe, you stay there and hold your mom's head in your lap."

They all looked up when Chaz Stewart came in the house with a medical bag.

Taylor came back with the linens. Chaz set his bag next to Jeffy, then put a pillow on Gabe's lap under Lizzy's head.

Chaz bent one of Lizzy's legs, removing her shoe and placing her foot on the floor. "Taylor, come hold her leg here. You'll have to hold it tight. Don't let it slip down."

Taylor nodded and did as told. Chaz went around to the other side of Lizzy and held the other leg. Jeffy draped a sheet over her knees and examined her. Neither baby was crowning. She shook her head. Closing her eyes, she "saw" into Lizzy's abdomen. Both babies were head down. The male was in the birth canal. It was almost as if they'd been waiting until it was safe to come out. But boy baby had been in the birth canal a long time. Placing her hands on Lizzy's abdomen, she whispered, "Okay, you can come out now."

Jeffy felt the immediate hardening of Lizzy's abdomen as a giant contraction began. Lizzy gasped and tried to sit up.

"I got you, Mom," Gabe said, extremely relieved to see her respond, even if it was because of pain.

"Welcome back," Jeffy said quietly to Lizzy.

Lizzy cried out. Jeffy had her hand on her abdomen and nodded. "I know, Mrs. Tanner, the contractions are strong and hurting your back, but we have to get the babies out now. Your little boy is in distress. So, come on, now, try to relax and let the contractions do their job. Breathe. Slow deep breaths."

Lizzy cried. "Where is Keegan? I need him."

"I'm right here," he said as he came in the door.

Everyone felt an immediate calm with Keegan's strong presence in the room.

"Good to see you, man," Chaz mumbled.

Gabe looked up to also see that Rose, Violet, Lily and Daisy were all standing just a few feet away on the other side of his mom. He wondered briefly where Iris was, but turned back to his mom when Jeffy spoke.

"Mr. Tanner, I need her to relax," Jeffy said quickly. "She's fighting the contractions."

"Elizabeth," Keegan said softly. "I'm here, sweetheart. You're okay. Relax for me. Breathe. Good girl. Relax. Breathe."

"Taylor, sweetie, let Mr. Tanner take over here by her side," Jeffy commanded.

Taylor moved up to sit on the stairs with the others.

"Mr. Tanner, hold her leg and press it slightly back toward her chest."

Lizzy moaned and cried with the next contraction and Jeffy watched as the baby suddenly crowned. "Okay, Mrs. Tanner, I can see the head. It's your son. He needs to come out, so with the next contraction I want you to push, okay?"

Lizzy nodded. "Here it comes," she cried.

"Okay good, now, take a deep breath, blow it out, take another deep breath, now push!"

Lizzy pushed until she screamed.

"Deep breath, Mrs. Tanner, and push again."

She did it again.

"Okay, you can stop. You're almost there. We're gonna do the same thing with the next contraction, okay?"

Lizzy nodded.

Jeffy ran her hand over Lizzy's abdomen. "You're doing good. Stay strong. We're almost done."

"Okay," Lizzy said as she sniffed. "The contraction is coming." She leaned her head back and moaned.

"Take a breath, good. Blow it out. Take a deep breath. Good, now push, Mrs. Tanner. Push!"

She had to take two more breaths and push, and finally, a son emerged into the light. Jeffy grabbed him immediately and stood up. She didn't want to cut his cord, but she needed to work on him. Jeffy nodded at Chaz. "Mr. Stewart, your turn. You get the next one."

"Violet, come hold this leg," Chaz said as he moved around to take Jeffy's place. He smiled at Lizzy and spoke softly. "You did it, Lizzy. Now let's work on your daughter."

"How's Isaiah?" Lizzy asked. "I don't hear him crying."

"Jeffy's working on him," Keegan said calmly. "You work on Gentian."

"But is he okay?"

Keegan couldn't lie to her. "Honey, Jeffy is working on him. I don't know his condition. Right now, Gentian needs you."

Gabe ran his hand over his mother's head. "Come on, Mom. It's gonna be okay."

While Chaz helped with Gentian, Jeffy was blowing air into Isaiah's lungs in small little puffs. She wrapped him in a towel and massaged his chest. Gabe was watching and praying that his tiny little brother would make it. He watched as Jeffy closed her eyes with her hand on the baby and nodded and prayed and nodded again.

Meanwhile, Lizzy screamed as she pushed her daughter from her body. Chaz held the child up, started working on clearing her passages, and the little girl began moving around, grunting and making soft sounds, and then she let out a shrill cry. Directly after that beautiful sound came another one. This one from the boy.

Gabe immediately closed his tear-filled eyes and thanked God.

Paramedics arrived to transport Lizzy and the babies to the hospital. Gabe gently lifted the pillow that his mom's head rested on, and eased out from under her. He set the pillow on the floor, and knelt down beside her and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Mom," he said.

She smiled at him. "I've missed you so much. I'm so glad you're home, Gabriel Tanner," she whispered, her voice barely a sound.

He nodded. "Me too." He moved out of the way so that the paramedics could attend to his mother.

Keegan moved up beside her while they worked on her. "Baby, you did it."

"I'm sorry, Keegan. I fell, and I couldn't get to my phone."

"I heard all about it. I'm just so grateful that you're okay."

Chaz laid a baby girl wrapped in a towel on her chest.

Lizzy and Keegan smiled. Lizzy touched her cheek. "Hello there, Gentian Tanner," she cooed.

The baby blinked her eyes almost as if she understood that her mother was speaking to her.

Jeffy laid the baby boy on Lizzy next. "Mrs. Tanner, I'm gonna ride with you to the hospital in the ambulance. I just feel the need to stay with him until I'm absolutely sure he's okay."

Lizzy nodded and looked at her new baby boy. His eyes were opened and he seemed to stare into her soul. "Hey there, my precious Isaiah," Lizzy said sweetly.

Keegan placed a hand on each baby's back and closed his eyes. "Hey there, kiddos," he said softly.

"We're your parents," Lizzy went on. "I guess you already know that.

But we just want you to know that we love you so much." She sniffed. "And you got lucky because your dad is the best dad in the world and he and I are gonna take such good care of you. Oh, little sweeties, my goodness you are so beautiful. Dear Jesus, I am so grateful."

Lizzy sniffed. "Thank you so much, Jeffy. Thank you for all you did."

Jeffy smiled. "Thank *you* for coming back. I know where you were. I know who you saw. I know it was tempting to let go. But you, Mrs. Tanner, you're also a warrior. And you chose to stand and fight this battle with us and with your family and I'm really happy you did."

"I saw Jesus," she said.

Jeffy nodded. "I know. And I know what He asked you. And if you could have seen the look of despair on your son's face, you would understand why I was so relieved by the answer you gave Jesus."

Keegan cleared his throat. "Well, this sounds like a story you'll need to tell me."

Lizzy smiled and nodded. "I think I was dying, Keegan. Not sure what I was dying of, but I think I may have left my body. I'll tell you about it later. But also, I hurt my back when I fell. I don't know if it's broken."

Jeffy jumped in. "It's not. You've torn several muscles in your lower back. It will take some time, but you will heal. And your blood pressure dropped dangerously low—that's why you were experiencing an OBE." She nodded at Keegan. "She also has a good bump on her head, and she'll have some bruising where she hit the steps when she tumbled down. But that is pretty much the extent of her injuries. So it looks like both Rose and her mom have been very blessed today. The dark forces tried to get you, and they tried to get your babies too, but we rebuked that stuff."

Gabe backed away. He no longer saw his sisters or his Cali fam. He went in search of them. He found his brothers and Jordan and his girlfriend in the kitchen, sitting around the table. They immediately stood and came to him and put their arms around him in a group hug.

Gabe didn't even try to hold back his tears. "Thanks, everyone," he choked out.

Taylor held him tight, buried her face against his chest and cried with him. Then, without even a word, the six of them knelt together in a circle on the kitchen floor and expressed their gratitude to God, one at a time.

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John 16:21

"When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world."

Chapter Three

The group of young people had barely risen up off their knees when Keegan poked his head into the kitchen. “Hey, kids.” He looked into his son’s eyes. “Gabe.” There was pain there but also gratitude. “So, I’ll be at the hospital with your mom and new brother and sister. Lizzy is very concerned about your homecoming being ruined.”

“Dad, seriously?”

He smiled. “You know your mom, always concerned about everyone else. Anyway, I promised her I’d tell you about all the snacks she made up as an appetizer for dinner, and that Jodi is expecting you all next door and she desperately wants you all to go to the Inn, have a good dinner, and be together with all the people who love us.” He glanced at his watch. “And really, there is no time for the snacks because it’s dinner time. We will FaceTime with you in a little while, once we hear what the doctors have to say. Though, as far as I’m concerned, when the best doctor in the world tells you everything is gonna be okay, then, I’m inclined to believe her.”

The group chuckled and nodded at that statement.

“Anyway, Gabe, your sisters are out on the porch waiting for you. They got a glimpse of the babies and got to give Mom a quick kiss before they put her in the ambulance. They are desperate to see you.”

Gabe nodded. “Well, I’m desperate to see them too. So, why don’t they come in?”

“Well, they went back outside at first because the house was full of paramedics and equipment. Now, they’re just sitting and talking and praying, giving themselves a minute to get themselves together.”

Gabe nodded. “Yeah, I get that for sure. Give me a second to get myself together too.”

Keegan nodded and looked at the other young people in the room. “And thanks, kiddos, or, young men and women, for being such a great support for Gabe, and for us all.”

“We’re family,” young Eric said quickly. “We’ll always be here for all of you.”

Keegan smiled. Young Eric was so much like his father. “Thanks. Okay, I’m off.”

Gabe stepped forward and Keegan embraced his son. “Welcome home, Gabe.” His voice broke and he cleared his throat as he hugged his son vigorously, patted his back, and finally stepped away, looking deep into his eyes. Words would never be enough to express the way Keegan felt about this fine young man he was honored to call his son.

And then it hit him. The words God spoke, first when Jesus was baptized and then again at the transfiguration. “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Keegan looked up and nodded. “I’m starting to understand,” he whispered.

“Understand what?” Gabe asked.

Keegan smiled. “Did I speak out loud? Sorry. I was talking to God.”

“Okay, but what do you understand?”

Keegan sighed. “I’m beginning to understand how God the Father feels about his Son, Jesus, when He said, ‘This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.’”

Gabe’s eyes filled with tears and he looked down, humbled by the sentiment.

Young Eric reached up and put his hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “I think that is about the coolest thing I’ve ever heard a father say to his son.”

Gabe sniffed and smiled and nodded in agreement.

Keegan briefly hugged Gabe again and left the house.

Gabe took a deep breath. He went to the kitchen sink and splashed some water on his face, then grabbed the kitchen towel and dried his face. He started to put the towel back on the knob of the cabinet door where his mom always hung the kitchen towels, but stopped. He could almost hear her voice. “Gabriel Tanner, that towel is now dirty. You’d better put it where it belongs and get a clean towel out and hang it up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he whispered. He smiled and did as she would have asked. Then turned toward his guests. “So, let’s go say hello to my sisters and then we’ll all head over to the Inn I guess.”

They all nodded and headed out the front door.

Rose was leaning against a truck in the driveway, talking to the guy Gabe only met by phone a few weeks ago.

Violet and Daisy were sitting on one of two porch swings, and it looked like they were having a prayer. Gabe looked out toward the drive.

“Gabe!” a little girl screamed.

Gabe smiled at the little girl who was being held by Lily, who immediately set her down.

“Gabe, Gabe, Gabe, Gabe!” Iris screamed again and again as she ran up the front walk toward the porch as fast as her little almost three-year-

old legs could carry her, which was amazingly fast.

Gabe ran down to meet her, lifted her up and swung her around high in the air. She shrieked with joy. Then he cuddled her close and kissed her cheeks. “Hey, my little flower,” he said softly.

“I missed you, Gabe.”

“I missed you too, baby girl.”

“They took mommy away in uh ambawantz.”

“I know, sweetie. They’re gonna take her to the hospital and let all the doctors and nurses look at her and in a few days she can come home.”

“I don’t want her to sweep at the hospital.”

“Why not? They’re gonna take good care of her.”

“But what if I wake up?”

“Well, if you want, you can sleep in my room.”

She grinned.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes!” she yelled.

Rose, Violet, Lily and Daisy all approached and circled around Gabe. He immediately glanced at the bandage on Rose’s upper chest, then looked into her eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked.

She smiled. “Are you kidding me? That bozo can’t stop us,” she said boldly, making Gabe smile.

“I love you, Rose,” he said quietly.

“Love you too, you little brat. Now give me a hug.”

Each sister took a turn to hug Gabe and each time Iris complained that she was being squished.

Then they gave a group hug which made Iris squeal and made everyone else laugh. Then the group split apart and went about welcoming and hugging Taylor and Jordan and young Eric and JoJo and Logan.

Taylor was hugged as if she were a member of their family. That was because the older sisters had a feeling she would eventually be just that. Jordan was greeted very lovingly too, and with sympathy for what she went through at the hands of a serial rapist. She also had some remarks about who knew that young Eric picking up a girl on the highway would lead to such a wonderful relationship.

JoJo was greeted with condolences and remarks about the game and asked if he thought he was gonna get out of work just because his arm was in a sling. He grinned and said, “It’s been working so far.”

Logan too was greeted and hugged. Finally once everyone had greeted everyone, Jericho, who’d been leaning against the front of his truck watching the warm scene, moved forward with a smile. “Gabe Tanner, we

finally get to meet in person."

Gabe smiled and offered his hand. "Jericho Jones, nice to meet you."

He looked back and forth between Rose and Jericho. "So, are you two, like..."

Rose jumped in. "Gabriel Tanner, will you stop. I can't believe I'm gonna have to beat you the very first day you come home."

Gabe chuckled. "As if." He smiled at Jericho. "So, fill me in."

Jericho shrugged. "We're friends." He waited a beat. "For now."

"Movin' a little slow?"

"Oh stop, Gabe," Violet said. "It took you seventeen years to ask Taylor out."

The others standing around all laughed.

Gabe nodded. "Ya got me there."

Young Eric spoke up. "Jericho Jones? I'm Eric Kino." He extended his hand.

Jericho shook it. "Very nice to meet you, Eric. I actually know who all of you are. You are the newest Kino Challenge Champion with a movie coming out." He turned to Logan. "You're the amazing singer and musician Logan Adams. I follow you on social media."

He looked at JoJo. "And you're his brother, the Heisman candidate and QB for USC." They shook hands. He turned to Taylor. "And you're Taylor Kino, Eric's sister and Gabe's girl, and you're Jordan Brooks, who spoke so brilliantly at the press conference after Eric was kidnapped." He shook both girls' hands.

JoJo studied the man. "You look very familiar."

Rose nodded. "He's the twin brother of Joshua Jones."

"Miami's Joshua Jones?"

Jericho nodded. "That's right."

"Jericho played football too," Rose put in. "In high school, and he was gonna play in college, but he got injured and missed his window."

JoJo nodded. "I guess we have something in common."

"Yep. God must have something different in store for you, JoJo. You are a strong leader and definitely a huge influence on the young boys of this country."

JoJo didn't respond.

"Well," Lily said, "let's get over to the Inn and have some dinner. Now that I know Mom's okay, and Rose is okay, and little Gentian and Isaiah are okay, I'm suddenly starving. Besides, I cooked a lot of the dinner and it's a meal fit for a king."

"Everybody get in the bed of the truck," Jericho said. "I'll run you

over there and drop you off."

"You're not staying?" Gabe asked.

"No, I promised Rose I'd take care of some things at the Center. We had a rough day and didn't get done what needed to get done. Heck, it took us half the day just to clean the oil off the floor."

"Oil?"

"Get in the truck. Rose can tell you everything that happened."

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Keegan watched the nurses take care of his children. They were gentle, but quick and efficient. They weighed them and cleaned them and took blood from them. Finally, once dressed and swaddled in their tiny blankets, they were laid in the bassinets. One of the nurses came out to speak with him.

"Mr. Tanner, your daughter is five pounds one ounce, and your son is five pounds four ounces. The doctor will be here in a minute and will do an examination and then we'll bring the babies to your wife. Though, I'm told that Dr. Kino examined them and already told you that they seem to be in perfect health. They are fine, big babies, for being twins. And they are already sucking and breathing well. Congratulations."

Keegan nodded. "Thank you. I'll go tell my wife. How long do you think it'll be before you bring them to her? I'm just asking because she's gonna ask me that question."

She smiled. "About thirty minutes to an hour."

"Okay, then. Thank you."

Keegan walked briskly to Lizzy's room and peeked in. She was being examined. Her doctor smiled at him as he quietly eased into the room. "How's she doin', doc?" Keegan asked.

"She's doing well. Except for the tumble she took that gave her a bump on the head and messed up her back. Even with that, she's gonna be back to her old self very soon. No concussion. BP is good. Back will take time to heal, but the pain will ease within the next twenty-four hours. Then she'll just have to not lift anything or do anything strenuous for a few weeks. She's an older mom, but she is very healthy. If I didn't know her age, I would assess her as a mom in her late twenties."

Lizzy smiled at that information. Keegan glanced down at his beautiful wife and winked at her. "Well, she takes very good care of herself and her family. And I guess all those children keep her young."

The doctor chuckled. "I guess so. It's hard to believe that this young, healthy woman is the mother of nine children. My husband and I are thinking of starting a family, and I look to Lizzy as the example of the

kind of mother I want to be. It's been an honor taking care of her."

"Well, we appreciate your excellent care. You came highly recommended," Keegan said.

"Thanks for that. So, I'm gonna get home to my husband now. But Lizzy," she began, turning to smile at her patient. "If anything changes, if you suddenly feel dizzy, or nauseated or in pain, you don't hesitate to call the nurse. And you have my number if you need to reach me in an emergency."

"When do you think I can go home?" Lizzy asked. "Is tomorrow a possibility?"

The doctor smiled. "Let's see how you're doing tomorrow and how the babies are doing. It's a possibility. But probably a far-fetched one."

Lizzy frowned. "My son is home."

"I understand. Lizzy, get some rest."

"I'd rather find something to eat. I'm starving."

"That's a good sign. I'll check on you tomorrow morning."

Keegan shook the doctor's hand and then turned to his wife. "Hello, my love." He bent down and kissed her.

"Have you seen the babies?"

"I just came from the nursery."

"How are they? When can I see them?"

He chuckled. "They are strong and healthy and they'll be here within the hour."

She relaxed and sighed. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Where else would I be?"

She shrugged. "Off on assignment or something."

He frowned. "I haven't been off on assignment in a long time. I've been working from home for months."

"I know, but seeing Bradley brought it all back to me. You know, all the babies coming when my husband is away."

"Um, seeing Bradley? Maybe you'd better start from the beginning."

"Oh yeah, you don't really know what happened."

"Let's remedy that."

She smiled. She loved it when he was demanding and in business mode. A little gruff. A little impatient. It always made her smile. "Let me see. I took a delicious nap and was headed downstairs to get the snacks laid out for Gabe and the other kids. I dropped my phone at the top of the stairs and it fell all the way down the steps. By the way, I don't know where it is and it's probably broken."

"Noted. Continue."

She giggled. “Anyway, then, somehow, I just fell. I mean, I took one step and I don’t know what happened. Maybe I stepped out too far. I just tumbled down. I literally fell head over heels. I remember thinking that I’m gonna fall all the way down and break my neck and I needed to stop the fall, so I reached out trying to grab the rail, and somehow, I did. But it like, jerked me to a halt. I was upside down on the stairs and my back hurt so bad. At first I couldn’t even move to get turned around. But I finally made myself do it no matter how much it hurt. Once I got turned, I tried to ease down the steps, but I couldn’t move, and then the contractions started and then my water broke and I think I cried.”

“Ya think?” he said with a smile.

“I was so scared that I was gonna have the babies right there on the stairs before anyone would come home and find me. I thought they would come out and tumble down the stairs and die.”

“Oh, honey.” He leaned over and ran his hand over her head and then held her face. “Sweet Elizabeth. I’m so sorry. I should’ve had someone with you.”

“Nonsense,” she said shortly. “Anyway, as I sat there, I started getting nauseated and I knew my blood pressure was dropping and it made me pass out. And that’s when things got crazy. It felt as if I left my body. Suddenly, I wasn’t on the stairs anymore. I was lying down in a beautiful, lush, green field. The grass was so soft. I was so relaxed and there was no more pain. It was lovely. And then Gabe was there. I heard him call me and I opened my eyes and he was there. And I told him I’d missed him and how soft the grass was and he started yelling at me. Calling me. I lifted my head up off the grass and I could see the tree. The beautiful giant tree with all of these amazing branches and beautiful leaves, and I told Gabe that I could see his tree because I had a knowing it was the same tree he saw when he was in a coma.

“I knew Gabe was crying, or praying, but I wanted him to know I was okay. I was fine. I felt so good. And then I looked up and Bradley was standing over me. He smiled and knelt down in the grass beside me. I asked him if it was really him and he said ‘yes.’ He said, ‘Hello, Lizzy,’ and I knew it was him. I’d forgotten what his voice sounded like, but when he spoke, I knew it was really him.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“He told me that everything was gonna be okay, and that the girls needed me. He also said he’d met Gabriel, and he was a fine young man.”

Keegan’s eyes teared up.

“Gabe was praying. I could hear him, but I couldn’t see him. I think

other people were praying too. Then suddenly, Bradley was gone and Jesus was kneeling in the grass beside me."

"Wow."

She blinked and tears spilled over her cheeks. "Jesus said he loved me. He said he knew I was tired, and if I wanted to come home, I could. But if I wanted to stay with my family and keep fighting the darkness alongside of them, I could do that too. It was up to me. I had a choice. What do I choose?" She stopped talking because the sobs overtook her.

Keegan sat down on the side of the bed, pulled her gently to him and held her against his chest. When she finally quieted he spoke as he held her. "And I'm guessing you chose to stay with us?"

She sniffed. "Yes," she whispered. "It felt good there. It felt so warm and joyful and the love I felt for Jesus was overpowering, and the love He had for me was the best feeling I've ever felt. Still, I couldn't stand the thought that my children and my husband would be so sad, and that they would be fighting a hard battle without me. I mean, I'm not a coward. I could hear Gabe crying, begging me to stay with him. I've missed him so much and he was pleading for me to not leave him, and not leave our family. So, staying here with my family seemed to be the only real choice I could make."

He rubbed his hand over her back and then pulled her away so he could see her face. "Thank you, Elizabeth," he said softly, as a tear ran down his own face.

She wiped at his tear. "Oh, honey, I didn't mean to make you cry."

He shook his head. "These are tears of gratitude. Thank you, Elizabeth, for choosing our family. You chose us over your own comfort, and ya know what? That isn't so hard to believe. You always choose us over your own comfort. Thank you, baby. Thank you for staying here with us. Lizbet, I love you so much. I thank God for you every day, but I think I might start doing that a hundred times a day."

She sniffed. "I love you too, Keegan. And I'm so grateful for you. Oh my goodness, you are such a good man."

"Not good enough. But I'll keep trying."

She grunted. "Help me lie back down. My back is starting to throb."

He gently eased her down onto the mattress. "Better?"

She nodded.

He smiled. "They're gonna bring the babies to you very soon. I watched them being weighed. Isaiah is 5lbs 4oz, and Gentian is 5lbs 1 oz."

Lizzy smiled. "That means they can go home with me."

Keegan nodded. "I thought that would make you happy."

"Oh, so happy! Thank you, Father," she whispered. "Can you hand me my water?" she said. "I have to drink a lot if I'm gonna make milk for two babies. And I'm so hungry. I wish I could have some of what Jodi and Lily were making at the Inn."

Keegan smiled. "I can make that happen. Grandmaster Kino called me and wanted to come up here to give you a blessing. I'll have him bring a care package."

"That would be great."

They both looked toward the door when they heard the sound of a bassinet being rolled down the hall. The door opened and two smiling young nurses rolled the bassinets into the room. Lizzy's eyes teared up immediately. One baby was sound asleep. One was fussing a little.

"Well," one nurse began with a sweet smile. "Little girl Tanner is awake, so, let's see how she does nursing." She lifted the bundle from the bassinet and handed her to Lizzy. "So, you just hold her like this, and..."

"This is baby number nine for me," Lizzy said quickly.

"What? I mean, how?"

"The usual way," Keegan said with a laugh.

The nurse smiled. "I mean, she looks so young."

"I'm forty-two," Lizzy said as she took her daughter. "And I have had three sets of twins," she said as she nuzzled her daughter's soft cheek. She lowered her gown and within only a few seconds, the baby had latched on and was sucking away. Keegan smiled. He went to the other bassinet and lifted his son up into his arms. He was in heaven. He had five beautiful step-daughters and two daughters and two sons of his own. Pure heaven. Now, he just had to do right by them. Provide for them. Teach them. Protect them. Love them. Them and their amazing mother.

✝✝✝

When Gabe and his sisters and the others with them walked into the Inn they were surrounded by warmth, and love and comfort and extreme power. John and Jodi Appel, always towers of strength for the entire community, could be depended upon for their stability, both physical and spiritual. Add to that having the Kinos and Adams there, it just made Gabe's family feel like there was no problem at all. Everything was gonna be fine. No, everything WAS fine. Everything was great and there was only super good things to look forward to. Only good. It felt good.

Everyone was greeting everyone else. Hugging, laughing, checking on Rose's condition, getting to know Jordan. The Stewarts were there and the Cali people were already enamored of little Jonathon Jones and Lachlyn Bryte. Jonathon's middle name was in honor of Jericho Jones

who'd helped to save his and his sister's lives. Lachlyn was named after her great grandmother, Joe Carter's mother, Lisa's grandmother on her father's side whom she'd never been able to know, because Joe's mother and father had already passed by the time Lisa found out that Joe Carter was her father.

In turn, all the Georgia people were very excited to see the five new Kino children, and the Stewarts were happy to finally get to meet them. And of course all the Georgia people were excited to meet Jeffy's and Cam's little Elijah.

While everyone was greeting everyone and cooing over babies and speaking to little ones, Gabe looked up and couldn't hold in the whoop and holler. He ran at the guy coming in the door.

"Peyton!" Gabe wrapped his arms around his friend and picked him up off the floor.

Peyton laughed and hugged his best friend tightly. Gabe finally set him down and they looked into each other's eyes, then laughed and hugged again.

Peyton put his hands on either side of Gabe's head. "I thought I lost you so many times this year. Are you done?"

Gabe nodded. "I hope so. Gettin' kidnapped, shot, sliced open, shot again, and stabbed, man, it is no fun."

Peyton still had hold of Gabe's head and he looked deep into his eyes. "I can't tell you how hard I prayed. I can't tell you how all of what you've been through has changed me. I love ya, man."

Gabe's eyes opened wide and he placed his own hands on top of Peyton's. He smiled. "I love you too, big guy."

They hugged again and laughed and patted each other's backs in a very manly fashion. Taylor approached with her beautiful smile in place.

"Hi, Peyton! It's so nice to see you!" She gave him a hug.

"Taylor, you're lookin' good as usual. You keepin' this guy in line?"

She smiled. "It's probably the reverse. Is Avery with you?"

Peyton sighed. "Naw, she went off to Auburn and met someone."

"You mean, like another guy?"

He nodded. Taylor frowned. "Must've been a pretty awesome guy to be able to steal her away from you."

Peyton shrugged. "I don't know 'bout all that. But really, I mean, I asked Avery to the Prom and we just sort of stayed together. It wasn't like, I mean, like you two."

Taylor nodded and took Gabe's hand. "There's not many like us."

"I agree," Peyton said.

Gabe noticed that along with Peyton was his brother Lucas, his mom, Rebecca Murphy, and right behind, was Agent Dalton, well now, Assistant AIC Dalton. "Peyton, we need to find time to sit and talk and you can tell me all about how baseball is goin' and what I really want to know, which is, how much you miss your old shortstop."

Peyton nodded. "We'll definitely have to find some time. Though, it's gonna be a busy week. Go greet everyone else. We'll talk again."

Gabe shook his hand and hugged him again and headed to see Agent Dalton. He approached his old bodyguard with a smile. "Dalton," he said warmly, his hand extended.

"Gabe. Are you behaving?"

"Tryin' to. Congrats on your big promotion."

"Thanks. I owe your father my life."

"I'm just glad God put you in his path," Gabe said quickly, trying to put the kind acts of his father into perspective.

Dalton nodded. "Me too, and I thank God for that every day."

Gabe nodded over toward Mrs. Murphy. "Soo like, did I see you two come in together?"

Dalton smiled. "Sharp as always, Gabe. Yes. I got up the courage and asked her out and, yeah, we're a thing, I guess you could say."

"How big of a thing?" Gabe asked.

"Kiddo, you've always been so pushy."

Gabe grinned. "So, it's a very big thing?"

Dalton sighed. "Since I met her because of you, I guess I'll tell ya. The way things are goin', and if all goes well through Christmas, I'm gonna ask her to marry me."

Gabe grinned. "So cool. Does anyone else know?"

"Your dad knows. That's all, and let's keep it that way."

"Yes, sir. So, where ya gonna live? I mean, after you get married?"

Dalton shook his head. "See? Pushy!"

"Well, ya gotta think about these things, right?"

"I am thinking about it. We'll probably sell her little house, and we'll buy a new home. There is a really nice subdivision being built a couple miles out past the high school. Those homes are looking nice and once I ask Rebecca to marry me and she says 'yes,' then I'll make that suggestion. And if she doesn't want to live there, we'll find a place nearby, because she doesn't want to leave Pine Forest."

Gabe grinned. "Agent Dalton, I mean Assistant AIC Dalton, I am so happy for you."

Dalton nodded. "I went from being a drunk, homeless military vet

living on the streets to a respected position at a world-renowned company, making good money where I can entertain the thought of buying my own home and supporting a wife. Like I said, I count my blessings every day, and I'd do anything to repay your father."

"You have repaid my father. All he really wanted was to see you doing well. He's probably told you to stop thanking him and like, pay it forward, right?"

Dalton smiled. "You're a chip off the old block."

"Now, that is a great compliment."

They both turned as Jodi and John Appel welcomed everyone to the Inn. John said because he doesn't often have the opportunity to do so, he'd like to call on Grandmaster Kino to bless the food. Once the blessing was said, they were invited into a delicious buffet of all the holiday season traditional foods one could think of in November.

Melaynah approached JoJo and smiled up at him. "JoJo, you're lookin' good," she said softly.

He smiled and nodded. "Thanks, Laynah, how're you doing?"

She nodded. "I'm good."

He looked her over. The beautiful girl with an adorable pixie face and voluptuous red curls hanging down almost to her waist. She was athletic and tough. She was tall, about the same height as Jordan, and slim, and simply gorgeous. She'd been one of his first crushes. She was young, actually just turned twenty-one on Friday. Her Marine special forces husband, also young, was currently in Afghanistan. "How's Jake? Have you heard from him lately?"

"Yes, he called me Friday on my birthday and again last night. He'd just gotten back from an op and was tired and a little banged up, and called me because he had to head back out again."

He looked into her eyes. "Are you worried?"

She sighed. "I try not to worry, but I admit, I'm a little stressed."

"I think that's understandable."

She smiled. "But it actually helps me to be able to watch you play ball. It takes my mind off things for a while." She put her hand on his good shoulder. "And I just want to say, JoJo, that you were amazing Saturday. Everything you did, you were fantastic. I mean, you are so talented, so good at what you do. Your skills are, like, amazing."

He chuckled. "Yep, good skills right up until I threw an interception to lose the game."

She laughed. "In fairness, you didn't actually throw it. I was screaming and cheering so hard for you. And when you didn't get up there

at the end, I cried. My dad had to calm me down."

"Yep, fun times," he mumbled. "And thanks for caring."

"So, JoJo, are you like, really devastated?"

He shrugged. "More like, disappointed in myself. I feel like I let the team down. And my family. And my friends."

"Are you kidding me? You gave it your all. You were phenomenal."

"Thanks," he muttered.

She put her hands on either side of his face and leaned forward and kissed each cheek.

His eyes opened wide. "Laynah, what are you doing?"

She grinned. "Jake's not here right now and so, I'm kissing you. It's not like it hasn't happened before," she said flippantly.

He nodded. "Yeah, you kissed me before, years ago, and I'm pretty sure that was in an attempt to make Jake jealous."

She frowned. "I wasn't trying to make him jealous. That makes me sound petty. I *was* trying to get his attention."

"Well, apparently it worked, and you got him and you married him, in case you need a reminder," he said pointedly. Sighing, he gathered her hands in his one large hand and pulled them down from his face. "Laynah, look around. You have to know that there are a lot of people who are watching us right now, and a few of them are probably trying to decide if they should come over here and kick my butt."

She giggled. "They wouldn't hurt an already injured man." She looked him over, ran her hand over his injured shoulder and down over the arm in the sling, then raised her hand and placed it on his chest. "A really cute, really nice, really amazing man."

He frowned, and pulled her hand away. "What has gotten into you? Jake is my friend. He's like a member of my family and you are his wife!"

She laughed again. "Okay, JoJo, calm down. You can blame Jake for this. He told me to flirt and give you a big ol' kiss and tell you that's from him, and tell you to buck up and don't get down. So that's for him. He also told me to do it in front of everyone to embarrass you and to see how you react and to video it and send it to him for his own entertainment."

JoJo sighed in relief, and then nodded in acceptance that he'd been had. "I see." He looked around to see that a few people were taking video, both Jake's mom, and Laynah's brother, Charlie. He chuckled. "Okay, well, two can play this game." He reached out with his good hand, grabbed Laynah by the back of her neck, pulled her forward and kissed her briefly, right on the mouth.

She gasped and pushed away and JoJo laughed and turned to the

people videoing. “Thanks, Jake. A kiss from a beautiful girl. I think I needed that. So, you wanna kick my butt for kissing your wife, you need to come on home and do it. I’m waiting for ya, big guy. Better hurry.”

Everyone standing around watching the encounter laughed and then applauded. JoJo bowed. “I’m so glad I can entertain you all,” he muttered. “Now, let’s go eat.”

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Dinner was amazing and everyone complained of overeating. Gabe, as usual, enjoyed sitting around, listening in on all of the conversations. He looked around the table. The only thing that could’ve made the evening any better was if his parents were there, and his new brother and sister. Still, he was truly enjoying himself. There were plenty of PDAs going around. He saw young Eric give Jordan a quick kiss. He saw Grandmaster Kino take Miss Shelley’s hand and kiss it. Mrs. Kino was serving her husband a piece of pie and kissed his cheek as she placed it in front of him. He glanced down at Taylor where she sat next to him when she placed her hand on his leg.

He smiled. “Having a good time?”

She nodded. “Uh huh. It’s so nice to listen to everyone. Makes me feel happy.”

Gabe nodded. “Yep, it’s cool. I wish Mom and Dad were here.”

Taylor sighed. “Are you going up to the hospital?”

He shook his head. “Dad said to let Mom rest. He’s gonna come home a little later. He said Mom is doing well and the babies are already nursing, and that’s a big deal.”

Taylor nodded. “Gabe, I know it was a hard thing to come home to. Are you okay now?”

He nodded with a sigh. “Yeah. I’m good. Grateful. Taylor, she talked like she was dying. It really scared me. Dad said when he gets home later he’s gonna tell us what Mom saw and heard. I mean, when she was talking about the grass and the tree and Jesus.”

“I wish I could be there to hear the story, but I guess you need some private time with your family.”

“You are my family, Taylor. But it probably will be too late by the time he gets home. I’ll call you and fill you in.”

She smiled.

He looked into her eyes. “I love you, Tay.” He quickly bent down and kissed her.

He looked back up to see Charlie Stewart smiling at him from across the table. He grinned. “So, Charlie, how’s it goin’?”

Charlie nodded. “Not bad.”

“I hear you’re a big hero.”

“Huh?”

“You delivered your mom’s babies,” Gabe said.

“Oh, yeah, that. Yeah, it was pretty scary.”

“I think it’s pretty cool. Do you feel differently?”

He shrugged. “Well, I remember when it was happening, all I could think about was my mom wasn’t dead. I mean, when we saw the ambulance get hit and it flipped so many times, we all thought mom and the babies were dead. So, when we realized that mom was alive, it was like, thank God. But she was in pain, and crying and I was just glad that I was small enough to squeeze through that window.”

“And like, how do you feel about actually delivering the babies?”

“Well, I didn’t really do anything but catch the babies when they came out. They were coming whether I was there or not, and Jericho said to just catch them. It was kinda messy, you know, like, gory I guess, and I think about that sometimes. And my mom and dad and I have talked about her being, like, embarrassed, ya know, but I wasn’t thinking about that at all. I mean, she wasn’t thinking about that either when everything was happening. She was in way too much pain. But afterwards, she felt like she had to talk to me about what I saw so I wouldn’t be embarrassed or like, I guess, traumatized.”

Gabe nodded. “I get it. I understand that you might be embarrassed, and probably she was a little embarrassed too. I saw my mom deliver today, but I was behind her and couldn’t really see much. Still, your dad was there, tending to my mom, and they’re like friends, ya know, and that makes me wonder if my mom is embarrassed.”

Charlie nodded. “I didn’t think about that. But you know, that’s the second baby my dad has delivered for your mom,” he said with a grin.

Gabe smiled. “Yep. And it’s a good thing for me. Ya know, I guess we just need to be mature and accept that’s how babies get born, and push it aside that someone might have seen the private parts of our bodies.”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, because I wasn’t thinking about that at all. I was just so thankful that mom was alive. I’ve seen calves, horses, dogs and cats, and now humans being born. The whole thing is pretty cool. That we can create another whole living creature and push it out and it becomes a separate living thing.”

Gabe’s eyes opened wide. “Charlie, that’s pretty deep.”

He shrugged. “Well, I’ve thought a lot about it since that happened. I’m actually thinking about, like, maybe becoming a doctor.”

Taylor smiled. “You mean like, being an obstetrician?”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah. I’m not sure yet. Not sure if I’m smart enough. But I’m gonna look into it.”

“That is very cool,” Gabe said sincerely. “I’m excited for ya, Charlie.”

“Thanks, Gabe. Actually, I’ve always thought that when I grow up, I wanna be just like you. I mean, you’re good at everything. You were top of your graduating class. You were good at all sports. At martial arts. At shooting. At dancing. At singing. And with people.”

When Gabe started to protest, Charlie went on quickly. “No. Don’t say you’re not or act all humble and stuff, because you are all that and more. And I still want to be like you in a lot of those things. But now, I feel kinda like I’m finding my own like, path. So, I’m still gonna play sports. I’m still gonna shoot and be the best martial artist I can be, but I think I’m gonna look into other things, like, maybe even being a doctor. And most of all, Gabe, the way you’re so close to God, and always talking on social media about being in service to God by serving people, helping others, that’s what I want to do.”

Gabe nodded. “Feeding His sheep. Not just like we’re doing this Thursday, but all the time. And not just food, but with kindness or healing or prayer or teaching the Word or cuttin’ someone’s grass. There are so many ways to help people.” He smiled down at Taylor. “The Kinos have this thing they pray about every day. They ask God to put people in their path that He wants them to help. And they ask God to help them know what to do for these people. So, when they run into someone on the street, or in the grocery store, or someone sitting on the side of a gas station, they take notice and they ask God what He wants them to do. So, that means almost every day they’re busy with helping someone.”

Charlie nodded. “That is so cool.” He smiled at Taylor. “You are very cool people.”

“My mom and dad are. I’m trying.”

Gabe shook his head. “She’s amazing.”

Peyton came up from behind and grabbed Gabe. “Hey, buddy, Mom’s tired and we’re gonna head on home.”

Gabe stood and frowned. “Man, we didn’t get a chance to talk much. Will you be at the Center tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“Ya wanna grab an early breakfast together before we go work our tails off?” Gabe asked.

“Sounds great. Just like old times.”

Gabe frowned. “I just realized, I don’t have any transportation.”

Peyton smiled. “That’s right, because I have your transportation. I guess *I’ll* pick *you* up in the morning for a change. 6:30?”

“Sounds good. See ya then, Peyton.”

“Count on it.”

As Peyton and his family and Agent Dalton left, Gabe’s attention was drawn by Violet sitting a few seats down. She rose quickly. “CJ! There you are.” She went to him quickly as he came into the room.

Carson Josiah Blackmon smiled. “Hello, Vi,” he said softly and leaned down to brush a soft kiss over her cheek. “Sorry I’m late. Had a little glitch with my assignment, but guess who I’m assigned to protect now?” he asked as he ushered her away to talk privately. He escorted her to a loveseat in the main lobby/living area and sat down with her.

“Who?” Violet asked.

“You. Your father feels like after today, and after speaking with the Kinos, we need to go back to full protection for the family until whoever hired that guy to hurt Rose today is found.”

Violet nodded. “Are you only protecting me?”

“Yes. And Thompson, McRee and Diaz are on Rose, Daisy and Lily respectively. And of course, your father has your mom, and I don’t know who will draw Gabe.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “If you’re gonna be with me all day every day, well, I mean, I spend a lot of time with Rose, and so does Jericho, which means you’ll be around Jericho.”

CJ nodded. “I’m a professional. I can handle myself.”

She sighed. “CJ, you know, this can’t go on. Whatever the problem is with Jericho, I wish you would just tell me.”

“The problem is not exactly *with* Jericho, but this is not the time to have this discussion, Violet.”

She looked up expectantly. “Then does that mean you will make a time for us to have this discussion?”

He sighed and brushed his hand over her cheek. “We’ll see.”

Violet smiled at the handsome Ameritech Agent. He was tall, and strong, and had dark brown hair and eyes. His face was handsome, masculine, and when he smiled, he melted her heart. But he hadn’t smiled much lately. She put her hand on his cheek. “CJ, you know you can tell me anything, right?”

He blew out a breath and didn’t answer her. She looked into his eyes and when she realized he didn’t answer because he didn’t believe he could tell her everything, she pulled away. “Well, that actually hurts.”

“I don’t mean to hurt you. I love you, Violet, please believe me.”

"I want to believe you. And I love you too, CJ, but I feel we are at a standstill in our relationship. If you don't believe you can tell me what your problem is with Jericho, then, I'm at a loss. I don't know where to go from here. I'm tired of walking on eggshells around you two. I'm tired of you sulking when he's around. There is a darkness that comes over you. What did he do to you? You know, Rose is interested in him, and if he's a bad guy, then I want to know. What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything, Vi. Just leave it."

Her eyes filled at the harshness in his tone. "How can our relationship go on any further if you can't even tell me about something that happened in your past? I mean, you won't even tell me about your family. A relationship can't have secrets."

"Unless those secrets are yours, right?" he countered.

"What? I don't have any secrets. I'm an open book," Violet said.

"Really? So, tell me what happened in New York?"

She blinked up at him. She opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't because the emotion was choking her. She took several breaths. "You know what, CJ? I've had a pretty hard day today. Someone tried to kill my sister, and my mother fell down the stairs and almost died and I have two new siblings and my brother is home, whom I've missed desperately, and I really don't have the energy to talk to you anymore."

She turned to leave and he caught her hand. "Vi, wait. I'm sorry. This whole conversation was not what I had planned."

She sniffed. "I bet. I need to calm down. I'll be in the kitchen helping with the dishes." She firmly pulled her hand away and left.

He watched her go. He did love her. And he wanted to ask her to marry him. Why did Jericho have to show up here in this little town of all places? If he didn't tell her what had taken place all those years ago he was gonna lose her. But if he did tell her, he might also lose her. He needed to speak with her father and get some advice, because losing Violet might be the straw that breaks this camel's back.

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Luke 8:17

"For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest,
nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."

Chapter Four

Young Eric stood between the dining room and lobby area and looked around at the large group of people, hoping to find his sweetheart. She'd seemed a little down at dinner, and now he was trying to figure out where she went.

He gazed around the large lobby/living room area. Most of the women were sitting in the grouping around the fireplace that was situated between the living and dining rooms. They were chatting and holding and cooing over babies, the Stewart twins and the Wallaces' little Elijah. Taylor was sitting on the rug in front of the fireplace apparently telling a story to the younger children.

Miss Jodi was across the room at the lobby desk. She said she was making some last-minute changes and would announce the room assignments in a few minutes so that everyone could get to their rooms and rest.

John Appel was chatting with young Eric's father and Mr. Stewart. His grandfather had packed up a large dinner and headed up to the hospital. Uncle Joey, Uncle Mark, CJ, Cam, the two Stewart boys, Charlie and Matt, and Jamie Brooks were talking and standing near the buffet tables in the dining room, munching, probably not because they were hungry, but because it was there.

Young Eric headed across the lobby. He looked to the smaller breakfast room that was to the left of the kitchen. Josie was sitting at the breakfast table talking to young Eric's little cousin, Sophia, and to Aralyn Stewart. He turned toward Miss Jodi who smiled at him as he approached. "Hey, Eric!"

"Hi, Miss Jodi. Have you seen Jordan?"

She frowned. "Not lately. But I'll keep an eye out for her."

He heard a piano playing from the music room behind Miss Jodi. "Maybe she's in there," young Eric said as he passed the lobby desk and peeked into the music room.

Logan and Violet sat at the piano together, playing a duet. Gabe, Daisy, and Lily stood around the piano. Rose was sitting in a chair, her eyes closed.

"Have you guys seen Jordan?" young Eric asked.

Violet nodded her head. "Yes. She's in the kitchen. I went in to help with the dishes but the staff and Jordan's mom have it taken care of, so I came out here."

"Thanks," he said, and headed to the kitchen.

He headed toward the back of the Inn. The kitchen was situated behind the lobby area, between the breakfast room to the left and the giant dining room to the right of the kitchen. Eric walked into the kitchen. He smiled and nodded at five kitchen staffers who worked at the Inn and Jordan's mom, Mrs. Brooks, chatting as they worked wiping down the counters and scrubbing the last of the pots and pans. At first he didn't see Jordan. He'd expected to find her chatting with the ladies or sitting at the island drying dishes or something. But instead she was standing against the wall near the kitchen door, leaning on her crutches, looking troubled. She looked up at him as he approached. "There you are," he said brightly.

She smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Jordan? What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing really."

"Are you tired?"

"Not really. I mean, it's eight o'clock here, but for us it's only five."

"Okay, well, I'm not stupid. There's something bothering you. Whaddya say we go out back for some privacy and we can talk."

She sighed and nodded. "Okay."

"Stay here. I'll be right back."

She nodded.

Young Eric headed back to the lobby and to his father. "Hey, Dad."

"Son."

"I think Jordan is feeling a little down or something. I'm gonna take her for a walk out back."

"Okay," Ricky said. "Any clue as to what the problem is?"

Eric shook his head. "Could be she's just not used to being somewhere other than home. Or could be jet lag. Or, maybe what we witnessed earlier today is bothering her. I'll let you know when I know."

"If I can help, let me know. Or Granddad."

Young Eric nodded. "Thanks."

"And take your coats. It's going down into the mid-thirties tonight."

Eric nodded and headed over to the pegs on the wall near the lobby desk that held everyone's coats and scarves. He donned his own suede jacket with Sherpa lining and grabbed Jordan's new faux fur and suede jacket. He smiled. They almost matched. He went back into the kitchen

and helped her put on her coat, then opened the large kitchen door and escorted her out.

Jewell Brooks, who just recently changed her name from Perez to Brooks, turned and smiled at the young couple. “Are you two going out?”

Eric nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I thought we’d get some fresh air.”

“Well, it’s cold out there.”

Eric grinned. “I’ll keep her warm.”

Mrs. Brooks laughed. “Have fun.”

Jordan nodded. “Love you, Mom.”

Jewell looked quickly back to Jordan, her heart swelling. “I love you too, sweetie. Have fun.”

They stepped out the kitchen door and looked around. They were standing on a large patio area that extended to their left where two sets of double French doors opened up from the breakfast room. The patio continued a good ways to their right to meet up with the veranda that was outside the dining room doors. On the far side of the veranda was a double raised garden bed filled with plants and flowers. Eric had been told that the raised bed was something Mr. Stewart put in the year he met his wife, and they’d preserved it and moved it to that spot.

Beyond the veranda was the pool area. The entire backyard space was beautifully decorated with lights and large planters, currently filled with fall mums. Out past the patio was a stone path, lit by solar lights that wound around the entire backyard space, all the way back to the pecan grove and eventually ended at the woods. At one point it branched off to the right, toward the cottages and vegetable garden, or to the left toward the pecan grove and apple and peach trees.

Jordan shivered. “Wow, it’s kinda cold out here.”

Eric smiled. “You wanna go back inside?”

She shook her head.

They walked slowly around the patio, Jordan’s crutches clicking softly with each step.

“It’s pretty out here,” Jordan said.

Eric nodded. “The lights are nice.” He pointed over toward the pool. “And the pool fountain is nice. The sound of water flowing is cool. I mean, it’s not the ocean, but I like it.”

Jordan looked over toward the pool, took notice of the water spraying up into the air and then landing in the center. The lights made the water sparkle and it made a pleasant sound. She sighed.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” he asked softly.

Jordan looked over at the guy she loved. He was so strong, so

attentive, his voice so warm and full of concern. He raised his eyebrows at her. She sighed. “I’m not really sure. Just thinking about things I guess.”

“Things like what?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Are you a little bit homesick?”

She thought hard and shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I mean, it’s really nice here, very different, beautiful, green. It’s interesting. It’s cool to see where Gabe grew up. To see what shaped him, ya know? To see what he saw every day.”

Eric nodded. He guided Jordan out to the stone path.

Jordan sighed. “Three, did you ever almost lose your mom?”

He glanced at her. “Lose her? Do you mean, did she ever come close to dying?”

Jordan nodded.

“No. I mean, yes, she did come close to dying, actually a few times. But I wasn’t born yet, so I didn’t come close to losing her.”

“Really? What happened?”

“Well, at one point she tried to make a deal with some bad guys to leave our family alone, and the deal went bad, and the bad guy made her fall off the side of some rocks. You know those rocks where the kids like to climb, if you head south on the beach at the grands’ house?”

Jordan nodded.

“She fell from the top of those rocks to the middle landing.”

“Oh wow.”

He nodded. “Yeah, and another bad guy also shot her in the chest a few weeks later.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Yeah, it’s a long story really and I have a feeling I don’t really know the whole thing. But like I said, I wasn’t even born yet, so I wasn’t traumatized by all that. Not like Gabe was probably traumatized today.”

Jordan nodded. “Poor Gabe. I mean, to see him so afraid, begging his mother not to leave him. It really got to me.”

Eric put his arm around her. “So, that’s what’s got you all down?”

“I’m not really down. At least I don’t think I am. I’ve never come close to losing my mother either. At least I don’t think I have.”

“Whaddya mean by that?”

“I mean, who knows what kind of hell Peter put my mother through that she hasn’t told me or that I was simply oblivious to.”

“Well, you could always ask her about that.”

“I’m going to. But anyway, I was just thinking, as far as I know I

haven't ever experienced almost losing my mom, and I'm thinking that because I haven't, I sort of take her for granted."

"Well, baby, actually all of us humans, because we're human, we take things for granted."

Jordan nodded. "Right? Like, we don't realize how nice electricity is until the power goes out."

"Right," he agreed.

"And I'm thinking, I've been a horrible, ungrateful daughter to my mother," she said, her voice emotional.

He stopped walking and faced her. She looked up at him, blinked, and tears ran over her cheeks. "Oh, baby. I doubt that," he said softly, reaching up to wipe her tears with his thumbs.

She shook her head. "The love Gabe showed for his mother today, the absolute, complete devotion, it got to me. And then I thought about the way I am with my mom."

"Jordan, what in the world are you talking about? You're awesome with your mom."

She shook her head. "No. I'm not. I've been thinking about all the times I've been short with her. I've been impatient with her. I've been plain old disrespectful. I've taken her for granted."

She turned and started walking farther down the path, shaking her head. Eric stared after her a moment, then quickly caught up to her when she stopped where the path divided. They turned right.

"Okay, babe, let's say for a minute that what you're saying is true. I mean, I can think of plenty of times that I've been disrespectful to my mom too."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, I wasn't always the great guy you know now," he joked with a smile, but he frowned when she didn't smile back. He walked along beside her silently for a few minutes.

"Jordan," he finally said, "babe, you can't beat yourself up because you think you might have been rude to your mom. If you were, the only thing to do is repent and ask for forgiveness. I know both your mom and the Lord will immediately and readily forgive you. I mean, okay, I get that seeing what you saw today made you mindful of your own life. And that makes me proud of you. Doing some soul-searching and making changes for the better is an ongoing process for us Christians."

"Yeah, but I bet you've never been rude to your mom," Jordan said.

Eric smiled. "Sure I have." And the light came on. "I have, but there *is* a difference."

She walked off the path and sat down on the grassy hill that overlooked Cottage number eight, and laid her crutches beside her. “Okay, what’s the difference?”

Eric shrugged and sat down beside her. “I had the advantage of a father who loved me, and taught me and disciplined me. So, when I smarted off to my mom he immediately called me down. My father honored and loved and respected my mother and there is no way that he would let me get away with being rude to her in any way. You didn’t have that. Your father passed away. Your step-father, I mean Peter, well, you know.” He turned to her and rubbed a knuckle over her cheek. “Babe, please don’t be sad.”

She sighed. “I’m not sad. I’m just disappointed in myself.”

“Don’t be,” he said softly. “Forgive yourself. And just do better from this point forward. That’s what Dad always told me when I messed up.”

She smiled. “When did you ever mess up?”

He laughed. “Almost every day. On a regular basis. Dad had to keep a firm grip on me.”

“Well then, I guess he did a good job, because you’re perfect now.”

“No, I’m far from perfect. Especially with what I’m thinking right now,” he said as he pushed her onto her back and leaned over her. He lowered his head and kissed her a long time and when he raised his head he was breathless.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered. “You said you’d keep me warm.”

“Oh, Jordan, what am I gonna do tonight?”

“Tonight? What do you mean?”

“Just the thought that I can’t slip across the hall and snuggle with you during the night, it’s making me feel so lonely.”

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Then we’d better get in as much snuggling as possible right now.”

“I agree,” he said as he kissed her again.

It was a few minutes later as they lay quietly in each other’s arms that they heard the voices.

“Alright, you two guys go that way. Make sure you check all the windows on that side.”

“Who’s gonna slice the tires?” another said.

“I got that,” another said.

“I can’t wait to mess these people up.”

Young Eric put his hand over Jordan’s mouth and bent his head to speak in her ear. “Listen carefully,” he whispered. “Do exactly as I say. You scoot down, stay low, until you get to the bottom of the hill, and then

you head back to the house. Go as fast as you can. Go straight toward the pool area and enter in through the veranda. Call my dad on your way, Jordan. I'm gonna go hold them off. Tell Dad I need help."

"But..."

"No time to argue. We have children in that house that have to be protected. Obey me. Go. Call Dad."

She grabbed her crutches and scooted down the hill.

Eric stood and stepped in front of the guys he'd heard talking. There were five of them. "Where ya goin', guys?" he asked.

They jumped back, letting out a string of profanity. He'd obviously surprised them. It was hard to tell in the dark if anyone was armed. Still, he knew at least one of them had a knife, the one who said he'd be the one to slice the tires.

One of them glanced at Jordan as she made her way back to the house. Another guy spoke. "Get her," he said.

When the one started after Jordan, Eric moved with lightning speed, sweeping the guy's leg, sending him down. They all jumped on him then. As he had many times in the past few months, he began to fight for his life. As he fought, one of the guys left and started back again toward the direction Jordan had headed. Young Eric saw him go and couldn't go after him. He prayed Jordan made it back inside.

Meanwhile, in the Inn, Ricky Kino laughed at Joey as he told a story from his childhood. Ricky reached down and glanced at his phone when it rang.

"Hi, Jordan, everything okay?"

"No," she cried. "Eric needs help. There's men out here." She let out a scream and the call went dead.

Ricky looked up. "Eric and Jordan are in trouble out back."

All the men immediately jumped into action.

Joey, Cam, CJ, Chaz, Mark and Ricky ran out the back door. A shot rang out and the bulletproof glass in the back window above the breakfast table spidered. Some of the women screamed. John Appel ordered Shelley and all the women and children into the music room and told Gabe and Logan and JoJo to stay and protect them. He then immediately grabbed two firearms from behind the lobby desk. He went to the music room and handed one to Gabe. "You're the last line of defense," he said. "It's up to you guys to protect them."

Gabe nodded. "With my life." He quickly pointed the gun down, checked the chamber, then shoved the gun inside his waistband.

John headed out.

Gabe looked at all the people in the room. “Don’t anyone go near the windows,” he ordered.

JoJo nodded. “Actually, let’s move you all back by that back wall behind the piano.”

The women and children did as ordered.

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Jordan was going as fast as she possibly could. She was almost to the house on the far side of the pool, but she’d had to stop to talk to Mr. Kino, because she found she couldn’t walk on crutches and talk on the phone at the same time. She was standing alongside the far side of the pool when the bad guy caught up to her. He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off the ground. She screamed and promptly dropped the phone in the pool. Lifting one of her crutches she jerked the top of the crutch straight up into the man’s face. He put her down as he grabbed his nose.

Jordan stumbled away, hopping on one foot, but he came at her again. She swung the crutch with all her might at the guy and hit him across the back. Cursing, he grabbed the crutch from her grasp and tossed it away. Then grabbed her and swung a fist at her face. She ducked and the punch only hit her on the side of her head. Still, it dazed her. He held her fast, getting ready to punch again, when she kicked his shin with her cast. Furious, he head-butted her. Her eyes closed and he let go of her. She fell backwards into the pool.

He stood there looking at her for a second, then turned and ran away.

Inside the music room Jeffy moaned. “Logan,” she said quickly. “Jordan needs help. She’s—she’s in the pool. Go—now!”

Logan ran out the door, through the Inn, out the terrace door and dove straight into the pool. Jordan was splashing around, trying to make her way to the side, but her wet cast and wet coat were weighing her down.

“I got you, Jordan,” Logan said. “Be still.”

She obeyed and put her arms around his neck. Logan had just gotten Jordan to the shallow end where he could walk out of the pool with her when young Eric arrived. He came down two of the steps into the pool and Logan placed her gently in his arms.

“Logan,” young Eric said. “Thank you.”

“Thank Jeffy.”

“I will.”

“Eric,” Jordan cried as she coughed. “Three, I’m so happy to see you. Are you okay?”

He chuckled. “Are you?”

“Yes. He hit me a couple of times and I fell in the pool. I thought you

got shot."

"No, the guy tried to shoot me. I took the gun from him just as it fired." Eric walked in through the veranda doors and went to set Jordan in front of the fire.

Mark came in to tell Gabe and the women that the place was secure. Jewell came running out and threw herself down next to Jordan.

"Jordan, are you okay? Oh, sweetie, you're soaking wet. Here, let's get this coat off."

Jordan's teeth were chattering. "That water is freezing."

Young Eric helped lift her up so they could get the coat off of her. Jodi brought towels and a blanket and handed them to Jewell, then turned and handed a large towel to Logan. She smiled at him. "You're in room seven with young Eric if you'd like to go change."

Logan nodded. "Thank you." He headed up the stairs.

"Eric," Jewell began. "Would you mind carrying Jordan up to her room and let me get her out of these wet clothes. I don't want her to catch a cold."

"You don't have to carry me. I can walk," Jordan said.

"Oh really?" young Eric asked. "How?"

"With my..." she stopped. "Oh yeah, my crutches are outside somewhere."

He smiled. "We'll find them in the morning. I promise." He scooped her into his arms.

"She's sharing a room with Taylor," Jodi said. She looked at her screen. "Room two."

Eric nodded and headed up the stairs. He dropped her off and was ushered quickly away. He headed back downstairs.

It was only a minute later that they saw the blue lights flashing on the walls coming in the window from the front drive. The police, however, didn't bother to come in. Chaz had instructed them to come around to the back. Joey and Cam handed custody of five slightly injured males over to the police. One had a broken hand. One had a bloody nose. One had a wrenched shoulder. One had an injured knee. One had broken fingers. All of them had several cuts and contusions on their faces. All of them were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three.

A gun and three knives had been confiscated along with some illegal substances. All of them had over five hundred dollars in their pockets.

Eric arrived back downstairs and was immediately told to go out back to speak with police to give his side of the story. Sighing, he headed out.

Gabe turned his gun in to Miss Jodi and went immediately to Taylor

because her face was pale and she looked shaken. He approached and took her hands. “Are you okay, Tay?”

She nodded. “I guess.”

He cupped her face in his hands and tilted it up so he could look into her eyes. “Talk to me.”

She sighed. “I’m scared.”

“It’s over.”

“For now,” she argued. “But it’s like, it’s starting up all over again, except this time, someone is out to get you or people you love. And that means...” she stopped.

He sighed. “That means that you’re a target.”

“We are warriors. That’s what Dad and Granddad always say. But I don’t feel strong right now. I’m feelin’ pretty scared.”

“It’s okay to be scared, baby. And that doesn’t mean that you aren’t strong. Listen, I won’t let anyone get you.”

She nodded. “I know you’ll try hard. But like, I think it’s inevitable. They’ll eventually get to me.”

Gabe sighed. “Okay then, so, would it make you feel better if we put extra eyes on you?”

“You mean, an agent?”

Gabe nodded.

“Maybe. I don’t mean to insult you. It’s not that I don’t think you can protect me. But you have things to do and you can’t keep watch over me twenty-four hours a day.”

Gabe sighed. “Okay. I’ll speak to Dad, or to Dalton, and to your dad, and we’ll get protection for you.”

“Thank you, Gabe.”

He pulled her close and held her tight. “It’s gonna be alright. We’ll eventually find this guy.”

They both turned as the front door to the Inn opened.

“What in the heck is going on? There are cops everywhere,” Heather asked as she and Nolan Sawyer came through the door.

Gabe turned with a smile to greet his eldest sister and her fiancé.

“Heather!” he said loudly. He rushed to her, picked her up and swung her around as if she were just a little kid.

“Good grief, Gabe, I think you’ve grown even taller, or bigger or something.”

He set her down. “I don’t think so, Heather. You just forgot how big and strong I am.”

“Oh, yeah, that must be it,” she said sarcastically. She hugged him

again and kissed his cheek. “Lord, I have missed you.”

He smiled and touched her face. “Me too. I mean, I’ve missed you.”

She laughed.

Gabe shifted his gaze to Nolan and held out his hand. “Nolan. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Thanks, Gabe, you too. So, what’s goin’ on here?”

The other sisters came running to greet Heather and Nolan while Gabe explained to Nolan all that had taken place. When he finished, Nolan shook his head. “There is never a dull moment around here.”

Rose chirped in. “Right?”

“Okay, everyone, listen up,” Jodi announced just as Logan came back downstairs all clean and dry. “Here are the room assignments. I’ve had to do a little tweaking, because with the current threat we don’t want any of you out in the cottages.”

Everyone that was not out in the back yard dealing with police gathered around.

“Shelley, I don’t know if you knew that John and I have moved down into Maddie’s old room for convenience’s sake, so that leaves our entire apartment empty up on the third floor, which we divided into two family suites. We thought we’d put you and Eric and the five little ones up there.”

“Oh, that will be wonderful!” Shelley said.

“Okay, good. And Jewell and her two kiddos will be up there too on the far side. You’ll see, the place is huge and both suites have their own kitchens, not that you’ll need to use them. Then Bree, you and Ricky will be in room number one on the second floor. Jordan and Taylor are in room two. Mark, Bella and Em are in three. Breez, you and Joey and your three little ones are in number four because it’s a little bigger and we moved a trundle bed in there for you.”

“Thanks, Jodi,” Breez said.

“My pleasure. Now, Toby and Caro will be in number five, and they should be arriving sometime tonight. Grace will be in six. As I already said, Logan and young Eric are in seven. JoJo and Brody will be in eight.” She looked up and smiled at Nolan. “And Nolan, that leaves you in room nine, which is down here, at the end of the hall past our bedroom. It’s a little smaller than the others, but...”

“Well, I don’t mind small, Miss Jodi. Still, I also don’t mind being in a cottage either. I’m not afraid of some idiots trying to make trouble. I have several friends with me,” he said as he touched his waistband. “If you know what I mean.”

She nodded. “Well, if you’d rather stay in a cottage you’re welcome

to do that. Just let me know what you decide." She quickly looked at the other young men who'd originally been scheduled to be in cottages. "Not you guys, though. Sorry, but you're inside the Inn by special request of your fathers."

JoJo nodded. "I get it. No problem for me. Closer to the food."

The others chuckled.

The rest of the men and young Eric came in from outside and immediately everyone wanted to hear the whole story of what went down, but as young Eric began to speak, Ricky looked his son over now that he was in brighter light, and realized he was not unscathed.

"Son?" Ricky said, interrupting his story.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you know that you're bleeding?"

Young Eric looked down at his chest, rubbed his hand over it. "Where?"

"You have blood running down your arm. Maybe we'd better check you over."

Jeffy immediately stepped forward and lifted his left arm. She sighed. "Take your shirt off."

There were several gasps in the room as he pulled his long-sleeved knit shirt over his head to reveal a good six-inch slice under his left arm.

"How can you not feel that?" Jeffy asked.

Young Eric shrugged. "Guess I'm getting used to pain."

"Cam, will you grab my medical bag? I have a suture kit. Eric, I'm gonna need you to lie down somewhere."

"How about on the big table in the dining room?" Jodi suggested. "John, will you grab a sheet?"

"Yes, ma'am."

While Jeffy stitched up young Eric, Joey told the story he'd heard young Eric tell the police. When he finished, Gabe had a question.

"So, did they get any information from the perps?"

"So far, just the same information as the guy who hurt Rose," Joey answered. "I'm in touch with Jason and we're working on some hunches. We'll let you know if it pans out. Until then, we do what we have to do to keep everyone safe. These guys came in from the woods out by the creek. We'll scan the area in the morning."

Gabe sighed. "I'm sorry, everyone. I guess I pissed somebody off."

"Don't apologize," Joey said quickly. "You're letting your light shine, and the ones who get mad about that are the dark side. You aren't responsible for the choices they make."

Gabe nodded. “Well, I hate that young Eric is hurt. But he sure is a hero, isn’t he? Taking all those guys on. And Jordan too.”

Everyone agreed.

Daisy spoke then as she bounced a sleepy Iris in her arms. “Well, Tanner family, we need to get this baby home and in bed.”

Rose nodded. “And Iris too,” she quipped.

Everyone chuckled and started saying ‘goodnight.’

“Don’t forget,” Rose announced. “We need all hands on deck tomorrow.”

“And we won’t have Jewell or Jordan until after they get back from the orthopedist,” Jeffy reminded them. “So that means, we’ll have to take up the slack.”

Ricky spoke then, to bolster everyone in his father’s absence. “But we won’t let this get us down or keep us from accomplishing our goal, right?”

“Right,” everyone said loudly.

“If anything, we’ll work even harder,” John Appel said.

CJ went to the door. “Tanners and Andersons, I’ll escort you home.”

Nolan nodded. “I’ll go with you, CJ. And Miss Jodi? If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go ahead and take a cottage. It puts me closer to Heather,” he said with a smile.

Gabe immediately made his way to young Eric as he was being stitched up and let him know he was grateful for what he did. He then pulled Taylor aside. “Tay, I spoke to your father and he’s gonna arrange to have an agent with you. He’ll be here in the morning.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“I love you, Taylor.”

She sighed. “I love you too.”

Gabe frowned. “Taylor, that didn’t sound like you mean it. I mean, like, are you upset with me?”

“No, of course not.”

He looked into her eyes, wondering what she was thinking. He lifted her chin and kissed her softly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night,” she murmured.

The Tanners/Andersons took their leave.

The men helped get luggage up to the respective rooms. Shelley and Bree gathered the little Kinos and Jamie and Josie and made their way up to the third floor to get everyone tucked in. Breez and Bella scooped up their little ones and went to get them tucked in for the night. Sophia started to give her mom a hard time, but Joey pointed his finger at her and raised his eyebrow. She pouted an adorably cute pout that had him

smiling, and the child headed off to bed. Taylor went upstairs to join Jordan in her room.

Logan and JoJo sat in the lobby chatting until Jeffy finished with young Eric. Once that was done, Jeffy excused herself and headed upstairs to nurse Eli. Jodi went to see if anyone needed anything. Cam, Ricky, Mark, Joey, Logan, young Eric, JoJo and John Appel sat around the kitchen table discussing the actions that needed to be taken. Once they had things set in their minds, John offered a prayer to protect their loved ones, to protect their endeavor, and to give thanks, that so far today, everyone had survived. It was obviously gonna be a long, hard week.

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Jordan looked up as Taylor came into the room. "Hey, Taylor."

"Hi. Did I interrupt? It looks like you were having a deep discussion with your mom."

Jordan wiped at the tears on her face. "Actually, we've been having a lovely discussion, mother and daughter."

"Oh! Well, I will just go back downstairs for a while."

"No, don't do that. We were done, really. Come in. Please."

Taylor nodded and came into the room.

Jewell smiled at her. "You're such a sweet girl, Taylor. I'm so glad you and my daughter are so good to each other."

Taylor shrugged. "Well, Ms. Brooks, she's like a sister to me. I've always wanted a sister."

"Well, now you have one," Jordan said softly.

Taylor came to sit next to her on her bed and hugged her. "How are you feeling? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. The jerk head-butted me, so I have a little headache. But I'm warm and dry and alive."

"Thank goodness," Taylor said.

Jewell stood. "Well, we have a big day tomorrow, so I'd better go get some sleep." She bent down over Jordan. "Goodnight, my sweet daughter. I love you."

"I love you too, Mom. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Taylor," Jewell said.

"Goodnight, Miss Brooks," Taylor said with a smile. She watched her leave and then turned to Jordan. "Your mom is so nice."

"Yours is too," Jordan said. "Isn't it weird that they're both so nice, and yet they're both so different? Like, my mom is kind of shy and sweet, and your mom is like, very strong and still so kind and thoughtful. I just love them both so much."

Taylor nodded. “Me too.” Sighing, she went through her luggage and put things away or hung them up for the week. She looked over at Jordan. “Would you like me to unpack for you?”

Jordan smiled. “And I guess you’re just like your mom, so thoughtful. But no thanks, my mom already did it for me.”

“Okay, well, I guess I’ll get ready for bed,” Taylor said as she gathered her things. Inside the bathroom, Taylor stared at her face in the mirror. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Father. Please forgive me for being so afraid. I’m not afraid of coming to see you. But I love Gabe so much and I’m afraid of not being able to marry him and share my life with him. I love him so much, God. So much. Please help me to not be afraid. In Jesus’ name,” she whispered.

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Iris woke once the Tanners and Andersons started down the path away from the Inn. She yelled Gabe’s name and scrambled down. Gabe scooped her up and held her tight. Once they arrived at the Tanner home, CJ took Violet aside to hopefully kiss her goodnight.

“Vi, I’m sorry about how our conversation went earlier. Please forgive me. I promise, I *will* tell you about my family and about what happened. Give me a little more time. It’s gonna be a difficult conversation, and you may not like me very much once the telling is done. Which is I guess why I’ve put it off. I don’t want to lose you.”

“CJ, you won’t lose me. I can’t imagine that anything that happened in your past would make me stop loving you.”

CJ swallowed as he thought about her words. The emotions welled up. “I understand that you can’t imagine it, and that tells me that when I tell you, you won’t see me in the same light anymore, in a good light anymore. But after tonight, I do see that I can’t put it off any longer. I’ll lose you if I don’t tell you. And I’ll probably lose you if I do. So, I guess I’ll just spill it and let the chips fall as they may. Or ashes,” he added.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Just give me some time. Maybe after Thanksgiving.”

She nodded. “Okay. And to be fair, there is something that happened to me too. And yes, it was in New York, and I haven’t shared it because I don’t like to talk about it. It makes me ill. Physically ill. But I’ll share it with you soon. I promise. And after I tell you, you may not like me so much either, because I was stupid and gullible and well, just stupid.” Her eyes immediately filled with tears.

"Oh, babe, don't cry."

She shrugged. Sniffed. "I'm sorry. I have a hard time with it, as you can see. I have nightmares too."

He nodded. "Sounds like we both have some healing we need to do."

"Sounds like it," she whispered. "I had therapy for a little while. Guess I need to go back and get some more."

He put his arms around her and brought her up against him. "We can work through this. Don't give up on me," he said softly against her ear.

"I won't," she assured him.

He pulled her away so he could look at her. He wanted to look as much as he could while he could see the love in her eyes, because that very well may disappear once he tells her what she wants to know. She smiled at him. She'd let her long, slightly wavy, blond hair stay down tonight, and it was shimmering under the outside security lights.

She wore a pretty, brownish-orange colored dress. She usually wore a dress, and they usually had flowers or ruffles, and this one had both. The ruffle around the bottom, and the flowers soft white. She was ultra-feminine. Her flawless skin, long lashes and a pink mouth made her mesmerizing. He loved looking at her. They could put her picture in the dictionary next to the word 'angel' and it would be a perfect depiction. Her beautiful blue eyes were shining with love as she gazed at him. They may not shine much longer. He sighed, leaned forward and kissed her.

"Good night, Violet. It's been a long, hard day. Get some rest."

"I will." She smiled. "Rose is alive. My mom is alive, I have two adorable new siblings, and my brother and sister are home. So much to be thankful for."

He smiled and nodded. "So much," he said softly. He pushed her away. "Now, go inside and lock up."

She kissed him one more time and headed up the porch steps.

"Don't lock me out," Heather called as Violet went inside.

Violet gave her a 'thumbs up.'

CJ stayed and waited for Heather and Nolan to finish saying 'goodnight,' but walked away to give them privacy.

"A few more months and we won't have to say 'goodnight' anymore," Heather said.

Nolan smiled at her. "Well, more like six to eight months, but, I can't wait for that time."

"When are we gonna tell everyone our news?" Heather asked.

He sighed. "I'm gonna leave that completely up to you. Whenever you feel the time is right. But I want to be around when you do it because I want to hear the big cheer when you tell them."

"I promise I'll make sure we're together when I tell them." She sighed. "You be careful in that cottage tonight."

"Don't worry. I'm a light sleeper and I'll have my buddies right beside me."

Heather smiled. "Well, if I sneak in to see you in the middle of the night, don't shoot me."

He shook his head and frowned. "Heather Anderson, you'd better not leave this house in the middle of the night."

She smiled slyly.

He took her by the shoulders and gave her a shake. "I mean it. I want your word right now."

"What will you do if I don't give it to you?"

"I'll tell your father and Gabe that you have plans to sneak out."

She frowned, her blue eyes shining up at him. "Now that's just plain ol' mean."

He chuckled. "That's me. So mean," he said as he pulled her close and kissed her once more. "Goodnight, my flower girl."

She sighed. "Goodnight, my big, handsome cowboy."

He pushed her away and watched her head up the steps. She was adorably cute in her tight jeans, suede boots and oversized white sweater. He watched until she finally disappeared inside the house. He glanced behind him at CJ and nodded with a smile. "Those girls are something else, aren't they?"

CJ nodded in agreement. "Pretty special young ladies."

"I hear you might pop the question soon."

CJ frowned. "We have some obstacles to get over first."

"Oh, sorry, man. I didn't mean to pry. From what I heard I thought it was as good as done."

"Yeah, me too." He sighed and looked over the Tennessee rancher. "Have you two set a date?"

"Only an approximate date. Sometime this next summer. We also have a few details that we need to take care of before we're ready."

CJ offered his hand. "Well, good luck."

"Thanks, man," Nolan said as he shook the agent's hand. "Who knows, we might end up brothers-in-law one day."

"That is my goal."

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Logan and JoJo waited for young Eric and walked upstairs with him. "How ya feelin', bro?" JoJo asked.

"Well, it hurts now."

"And it didn't hurt before you knew about it," Logan added. "Which means it's all in your head."

Young Eric smiled. "Yep."

"How many stitches? Did she say?"

"Eleven."

"Wow. More than I thought it would take."

"She said it seemed like a lot, but it was just a long cut, but not too deep and it should heal quickly."

They got to the rooms. "Well, this is me," JoJo said. "See you guys in the morning."

Eric nodded. "I'm gonna slip in and check on Jordan."

Logan nodded. "Good. Take your time because I'm gonna give Melody a call."

"Gotcha."

Young Eric went to Jordan's door and knocked.

Logan headed into room seven, immediately pulled out his phone and called his girl.

"Hi, Logan!" Melody said as she answered on the first ring. "I was just about to call you."

"Hey, Melody. Lord, it is good to hear your voice."

She sighed. "Yours too. I miss you so much."

"I miss you too."

"It's strange," Melody said. "How I was going about, living my life with no problem, and now, since you came into my life, it feels like I can barely function without you around."

"I feel the same way. I have to force myself to concentrate on what's happening around me."

"So, how was your first day away? Anything exciting happen?"

He chuckled. "You are not gonna believe everything that happened. Like, before we ever landed, Rose, um, you remember her, right?"

"She's one of the twin sisters of Gabe, right?"

"Right. She was attacked by some dude at the community center. Mr. Tanner got to her just in time. The guy was stabbing her."

"Oh no! Is she okay?"

"Yes. Like I said, her father got to her in time. He'd barely begun to cut her when he stopped the guy. She went to the hospital, got stitched up

and went right back to work. She's an amazingly tough girl. The thing is, the guy who stabbed her was paid to hurt her, specifically saying to hurt Gabe Tanner's sister."

"But why?"

"Who knows. They're trying to figure that out. But ya know, Gabe is in the limelight, he's a bright light. So, that means the bad guys will try to end him and if they can't get to *him*, they go after people close to him."

"Oh, Logan, poor Gabe. I mean, that must make him feel so bad."

"It's cool, Melody, that you immediately think about how Gabe must feel. You are very empathetic."

"I don't know about all that," Melody said lightly. "So, what else happened?"

"Well, then we arrived at Gabe's house," he began. He went on to tell her the whole story, from his point of view, of Mrs. Tanner giving birth to her twins.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so glad she didn't die. For Gabe to go home and to have his mother die in his arms, I just can't even."

"I know, right? It was pretty scary. And then, we thought everything was done. We ate dinner at the Inn and young Eric and Jordan went out for a walk in the back of the Inn. There's this lighted path and it's really nice out there. So, while they were out there, young Eric intercepted five guys who were paid to come here and start trouble. Eric fought them off, but Jordan didn't make it back to the Inn before one of the guys got to her. She fought with him, but he hit her in the head and she fell into the pool. With her cast and her coat on, she was struggling to swim, but Aunt Jeffy told me to go to the pool and help her. So, I dove in and was able to get her out, and I'm tellin' ya, that water was freezing."

"Oh, Logan, was Jordan okay?"

"Yeah, I handed her off to Eric and they took her upstairs and got her dry and warm and she's okay."

"Well, thank goodness you were able to help her. Such a hero."

He chuckled. "Yeah, that's me. But Eric was the real hero."

Melody listened as Logan then went on to tell about Eric being sliced open. Finally, he got to the end of the tale.

"Wow, I mean, and this was only the first day. Who knows how this week will go!"

"Well, I'm hoping we got all the bad stuff over and the rest will be smooth sailing. So, that's all I got about me today, Mel, tell me, what did you do today?"

"Well, I tried to take a page from your book."

"Hmm, my book? You sang a song for somebody?"

She giggled. "Well, that's not what I meant, but actually I did sing a song for someone today."

"Really? Who?"

"His name was Cliff, and he was a sixty-two-year-old homeless man. Today was his birthday."

"And where did you meet this man?"

"Well, as I said, I was trying to take a page from you, or from your family. So, I took the little bit of money I had left after I made my car payment and I went out and bought some bottles of water and protein bars and little bags of cookies and socks and I brought them home and was dividing them up in bags and my dad came in and asked me what I was doing, and I told him I was gonna go give them out to homeless people. Ya know, there's a lot of homeless people in that area just east of me, just outside of town. And my dad said he didn't want me going alone."

"Okay, good, cuz I was about to yell at you."

She only smiled. She actually loved how protective he was toward her. "And since my dad is out of school this week, he suggested we make it a family thing. And then my mom suggested we get some inexpensive backpacks to put everything in, instead of just putting it into bags. So my parents bought the backpacks and we put everything in them and then Phil said he wished we had enough money to put Bibles in each pack, and then Lyle said we can get New Testaments at the dollar store, so we went around to several dollar stores and bought up all the New Testaments and put them in the backpacks. We could only afford twenty backpacks, so we put the rest of the stuff in bags and we went and handed them out."

"Melody, I am so proud of you for doing that."

"Thanks. It felt really good. And something I noticed, it was weird, but the whole time we were out doing that, no one in our family argued or talked ugly. We felt really close to each other. It seems since you came into our lives, our whole family dynamic has changed."

"I love that, Mel. So, did you do any preaching? Did you talk to anyone? Or did you just hand out the stuff?"

"I didn't preach. I'm not educated enough to do that. And maybe a little bit too shy. But I did talk to several people. And I found out that it was Cliff's birthday and so I sang 'Happy Birthday' to him. Still, it was a good experience. The only problem is we didn't have nearly enough stuff. We probably could have given out fifty more backpacks, but we were out of money."

"Okay, well, what if I take up a donation and send you more money.

Would you want to go do it again?"

"I would *love* to go do it again! I know my family would love it too!"

"Awesome. Then go tell your family it's a go, because I'm gonna have the money to you on *MoMoney* in about fifteen minutes."

"That fast? How can you collect donations that fast?"

He laughed. "I'll just send out a text on our family chat. They'll send me the money and I'll forward it to you."

"Oh, wow. Logan, this is gonna be so much fun to go do it again."

"Melody, you are making me very happy. I'm proud of you. I miss you so much. I wish I was there to help you with this project."

"Well, maybe we can make it an ongoing project. I mean, Christmas is coming. Maybe we can help some homeless families celebrate."

"That sounds like a plan. I'm in." Logan looked up as young Eric came into the room.

"Well, Mel, young Eric just walked in, so, I'm gonna let you go, cuz we have to get some sleep. We have an early start time tomorrow."

"What time do you have to be up?"

"5:30."

"Oh, well, you're gonna have a full day, aren't you?"

"Yes. There's a lot to do. And I have a new project too, but I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

"Okay. Well, Logan, I miss you and goodnight."

"Miss you too, and goodnight."

He ended the call and immediately sent out a text to the family asking for donations to Melody's project with a quick explanation of what she was trying to do. He smiled as within minutes the money came pouring in. He waited another ten minutes and forwarded the money to her.

A minute later she called him back.

"Hello," he said as he chuckled.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" she said loudly.

"You're on speaker," he said quickly.

"Oh! So, who can hear me?"

"Just young Eric."

"Oh, hi, Eric! I hear you were a hero tonight!"

He laughed. "Whatever."

"Anyway," Melody went on. "Logan, are you kidding me? Ten thousand dollars?"

"What can I say? It's nothing to them. I know you know that."

"I guess I do. But still, that much, that fast? That's crazy!"

"Don't spend it all in one place," he joked.

She giggled. “You guys, your family, you’re awesome.”

“Mel, really, this is nothing to them. Please don’t make a big deal about it. The hard part of this work will be coming from *your* family. That’s what’s important.”

“Well, I intend to help a whole lotta people!”

“I’m glad, babe. Make some video, please. That’s how you can repay them. Make some video and we’ll put it on Gabe’s site and encourage others to do something similar.”

“I will. I promise. Goodnight, Logan.”

“Goodnight, Melody. Sweet dreams.”

He ended the call and turned to young Eric. “Brother, that was very generous of you.”

“No biggie, like you just told her. And soon, when your album comes out, you’ll have plenty to donate.”

“I hope so, bro. I hope so. There’s so much I wanna do.”

“Logan, just your music alone, the messages, you are gonna take the world by storm. I’m so proud of you.”

Logan sighed. “Thanks, Eric. So, how’s Jordan?”

“She seems okay. Maybe a little down. I’m probably gonna go back and check on her during the night. She doesn’t have her phone. It’s in the bottom of the pool, so she can’t text me.”

“Well, she has Taylor, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, she’ll contact you if she needs you.”

“I guess.”

“I know your adrenaline might still be working, but try to get some sleep, Eric. Big day tomorrow.”

“You’re right. Night, Logan.”

“Goodnight.”

“Sweet dreams,” Eric added with a laugh in a high feminine voice.

Logan chuckled.

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Deuteronomy 15:11

“For there will never cease to be poor in the land.
Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your
hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”

Chapter Five

Still November 25th, Monday Night
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan drove through the large iron gate and pulled into the garage. He turned the car off and just sat there, looking around him. He'd driven into this garage thousands of times over the past eighteen years. Tonight, however, it seemed different. It seemed unfamiliar. He glanced over at Lizzy's minivan parked on the other side. In the adjacent garage were Rose's and Violet's cars. Daisy and Lily were parked in the drive in front of the garages. Gabe used to park his truck behind the garage.

Gabe. Keegan sighed. Gabe's bright smile and mischievous personality were sorely missed around here. Now though, Keegan had another son, tiny little Isaiah. He wondered what kind of personality this new young man would have. Would he be shy or outgoing? Would he be as bright as Gabe? It will be interesting, Keegan thought, to see what personalities the two new children would have. Keegan had learned that each one of his children thus far was different and unique. Though the five eldest girls looked so much alike, they were distinctly different. Heather, quiet and responsible. Rose with her toughness and confidence. Violet and her delicate, precise, calm and feminine ways. Daisy with her logical mind and adventurous spirit and Lily with her solid, maternal nature, very much like her mother. Then little Iris, who was ultra-confident, brave, bright, very much a girly girl. And Gentian. Where would she be on the spectrum between Rose and Iris?

Keegan drew a deep breath and went into the house through the kitchen door. He could hear the low murmuring sound of his children talking softly to one another. It was such a pleasant sound. They were in the den, and he stood just outside the den door to listen for a moment, not to intrude on their privacy, but to relish the moment.

"I remember it vividly," Heather said softly. "The guy had you by the arm, Lily. I was terrified. Mom fought him so hard. But he finally kicked her in the stomach. She still got up and tried to grab the wheel from the driver's side. I think he punched her in the face and she fell from the moving car. It's a wonder you survived, Gabe."

"I remember too," Daisy said. "And I was only four, but I remember being so happy when Dad came back with Lily. He was like, this Superman person in my eyes."

"He still is, in my eyes," Heather said.

"Me too," they all said.

Keegan teared up. He had to clear his throat as he drew a breath and walked into the room.

"Dad!" Rose said.

All the girls jumped to their feet and hugged their father. Gabe remained seated because he held Iris on his chest as he'd patted her back until she'd fallen asleep. So, instead, Keegan walked over and placed his hand on Gabe's head. "Son."

Gabe nodded. "Dad. We were just talking about you."

Keegan nodded. "I heard part of that. Very humbling." He took a seat on the large sectional sofa and put his arms out. Immediately, his daughters snuggled up close to him. He sighed. "Thanks, I needed that."

"How's Mom?" Gabe asked.

"She's doing very well. The babies are healthy and already nursing. Mom's back is causing her a little bit of pain, but she's coping, as she always does. She's a real trooper."

They were silent a moment as they thought about that.

Gabe sniffed. "I thought she was leaving us."

Keegan nodded. "I know. She told me you were begging God to not take her. Jeffy said her blood pressure was dangerously low and she *was* in danger of leaving us."

"Mom was talking about soft green grass, and a tree, and Bradley Anderson," Gabe said. "I think she was dying."

"Well, she was in the place that you described, the place you went to when you saw Jesus. And Jesus spoke to her. He gave her a choice."

Gabe blinked, but couldn't speak, because he was remembering the place and how beautiful and peaceful and wonderful it felt.

"What choice did He give her?" Rose asked.

"She could stay there, where she was comfortable and peaceful, with no pain and no struggle, or she could come back here and stand side by side with her family and fight the battle against evil."

"So—she chose us," Daisy said softly.

"She did. She said she could hear Gabe crying, begging her to stay and she could feel his anguish and his pain and as tempting as it was to stay, there was no way she could stay there knowing the hardship her family would be facing."

"Thank goodness," Lily mumbled.

Gabe didn't say anything, but the tears welled and fell on his cheeks.

Rose looked over at him when he sniffed. "Oh, sweetie, it's okay." She grabbed a tissue and went to him and blotted his cheeks and eyes.

"So, when can Mom come home?" Violet asked.

"It will probably be Wednesday. She's desperate to somehow be a part of things on Thursday. We'll have to figure something out."

Rose nodded. "Well, we already have a classroom set up for the Kino and Adams children. We could have an adjacent classroom set up with some cribs. I mean, not just for our babies, but for Elijah, and the Stewart twins too. And a good comfortable chair for each of the mothers to nurse the babies. Even if they're in a different room, at least they'd be at the facility, and they'll feel a little bit a part of it. And maybe one of us could go in and watch the babies a few minutes so that Mom and Aunt Lisa can take a stroll around."

"Dad," Gabe said suddenly. "You know what happened at the Inn tonight?"

"Yes, I do. We're gonna have an agent on each of you until further notice. And in addition we have fifty agents scheduled for the event itself. And twenty scheduled for the big volunteer meeting on Wednesday that's being held at the Pine Forest High School Gym."

"How many helpers do we have?"

Rose smiled. "Five hundred."

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "What? It takes five hundred people just to serve some food?"

"No, serving the food is the easiest part. But we have cooks and counselors and pastors and music and gift bags to hand out. Doctors and nurses. Church choirs. School choruses. The UGA baseball team, compliments of Peyton. A lot of John's and Brian's students from Appel Martial Arts and also students from Georgia's Kino Martial Arts, all coming to help in any way they can. There will also be the mayor and other politicians. Country music celebs that Toby is bringing in. It's a huge undertaking. And I'm in charge of it all and I pray it goes down without too many problems."

"Rose, with all this, I'd say you're holding up pretty well," Gabe said.

She nodded. "Thanks, little brother."

"And she hasn't said this, Gabe, but she's mostly worried about how it goes down since it's being done by the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*," Keegan put in. "She doesn't want to mess up your good rep."

Gabe smiled at Rose. "Silly Rosie, my rep is too good, you could never mess it up."

Rose and her sisters laughed. "You are so cocky," Rose responded.

He grinned. “No, really, we’re gonna do the best we can do, and if that messes up our good name, then we’re catering to the wrong people. But it won’t, because the people we’re supposed to touch, the ones we’re supposed to help, they’ll be put in front of us. As long as we keep service to God foremost in our minds, there is no way for us to fail.”

“Wow, Gabriel Tanner,” Heather said softly. “While I’ve been gone, you really have grown into an awesome young man. It’s kinda sad, but you are not just a little boy anymore.”

“Thanks for that, Heather. It’s not me. It’s just listening to Mom and Dad and my sisters, and other teachers. I’m a quick study.”

“You’ve always been super smart, Gabe,” Violet said. “I am so stinkin’ proud of you.”

“As am I, son,” Keegan said softly. “So, I’m going back to the hospital first thing in the morning. Your mom says to stay here and help Rose and don’t you dare take time to come and see her. She says she’ll see you on Wednesday and the extra time apart will make her homecoming even sweeter. But that means I won’t be here to help, so you’ll have to work a little harder.”

“Well, Jericho and his crew said they would volunteer to come and take care of any details we missed,” Rose said.

Keegan nodded. “It will be duly noted. Remember to set up a nursery room with several cribs or smaller bassinets. And rocking chairs with cushions. Buy what you need. I’ll cover it.”

Rose nodded and put it in her notes. “Got it. If I’ve forgotten anything else, let me know, people.”

“What about the contents of the gift bags for everyone?” Gabe asked.

“All the supplies have been delivered. I was counting on Jordan, Taylor, Jamie, Josie and Aralyn to fill all of the bags. Jordan won’t be able to join them until she gets back from getting her cast replaced, but Taylor can handle it and boss around the younger ones until Jordan arrives.”

Gabe nodded. “How many bags do we have to do?”

“At least five thousand, though we’re reaching for more. And we have to make some for adults and some for kids and some for men and some for women, so it’s a little complicated.”

Gabe nodded. “We got this. We’ll make it happen. And we also have Lucas, and Charlie and Matt.”

“Yes, but I’m gonna need their strong arms and backs moving cases of water bottles and boxes of supplies first. Then they can help and open the boxes for them and transport the bags that are completed to the back halls. And I have wagons ready. They’ll fill the wagons with the open bags, fill the bags with the supplies and when one wagon is full, they’ll

take it to the back hall and unload it while they fill the other wagon."

"Sounds like you have everything planned to the last detail," Gabe said. "Which shouldn't surprise me at all."

Rose smiled. "I think I do, from how many pans of mashed potatoes we need to hosting and counseling, to entertainment and prayers and everything in between. Still, if you think of anything, let me know immediately."

"Will do," Gabe said. "And don't be afraid to call on the people who came here to help you. They have vast resources."

Rose nodded. "I'm counting on that."

"Okay, everyone. Let's have a prayer and hit the sack. Try to get some sleep," Keegan said.

"Oh, Dad," Gabe began. "Peyton is gonna pick me up at 6:30 in the morning so we can do breakfast together."

Keegan frowned. "Well, I'll let Dalton know so that Agent Key will be here before you leave."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I didn't think about that."

"Try to think about it, Gabe. Someone wants to hurt you. You thinking of your own safety will help to relieve some of my stress."

"Yes, sir, I promise."

Keegan looked around at seven of his nine children. "I love you all so much, and I'm so proud of every single one of you. Keep up the good work, kiddos. We have a long way to go."

"Yes, sir."

"Gabe, we've missed you. Will you honor us with a prayer?"

"Happy to," he said with a smile.

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"Jordan? Are you awake?"

Jordan opened her eyes and smiled at Taylor. "I am now."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I'm just teasing. What's up?"

"I can't sleep. I'm feeling really jittery."

"Jittery? Like, scared?"

"I guess."

"Well, it is an old house with a lot of history."

Taylor smiled. "That's not what I'm afraid of."

"Then what?"

Taylor sighed. "I mean, someone wants to hurt Gabe or someone close to Gabe, and I'm really close to him. It makes me nervous. After everything that's happened this year, I've changed from being strong and bold to being a chicken about everything."

"Don't beat yourself up about it. It's completely understandable, Taylor. I mean, after that rapist guy beat me up so badly, I've had some pretty bad anxiety myself."

"I wish Gabe was sleeping down the hall. I'd just sneak into his room and then I'd feel safe."

"I get it, sweetie. Umm, remember at your house, you went to sleep in your parents' room for a while?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah, at least that made it where I could sleep."

"So, your parents are just down the hall, right?"

"Yes. They're in that first room."

"I'm sure they wouldn't mind if you went to talk to them for a bit."

"Ya know what? I think I will. But will you be okay?"

Jordan nodded with a smile. "Sure. I'm fine. At least I think I am. I have a little headache is all. I'm gonna try to sleep."

"You want me to get Miss Jodi to make you some tea?"

"No! Please don't wake her up. She works so hard."

"You want me to get your mom?"

"No. Same thing. Besides, she's up another flight of stairs."

"Oh yeah. Well, I'm gonna go talk to my parents."

"Goodnight, Taylor."

"Night, Jordan. Love you."

Jordan smiled. "Love you too."

Taylor grabbed her robe and phone, headed down the hall and knocked on her parents' door.

"Come in," her father called softly.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Taylor. You okay, sweetie?"

Something about the sudden relief she felt at the sound of his voice made her eyes fill and she sniffed. "Dad, I'm scared."

"Come in and close the door, baby girl," her mom said.

Taylor came in quickly and was invited to crawl into bed to sleep between them. They lay there quietly for some time.

"Taylor, do you want to talk about it?" her father asked.

She yawned. "Not right now. I just want to sleep."

He chuckled. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Night, Daddy."

Five minutes later Ricky spoke again. "One more thing, Taylor."

"Yes, sir?"

"So, Jordan is all alone in the room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you leave her your phone by any chance?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Okay, I'll take care of it. You go to sleep." He reached over and picked up his phone and called young Eric.

"Dad? Everything okay?"

"Taylor was having a hard time and came in to sleep with us, which means Jordan is in her room alone with no phone and no crutches."

"And that makes her helpless and vulnerable. I got it. Thanks, Dad."

"Goodnight, Eric."

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Jordan lay in the dark, thinking about the exact things she shouldn't be thinking about, namely, the night she was almost beaten to death by some crazed rapist. She was also thinking about the feeling of being alone, in the dark, in a big, old, southern home. Then she really began panicking when she realized she couldn't text Three, because her phone was in the pool, and her crutches were out there too, somewhere! Which meant she was stranded! Stuck! And Taylor was gone, so she couldn't talk to her or get her to call Three for her. She felt the panic start and her breaths started coming in huge gasps.

Sitting up in bed she reached for the light. What could she do? Earlier she thought if she needed to go to the bathroom, she'd just stand up and hop, so she stood now. She was immediately dizzy. Taking several deep breaths, she got her bearings and hopped to the door of the room. She stood there by the door, her hand on the knob. She wasn't stranded. She could hop everywhere she needed to go. She was okay. She was okay. Then why didn't she feel okay? She wanted to go down the hall to find Three, but she didn't even know what room he was in.

She could go to the Kinos' room, she thought. Taylor said it was room one, though she hated to bother them. But maybe she could just knock on their door, poke her head in and quickly ask which room Three was in. Was she desperate enough to do that? They would understand. They're always so kind. She nodded as she made up her mind to do just that. Turning the knob she opened her door— and screamed.

"It's me. It's just me," young Eric said quickly as he stepped forward to grab her before she fell backward. He gathered her into his arms and looked around him in the hall. His father, Logan, Mark and Joey all stood there. John Appel came running up the stairs a few seconds later.

"Uh, sorry, guys. I went to knock on her door at the same time she opened it and I scared her," he explained. "Dad, please tell them why I went to her door. I gotta take her to bed."

"Yeah, I've heard that one before," Joey quipped.

Everyone chuckled as young Eric carried Jordan inside the room and

closed the door behind him.

Out in the hall Ricky quickly explained that he'd called young Eric and told him to go see about her since she was alone and stranded. He glanced at John. "Sorry to wake you, John."

"You didn't. I was getting up. Toby just texted me to open the gate and they just pulled in. So, I hope we won't be disturbing you as we get them settled in for the night."

Ricky shook his head. "Not at all. Actually, I think I'll stay up and help you welcome him."

Meanwhile, inside Jordan's room, young Eric carried Jordan to her bed and laid her down. She looked up at him, her eyes blinking. "I'm sorry I screamed. I wasn't expecting anyone to be on the other side of the door."

He smiled as he sat down next to her. Leaning over her, he stroked his hand over her face. "How ya doin'? Feelin' okay?"

"I'm better now that you're here. I was feeling a little panicked. I was on my way out to try to find you."

"Well, I'm here now," he said softly.

"Will you stay with me? Please?"

"If you really need me to, of course I will. But, I'm a little weak right now, so you'll have to help me."

"Weak?" She looked into his eyes. "Oh, weak. Got it. Well, I have a pretty good headache goin' on, so no messing around, Three. I just want you to hold me. Would that be okay?"

He lay down beside her and turned toward her. "That would be great. Would you like me to get you something for the headache?"

"No, I don't want to bother anyone."

"Jordan, it's no bother. Besides, John is up checking in the Nash family. He has all of Granddad's teas and probably some of Jeffy's new meds. I can run get you something."

"I don't want you to leave me."

He sighed. "Okay, then I'll do a little acupressure." He took her hand and began to press and massage between her thumb and forefinger. After a few minutes he changed to massaging her face. The point between her brows, the bones under her eyes, her forehead and finally the bones behind her ears. He watched her as he ministered to her. He was so in love with her and it hurt to know that she was hurting. He sighed and she opened her eyes. He smiled at her. "Any better?"

"So much better," she said softly. "You are so good to me."

"People are usually good to the ones they love."

"You really do love me, don't you?"

"Uh, yeah, I really do. I don't lie. And I know my own mind."

She sighed. “I really love you too.”

“I believe you.”

She giggled.

He stopped massaging and pulled her in close to his body. “Try to sleep, baby. We have a long, hard day tomorrow.”

She snuggled up close, pressing her face against his neck. “Umm, you smell good.”

“Ah, the clean smell of antiseptic. It’s always a turn-on,” he joked.

“Antiseptic?”

“Yeah, from when Aunt Jeffy stitched up my arm.”

She sat up. “What?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess you didn’t know. One of the dudes I fought, he cut me. It’s not bad though. A very shallow cut.” He pulled her back down.

“How many stitches?”

“Eleven.”

“Eleven!” she exclaimed as she sat back up.

He pulled her back down. “Sounds bad, but it’s not. It’s a long but shallow cut. Probably could have gone with butterfly bandages but Jeffy didn’t want any chance for it to open back up. No big deal. I didn’t even know I’d been cut until Dad saw me bleeding. Now, stop talking and go to sleep,” he said as he closed his eyes.

She sighed in disappointment.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her, pushed her onto her back, lowered his head and kissed her soundly. “Better?” he said.

She smiled and closed her eyes. “Better.”

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Ricky stuck his head back into his room. “Everything’s okay, ladies,” he said. “Young Eric scared Jordan. That’s all it was. And John said that Toby has just arrived so I’m gonna go down and help welcome him.”

“Okay, sweetie. Taylor and I will tough it out until you get back.”

“That’s my girls,” he said. Closing the bedroom door, he trotted down the stairs wearing only his pajama bottoms and a charcoal gray t-shirt.

John was just opening the door of the Inn. “Toby,” John said. “Welcome, y’all come on in!”

Toby laughed. “Y’all?”

John grinned. “I’ve been practicing.”

Toby came through the door with two large pieces of luggage. He was followed by his wife, Caroline and daughter Grace, who each had a smaller piece of luggage, and lastly, son Brody, who had two more large pieces of luggage.

Toby looked up to see his good friend standing there too. “Rick! Hey,

man, you didn't have to get up just to see me in."

"Of course I did," Ricky said jovially.

The family set the luggage at the bottom of the stairs and turned to greet their host and their friend.

John and Ricky shook everyone's hand and kissed Caro's and Grace's cheeks.

"How was your drive?" John asked.

"It was good for me and Caroline," Toby said. "Not sure about almost six hours in a car for the younguns."

"We were fine, Daddy, and you know it," Gracie said.

Toby smiled. "We did have some fine discussions, didn't we?"

Caroline smiled at Ricky. "The kids wanted to rehash how Toby and I met as kids, and then how we met again in New York. They think it's a grand story."

Ricky nodded. "They're right." He looked at the kids. "Did they tell you they were all over the national news?"

"Yes, and all about Mom's hooker friends, and about the deranged teenager who kidnapped Mom."

Ricky nodded. "And about the horse?"

Toby and Brody laughed. "Yep," they both said.

Caro and Grace rolled their eyes.

Brody shook his head in wonder. "When I grow up I wanna be just like my dad."

"Except you'll be married, right?" Toby added.

"Yes, sir, of course, but Dad, I mean, on a horse, that's impressive."

"More impressive for the horse," Toby said.

John laughed. "So, is there any more luggage or anything you need from the car?"

"Nope, I think we have it all," Caro said.

"Are you hungry?" John asked next.

"No, we stopped and had a late dinner," Toby replied. "Don't bother with us, John. Just tell us what rooms we're in and we'll take care of it."

"Don't tell me how to do my job," John said in mock sternness.

Toby chuckled. "Yes, sir."

John smiled. "Toby and Caroline, you're in room five. Grace, you're right across the hall in room six. And Brody, hope you don't mind that we're gonna have you bunk with JoJo in room eight. We were gonna have all you young guys out in the cottages, but we've had some trouble here, and we don't want anyone out there who isn't trained."

"So, then, who's in the cottages and what kind of trouble?"

"Well, Jeffy and Cam are in number one. Cam can handle anything

that comes his way. He's a machine. And Heather's fiancé Nolan is in number two. He's not trained, but he's well-armed. And as far as the trouble, hmm, let's see, nutshell version. We found out today that several people had been paid to mess up our endeavor, to cause trouble, and in one instance, one was told to hurt Gabe Tanner's sister. And we're not just talking about little pranks. Rose was almost stabbed to death this morning, and tonight, young Eric intercepted five guys out back while he and Jordan were walking. One shot was fired," he said as he pointed toward the broken glass in the back window. "And Eric got eleven stitches in his arm, and Jordan, Eric's girlfriend, was knocked in the head and thrown in the pool. If not for Jeffy, she might have drowned."

"So, these guys are not messing around," Toby muttered.

"Right. So, fair warning. You can take your family and head home if this makes you uncomfortable."

Toby looked around at his family. It was Caroline who spoke. "Toby taught me that we don't cower. We face everything head on, even if it's dangerous, right, guys?"

"Absolutely," Grace said.

Toby and Brody both nodded, knowing that protecting the two women would be up to them.

"We certainly can't let someone keep this event from happening," Toby said calmly. "We're in. And we're also armed. All of us."

Ricky smiled and John nodded. "Good. So, let me at least help carry some luggage up the stairs."

Toby smiled. "If you feel you must."

John grabbed one of the large pieces from Toby and Ricky took the two smaller ones from Caroline and Grace. They then saw them to their doors, and handed them their room keys. "Make yourselves at home. If you want to raid the kitchen, feel free. If you need anything, call me. I mean it. Your comfort is important to us. There are extra towels in the small closet in the bathroom, and extra blankets and pillows in the top of the bedroom closet."

"John. We're fine. Go get some sleep," Toby said.

John glanced at his watch. "So, it's close to eleven. Breakfast will begin as early as 5:30 and will last until 10:00."

"What time is everyone headed off to the center?" Caro asked.

"Most everyone will eat about 6:00 to 6:30 and be off, except for maybe Shelley, because she's got the five kids to dress and feed, or Breez, because she's got three, or maybe Bella, because she's expecting and has Emily. Or maybe Jeffy, since she's nursing."

Caro laughed. "So, everyone except the moms with little ones."

John shrugged. “Yes, except Jewell, whom you haven’t met, and her two kids who are a little older. Jewell is Jordan’s mom.”

“And Jordan is young Eric’s new girlfriend, right?” Grace said.

“Right.”

“Can’t wait to meet her and her family,” Caro said. She smiled. “Well, goodnight, you guys.”

John smiled. “Goodnight.”

Ricky kissed Caroline’s cheek. “Goodnight, Caroline. Always so good to see you.”

Caro’s face turned red and Toby frowned. “Rick, will you stop messin’ with my wife?”

Ricky grinned. “Sorry, Toby. She looked so sweet standing there.”

“She always does,” Toby conceded.

“Toby, open this door and let me in,” Caro ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ricky and John said ‘goodnight’ one more time and left the family to themselves.

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Brody turned with his key and let himself into room eight. JoJo sat up and immediately turned on the bedside light.

“Sorry,” Brody said.

“No worries, I wasn’t asleep. We’re all trying to sleep, but for us it’s only like eight o’clock, so I was awake.”

Brody smiled, dumped his luggage on his own bed and headed over to JoJo to shake his hand. When JoJo offered his left hand, Brody frowned at him. “I watched the game. Tough break.”

JoJo nodded. “It is what it is.”

“So, what’s the prognosis?” Brody asked as he went about unpacking his suitcase.

“I’m scheduled for surgery to repair a grade five or six separated shoulder. Then I’ll have twelve weeks of recovery and will start physical therapy. It’s gonna be a long road back.”

“Sorry, man. So, like, are you in pain?”

He nodded. “Yeah, some. It comes and goes. I have some pills, but I don’t like taking them, so I try to go without as much as possible.”

Brody nodded.

“So, how’s your coming season looking? I mean, you’re ranked, like third, right?” JoJo asked.

“We’re ranked fifth right now. Hopefully I can change that.”

JoJo nodded. “Fifth is a good place. What’s your current average?”

“I’m batting .426 right now. Third in the nation.”

"Geez, guy, that is fantastic."

"Thanks."

"Are you still gonna be at third?"

Brody nodded as he kicked off his shoes and pulled off his clothes.

"So, to be that skilled at third base and hitting like you are, you'll go pro for sure."

"Ya know you shouldn't say stuff like that."

JoJo smiled. "Yep, I know all too well. So, like, is that your goal, to go pro?"

Brody nodded. "Yes. I love the game. I love the job. And I think I can do a lot of good. So, why do you ask? Was going pro not your goal?"

JoJo frowned. "To be honest, Brody, I'm not sure. I was feeling pretty burned out. Been playin' football since I was a little kid. Missed a lot of family time, a lot of church time, and as you know, even in the off-season, you're still working hard and focusing on the game. I was beginning to think that it's not what I really want to do. It's almost like I kinda manifested this injury." He shrugged. "I've been doing a lot of praying and a lot of soul-searching. I just really don't know where I'm headed right now. But I'll trust God, and be ready and willing for what He asks of me."

Brody nodded as he stood in his boxers and t-shirt and thought deeply about what JoJo just said, then looked up suddenly. "So, Jo, just a hypothetical question, what if you hadn't been injured and you got drafted? Would you have gone with it?"

JoJo nodded. "Good question. I think I had it in my mind that if that's how it all played out, then that's what God wanted me to do. I've always prayed and asked God to let me know His will for me, because that's all I really wanted to do was His will. Young Eric and I, and Logan, we've discussed the fact that if we're doing God's will, then it doesn't matter how easy or how hard it turns out to be—we will do whatever He asks us to do. So, in my mind, if football kept going so favorably, then I thought God was telling me that's what He wanted me to do. I mean, if I hadn't gotten hurt and had gone pro, I figured that was what He wanted me to do.

"But lately, I've been thinking along the lines that there is something more I could do, more for the Kingdom. Not just play a game. And lately I've been thinking if I do go pro, then the games are on Sundays mostly, and I've always seen myself being at home with my family on Sundays. I also began to see like, these visions of me working with kids, teaching them, helping them, mentoring them. Lots of kids."

Brody nodded. "So, maybe you are getting messages from God that He does have something different for you than playing pro football."

"I've been thinking exactly that. And I'm fine with that. As long as

it's what God needs me to do for Him, I'm all in."

Brody sighed. "You're making me think about my path. I mean, I've always wanted to play pro baseball. As long as I can remember. I've pursued it because it's what *I* wanted to do, I mean, the emphasis on 'I'. *I* thought, since I'd been so blessed with it, that it was what God wanted me to do, but I haven't really asked Him if He wanted something different for me. I just assumed it was my path."

"And it probably is," JoJo added. "I mean, you seem to be, as you've already pointed out, very blessed in this endeavor."

"Maybe," Brody said softly. "But still, even if my path is baseball, I need to be thinking not what I want, but what God wants for me. I need to tweak my thinking. No matter what He blesses me with, I will serve Him."

JoJo nodded in agreement. "No matter what."

Brody sat on the edge of his bed. "As always, Jo, speaking with you is intriguing, compelling, thought-provoking and stimulating."

JoJo chuckled. "I'm sure."

"Mind if I kneel here awhile and pray?"

"Of course not. Have at it."

Brody eased off the bed and got down on his knees, facing the bed.

"You want the light on or off?" JoJo asked.

"Off. Thanks."

"Goodnight, Brody."

"Night, Jo."

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Luke 14:25-33

"Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

Chapter Six

November 26th, 5:00 AM, Tuesday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe quickly shut off his alarm before it woke Iris. He glanced at her. She sighed softly and turned over. He had to smile. His baby sister was so adorable. She had longish, beautiful, soft, dark curls, big blue eyes, a tiny little turned-up nose, a pouty little mouth. He totally adored her. Her eyes were currently closed and her cheeks were pink from sleep, but when those eyes were open, she could melt the hardest heart.

He sighed. He guessed she wasn't his "baby" sister anymore. Now Gentian was his baby sister. Iris would be three in two weeks, on December 10th. She grew up so fast. And now, he'll be gone and she'll grow up without really knowing him, and he won't really know her. He shook his head. He didn't like that one bit. Who was gonna teach her the things a brother needs to teach his little sister? Who was gonna teach her to be silly? Who was gonna swing her higher than anyone else will dare do it? Who was gonna chase her around and let her tackle him? Suddenly, these things seemed vitally important.

Sighing, he rose quietly from the bed, grabbed his clothes and tiptoed into the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later he emerged showered and dressed. He glanced at Iris again. She'd turned over, kicked off the covers and was now lying in the center of the bed, her arms and legs spread out as wide as she could get them. He chuckled.

Dropping to his knees by the bed, he clasped his hands together. "Good morning, Father," he prayed softly. "So, first thing I wanna do this morning is say thank You. Thank You a million times for my family and for Rose being okay, and for Mom being okay, and for the new babies being okay. Thank You. Thank You, Jesus, for taking time to speak to Mom in the meadow. Thank you for giving her a choice and I have to say, I'm really glad she chose to stay with us. Anyway, Father, I have so much to be grateful for, and I just wanted to express that to You this morning.

"Father, I also want to ask for Your blessings and assistance. Please bless this giant event we're planning. Please put the people You want us to help in our path. Put them on those buses and bring them to us or help

us find them. Help us to feed them physically, emotionally and mostly, spiritually. And Father, please, keep these dark, evil forces who want to harm us or stop us, keep them away, thwart their efforts, put stumbling blocks in front of them. Oh, and help us to find out who's doing this and help us stop them.

"Father, we want to serve You. We want to do Your will. So we ask for Your protection. We ask for Your holy angels to watch over our endeavor. We ask for wisdom and discernment. Be with us, I pray, in the name of Your Son, whom we love and are so grateful for, Jesus Christ. Amen."

Gabe rose, smiled at his sister and headed downstairs. Rose was in the kitchen and turned as he entered.

"Hey, Gabe! Good morning!"

He moved forward and hugged her. "Good morning, Rose." He looked her over, glancing at the bandage on her chest. She wore a casual tan V-neck sweater over jeans, her gun on her hip. He could see only about half the bandage on her upper chest. He pointed at the bandage. "So, does it hurt?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Not too much. I mean, really, it's just a small cut."

Gabe's lips pressed tightly together and his temper rose for just a minute. He nodded at her waist. "Is that the gun you used?"

"No, they confiscated my gun, but I can get it back soon."

"Good. So, what gun did you use?"

"My Smith & Wesson Shield."

Gabe sighed. "Hollow points?"

She shook her head. "No, I was getting low and so was using full metal jackets."

"What do you have today?"

"Hollow points."

"Good. And, Rose, fire twice."

She grinned. "Yes, sir, Gabriel, sir."

He sighed. "You know, it's because I love you."

She nodded. "I know. But when did my little baby brother grow up? One minute I'm holding him on my knee giving him horsey rides or pushing him out on the swing, and the next he's instructing me on how to kill a man quickly."

He grinned. "Well, how to *stop* him quickly. That's the goal. To stop him. It's my turn to worry about you, Rose. You always worried over me. I remember when I was like, three or four, so I guess you were maybe nine or ten, you swung me really high on the swing and I started to fall out and

you screamed so loud. You were so worried about me."

She nodded. "And you didn't even fall. You held on to the chain with that tiny little fist of yours while your body dangled in the air."

He raised his fist and looked at it. "Not so tiny now, huh?"

She sighed. "The time goes by so fast."

"I was just thinking that this morning as I watched Iris sleeping. I mean, I'm gonna go away and she's not even gonna remember me."

Rose nodded. "Sometimes I wish we could just stay young and live here with our parents forever, but we have to continue on. The dynamic changes. We grow up. We'll eventually have a family of our own."

Gabe sighed. "That feels so weird, but when we do have families of our own, we need to promise to stay in touch. I mean, look at Dad's sisters. We hardly ever see them or our cousins. I want my kids to be best-friend cousins to your kids. You know, like young Eric and Taylor are to Logan and JoJo."

Rose teared up. "Oh, Gabe, Lord have mercy, I love you so much."

He grinned. "Backatcha, sis."

"Sounds like mushy talk in here," Violet said as she entered.

"Morning, Vi," Gabe said as he gave her a hug.

A second later, their father came downstairs with a small suitcase.

"Good morning, Dad," Gabe greeted.

"Morning, son."

"Is that stuff for Mom?"

Keegan smiled. "No, I'm running away."

They chuckled.

Keegan started some coffee and pulled eggs out of the refrigerator. "Who wants breakfast?"

"If you're cooking, I'll take some," Violet said.

Rose's phone buzzed and she raised it up and read the text.

~~Good morning, Rose. Shall we try this again? Only this time I'll go get the coffee and bring it to you at the Center.

She smiled and then texted.

~Good morning! Sounds great. I'm on my way out right now.

~~See you soon

She smiled as she looked up at her family. "I gotta go."

"Was that Jericho?" her father asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Is Agent Thompson here yet?"

"Oh, yeah, our bodyguards. I totally forgot."

Keegan frowned. "Well?"

"No, he won't be here for ..." She glanced at the time on her phone.

"For ten more minutes."

"Then you won't be leaving for ten more minutes, right?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

"So, have something to eat while you wait," Keegan ordered.

Sighing, Rose nodded. "I'll have a muffin."

"Gabe? You want some breakfast?" Keegan asked.

"No, sir, I'm going out to have breakfast with Peyton, remember?"

"Yes, I remember, but that's never stopped you before."

Gabe grinned. "Truth. I'll also have a muffin."

Rose finished texting Jericho to let him know she was having to wait on Agent Thompson and then grabbed a muffin for both herself and Gabe.

They all looked up when Daisy came into the kitchen carrying a teary-eyed little girl.

"See, there he is," she said softly to Iris, motioning toward Gabe.

Iris frowned at her brother. "You weft me."

He chuckled. "I have to go see Peyton. You remember Peyton?"

"Yes, but I want to go wif you."

"This is time just for Peyton and I."

"Peyton and me," Violet corrected.

Gabe grinned at her. "For Peyton and me," he repeated.

Iris' lips trembled. "I want to go wif you," she said softly as the tears started again.

Gabe blew out a breath. "Iris, not this time."

"I want to go!" she yelled.

"Young lady, you'd better stop that right now," Keegan said firmly.

"But I want—to—go wif Gabe!"

"Iris," Rose said calmly. "Remember you were gonna come with Daisy to see me at the Center today!"

"No! I don't wanna go to the Cenner, I wanna go wif Gabe!"

Gabe sighed. "Dad, I would usually just bring her along, but for some reason, I don't feel like I should today."

Keegan nodded. "Well, even if you felt like you should, she doesn't get to go, because she's throwing a fit and she needs to know right now that throwing a fit will never, ever get her what she wants. Not in this household, anyway."

They all smiled. Their father had made that rule quite evident their entire lives. The best way to *not* get what you want is to throw a fit.

Keegan nodded as a strong thought came into his mind. "Iris," Keegan said. "Ya know what?"

"What?" she asked in a tiny, trembling voice.

"Let's have some breakfast, and then I'll help you get dressed and I'll

let you come with me to the hospital to see your mom."

The little girl wiped her nose on the back of her hand as her eyes lit up. "I can go see Mommy?"

He smiled. "Yes. But you have to eat your breakfast and wear whatever clothes Daisy picks out and lays on the bed."

He looked up at Daisy. She saluted and ran up the stairs.

"I can't believe I'm hearing you give in," Rose said.

Keegan shrugged. "I'm not giving in to the demands of a petulant child to go with her brother. I *am* listening to God, who just put some words in my head."

"What did He say?" Gabe asked immediately.

"He said, 'Suffer the children to come unto me.'"

They were silent a minute and then they all nodded. "Cool."

Gabe lifted Iris and hugged her and sat her in her booster seat at the table. "Okay, well, my flower girl, that settles it. Have fun seeing Mommy. You're so lucky."

She grinned.

"And eat all your breakfast," he said as his father placed a plate in front of her.

"I will," Iris said.

"So, where's Lily?" Gabe asked.

"She's working at the Inn and left here this morning a little before five," Keegan answered.

"By herself?"

Keegan looked at his son. "What do you think?"

Gabe grinned.

Daisy came back down the stairs and Rose glanced at her phone. "Okay, Dad, Agent Thompson is here. I'm leaving." She ran around kissing her father, brother, and sisters. "See you guys at the Center. Be ready to work hard."

"Ready and willing. See you soon," Gabe said. "Be careful. And remember, Rosie, shoot twice."

"Got it. Bye." She ran out the door.

Keegan glanced out the window and saw the agent park his car beside the garage and go inside the garage. When Rose's car pulled out of the garage, Agent Thompson was at the wheel. He smiled. They'd chosen Thompson because he was very hardcore, strong-willed, and that's what it would take to protect Rose.

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November 26th, 6:00 AM, Tuesday Morning
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

The breakfast table at the Inn was covered in every kind of southern breakfast delicacy possible. Bacon, sausage, eggs, hashbrowns, biscuits and sausage pepper gravy, bacon/egg/cheese biscuits, a huge fresh fruit bowl, grits, pancakes, apple/berry muffins, chocolate bran muffins, cinnamon rolls, sausage rolls and even a steaming pot of oatmeal with fixin's, which included flax seeds, raisins, bananas, honey, brown sugar, and raw milk cream.

Jodi, Jewell, Lily and the kitchen staff had been hard at work since 5:00 AM and the wonderful aromas filled the Inn. It didn't surprise anyone when the first to arrive downstairs were JoJo, Brody, Logan, Josie, and Jamie. Young Eric came down too, but went immediately outside to find Jordan's crutches and went straight back upstairs to deliver them and then help her down the stairs.

The boys and Jordan sat at the large breakfast table, sampling everything and moaning in pleasure.

"This is so good," Jordan said softly.

Young Eric smiled at her. "What's your favorite so far?"

"Um, I think the gravy biscuits and the hashbrowns. And oh my goodness, this muffin is amazing." She grinned. "I'm gonna get fat."

"It is tempting to overdo it," Logan said.

"Their kitchen staff is awesome," Jordan said.

"They are actually award-winning, though that was when Miss Maddie was alive."

"Who's in charge now?" Jordan asked.

"Actually, it's one of Gabe's sisters," JoJo replied.

Jordan looked up as the one they spoke of came in with a fresh tray of muffins. "Which one is that?" Jordan whispered. "Is that Daisy?"

"No," Brody said immediately. "That's Lily."

The firm comment made the brows of young Eric, Logan and JoJo shoot up. They looked at each other and then looked at Brody.

He shrugged. "What?"

"So, which one are you interested in?"

"What makes you think I'm interested?"

"Are you saying you're not?"

He didn't answer.

"Can I get any of you anything?" Lily asked.

Everyone declined.

"No," Jordan said. "But, Lily, this is delicious."

She smiled. "I'm glad you like it. We're just following Miss Maddie's recipes. I wish you could have known her. She was amazing. She took all of her old southern recipes and worked on making them healthier without

losing their deliciousness. Like the biscuits. They aren't made with white flour anymore. Well, some of them are, but some are made with chickpea flour, and some with almond flour and some with coconut flour. Maddie was amazing. She won awards in several cooking magazines."

"Wow, I know my mom wishes she could have met her."

"Well, your mom is in the kitchen right now, cooking up a few of those recipes. She's adorable."

Jordan smiled. "Thanks, Lily."

Lily nodded and headed back into the kitchen.

"So, Brody, which one has grabbed your attention?" Logan asked.

"Nunya," he answered.

The boys all chuckled. They all looked up as their fathers and uncles came downstairs.

Ricky, Mark, Toby and Joey came down at the same time; Cam and Jeffy and Nolan came in from the cottages. Everyone greeted Toby and Brody, since they were the newcomers, and then greeted each other.

Jordan looked around at all the men and realized, except for the kitchen workers, she, Josie, and Jeffy were the only girls so far. Someone asked if the food had already been blessed and young Eric informed them that he had said the blessing. John entered the room and greeted everyone. A few minutes later, Grandmaster Kino came down the stairs.

The boys immediately stood and bowed to their grandfather.

"Good morning, Granddad," young Eric, Logan and JoJo said.

"Good morning. Sit. Eat. I appreciate the show of respect."

"Actually, we're about done. We'll clear out and make room for you men," JoJo said quickly.

Young Eric looked at Jordan. "Do you want anything else?"

She shook her head. "No, I feel like I'm gonna pop," she said, rubbing her stomach.

He helped her up. "Go sit in the lobby and I'll clear your place."

"No need," a staffer said as she set a tray on the table and began clearing the dishes.

The young people moved and made room for the men at the table.

Brody took a moment to approach Lily.

"That was delicious," he said.

"Thanks, Brody, I'm glad you liked it."

He nodded. "So, will Daisy be coming over to eat by any chance?"

Lily smiled a knowing smile and shook her head. "No, sorry. She's probably already on her way to the Center."

Jordan watched him. "So, Three, the big guy, Brody, he's the son of Toby Nash, right?"

"Yes."

"And that is Toby Nash, right?" she said nodding toward the singer.

"Yep."

"Wow."

"Wow?"

"I mean, I listen to his music."

He grinned. "Me too." He looked closely at Jordan. "Are you a little starstruck?"

She giggled. "Maybe."

"I don't remember you being that way when you met *my* parents."

"I was. I was just trying very hard not to show it."

"I see. I'm not sure how to feel about that."

"You mean, the 'does she like me for me' thing?"

He nodded.

She frowned. "I've never been anything but honest with you, Three. I love you for you and all that you are, and not because your parents are movie stars. If you think that little of me, then you know what, I'm not sure I wanna talk to you right now."

"Okay, okay, don't be mad. It wasn't a serious comment."

She pouted. "Fine."

He grinned. "Fine."

She was silent for a few minutes and then sighed, deciding to take up the conversation again. "So, Brody, is he a singer too?"

Young Eric shook his head. "He can sing really well, but he's not a singer. He plays baseball at Tennessee. It's his last year. He'll probably go pro, because he's really good."

"Oh, wow! That's cool. He's so big, I should've known he was some kind of athlete."

"He's not that big. He's only two inches taller than me."

She looked him over. "Three, are you jealous?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

She reached her hand out to him. "Well, don't be a silly boy. There's no one for me but you."

"Are you sure?"

She turned to stare at him. "What is wrong with you? You're about to make me really mad."

"What's he done now?" JoJo asked as he came over to sit near them.

"He's questioning my love for him."

"Is that what I did?" young Eric asked.

"You know good and well that's exactly what you did," she said.

She struggled to her feet and grabbed up her crutches. "I'm going

upstairs to find Taylor."

He stood. "Okay, well, us guys are gonna be heading over to the Center shortly."

"Fine. I'll be there when I get back from the doctor." She turned and headed up the stairs.

The guys watched her go, then JoJo, Logan and Brody turned to young Eric. "What's goin' on, bro?" JoJo said.

He shook his head. "I'm not sure. I said some dumb stuff."

"So, *are* you questioning her love for you?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't think?"

He shrugged.

"He's just nervous," Logan said.

"Nervous about what?" Brody asked.

JoJo smiled. "He brought a ring with him."

"You're gonna propose?"

"I was."

"You still are, you idiot. Stop second-guessing yourself and stop sabotaging yourself. You love her. She loves you. Where's the confident Kino Challenge Champion?" JoJo said.

Young Eric nodded. "Right. Right. Okay. I got this."

"This is awesome," Brody said. "When are you gonna do it?"

"Not sure yet. I decided to do it here, while our whole family is together. We're missing a few people, but we almost never have everyone together. And I didn't want to wait any longer."

"Who are we missing?" Brody asked.

"The Davises and the Lees."

"Oh, gotcha. So, are you gonna wait to propose until after Thanksgiving, or before, or the day of?"

"Good question. Not after, because some people have to leave right away and everyone will be tired."

"Then that doesn't give you much time to decide. You have three days in which to do it," Logan said, his eyebrows raised.

"Well, I'd like it to be when she's not mad at me."

"Good idea," Brody said with a laugh.

"So stop making her mad," JoJo advised.

"Another good idea," young Eric said softly.

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James 1:19

"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;"

Chapter Seven

November 26th, Tuesday Morning
Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Agent Thompson pulled Rose's car into the parking lot of the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* on Main Street in downtown Pine Forest. They could see that there were other agents there. They were the ones who'd had the job of watching over the facility and the big tents out back overnight, to keep anyone from destroying them and ruining the event, which seemed to be the bad guy's agenda.

Agent Thompson was walking her to the building when he promptly shoved her behind him as a large man approached holding a cardboard tray with two large cups and one small cup.

Rose quickly stepped out from behind the agent. "Agent Thompson, this is Jericho Jones. You'll be seeing a lot of him, because we're like, um— buddies."

Jericho's brows shot up. "Buddies?" he questioned.

Rose nodded nervously. "I mean, like, friends."

Jericho nodded. "Okay, friends." He offered his hand to the agent. "Agent Thompson, nice to meet you. And Rose and I will be more than buddies if I can ever get her to find time to go on an actual date with me."

Agent Thompson smiled. "I feel ya, man."

Jericho nodded. "So far, a few coffee dates and watching a few sporting events with her family, that's as far as I've gotten."

"Well, I wish you luck," Agent Thompson said.

"Thanks. I need it."

"So, do you work around here?" Thompson asked.

"Well, yes and no. I'm a Firefighter/EMS specialist and I train all emergency services personnel. So, I'm here at least until after the New Year. Maybe longer."

"Maybe longer?" Rose asked.

He shrugged. "With the proper incentive."

She rolled her eyes, and punched in the numbers on the alarm and the three entered the building.

"If I'd known you'd be here, Agent Thompson," Jericho began, "I would've brought you a coffee too."

"No problem. I've had breakfast and I'm fine. I'm working right now, anyway. Miss Rose, where will you be?"

"I'll be in the office over there," she said, pointing to her left. "It's that door behind the high counter."

"Got it. Mr. Jones, you'll be with her?"

"Yes, and please, call me Jericho, or some call me JJ."

"JJ it is. Miss Rose, I'm gonna check out the facility. Maybe later today you can take me on a tour. For now, I would like to walk around and make my own assessment."

"Assessment?"

"As to the layout and safety of the premises."

Jericho smiled. "I like this guy."

"Just doing my job."

"Just to be sure, Miss Rose, at this time you and JJ are the only ones who should be on the premises, correct?"

"Yes, correct, until Daisy and a whole bunch of other people arrive. And please, just call me Rose."

"Yes, ma'am. Rose it is."

"Just out of curiosity, Agent Thompson, how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-five, ma'am."

"Well, at least you're older than me. You look very young."

"Yes, ma'am, I get that a lot."

"Well, right now, I'm twenty-three, but..."

"And you'll be twenty-four on Christmas Day. Yes, ma'am, I know."

"How did you know?"

"I received this assignment yesterday afternoon and I did my homework. I take my job very seriously."

Rose smiled. "I see you do, and I now know why you were sent to watch over me."

He nodded. "Enjoy your coffee."

Rose and Jericho headed into her office. She sat at her desk and he set the coffee in front of her and then set a second Styrofoam cup beside it.

"What's this?" she asked.

He grinned. "Your ice cream."

She squealed with delight. "Oh, yay, thank you so much, Jericho!"

He smiled. "You're very welcome." He watched as she took the plastic spoon provided and raked the soft-serve ice cream into her cup of coffee, and then licked the spoon clean.

She looked up and smiled at him, looking him over. He wore blue jeans, athletic shoes and an old, faded, UGA sweatshirt. "You're looking very handsome today."

"Is that because I brought you ice cream? Because I'm dressed for working."

She giggled. "Maybe."

"Note to self, ice cream improves my image."

Rose laughed as she drank some of her coffee and put it down on the desk. "Umm, that is so good."

He watched her as she licked her lips. He moved closer and she looked up at him from where she sat, her gorgeous blue eyes opened wide. Reaching out, he softly touched the edge of her V-neck and opened it a bit and pressed his fingers lightly along the edge of the bandage, where it met her skin. She drew in a breath.

He looked into her eyes.

"Uh, I don't know what you're doing, but just because I got stabbed and you helped to doctor me doesn't mean that you can just touch me intimately whenever you'd like."

He smiled at her. "When I touch you intimately, you'll know exactly what I'm doing," he murmured.

She swallowed. "When? You mean if?"

His eyes darkened. "I say what I mean."

"You're mighty sure of yourself, Jericho Jones."

"One has to be to win over the most amazing girl I've ever known."

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

He put his hands around her upper arms and pulled her to her feet. "Rose, have dinner with me tonight."

"I, I, don't have time."

"You have to make time to eat or you'll get weak and sick and mess everything up. You have to be here on Thursday, healthy and strong. I'm only asking for dinner. No movie. No dancing. Just dinner."

"I'll only have a short time."

"One hour. One hour spent dining with me."

She sighed. He moved closer, tilted her face up, ran his thumb and forefinger over her jaw and touched her lips. He stayed there like that for several seconds and then sighed and stepped back. "I'll pick you up. Your agent can follow if he wants, but I want you alone."

She nodded. He smiled and set her back into her chair, and took his own seat across from her desk. "So, Rosie posey, what's on the agenda today?"

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Jeffy smiled when her phone buzzed. She'd been expecting the call. "Well, hello there, Kimmie Deal," she said brightly. "Anything you wanna

tell me?"

Kimmie giggled. "Nope. Just called to say 'hi.'"

"Liar. How far apart are the contractions?"

"Ten minutes apart. The midwife is on the way, my dad is a nervous wreck, my mom is right here and Jensen is hanging in there, doing all the right things."

"Is there water in the bath?"

"It's filling. And Jensen is checking the temperature right now."

"How bad is the pain?"

"Not too bad yet."

"Okay, well, the water is gonna help a lot with that. I know you know, but I just wanted to reassure you. I'm so sorry that I'm not there for you."

"It's okay, Jeffy. I knew this is probably how it was gonna go."

Jeffy breathed deeply and closed her eyes.

"Hello?" Kimmie said.

"I'm here. Just reading you. Everything is good right now. Your water is gonna break soon, and the contractions are gonna come hard after that. Go ahead and get in the water now. I'm gonna take some of the discomfort."

"Don't you dare. I wanna feel it all, every single bit of it."

Jeffy smiled. "Kimmie the warrior. I'm so proud of you. And happy for you. I love you, Kim. I'm gonna hang up and let you share this special time with your hubby. Take video and pics and send them later."

"Will do. Ugh, this is a hard one."

"Are you sure you don't want me to help?"

"No, I'm not sure, so hang up before I break my resolution."

Jeffy laughed. "Yes, ma'am. Be strong. You too, Jensen."

"Trying to," he said loudly.

"Bye, Jeffy. Love you like a sis," Kimmie said.

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At the aptly named *Church Street Diner*, Gabe grinned at Peyton as he criticized the amount of food on Gabe's plate. Gabe looked Peyton's plate over, which was just as full.

"Look who's talkin'," Gabe said.

"Well, yeah, but I didn't eat anything before I left the house. Can you say the same?"

Gabe laughed. "Nope."

"Where does it all go?" Peyton asked. "You don't have an ounce of fat on you."

Gabe shrugged. "I guess I expend a lot of energy." He quickly glanced at his watch.

Peyton smiled. “Don’t worry, we have plenty of time before we have to report, and we’re only two streets over from the Center. We’re good.”

Gabe nodded. “I just don’t wanna be late. All the Kinos and Adams and Smiths will be arriving at the center in about an hour.”

“Smiths?”

“Toby Nash’s family. Their real name is Smith. Nash is a stage name, but he keeps his legal name Smith.”

“Got it. So, that means, Brody Smith is gonna be here?”

“Yes, he’s here.”

“He’s doing great,” Peyton said. “He has one of the highest batting averages in the nation.”

Gabe nodded. “He should. He’s a big guy.”

“Bigger than me?” Peyton said.

“Yep. You met him at Jake and Laynah’s wedding.”

“Yeah, just trying to remember.”

“Well, you can look him up on your phone, but you’re gonna see him again within the hour. He looks almost exactly like his father, just a younger version. Anyway, your average was almost at the top for high school, Peyton. You’re no slouch.”

“I know that. And I’m workin’ hard and I’m gonna make something of myself.”

“I totally believe in you,” Gabe said with a smile.

Peyton smiled. “And I believe in you, Gabe. You’ve been such a major part of my life.”

“And you’ve been the same for me. And listen, Peyton, like, I’ve been meaning to say that though we may not be able to get together like we used to, you’ll always be, I mean, my best friend.” He shook his head and smiled. “Wow, this is too sugary for me.”

Peyton laughed. “Really? You’re usually the one who gets all emotional and spouts poetry.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Gabe, give me a break. Everything touches you so deeply.”

“Whatever. Okay. Here’s something else I’ve thought about, something I need to thank you for.”

“What?”

“Taylor.”

“What do I have to do with Taylor?”

“That day on the phone, when you went bonkers over her hotness. It opened something in my mind. I’d always thought of her as being way out of my league and off-limits. Because of you, I started to see her in a

different light. And then, her father had me teach her to shoot, and it was like, a fire started burning and I couldn't put it out."

Peyton chuckled. "The way you say things, Tanner, I swear you could write a book of poetry."

Gabe shrugged. "So, anyway, whaddya think about your mom and Dalton?"

Peyton nodded with a smile. "I think he's a good guy and I really like the way he treats her, the way he takes care of her. If they work out, I think it will be so good for my mom. And Lucas likes him too. So that's also a good thing."

"This makes me so happy," Gabe said. "Dalton is a good guy."

Peyton nodded. "Yeah, I think he is."

They talked for several minutes as they cleaned their plates.

"Tanner."

Gabe glanced up to his right at Agent Key who was standing against the wall next to the table where Peyton and Gabe sat eating breakfast.

"Yes, sir?" Gabe said quietly.

"Check out the shaved head at your three."

"The guy at the counter with the blue shirt?"

"Yes. He's nervous. He's looked at you several times. Be ready."

"Got it."

Agent Key sighed, moved forward. "Nope, Gabe, I don't like it. The setup is not good. Too crowded. Let's go."

Gabe frowned but obeyed. "Ready, Peyton?" Gabe said as he stood.

"Uh, I guess so."

The guy at the counter turned to look at Gabe again and apparently saw that they were getting up to leave. He reached for a weapon that had been tucked in the back of his pants.

At that very moment, a little boy right in front of the blue shirt guy dropped his little plastic bottle of orange juice and began to wail.

Blue shirt pulled a gun and stepped toward Gabe, but immediately stepped in the puddle of juice. His feet went out from under him and he fell onto his back, the gun falling from his hand and sliding across the floor right at Gabe, who simply put his foot down on it and then scooped it up and pointed it at the guy. A couple of women screamed. Agent Key went to the bad guy as he started to get up. A quick punch to the throat and then forehead, and the guy was neutralized. Agent Key ordered Gabe to call his father as he quickly cuffed the perp.

Gabe called his father, and his Uncle Joey, who was probably nearby, and Sheriff Ty. Within five minutes, police and Joey walked through the door of the diner.

Joey approached Agent Key and Gabe. “Everyone okay?”

Gabe nodded. “Yes, sir.” He nodded at his bodyguard. “Thanks to Agent Key. He spotted him almost immediately and was trying to get us out when the guy pulled the gun. I mean, I guess the guy was gonna just outright shoot me.”

Joey nodded. “He was, and I’m sorry, Gabe, but I want you in a vest the rest of the week.”

Gabe sighed. “Yes, sir.”

Joey turned his attention to Agent Key. “Agent, good job,” Joey said, as he offered his hand.

“Thank you, sir, and may I just say, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Deputy Chief Adams.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

Agent Key smiled. “As much as I’d like to take credit for what happened here, it was really a kid who saved the day. Right as the perp turned to pull his weapon, some kid spilled his juice and the guy slipped. It was almost a miracle, or he may have gotten a shot off.”

Joey nodded and glanced at Gabe. “Things are not almost a miracle. They either are or they aren’t. We all prayed for protection this morning. We prayed all together that God would thwart the enemy. He’s answering our prayers.”

Gabe nodded. “Wow, I used pretty much those exact words in my prayer this morning, that God would ‘thwart the enemy’.”

“Did you?” Joey asked, amused. “Grandmaster Kino said our prayer this morning, and he too used those exact words.”

Gabe gave a wide smile. “God is so cool.”

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November 26th, 7:30 AM, Tuesday Morning

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe, Peyton, Agent Key, and Joey Adams walked into the Center, but Gabe didn’t get six feet in the door before a beautiful young girl ran at him and jumped into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and her legs around his waist and laid her head on his shoulder and cried.

He held her tight as he spoke to her. “Okay, Tay, it’s okay now. I wasn’t even hurt. It’s gonna be okay.”

She pulled her head away just far enough to look into his eyes and then cried some more.

He chuckled at her. “Okay, Taylor, I understand. I do. But it’s gonna be okay. Do you believe me?”

She sniffed and nodded.

"Okay, babe, I'm gonna set you down because some people want to talk to me, but you stay right here by my side."

"Okay," she said softly.

Peyton headed to speak with his mother and brother and fill them in on what took place.

Gabe set Taylor down and put his left arm around her, then shook hands with all the people who'd come to speak with him.

As young Eric, Logan, JoJo, Brody, Ricky, Mark, John and Chaz surrounded Gabe and asked questions, he kept his arm around Taylor. After about fifteen minutes, Rose approached and hugged her brother from behind. "Okay, guys, we're all happy that my little brother is okay and another attempt at putting out his light has failed. I'm gonna give you about five more minutes to chat and then, I'm really gonna need for you to get to work."

The men all chuckled and nodded in agreement.

Eric senior approached Gabe and spoke to him for a few minutes.

In the meantime, Joey was on the phone to Jason and then Keegan, and then he spoke in person to Eric senior and John Appel. Finally, he asked Rose to announce a quick meeting in the cafeteria.

Rose made the announcement and ended it with the order that no one better mess up the tablecloths or decorations or there would be consequences, making everyone laugh.

Joey asked Logan to turn on one of the amps and hand him a microphone. "Okay, everyone. We're running a few minutes behind on our duties today, but Rose will be pleasantly surprised about how fast we'll catch up, which is what I told her, so don't make a liar out of me.

"I think you need to know what's happening. Yes, there was an attempt on Gabe's life this morning. Yes, there were two violent attempts yesterday. Satan is working very hard to keep us from doing this thing we're trying to do. We call it the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, but we're doing more than feeding them, I know you all realize that. We have some leads this time. This guy today was not your regular lowlife street criminal hired in Atlanta from the back of an SUV. He has connections to Dr. Julian Black. We'll know more later and we'll speak to the correct parties later. But here is what I'm getting at— we can't let this get in our heads and make us fearful. And on that note, I'm turning the mic over to Grandmaster Kino."

He handed the mic to Eric as he approached. He bowed to him and Eric turned to speak. Eric looked over the crowd of people. "Rose," he said softly. "Can we get this giant monitor turned on?"

"Yes, of course." She ran to get the remote.

"And Daisy, Joey is gonna send you a video. Is it possible for you to cast it up on the screen?"

"Yes, sir, I can do that," she said cheerfully.

"Thank you." Eric smiled and nodded at the crowd and was obviously counting and then finally spoke. "I just quickly counted and there are around seventy people here currently. Tomorrow we'll be addressing over five hundred volunteers who will be donating their time on Thursday, and that will include most of you people too. What an amazing group of people we have right here in the small town of Pine Forest and the surrounding towns. I'm very honored to be in the presence of this group who loves God, who serves Him and honors Him, and does it with no thought of accolades. You just want to do what's good and right and serve God. So, because I feel that way about you all, I know you will understand that this little thing, this attempt to thwart our endeavor and to take the light that is Gabe Tanner away from this world, will not deter us.

"We won't let it deter us because that's what they want, and we will not give in and we will not bow down and we will not be thwarted. As a matter of fact, God will do the thwarting. This morning, in our family prayer at the Inn, I asked God to thwart the plans of the evil ones. And I learned today that Gabe, in his personal prayer this morning, used those exact same words. God has answered our prayers and has put it in my head that He is directing this endeavor and He will continue to answer our prayers. I also learned from Gabe today, that little Iris wanted desperately to go with her brother to the restaurant, and Gabe, who usually would grant her any plea, felt strongly this morning that she shouldn't come.

"And then, Gabe's dad, Eastern Division Chief Director Keegan Tanner, told Gabe that God told him to bring Iris with him to visit Lizzy, who, as you all know, has just given birth to two beautiful new spirits. He said God's words were, 'Suffer the children to come unto me.'" Eric stopped as he became emotional and realized the Holy Spirit was filling him. He looked up. "So, God spoke to both Gabe and Keegan to keep Iris safe. And then, at that restaurant, well, watch how God thwarted the would-be assassin. Daisy, roll the video."

Everyone stared up at the big screen and watched how a little boy, approximately four to five years of age, had a bottle of orange juice literally jump out of his hand. The boy cried and immediately ran to his mother, putting him out of harm's way. The gunman slipped in the juice and went down.

"Play that back a minute, Daisy," Eric directed.

She did.

"That bottle of juice looks like it is literally pulled from the boy's hand." Eric smiled. "There would be some that think I'm just an old man ranting and raving and sounding crazy, but I don't care what others think. I've been close to God since I was a boy, and I cannot and will not deny it when I see Him working in our lives in a very real way. If we deny these things, then surely, the miracles will stop. One more time, Daisy."

She played it back. It was obvious. The bottle simply moved upward out of the boy's hand and then flipped over onto the floor.

"And as you can see, the timing was perfect. If the juice had been spilled any earlier, the gunman would have seen it and simply jumped over it. Any later and it wouldn't have had any effect on the guy. It was perfect. God's timing is perfect. Always. Let this lift you. Let this show you that God is with us in this endeavor. He will bring us the people that need to come. People that may be His future warriors. But it's not just them that will be impacted. It's all of us. All of you. How this event will change each of your lives remains to be seen. But I know it will." He smiled.

"So, I know Rose would like us to get back to work. Work extra hard and extra fast so she won't be stressed. But Rose, I want you to know, we all want you to know, that we understand how hard you've worked on this event and how important it is that we all do our jobs. If we do that, everything will work. We are part of a team. The linemen have to block. The running backs have to run, the receivers have to run the right routes, turn and be ready." He heard a murmuring from the guys and smiled.

"So, I was giving football analogies because it's that time of year. But there will be a baseball team here from UGA, thanks to Peyton, and we are blessed to have Brody Smith here with us too, from the Tennessee Vols, so I'll change my analogy. The fielders have to back up their pitcher. Focus, concentrate, no balls get by, and by balls I mean souls. The catcher takes care of the pitcher, again, no balls get by. When it's your turn to bat, you give it your all. You swing away. So, people, it's time to step up to the plate." He grinned. "Was that enough?"

"More than enough," Brody called out, making everyone chuckle.

"So, I've said enough. I'm gonna switch back to football for a second, and call on one of my grandsons, to give us a prayer, and then stay quiet so that Rose can take the mic and remind us what we need to be doing and we'll get to it." He nodded. "JoJo? Will you honor us?"

JoJo came forward, took the microphone and delivered a beautiful heartfelt prayer, giving thanks, asking for protection and for direction and for energy and strength, all in Jesus' name. Rose then took the mic and quickly ran off a huge list of everything that everyone was supposed to be working on and the crowd got to work immediately. Rose smiled. It was

all gonna be okay.

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Still November 26th, 11:00 AM, Tuesday Morning
Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Young Eric took a quick break from hanging lights in the cafeteria, pulled out his phone and checked the time. He felt like he'd waited long enough to hear how things went at the doctor. She hadn't contacted him to tell him, so he figured she was still mad at him, and that worried him. He decided to send a text.

~~Hey Two-three. How's your foot? Did you get a new cast?

She didn't answer right away, and after a minute he started to get impatient. Finally, though, he got an answer.

~Wow, Three. I just got my new phone turned on and transferred. Just now. When your text came through, the tech guy was still holding my phone. Lol [laughing emoji]

~~Sorry. Guess I was anxious.

~NP. Yes, I have a new cast. They X-rayed my foot. Looks fine. No new damage. They think it's healing well. I'm walking out the door of the phone store and GPS says I'll be there in fifteen.

~~So you're not mad anymore?

~Too hard to stay mad at you.

~~You know I wasn't really questioning your love for me.

~Talk about it when I get there. I LOVE YOU!

~~[smiley face]

Relieved, he shoved his phone back in his pocket, moved the ladder about six feet and climbed back up.

Brody Smith nodded at him from the ladder opposite him. "So, how's she doing?"

He smiled. "She's on her way back."

"And she's not mad anymore?"

"Doesn't seem to be."

"Good. Looks like we're about done with the lights."

"Yep, let's get this done, unload the cases of water and eat some lunch."

"Sounds good," Brody said.

Logan and Gabe walked up to them. "Wait until you see the cases of water," Logan said.

The guys came down the ladders. "Why?"

Gabe smiled. "There are two hundred cases of spring water and two hundred cases of flavored water."

"Wow. Where are they and where exactly does Rose want them?" young Eric asked.

"They're in a truck backed up to the loading dock behind the cafeteria, but not sure exactly where she wants them," Gabe replied.

"I'll go ask," Brody said quickly.

Logan and young Eric smiled at him knowingly.

"Yeah, Bro, why don't you go do that," Logan said with a laugh.

Gabe watched this exchange. "What's that all about?"

Young Eric nodded toward Brody as he walked away. "We think he's got his eye on your sister."

Gabe frowned. "On Rose?"

"On Daisy, silly boy."

Gabe thought about it. "Ya know, at Jake's wedding I saw him dancing with Daisy pretty close, but I didn't think too much about it because he's younger than Daisy."

"He's twenty-two, Gabe, and so is Daisy."

"Yeah, but he just turned twenty-two, and Daisy will be twenty-three next month."

Young Eric shrugged. "He turned twenty-two in July, so, she's only seven months older than him. That's not a big deal."

"Interesting," Gabe said.

Brody headed to the front lobby and when he got there he frowned. To his right was the tall front counter that Daisy usually sat behind, usually working on the computer. At this moment though, she was standing on the very top level of a little four-foot stepladder. Both hands were over her head as high as she could reach, pressing something against the center of the wall.

He had to admire the view. Daisy Anderson was a beautiful girl. That adorable cherub face, those big blue eyes, the long, white blond hair that came to the middle of her back in soft, shiny waves, and that tight athletic body. Currently, she was dressed in some hot blue jeans, and a soft, golden sweater that exposed just a hint of her navel because her hands were up over her head. "Daisy?" he said.

She peeked at him under her arm and muttered, "Just a sec. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty." She continued counting until she reached thirty and then took her hands away from whatever she was pressing on and looked at it closely, making sure, he supposed, that it wasn't coming off the wall.

She smiled. "Okay. Sorry. The directions say to make sure you press firmly for thirty seconds. And I don't want this hook to fall down."

He moved forward to look at the hook. "You should've asked one of us to do that for you."

She shrugged. “I did it. I hated to have to bother you guys, you’re all working so hard.”

“So, what’s going on the hook?”

She leaned over to pick up a large fall wreath, but it was out of her reach from where she stood on the top level. Her body wobbled, and then the ladder wobbled and she gave a yelp.

Brody reacted quickly. Placing his hands on the high front counter, he jumped over it, landed right next to Daisy and caught her as she fell.

She looked up at him as he cradled her in his arms. “Wow, Brody, you’re quick.”

“And it’s a good thing, too,” he quipped. “Daisy, you need to be more careful. You could’ve fallen and broken your arm, or worse.”

She nodded and gave a shrug. “I’m sorry. You’re right. But hey, thanks for catching me!”

He chuckled. “You’re welcome.”

“Can you like, put me down now?”

“Oh,” he mumbled as he set her carefully on her feet.

She immediately reached down and righted the ladder, grabbed the wreath and started up again.

“Are you kidding me?” Brody grumbled. “Give me that.” He took the wreath from her, climbed the small ladder and quickly hung the wreath on the hook.

She watched him. “Thanks again. So, how tall are you?”

“I’m six four.” He came down and folded the stepladder. “How tall are you?”

She smiled. “I’m five feet, five inches.”

He smiled. “Cute.” He couldn’t help it, he reached out and tucked a lock of her hair back that had fallen in her face. He looked into her eyes that were questioning him. “Don’t want to block that beautiful face from view,” he said softly.

She blushed, which made him smile.

“So, um, did you come up front for a reason? Did you need something?”

“Oh! Yep. I’m supposed to come find Rose and ask her where she wants the cases of water placed.”

“Rose is somewhere in the building, I don’t know where. But I do know where she wants the water stacked. I’ll show you.”

He followed her into the gym. They met up with the others who’d been directed to unload the water. Gabe, Peyton, young Eric, Logan, Charlie Stewart, and Lucas Murphy. JoJo was also there, saying he

would be happy to supervise.

"Hey, guys, follow me," Daisy said with a smile. She walked past them and toward a long row of tables along the back side of the gym on the right side of the stage. She went behind the tables. "So, this is the beverage table. If you could stack the water and the flavored waters along this wall behind these tables, but make sure you leave walking room behind the table so that the person working this area has room to move."

All the guys nodded, except young Eric. He was shaking his head. "Hold on," he said as he trotted across the gym to where some of the men were working on repairing a light. "Can I borrow a tape measure?"

"In that tool box on the stage," Jericho stated, grunting as he tightened a bolt above his head.

"Thanks." Young Eric went to the apron of the stage, grabbed the tape measure, came back and measured the wall behind the beverage tables. Shaking his head, he turned to explain. "Let's just say for one second that there are only two hundred cases of beverages. Each case is approximately ten inches by eighteen inches. If we stack them six high against the wall, which is about as high as I think they should be stacked for safety reasons, and then we made another stack of six high right in front of the first stack, that would cover eighteen inches of wall space. So, eighteen inches of wall space will accommodate twelve cases.

"There are two hundred cases, divide that by twelve, because we're stacking twelve at a time. Which, if I round it off, means we need seventeen spaces of eighteen inches each. Which is over three hundred inches of wall space, which is about twenty-five feet. But we only have twenty-eight feet here. And, there are four hundred cases altogether, which would mean we need fifty feet of wall space. If you want it stacked just behind this row of tables, we can fit a little over two hundred cases. We can put the other two hundred along a different wall, or leave them on the loading dock and bring them in little by little on Thursday."

Young Eric held up a finger. "Or, the alternative is, we stack them turned with the ten inch side against the wall, but that makes them stick out into the space behind the tables an extra sixteen inches. So, if you want to move these tables out from the wall an additional sixteen inches, we could get three hundred and ninety-six cases stacked behind them, on..." he stopped and calculated. "On twenty-seven feet six inches of wall space. We could put the last four cases under one of the tables."

Daisy, Charlie, and Lucas were wide-eyed. Gabe chuckled. Logan and JoJo smiled. Brody and Peyton looked at each other. "Is he serious?" Peyton asked.

"You wanna check my math?" young Eric challenged.

"Eric is really smart and very good with numbers," Gabe explained. "At one point he was thinking about being an astronaut physicist."

Daisy pulled out her phone and called Rose, who arrived on scene in a few minutes. The problem was explained again to her and she made the executive decision to move the tables out sixteen inches and put the last four cases underneath, saying that they didn't have time to ask the guys to move the beverages on Thursday.

"Okay, so now, get to it, guys. It's almost lunchtime," she ordered and started off.

"Rose," Gabe said. "While we're stacking the water, we're gonna move the beverage tables completely out of the way, but I promise we'll put them back when we're done."

"I trust you, Gabe."

He grinned. "Good." He looked around. "Hey, guys, I have an idea. Whaddya say we make this fun?"

"How?"

"How about a little competition?"

The guys all smiled. "How so?" Peyton asked.

"Well, there are four hand trucks. We divide up into teams of two, and see how many cases of water we can stack in a given amount of time."

Daisy laughed. "Gabe, you make everything into a competition."

"I like it," Brody said with a smile.

"But there's only seven of you," JoJo said quickly. "I'll judge, but we need another guy."

Gabe looked around. CJ was off somewhere with Violet. She had the children and was working on a musical number. Jericho was just coming down from the ladder. "Hey, Jericho, we need another guy. We're gonna have a competition, teams of two."

Jericho shook his head. "Sorry, I have a list a mile long to do for your sister. But, hey, my guy Jalen is a young guy. Find him."

"I'll go call him over the loudspeaker," Daisy said.

A few minutes later, Jalen arrived in the gym. "Whatcha need, guys?"

Gabe smiled. "Uh, well, your boss said you might be willing to join us in a little friendly competition."

Jalen smiled. "Always, but I have to warn you guys, I've won a lot of firefighter competitions."

"Awesome," Gabe said excitedly. "Wanna be my partner?"

Jalen laughed. The others moaned.

"Uh, sorry, Gabe, that's not how the teams are gonna be decided," JoJo said quickly.

Gabe shrugged. “Okay, so, how will they be decided?”

“Everyone get in a line,” JoJo commanded.

They all did.

“Count off,” JoJo said.

They all did.

“Stay in line. Daisy, can I get a piece of paper and a pen?”

“Be right back.”

She came back with the items. JoJo tore the paper into eight pieces, wrote numbers one through eight on the pieces, took off his USC hat and put the pieces in it. “Daisy, draw two numbers.”

She drew two and seven.

“That’s Brody and Peyton,” JoJo said with a smile.

“Man, two college athletes together. Not fair,” Peyton’s brother Lucas complained good-naturedly.

The teams ended up being, Brody and Peyton, young Eric and Lucas, Jalen and Charlie, and Gabe and Logan.

“Alright,” JoJo said. “We’ll run two teams at a time so that you don’t get hurt gettin’ in and out of the truck.”

“Hmm, how long should they go?”

“Let’s give them two sets of five minutes,” Gabe suggested. “The first two teams go five minutes, then they rest and the second two teams go five minutes and then each team goes one more time to see who the best two teams are. Then those two teams square off on each other.”

JoJo nodded. “Okay, we are gonna see how many cases you can get off the truck and stacked against the wall, short side against the wall six high, correct, Eric?”

Young Eric smiled. “Right.”

“Only work on the regular water first,” JoJo said.

Young Eric got a text and pulled out his phone. “Hold up a second, JoJo, Jordan just got here. Let me go greet her and get her in here.”

JoJo nodded. Eric rushed out. He smiled as she came in the front door. Rushing to her he took her in his arms and hugged her hard.

“Hey, babe, I’m so glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

He kissed her quickly. “We’re about to have a water carrying competition and I’m teamed up with Lucas Murphy, Peyton’s little brother. Come on in and watch.”

“Okay,” she said. “Grab me a chair, cuz I don’t feel like standing a long time.”

“Got it.”

They hurried back into the gym. Jordan immediately started cheering

and clapping and whistling, telling her man to kick butt.

Gabe started swinging his arms, loosening up. “Too bad we don’t have any spectators. That always gets me goin’.”

“Oh, I can fix that,” Daisy said as she walked away.

“Attention everyone. Lunch will be coming in the door any minute now, and since you’re about to break for lunch anyway, we have a special treat for you. There is about to be an important competition. If you’d like to join us in the gym or along the way between the gym and the truck outside the cafeteria loading dock, our young men are gonna square off on a competition to see how many cases of water they can move from the truck into the gym in a five-minute block of time. There are four teams. Two teams will compete at a time. After the competition is over, we’ll break for lunch.”

It took only a few seconds before people began filing into the gym.

JoJo announced the rules and explained the course for everyone. It wasn’t just a few feet. It was a trek from the truck at the loading dock, inside and through the cafeteria kitchen, across the open cafeteria to the hallway, down the hall to the gym doors, and across the gym to the back wall. Daisy, Rose, Lily and Heather were asked to keep track of the count for each respective team.

The gym was now full. Grandmaster Kino, Ricky, Toby, Mark, Joey, Cam, John, Chaz, Nolan, Jericho, and his guys, Jimmy, Max, Micah and Luke, CJ, Agent Key, Agent Thompson, Agent McRee, Agent Diaz, and many other agents were there. Most all of the women and children had come in to watch the guys. Silly family competitions were always a fun time. Laynah came to sit next to Jordan, and they compared whistles. Laynah had Jordan beat on that.

Brody and Peyton versus young Eric and Lucas would go first.

The guys were stretching and getting ready. All of them pulled their sweatshirts over their heads, leaving just their white t-shirts. They tossed their sweatshirts at a chair. Jodi quickly picked them up off the floor and laid them neatly over the back of the chair, making the women smile. A few people volunteered to video, and Taylor decided to go live on Gabe’s channel. She quickly sent a text to Mr. Tanner, telling him and Mrs. Tanner to watch what’s going down live on the website. She signed on and quickly started explaining the rules and the competition. She barely finished when JoJo pulled out his phone, set the timer, and yelled. “Teams, on your mark, get set, go!”

The boys took off, finding it harder than you might think to run with a hand truck by your side. Brody and Peyton got to the truck first. Within

only seconds, picking up two cases at a time, they had six cases loaded on the hand truck and hightailed it back to the gym. The crowd was cheering.

Young Eric and Lucas were only a few seconds behind. It ended up that both teams completed six trips, so had delivered thirty-six cases. JoJo decided in case they needed it later, he should take note of how far they'd made it on their seventh trip. Brody and Peyton had already loaded the hand truck again and had made it to the gym when time was called. Young Eric and Lucas had only just finished loading their hand truck again, but hadn't started back yet.

Jalen leaned over to Charlie. "Looks like we need to do something different. We'll go to the truck, load the hand truck, you start back and I'll grab an extra case to carry and catch up to you."

Charlie grinned and nodded. They bumped fists.

Gabe too was thinking along those same lines. Only a bit different. "Logan," he whispered. "Can you still control the hand truck if we add a seventh case?"

Logan nodded. "Absolutely."

"Okay. And once you're good, you take the hand truck out and I'll grab an extra case myself."

Logan grinned. "We got this."

Gabe nodded. "Yeah we do."

JoJo held up his phone to start the timer and nodded at the next two teams. "On your mark, get set, go!"

Both teams did as they'd planned. But Jalen's team didn't notice that Gabe and Logan had an extra case on their hand truck.

After four trips Jalen and Charlie had twenty-eight cases, and Gabe and Logan had thirty-two. Then on trip number five, Jalen noticed that Gabe and Logan had been carrying an extra case, and so he surprised everyone, by grabbing not the one extra case, but two, carrying a case under each arm. So after five trips, it was Jalen and Charlie - thirty-six, and Gabe and Logan - forty. Even with Jalen's extra effort it looked like Gabe and Logan were gonna win. They were on trip six, however, when the unthinkable happened just as Logan turned the corner into the gym. Logan tripped over the wheel of the hand truck, lost control, and toppled over. Gabe stopped to help him.

Time was running out. Jalen and Charlie got to the gym and got their cases stacked, giving them forty-four. Gabe and Logan tried to restack the cases on the handtruck but knew they were almost out of time. They each picked up a stack of three cases and hurried to the gym, but they didn't get them put into place before time ran out.

They put their cases down and lay on the floor, breathing hard.

The crowd cheered for them harder because they lost and because they'd made such a great effort, and they cheered for Jalen and Charlie who'd gone above and beyond– especially Jalen. The score for the two teams was Jalen and Charlie - forty-four, Gabe and Logan - forty.

Then JoJo reminded everyone that there was a second round and it was the total of the two rounds that would determine the championship round and for the preliminary round, all they had to do was beat their one opponent. A few of the men went and cleared up the fallen cases of water and the hand truck.

So, Brody and Peyton saw that the best way to win would be to duplicate how Jalen carried two cases with a seventh case on the hand truck. Brody carried the two cases and Peyton operated the hand truck. They made six trips and ended with fifty-four, plus their original thirty-six for a total of ninety.

Young Eric and Lucas did the same, but Lucas, being only fourteen, struggled to keep control of the hand truck with a seventh case on top, and so had to go slower. They only completed five trips for forty-five, plus their first round of thirty-six, giving them a total of eighty-one. Winners, Brody and Peyton.

All four guys, Brody, Peyton, Eric and Lucas were covered in perspiration and breathing hard by the time their second round was over.

"Sorry, Eric," Lucas said as he tried to catch his breath.

Eric smiled and rubbed his head. "Are you kidding me? Nothing to be sorry about. We gave it our all. And I wouldn't want anyone but you for my partner, because you're younger and not to your full potential yet, and you made me really proud of how hard you worked and didn't give up. I'm more proud and happy about that than concerned about not winning."

Lucas smiled. "Thanks, man. I think I get why Gabe likes your family so much."

Peyton, who'd heard what was said to his little brother smiled and nodded at young Eric. "Thanks, man."

The crowd cheered and applauded long and hard for the two teams. Now it was time for the other two teams to complete their second round. Gabe and Logan decided that rather than duplicate what Brody and Peyton did, Gabe had to carry three instead of two in order to make up for their deficit. If Gabe could do it, that would give them ten cases per trip.

Jalen and Charlie decided to play it safe. They didn't want to risk Charlie losing control of the hand truck, so, Jalen told Charlie to still only carry six and he would carry three giving them nine cases per trip.

It came down to the wire, to the very last second. All Gabe had to do

was put his three cases down in time. If he did they would win 100-98. Unfortunately, Gabe was at his last bit of energy and strength. He was behind Jalen by only a few seconds. Charlie was unloading his hand truck. Logan was right beside him unloading his hand truck. They both looked up to see Jalen and Gabe coming at them. Jalen threw his three cases down. JoJo called time. And a second later, Gabe threw his cases down.

Both Gabe and Jalen lay down on the floor, breaths coming in great gasps. Charlie and Logan, bent over, hands on knees.

JoJo smiled. "Great goin' guys." He leaned over and spoke to the ladies. "Okay, everyone, Jalen and Charlie won, 98-97! That means, in twenty minutes of time, these guys brought in three hundred and sixty-six cases of water. But they actually brought in more than that because several of those cases were brought in but didn't count because they didn't make it to the finish in time. That *would* bring us to the final, however, the problem is, I've just been informed that we only have 11 cases left on the truck, so, I guess there will be no final."

"Thank goodness," Jalen quipped.

JoJo went on. "We just need volunteers to bring in the last eleven and we're done."

Gabe drew a deep breath. "Okay, I'll do it. Just give me a chance to catch my breath," he panted.

"And I'll help him since it's my fault we lost," Logan added.

"There is no fault," Gabe said, breathlessly. "We tried to do more. We gambled and lost. No shame there."

"Whatever, brother."

Gabe finally sat up and went to help Jalen up, holding out his hand to him. "Good job, Jalen. You did your firefighters proud."

"Yeah, he did," the other firefighters yelled and cheered.

Jalen let Gabe help him up and shook his hand. "I'm too old for this," he mumbled. "You're gonna be back to normal in a few minutes. I'm gonna need about a week."

Everyone laughed.

Brody rose. "Gabe, I'll get the other cases. You rest. Besides, I wanna see how difficult that is, I mean, carrying three cases at a time as fast as possible."

"It's a little harder than I thought it would be," Gabe said. "I think that's because of the bulkiness of carrying them in front of my body."

Young Eric nodded. "Right. Because these cases only weigh approximately thirty-six pounds, so that's only 108 lbs, which would be like picking up Taylor and carrying her around. But she's not bulky like these cases are, so she would be easier to carry."

Taylor laughed. “I like that you think I’m not bulky and I really like that you think I only weigh a hundred and eight pounds.”

The girls all giggled.

“I’ll go get them,” Brody said. “JoJo, time me.”

JoJo held up his phone. “Okay, ready...”

“Wait,” young Eric said. “I’ll go too.”

JoJo grinned. “On your mark, get set, go.”

The two took off and finished strong, pretty much at the same time.

Rose called out over the crowd. “Lunch is here, everybody. Who wants to bless the food?”

“I do, I do,” Angelina Kino said, as she jumped up and down.

“Okay, sweet girl, go ahead.”

She bowed her head and then looked up and frowned fiercely. “Evwy body be quiet.”

Rose looked around and asked for help from Ricky Kino.

Ricky spoke loudly and everyone got very quiet. “Hey, everyone. We’re saying a blessing on the food.” He smiled at his sister. “Okay, Angelface, go ahead.”

“Deah, Fawder, tank you for our food, pwease bwess it, we wove You Jesus, hep our famwy, in Jesus’ name, amen.”

“Amen,” everyone repeated with a smile on their faces.

“We have the food on some tables in the lobby area. Grab what you want, eat where you want, but do NOT mess up these tables in the gym or in the cafeteria,” Rose ordered.

“Yes, ma’am,” several people chirped.

The crowd dispersed.

Gabe started putting the beverage tables back in front of the cases of water as he’d promised. The others saw and helped him.

Once that was done, the guys found their sweatshirts and started toward the front lobby.

Brody took a deep breath. This was his chance.

✝✝✝

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

Chapter Eight

Brody jogged over to Daisy, who was straightening up the decorations on the beverage tables. “Hey, Daisy.”

She turned and smiled at him. “Hi, Brody. You guys were impressive. Did you have fun?”

“Literally, loads of it,” he said with a grin.

She giggled. “Wow, dad jokes. I love that.”

He smiled.

She picked up a napkin from the table. “Here, you’re kinda sweaty.”

He accepted the napkin. “Oh, sorry,” he mumbled as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

“That’s okay, it’s hot. Literally,” she quipped.

He chuckled. He wiped his face and didn’t see a trash can nearby and so stuffed the napkin in his jeans pocket. “Um, so, would you like to, uh, I mean, will you eat lunch with me?”

She smiled sweetly. “Sure.”

“Awesome.”

They walked to the lobby together and stood in line as they waited for the moms to help the children load their plates, and then for everyone else who’d beaten them to the lobby to get their food.

“So, Daisy,” Brody began, “are you still in school?”

“Nope. I graduated this past summer.”

“Hmm, I didn’t get an invitation to the graduation.”

“Well, it wasn’t a big deal. I didn’t walk. I needed two more credits to graduate when the big spring graduation took place, and so I took summer classes and finally made it. No big deal. There was a lot going on that was definitely more important stuff than my little graduation.”

“There *was* a lot going on. Your family has been through some messed up stuff.”

Daisy nodded. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

“Oh, I see that. Your family is impressive. You are impressive, too.”

She blinked up at him. “Me? How so?”

He smiled warmly at her. “I’ve known you, Daisy, since we were kids. I’ve always had my eye on you. You keep a low profile. You’re

humble and kind. But you're also so strong."

She shook her head. "You must have me mixed up with Rose."

He shook his head. "Nope. I don't have you mixed up with anyone. When you were little, you watched out for Lily and for Gabe. You didn't make a big deal about it, just like you didn't make a big deal just now about your graduation. You just did it, without complaint, no big deal. I remember one time in Nashville, you stopped Gabe from running into a busy street. When you fussed at him, it got Violet's attention and she came over to help, and took his hand and led him back to your mom. I remember it distinctly. She thanked Violet for looking after your brother. But you didn't get any credit."

"Well, my mom had a lot of children to look after, so that was not really a big deal."

"Oh, I'm not criticizing your mom at all. She's a sweet, wonderful lady and obviously with that many children, you can't see everything they do all the time. That's not my point. My point is, you weren't upset that Violet got credit for looking after your brother. You were just happy to help. And you're still like that. Happy to help. Low profile. Logical mind. No ego. And the most beautiful girl I've ever met, inside and out."

Her mouth fell open. "Wow. I mean, thank you for the compliment, but, where did all that come from?"

He shrugged. "Those are some things I told myself I would say to you if I ever got the chance. I thought that back when I was like, ten. And then, I got into my teens and lost my nerve."

She giggled as they moved up in line. "Big, strong, Brody Smith, afraid of little ol' me."

He smiled. "Well, a guy gets to a certain point in his life when the opposite sex *is* pretty scary."

"But you're not afraid anymore?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, not afraid anymore. Just tryin' to make up for lost time. I didn't realize that once I got to high school, that my attention would be drawn to baseball and it would take up so much time in my life. And in college, it's eat, drink and sleep baseball."

"So, why now? Why tell me these things now?"

He sighed. "Because I can't fight it anymore."

"Fight what?"

They moved up to the table and he smiled at her. "Let's eat and we'll talk some more."

They both grabbed a plate and placed a wrapped sub sandwich, a bag of quinoa chips, a piece of fruit and a bag of cookies on it.

"You grab the napkins and I'll grab the water," he said.

"Ya wanna just sit at my desk?" she offered.

He glanced around and shook his head. "Actually, I don't. Too many people. Let's find an empty classroom."

Her brows rose. "Oh, okay."

She walked up to an Ameritech Agent standing nearby. "Agent McRee, we're gonna go down the front hall there and find a classroom to sit in so we can talk. I'll be with Brody, so I'm okay."

The agent smiled. "Well, I'll be outside the classroom door."

Daisy smiled at the man. "I guess I should've known that. But please grab yourself some lunch at least."

"I will. Don't you worry about me."

Brody smiled, because it was so like Daisy to be concerned about someone else. Daisy led him down a hallway to a classroom at the end of the front corridor and went inside. The room was pretty much empty except for one chair and some boxes. They sat on the floor, against the wall by the row of windows.

Brody watched her as she opened her sandwich and tried to stuff some of the lettuce and a pickle back inside the bread, made it nice and neat, and then took a big bite. He smiled.

She looked at him, her mouth full, and nodded, chewed and swallowed. "This is really hittin' the spot. Guess I was hungry." She grabbed a napkin and wiped the mayo from the side of her mouth.

Brody smiled again. Everything she did made him smile. He took his own bite and nodded in agreement. He set his sandwich down, opened his chips and stuffed a few in his mouth.

Daisy opened a water and handed it to him. He took it and drank.

After they ate for a few minutes in silence, she turned to him. "So, back to what we were talking about. What can't you fight anymore?"

He frowned. "I might have said too much."

"Come on, now. We were having an interesting discussion. You can't stop now."

He nodded. "Well, maybe saying 'fighting it' isn't the right way to say it. That sounds like I'm obsessed or some stalker or something."

She giggled. "A long-distance stalker."

He sighed. "I'm in over my head. Okay, what I mean is, I've always admired you. I've always thought you were an amazing girl. And the time we spent together as kids, and even as we grew up, like when we were in high school, I thought, wow, that Daisy, she's about the sweetest girl I've ever met. Wish I could find someone like her. And of course, as we got older, I couldn't help but be attracted to you, because you weren't only

sweet, but the prettiest girl I've ever met."

She smiled. "Other than my sister."

He nodded with a smile. "Well, she's pretty too, obviously, but it was you I couldn't stop thinking about. You two might look exactly alike, but you're different from each other, I guess, in demeanor."

Daisy smiled kindly at him. "I think it's pretty cool that you can tell the difference between us. I mean, all these years you've never accidentally called me 'Lily'."

"Yeah, it seems so obvious to me, the difference. But not in a bad way. There's nothing wrong with Lily. You're just different."

"So, when you said you couldn't fight it, you meant, what?"

He sighed. "Okay. Guess I'll lay all my cards on the table. I couldn't keep trying to ignore the fact that I liked you, that I had feelings for this girl I've known my whole life. I had this fondness for you."

"Fondness?" she questioned, her eyes twinkling.

"Well, that's not exactly right. I mean, I'm attracted to you. I mean, Daisy, that I like you."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, well, that's nice. And you've fought these feelings for a long time?"

He nodded as he took another large bite of his sandwich. "A long time. Actually, as long as I can remember."

She stopped halfway to putting a chip in her mouth, and looked at him. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really. I swore to myself that once I graduated from high school I would get in touch with you, see if I could take you out on a few dates, somehow, though we live in different states. But all my time was taken, and suddenly, it's four years later."

"Well, we have seen each other a few times over the past four years," Daisy said.

He nodded. "Yes, but it was always just a few days and then I had to be back at school."

"Brody, I'm really touched by this. I feel honored, but, like, didn't you have any girlfriends all through high school or in college?"

He shook his head. "No, well, actually, yes I did, but I couldn't help comparing them to you, so they never lasted very long. One girl broke up with me and said I was a snob. Maybe I was, but it was like knowing you, no one else measured up. You ruined me for anyone else."

She smiled. "That's just too sweet."

He rolled his eyes.

"And so, you finally got up the courage and decided you were gonna

talk to me?"

"Well, actually, to be honest, it was my father who helped me to gather my courage."

"What do you mean?"

"My dad came to my room one night, last Christmas, when I was home from school, to have a talk with me. He thought I was down," Brody said using finger quotes on the word 'down.' He stopped and looked at her, not sure if he should say any more.

"And?" she prodded. "Were you down?"

"I guess I was, though I hadn't put much thought to it. My dad was concerned and apparently, so was my mom, so she got my dad to come and talk to me."

He finished his chips and opened his cookies and ate one. "It wasn't like I went crying to my dad about being lonely or anything, but he asked me about my dating life. I think he thought I had a girlfriend and we broke up or something. That wasn't the case, but my dad and I are close, and I did tell him how I was struggling with comparing other girls to you. He asked me what it was about you that made me like you."

Daisy didn't say anything to him about how those few words affected her, the part about him 'liking her.' It was a pleasant thought that this big, strong, athletic, and very good-looking guy liked little ol' her. Even more, that this very upright, thoughtful, smart, God-fearing guy liked her.

Brody went on. "I told my dad how I'd noticed you since I was a little kid. Whenever we came down here to Georgia, and whenever you guys came up to Tennessee. I told him about the qualities I'd noticed, the ones I just told you about, Daisy, your humility, your kindness, how you work hard and don't expect anything, your sweetness, and he told me something really cool. He said my mother had that same effect on him when he met her. She was down-to-earth, honest, simple, not in thinking, but in taste, and not all caught up in herself, but rather remained in the background and served others. He said that he compared her to every girl he met. You see, he met her when she was twelve and he was only fourteen. But they lost touch, and then he met her again when he was twenty-nine. He told me that lots of times, girls seek out guys who are like their fathers, whether their fathers are good or bad. But that boys seek out girls who are like their mothers only if their mothers are good. And Daisy, my mother is just an awesome person.

"Dad told me that even at twenty-nine, he hadn't really had a decent relationship with a girl because he'd always been in love with my mom, but didn't realize it. He said he compared every girl he met to her. After that talk, I promised myself that the next time I got to see you, I'm not

gonna waste any more time. I'm not gonna wait until I'm twenty-nine. So, I saw you when we came down for Jake's and Laynah's wedding and I asked you to dance. You probably don't even remember."

"Actually, I do remember. You looked very handsome in your suit. And I remember Gabe was happy that you reached out to his friend Peyton to encourage him, since you both play baseball in college. But I mostly remember when we danced because you reached out and touched my face like you were gonna tell me something very important."

He nodded. "Well, it was important to *me*. I was gonna ask you to go to breakfast with me before our family left the next day. But Lily came up to you to ask you for some help with something, and I didn't get a chance to speak to you again."

"I'm sorry, Brody."

He shrugged. "It is what it is. No need to apologize. But when we were invited to come down and help this week, I decided, this was it. I was gonna find time to see you, to speak to you, and see if, well..."

She waited, and when he didn't go on, she prodded him. "See if what?"

He blew out a breath. "And see if there's anything here. Like, a possibility for you and me to see each other. To get to know each other better. To see if there's any interest on your part."

"And if there's not?"

He frowned and shrugged. "Well, at least I could say I tried. I'll go home, lick my wounds and keep on keeping on. I'd probably take out the frustration on a few baseballs," he said, smiling down at her. He shook his head. "Ya know, things are about to change for me. My life is about to change. After this season, I graduate. I'm told I'll be in the top four of the MLB draft. People are starting to know my name. Even now, just do a search on me and my picture and stats will come up. Soon, I'll have that problem that a lot of people in the limelight have, which is, they never know if someone likes them because they like them, or because they like the fame and the money."

"Don't you already have that problem?" Daisy asked. "I mean, you are the son of one of the biggest country music stars in the nation and of a famous dancer turned judge on TV."

He nodded. "I do have that problem when they find out who I am, but my dad is Toby *Nash* and I'm just plain old Brody *Smith.*"

Daisy nodded.

Brody watched her as she placed a cookie in her mouth and chewed it slowly. He cleared his throat. "So, is there any interest, Daisy? Even the

slightest?"

She smiled up at him. "It's a pleasant thought, Brody. I mean, I guess I haven't really thought about it before because you're younger than me."

"Not that much younger. Seven months. That's not a big deal."

She nodded. "No, our ages don't really bother me. I was just kind of talking to myself, trying to understand why I've never thought about you and me before. Because, Brody, you are ultra-attractive, as guys go. Big and strong and funny and smart and kind and such a gentleman. And I think you are very serious about your faith, which is the most important thing to me."

He nodded with a smile. "See, what you just said? Your faith, my faith, that is what's most important to you. Not my career. Not how much money I'm gonna make as a baseball player. My faith. Which, by the way, is the most important thing to me too. No matter what I choose to do as my career, I want to serve God first. If I do what He wants me to do, what He put me on this earth to do, then I know I'll have an amazing family of my own one day and I'll be happy. And so, Daisy, I just want to know if you would like to maybe go out with me? I mean, would you like to share some time, somehow, even though we live in different states?"

She nodded. "It seems we have the same priorities, Brody, which is a good reason to, like you said, share some time."

He smiled. "Is that a 'yes'?"

"That's a 'yes'." She smiled. "And now that I've said that, I find my heart beating a little faster."

He laughed. "See? Your honesty is so awesome. No pretenses. You just say what you mean, or what you feel. No wasted time. I love that and really like that your heart is beating faster."

She shrugged and smiled. "Always good to be honest. It's been a really interesting day, hasn't it?"

"Hmm, interesting? Well, it began as horrifying, when someone actually tried to gun down your brother. But then, the little water carrying competition was kinda fun. Still, the best part definitely has been getting to talk to you." He stopped to think a moment. "Actually, the best part is when you agreed to go out with me. Now, I just have to find a time to make that happen."

She smiled. "Well, it's a busy week, but maybe we can figure something out."

"So," Brody began, "will you be at the Inn this evening for dinner?"

She nodded. "Yes, actually. Aunt Jodi said because Mom just had the babies, our meals will be provided for us for the next few weeks, which is silly because us girls can certainly cook for our family. But Aunt Jodi

will not be denied. So, we said, for the next few days at least, we'll come to the Inn instead of making people bring the dinner over to our house."

"Well, I'm glad you'll be at the Inn, because, you know with my dad there, after dinner will be a huge sing-along."

"Oh, I love that!"

"Me too. And maybe, at some point, we can slip away for a little walk around the property."

"Maybe. But ya know, that's exactly how young Eric and Jordan got attacked last night."

He frowned as he helped gather all of their lunch trash. "Okay, then, we'll play that by ear." He stood and held his hand out to her. She placed her hand in his large one, and he pulled her to her feet. He held on for an extra moment or two, looked deeply into her eyes, and smiled at her before he let go.

Daisy sighed. Now that they'd had this little talk, her heart was doing flip-flops and her mind was buzzing with the possibilities. She needed to think, to talk to her sisters, and get herself under control. Still, for some reason, she couldn't contain her smile. Had something been missing in her life? Had she been lonely and didn't realize it until now? The next few days were gonna be very interesting, to say the least.

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Everyone got back to work after lunch. Rose and Rebecca tried out the new fryer that had been installed that morning. Other kitchen equipment was tested to make sure it was ready, from stoves and ovens and fryers to warming bins and refrigeration. Food was inventoried, though most of it would be arriving in timed intervals, from the women and restaurants of Pine Forest and the surrounding towns and communities and churches.

Logan, Toby, Grace, Brody and Violet got the stage ready, with both equipment and decorations, because there would be live performances on Thursday, from local school and church choirs, to a few standout student performances, to Violet's children's choir, and to celebs, including their own Toby Nash, Gracie Nash and Logan Adams.

More twinkling lights were hung by the six firefighters both inside and out, along with a huge banner declaring "*The Feeding of the Five Thousand*" would take place on Thanksgiving Day. Shelley, Bella and Breez worked on making sure the children's playrooms were ready in case there were more children than they thought. Lisa, Chaz, Jodi, and Jeffy made sure the nursery room was set up, cribs put together, rocking chairs tested, and everything thoroughly cleaned and sanitized.

Boxes of purple chef's aprons were unpacked and the aprons folded and ready for each volunteer to don, along with sticky name tags and markers for the volunteers to write their names on them. These things were laid on the welcome tables in the lobby.

Young Eric and Jordan, Gabe and Taylor, Jamie and Josie Brooks, Sophia Adams, Aralyn, Matthew and Charlie Stewart, and Lucas Murphy had a late afternoon push to finish filling over five thousand gift bags.

Melaynah Appel, Joey, Mark, Cam and Ricky worked outside, trimming the grass and getting up leaves, and adding a few landscaping touches. Meanwhile, John Appel and Eric Sr. walked the mayor of Pine Forest, Andrew Bradbury and his wife, around the facility, inside and out, including the tents out back. They presented him with inspection certificates and any information he wanted since he was the one who encouraged Rose to pursue having this amazing event.

Finally, Rose made her rounds, giving last-minute instructions to Bree, Caro, and Daisy, who would see that her list was completed, because Rose would be leaving a little earlier than everyone else. Several other people also left earlier than the others. Lily and Jewell Brooks left early to head to the Inn and work on dinner for the large group. Jeffy and baby Eli headed back to the Inn to rest, Lisa and her twin babies headed home to do the same, and Jericho left early to head to his rented home and prepare dinner for himself and Rose.

Once everything was complete, the last thing to be done was for Daisy to walk around with Rose's checklist and make notes for the next day's chores that they would see to after the big volunteer meeting over at the high school.

As everyone gathered their coats and purses and children and were heading out, Brody approached Daisy.

She looked up and smiled at him, her heart doing another little flutter as she remembered their talk at lunch and the hint of promise it brought.

"Tired?" Brody asked.

She nodded. "A little. Though I haven't worked nearly as hard as you guys did today."

"Sometimes brain work is harder than plain ol' physical labor," he said. "So, everyone is taking off. Are you about ready to leave?"

"Soon. I have to do a walkthrough and a walk around the perimeter."

"Hmm, alone?"

She grinned. "I have Agent McRee."

"Oh, yeah," Brody said as he glanced over at the agent.

McRee smiled. "Sorry to ruin your action, man," he quipped, making Brody laugh.

"Still, Daisy, would you like some company?" Brody asked.

"Sure. Let's start back in the west corridor and work our way to the kitchen, and then the east corridor and then to the gym, and then we'll head outside."

They walked and talked. Daisy was very careful to check every room on Rose's checklist. She made a list of things to correct, like the dirty mirror in one of the restrooms, and the dock door in the kitchen wasn't locked. There wasn't much else, because the people who'd helped out were extremely conscientious.

As they walked, they talked about Brody and what he could expect when he got drafted. He told her that after he signed, the organization would assign him to one of its minor-league teams.

"So," he went on, "I could end up in another state pretty quickly."

"How do you feel about that?"

He smiled. "It's part of it. I'm gonna travel anyway, so I guess I'll just go wherever they send me." He smiled at her. "And while I'm working on gettin' to 'The Show,' what are you gonna be doin'?"

"Right now, I'll stick with working with Rose here at the Center."

"Do you like your job here?"

"I love it. I love being near my family, near my sisters, and I love helping with this place. It keeps me on my toes because I'm in charge of the website and the PR, from advertising, to social media, and even to just greeting people with a smile when they come in the door. Rose has so many things going here, it's actually pretty challenging and pretty fulfilling work."

He nodded.

They got back to the front lobby area and she grabbed her coat. "All I need to do now is walk the perimeter outside. That should take about fifteen minutes and then my reinforcements will be here and we'll head to the Inn."

"What reinforcements?"

"About twenty Ameritech agents that will watch everything overnight. Not that we would normally need that in this small town, but given what's happening with someone trying to hurt Gabe and Jeffy said the bad guys are gonna try to stop us from succeeding. So, it's just a precaution."

He held the front door as she walked out. "I hate that it's even possible that someone could hurt you or a member of your family," he said with a frown.

She laughed. "It's okay. We're getting used to it ever since Gabe kicked butt in that first Mini-MART."

They headed off to the left, toward the parking lot and walked along where the lot met the small park that was on the other side. They walked across the open green field on the back right of the building, then along the back tree line. Daisy turned to stare across toward the building. She smiled. "The tents look so large and inviting, like a wedding or something. So pretty lit up like they are. I imagine it'll be even prettier when the sun goes down in about thirty minutes."

He looked and tried to see it how she saw it. It was indeed nice. It made him want to go inside and sit and watch people. He was a people watcher. He liked to see what made them tick. He liked to see if he could read them. They continued across the entire back tree line. He was told that on the other side of those trees was a corner gas station, an auto repair shop, a Dollar General store, and a restaurant called The Dillon House which mixed some nicer entrees with southern cooking. Long ago, it was a large home, mansion really, that was owned by the Wilsons, who own the property out at Wilson's Lake. Then it was bought by another prominent family, the Dillons. Eventually, they sold it to a young husband and wife who turned it into a restaurant.

Brody and Daisy started to head left, toward the south side of the center, when Brody heard something. He quickly looked behind him to make sure that Agent McRee was still back there. The agent moved forward quickly.

"What's wrong?" Daisy asked.

"I heard something," Brody explained. He put his finger to his lips and listened for several seconds. He looked at both Daisy and the agent. "Do you hear that?"

"An animal, maybe," McRee said.

Brody nodded and went to look closer into the woods. The sun was going down and the shadows were getting darker, but he could see now. "Oh, wow, okay, hello there, guy," he said kindly. He knelt down and put his hand out. A black nose stuck out of the underbrush and smelled his hand. "There ya go, buddy. It's okay. See, I'm not gonna hurt you. Are you stuck in there?"

Brody moved closer as Daisy knelt down trying to see. It was a dog, possibly a shepherd/lab mix. It was a golden color. "Oh, my goodness, I see you."

"Uh, oh," Brody said. "You're not a guy. Well, hello there momma." He turned to Daisy. "She's having puppies."

"Right now?"

"She's workin' on it."

"Oh, Brody, we can't just leave her here all alone in the woods."

"No, we can't." He started pulling branches away so he could get a better view of her and see if she was hurt. She gave a soft growl. "It's okay, momma, we're not gonna hurt you." He reached in and scratched her head and stroked her neck. "There ya go, girl. We got you now."

He stood back up and pulled his orange sweatshirt over his head. His t-shirt came off with it. "Oh, sorry," he muttered. He quickly worked to pull the white t-shirt away from the sweatshirt.

Daisy couldn't help but let her eyes run over his torso. Lord, he was gorgeous. Earlier today, when he had only the t-shirt on, she'd been able to see that he was thick and fit and his biceps were bulging. But with nothing on, her mouth went dry. His chest was well-muscled, his abs ripped.

He quickly pulled the t-shirt back over his head and put his arms through. He knelt down with the sweatshirt and placed it over the dog, and gently lifted her out of the thicket. The dog whimpered as he cradled her in his arms. "Okay, momma, we got you now. You're gonna be okay." He looked at Daisy. "Will you use the flashlight on your phone and make sure she didn't already have a puppy?"

Daisy quickly checked the thicket thoroughly, to make sure. "There are no puppies yet," she assured him. "So, we broke all the boxes down, but we can put one back together. We have some packing tape."

Brody nodded. "That would be great."

With Brody holding the dog carefully in his arms, they headed back to the center. They went in through the front door and headed to the back dock where Daisy found a good box. Agent McRee helped her put it back together. Brody looked the dog over as he waited and then carefully placed her, along with his shirt, into the box.

"Daisy, do you have a small bowl we could give her some water in?"

"Yes," Daisy said and she went into a cabinet that had some old Tupperware. She filled one with water and set it in the box next to the sweet dog. She lapped at it immediately, quickly drinking the whole bowl. Daisy refilled it.

"Miss Daisy," McRee said. "The other guys are arriving. Give me your checklist and I'll go finish it up."

She glanced up at him. "Oh, I couldn't ask you to help like that."

He rolled his eyes and held out his hand. "Give me the list."

She rose to get it off the stainless steel counter where she'd laid it. "You're awfully bossy, aren't you?" she said with a smile.

He shrugged in apology. "Sorry. Comes with the job. We're used to giving people instructions that will save their lives."

"Well, you're not saving my life right now."

"Aren't I? You think of Miss Rose finding out that you didn't finish her checklist."

Daisy and Brody both laughed.

While McRee went to finish Rose's list, Daisy opened some canned chicken breast and put it in another Tupperware dish and handed it to Brody. He picked some up with his fingers and held it out to the dog. She sniffed and flicked out her tongue to taste it, but wasn't very interested. He smiled and petted her head. "Good girl, yeah, that's a good girl."

"Why won't she eat? She has to be hungry," Daisy asked.

"If she's real close to giving birth, she won't eat. I'm surprised she drank, which means she must've been totally dehydrated."

They gave her more water, but this time she only took a little.

"Okay, rest, girl. We're gonna take you home. You don't know it yet, but you hit the jackpot, little momma."

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November 26th, 5:20 PM, Tuesday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Violet and CJ had just stepped inside the house when Rose came down the stairs. Violet smiled. "Wow, don't you look pretty!"

Rose sighed. "I'm so glad you came home. I thought you two would head straight to the Inn."

"I wanted to change clothes real quick," Violet explained. "Why are you glad I came home?"

"Because I needed to ask if I look okay."

"You're kidding, right?"

CJ nodded. "Rose, you look amazing."

"Turn around," Violet said.

Rose turned slowly. When she turned back Violet was smiling. "I love seeing you in a dress."

Rose sighed. "I thought I'd change it up. He's pretty much only seen me in jeans."

"Well, sis, you did good," Violet said. "And I love the little gold clip in your hair."

Rose reached up to pat her hair, which was very different from Violet's hair. Though both were almost white blondes, Violet's hair was long, and slightly wavy. Rose's was just past her shoulders and straight. She usually simply parted it on the side and let it hang, but tonight she had taken the front strands and put them up on the side, away from her face.

Rose went to the mirror in the formal living room and looked with a critical eye. The dress she wore was a casual, floral number, white with

red roses splashed across the front. It had a scalloped V-neck and it came to just above her knees, showing off her muscular calves. The shoes were a crisscross ankle strap, tan, wedge sandal with a medium heel. She wore only her simple gold cross around her neck, and some small gold floral design studs in her ears.

Violet nodded from behind her as they looked into the mirror. "Perfect, Rosey. Not too much. Not too little. Perfect. You're gonna knock his socks off."

Rose smiled and hugged her sister.

"Oh, and you smell good too!" Violet said.

Rose laughed. "Yeah, I came home and took a shower."

"Ha, you don't fool me. I smell the good stuff I gave you for Christmas last year."

Rose smiled. "Okay. Ya got me."

They both turned at the knock on the door.

CJ opened it and nodded. "JJ."

Jericho nodded. "CJ, always good to see you."

CJ pressed his lips together and stood back. "Come in, Rose is in the living room."

Jericho came in and headed straight to the living room, and stopped short, his eyes opening big. "Wow, Rose, you look, I mean, really beautiful."

She smiled. "Thanks, Jericho."

He couldn't keep his eyes from traveling over her, from the heeled shoes, up those gorgeous legs to the way the dress flared around her knees, to her tiny waist, to her lovely breasts, her delicate-looking neck, her sleek shiny blond hair, her stunning smile and her big, blue eyes looking at him.

"Uh, you're staring," Rose said with a smile.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry, you look amazing, Rose." He looked at Violet's grin and smiled. "So, are you ready? I mean, you said you'd only give me an hour."

"I might extend the time since we got so much done today at the Center," Rose said.

"Yes," Jericho said, taking the win with the pump of his fist.

Rose went to the hall closet and grabbed a gray coat. He held it for her and then pulled her hair out from under the collar.

"Thank you," she said softly.

They said their goodbyes to Violet and CJ and Jericho ushered Rose out to his truck, Agent Thompson following behind on his way to his own car. "Hmmm, it doesn't seem right to put such a beautiful girl into a big,

black truck," Jericho murmured.

"It seems perfect to me," Rose said with a laugh. "Looks like you cleaned it up, anyway."

He smiled. "Well, I might have done a quick vacuum and taken the tools out of the seat."

She giggled.

He closed her door and went around to get in.

She smiled at him. "You look really nice too," she said. She looked him over. He wore dark slacks, a white shirt and a tan sport coat. His thick brown hair was combed back from his face, accenting his chiseled jawline and his lips. He turned and smiled at her.

She smiled back. "So, where are we going?"

"Well, now that I know we have more time, I'm second-guessing what I had planned."

"What did you have planned?" Rose asked.

He sighed. "I made you dinner at my home. I cleaned my house, bought a tablecloth and some candles and cooked you dinner."

"At your house?"

He nodded. Then looked at her shocked expression. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I wasn't gonna try to seduce you or anything. I was just gonna cook you dinner and play some music and light some candles and make it nice for you. I knew you didn't have a lot of time. I thought if we take time to drive to a nice restaurant and wait to be served, it might take longer than an hour, so, I decided to cook for you instead." He looked at her, wondering if he'd totally messed up and this date was gonna be over before it started.

Rose nodded her head as she thought, then turned with a smile. "So, what did you cook?"

He blew out a breath. "Surf and Turf. T-bone steaks, shrimp, asparagus and wedge potatoes."

Her eyes opened big. "Wow, that sounds really good! And you cooked it all yourself?"

He nodded. "I did. It's one of the few dishes I can actually do well. It's all ready. You won't have to wait."

"Well, I am hungry," she said. "Can't wait to try your cooking."

"Are you sure? Because we can head over to a restaurant, since you have more time now. *Sally's Steakhouse* or *The Dillon House* are close," he offered.

She smiled. "Why do that when you have our meal all prepared? I'm looking forward to your surf and turf."

He smiled. "Okay!" Only two minutes later, he pulled into the

driveway of a small brick home that was in a neighborhood about a mile past the high school.

She smiled as he came to open her door. “So, don’t you have the guys as roommates?”

He nodded. “Two of them, yes, Jimmy and Max. We had to divide up. Micah, Luke and Jalen moved into a similar three-bedroom over on the other side of town about two miles past the DQ.”

“So, where are Jimmy and Max?”

“Oh, so, John and Jodi Appel invited our gang out to the Inn for dinner tonight.”

“That was sweet,” Rose said.

Jericho smiled. John Appel had done him the favor on purpose. He’d said Jericho could thank him later.

“What are you grinning about?” Rose asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

They headed in.

“Umm, it smells good in here,” Rose sighed.

He took her coat and laid it over the sofa. She followed him into the kitchen, curious to see the setup.

Looking around her, Rose smiled. The kitchen was clean. It was an older home, not very modern, but he’d made it work. The small dining room was right next to the kitchen. She glanced in to see the table set. A white tablecloth, two candles, plain white dishes, paper napkins with the silverware sitting on top. She smiled.

She watched as he pulled a pan out of the oven and placed it on top of the stove. Looking over his shoulder, she took a deep breath. “Umm, can’t wait.”

He stood there for a second, frowning.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I, uh, just realized that I don’t have any serving dishes to like, put it on the table.”

She giggled. “We don’t need any. Let’s get our plates and bring them in here, load them up and then go sit in the dining room.”

He smiled and nodded. “Good idea. Let me get your drink first. What would you like?”

“Whaddya got?”

“I have water, red wine, beer and some soft drinks.”

“Hmm, I’ll try to resist the beer and have some wine, since you made such a fancy meal.”

He grinned. “That’s very classy of you.”

"Oh, that's me to a 'T,'" she said with a laugh.

He smiled. "I don't know what you're tryin' to say, but you, Rose, are definitely one classy lady."

She huffed. "I am *no* lady."

He turned from opening the wine, set the bottle down and put his hands on her shoulders. "What are you talking about, Rose? Don't put yourself down. You are an extraordinary *lady*."

She looked up into his sincere face, blinking her eyes as she tried to make herself accept the compliment. She sighed. "Well, I'm not sure what kind of *lady* wears a dress and considers carrying her firearm tucked inside her underwear."

He choked, stepped back, his mouth dropping open.

She giggled. "Sorry, did I shock you?"

He smiled. "No, but you gave me a visual that will be hard to ever forget." He swallowed, poured the wine and went to put it on the table, then grabbed both plates and brought them into the kitchen.

Rose took her offered plate and filled it with a steak and shrimp and asparagus and only a few potatoes. He filled his plate and they went to the dining room together.

He held her chair and then quickly lit the candles, before he sat down.

He looked into her eyes across the small table. "Would you like to say the blessing?"

She shook her head. "No, you pray," she said cutely.

He nodded his head, accepting the gift she'd just given him. Rose was a strong woman. A young lady who was used to being in charge, used to giving orders and directing others. It was a gift. Her offering him the opportunity to lead them in prayer on their first date was a small but meaningful gesture. Rose was used to being in charge, but with the right man, she could trust enough to step back and let him lead.

He reached his hand across the table, palm up and nodded at her. She smiled and placed her hand in his. He squeezed it and bowed his head. "Father, Rose and I come before You at this time to give thanks for the bounties of this table. We are so grateful for all that we have. We ask Your blessing on the food. We also ask Your blessing upon the amazing group of people that have gathered together this week to feed Your sheep, and we pray that You will lead us and guide us in that endeavor. We always want to do Your will, Father. In Jesus' powerful name we pray, Amen."

"Amen," Rose uttered softly as she blinked up at this very powerful man. The prayer was beautiful. She could feel the Spirit and feel Jericho's strength, and it touched her heart.

They chatted and ate and sipped wine. Rose couldn't stop talking

about how delicious the meal was, and Jericho couldn't take his eyes off of beautiful Rose. He asked her questions about the big event, asked if there was anything else he could do to help. She went off on all of the plans and how everything was coming together and she was learning to let go and trust God, and that she realized that some things are in His hands.

"Well, my guys and I are all in, and if you need anything, anything at all, find me and we'll make it happen."

"Thank you, Jericho." She smiled at him, her eyes glistening. "You seem to always be around to save the day."

"Not always. But with you, my timing seems to be pretty good. I guess it's because I find myself wanting to save your day."

She dabbed at her lips with the napkin, picked up her wine and leaned back in her chair as she sipped. "That's interesting. But doesn't that imply that if you want to save my day, then you want something to go wrong with my day?"

He smiled. "Well, I don't mean to imply that. I only mean, that if you need saving, I hope I'm there to do it."

She sighed. "If I need saving, I hope it's you that saves me."

He smiled at that bold statement. "That reminds me," he said softly as he rose from the table. He came to her and held out his hand. She took it and he pulled her to her feet. He looked into her eyes, then let his eyes travel down to the V of her dress. Slowly, he touched the scalloped edge and moved the material slightly away from her skin.

She gave a soft gasp, but then realized he was only trying to check out the knife wound.

He nodded. "I thought, since I didn't see the bandage, that you'd left the wound unprotected," he said softly. His finger lightly brushed over the new bandage. A large Band-Aid, really, turned at a different angle to hide it under the dress.

She swallowed, looking from his finger, up to his eyes. Finally, he moved his finger from the bandage, put it under her chin and lifted up. Slowly, he lowered his head, giving her plenty of time to step away, or to say 'no'. She did neither. He moved to cup her face with his hand and then softly touched his lips to hers. He pulled back, ever so slightly, as if he expected her to stop him, or slap him or make some smart-aleck remark, but she didn't, so he leaned forward and kissed her fully on the lips. When she gave a soft moan, he moved closer still and used both his hands to cup her face and kissed her deeply. Slowly, he finally pulled away.

He was breathing hard, but so was she and that made him smile. She blinked, looked into his eyes and back at his mouth, which made him kiss

her again, and when he finished that kiss, he pulled her against him and held her close. Usually, he would think it was too soon to kiss her, but there was something about Rose. He seemed to know instinctively that he had to catch her by surprise. He had to work fast and keep her off-kilter, and he had to lay claim.

She turned her head and laid her cheek against his chest and that worried him a bit. "What are you thinking, Rose?" he asked softly.

She sighed. "I'm not sure. I don't know what I'm thinking. I don't understand how I feel right now."

"How *do* you feel?"

She shook her head. "That's just it. I don't know. I don't think I've ever felt this way before."

He smiled at that.

"I feel..." She stopped. "I feel relief."

"Relief?" he repeated. "Now I don't understand."

"Relief like, like there was this ache I didn't know I had, and your kiss, it made it go away. I don't hurt anymore. But I didn't know I was hurting until you made the hurt go away, and suddenly I noticed the feeling of relief."

He was quiet as he thought about her honest words. "So, do you know what caused the pain?"

She shook her head. "No."

He held her close and ran his hand over her back and then squeezed her to him. "Well, I'm glad it's gone."

"Me too. Once again, you saved the day."

He gave a soft laugh. "You saved me too, Rose. Thank you for coming to dinner. Thank you for going out with me."

She sighed. "You're welcome."

"I hope we can do it again sometime."

She smiled. "I hope so too." She stepped back and looked up at him. "What's for dessert?"

His face fell. "I, uh, oops, I didn't think about dessert." He sighed. "Whaddya say we go grab a Blizzard at the DQ?"

She giggled and nodded. "Okay, sounds awesome, except I'd rather have a banana split."

"You got it. Let me clean up here, and we'll head out."

"You think I'd stand by while you clean up?" she said as she started clearing the table.

He chuckled and blew out the candles.

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1 Corinthians 11:3

"But I want you to understand
that the head of every man is Christ,
the head of a wife is her husband,
and the head of Christ is God."

Chapter Nine

Daisy opened the door to the Inn and held it open for Brody as he entered holding the large box.

"There you are," Jodi said with a warm smile. "Come on in, you three, dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Brody, Daisy and Agent McRee walked inside.

"Whaddya got there, son?" Toby asked.

Brody smiled. "We found a momma out in the woods behind the Center. We couldn't just leave her there."

Toby moved quickly to look into the box, his face changing to one of a little boy at Christmas.

"Another dog?" Caroline asked.

Brody grinned at his mother as everyone came to peer into the box.

"Miss Jodi?" Brody asked. "Is it okay? Maybe just until after she gives birth, which she's about to do."

"Oh my goodness, yes, of course. We haven't had a dog in the house since Jake's Scout died." She peeked into the box. "Oh, she's a big girl."

Brody nodded. "Where should I take her?"

Jodi thought. "Let's put her in the extra room down here." She led the way back to the smaller bedroom on the main floor that at one time belonged to Lisa Stewart's mother.

He set the box down on the floor, reached in and carefully lifted the dog out of the box.

"That box is too small for a whelping box," Toby said immediately. "Let's clear out that corner of the room." He turned to Jodi. "I promise whatever gets messed up I'll replace. Do you have some old blankets or towels?"

Jodi went to grab a few of both.

Toby made an area in the corner. He broke down the cardboard box and laid it flat first, trying to protect the floor. Then he laid the blankets on top of the cardboard. Using the blankets and some storage baskets off a shelf, he designated the area.

"There, now the dog will keep the puppies inside this area, until we can get a better setup. Jodi, I'll buy you a whole new bed and bedspread

and baskets, whatever you need, I promise."

Jodi laughed. "Okay, I'll hold you to it."

Brody unloaded the dog onto the pad of blankets in the corner and gently stroked her. Toby reached over and did a quick exam. "Oh, she's gonna give birth soon, for sure. I can feel the contractions."

"Let's leave her to it and come back and check in a bit," Brody said. "I mean, I don't want to mess up dinner."

"You mean, you're hungry," Toby said with a laugh. "But really, let's do leave her alone for a bit. Let her get oriented."

"I can't believe all the kids haven't come running," Daisy said.

"They're all in the music room with Logan and Violet and Gracie, with the doors closed. They're working on a special musical number," Jodi offered.

Brody nodded. "Well, thanks, Miss Jodi, for letting us put the little momma here. After dinner I guess I'll run to the store to buy her some food and a leash. Is there a way to turn up the heat a little in this room? The puppies need it to be warm."

Jodi nodded and went to the thermostat. "How warm do you want it?"

Brody looked at his father. "What do you think, Dad, about 80˚?"

Toby nodded. He smiled at his son. Toby himself had been known in his community as the guy who took in every stray animal he came across, a sick squirrel, a bird with a broken wing, about nine or ten dogs and dozens of cats. He also had goats, and pigs. He even had a three-legged deer at one time, but she died when Brody was about four years old. They'd had a dog, Rascal, who'd died of old age when Brody was eight. Toby sure did love that dog. Brody had loved him too and took it pretty hard when Rascal passed. Still, it was nice to see Brody still had a love for animals. The boy had definitely brought home his share of strays.

Once they decided the dog was comfortable, they left her to do what comes naturally. Brody ran upstairs to wash up and change shirts and Daisy headed to the kitchen to wash her hands.

Lily joined her and whispered in her ear. "So, do you want to tell me about you and Brody having lunch together and then he stayed with you after everyone left?"

Daisy smiled at her twin. "Of course I want to tell you, silly." Her eyes sparkled. "Brody is interested in me. He wants to date me."

Lily squealed and jumped up and down and hugged her sister. "Oh my gosh, this is so exciting. I mean, Daisy, he's so hot. This is so cool, and so unexpected. I mean, it's like, out of the blue, right?"

Daisy smiled. "Apparently it's not out of the blue. He says he's liked

me for a long time. For years. Actually, he said, as long as he can remember, he's had his eye on me."

"Oh, wow, Daisy, that is so romantic."

"I know, right?" She got quiet. "It actually makes me feel special."

"Uh, that's cuz you are, silly girl."

"I don't know about all that, but, you know, being a twin, being a second-born twin of a second set of twins, it's like, I'm just, I don't know. I can't explain it."

"You don't have to. I get it. Finding our own identity is hard. But I'm so proud of you, Daisy. And God sees you, you, not a twin, not a sister, you. And now, I'm so excited about what you and Brody might become."

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Daisy said.

They both got quiet when they heard someone clear their throat. They turned to see Miss Caroline come from the pantry door. Daisy's eyes got wide. She wondered if Brody's mom had heard what they were talking about. The beautiful woman had a pleasant look on her face as she went to place a few platters on the countertop. She nodded and smiled at the girls. Lily and Daisy smiled at her. "Hey, Miss Caro."

She smiled. "Hey, ladies. Are y'all about ready to eat?"

They nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Caro smiled. "Good. Come on out, we're about to have the blessing."

The girls nodded.

Caro put her hand on Daisy's shoulder. "And your sister is right, Daisy. God sees you." She paused. "And my son also sees you," she whispered.

Daisy's mouth dropped open as she watched Brody's mother turn and leave the kitchen through the dining room doors.

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In the music room, Violet, Logan and Gracie worked on the special number that they just knew was gonna blow everyone away. They knew because the children's voices were blowing them away. Violet played the piano with Gracie sitting beside her. Logan played his guitar and the children sang their parts perfectly. Then it was the verse Logan was to sing alone. While he was singing, though, he was suddenly interrupted.

Both Noah and Abraham jerked as if they'd been shocked and then started to cry.

Logan stopped playing and knelt down in front of them. "What's the matter, guys?"

Noah rubbed his fists over his eyes. "Mewody," he said.

"Melody? What about Melody?" Logan asked kindly.

"She hurt," Abraham said.

Logan's brow furrowed. Immediately he put his guitar down and headed toward the door to find Jeffy. He slid open the pocket door and Jeffy stood there.

"Oh, Logan, I was just coming to get you. I think you should call Melody. She's hurt. She's okay. But call her."

"I was just coming to see you, Aunt Jeffy, because Abe and Noah just started crying, saying that Melody is hurt."

Jeffy looked past Logan to the kids. "Really?"

While Jeffy went to speak with the children, Logan nodded as he pulled out his phone and called Melody. She answered on the first ring.

"Hello?" she said with a sniff.

"Are you crying?"

"Not really. Or, maybe a little," she said softly.

"Are you hurt?"

"A little bit."

"Melody, what happened? Are you okay?"

"Some guy hurt me. How did you know?"

"We'll talk about that later. Tell me what this guy did."

She sighed. "We were out giving out backpacks to the people, and this one guy, obviously on something, he said he thought I was pretty and he grabbed me by the arm. I tried to get him to let go of me, but he wouldn't. Then my brother came over and pried his hand off of me, and the guy got mad and pushed me and told me to get away from him. I wasn't expecting him to push me and I lost my balance and I fell off the sidewalk and into the street and scraped up my arm and cut my hand. But I'm okay."

Logan closed his eyes a moment, trying to get himself under control. "Okay, Melody, that's it. No more. You can't go out to do this thing anymore unless I'm with you."

"Excuse me?"

"You're too tiny, too pretty, too much of a target."

"Logan, I get that you're trying to protect me, and I get that it's frustrating to hear that I got hurt and you're not here to do anything about it, but I'm okay. Really I am. It was no big deal."

"Are you telling me that you're gonna go ahead and do this when I've asked you not to?"

"You didn't ask me. You told me. And either way, the answer is yes. You were kind enough to make a huge donation and I'm gonna use up that money until it's gone."

He sighed. "Save some of that money for when I get back. It's only

five more days. Can't you wait until I get back? Please?"

"That's more like it. Yes, I can wait, after we give out the backpacks we have today."

"How many more do you have to give out?"

"We had a hundred and there's only about twenty more."

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm sitting on the curb talking to you and watching Lyle and Phillip talk to a few homeless people and hand them the backpacks."

"Did you get the cut on your hand taken care of?"

"Not yet. But I'm using my shirt to press on it."

"How bad is it?"

"Not bad. Like, I won't need stitches if that's what you mean."

He blew out a breath. "Okay."

"So, how did you know? Your Aunt Jeffy?"

"Yes and no. So, apparently, we might have a couple more psychics in the family."

"Really? Who?"

"Noah and Abraham."

"Oh, wow! They knew I was hurt?"

"Yes, they started crying, saying Mewody is hurt. Then Jeffy came to tell me the same thing."

"Crazy."

"Right?" He paused. "Hey, Mel, they're calling us together for prayer. Gotta go. I'll call you later tonight. You stay safe until then."

She giggled. "I will. Bye, Logan."

"Bye." He hung up and headed into the dining room where everyone had gathered.

John Appel had just called on Breez Adams to say the blessing on the food when the Inn door opened.

"Got enough for two more people?" Keegan asked as he carried Iris into the room.

"Dad!" Violet said. "I'm surprised to see you!"

"Your mom kicked us out. Made us leave. She wanted me and Iris to be here with all of you and said she wanted to rest."

"Well," Lisa Stewart responded. "She probably wasn't lying."

"That's true," Laynah added. "Mom says she feels like she just can't get enough sleep."

"Her body is expending a lot of calories to make enough milk. It makes us tired to feed just one baby. With two, she's gonna be tired for a while," Jeffy added.

"Anyway, of course there's enough, Daddy," Lily said. "We have a

lot of people here tonight with our firefighting friends and our agents. But we're minus Rose and Jericho so you can fill in for them."

"Keegan, Breez was just about to say the blessing," John said. "And I have a bunch of very tired people here who have worked hard all day and would like to eat dinner and get their babies to bed."

"You sure do," Shelley said. "And I have to get me to bed too."

Keegan nodded. "And I have one too, who needs bed, so by all means, let's do this."

They all bowed their heads to pray and dinner was served. There were three different kinds of pasta dishes, salads, rolls, soups and desserts and there was more than enough for all. They had to sit some of the people at the breakfast table and some simply ate in the lobby on their laps. Those turned out mostly to be the young people. Gabe and Taylor, young Eric and Jordan, JoJo and Logan, Brody and Daisy and Lily, Laynah, Charlie and Matt Stewart.

Peyton and Lucas Murphy were having a family dinner with their mom, Rebecca and her guy, Dalton. His actual name was Andrew Dalton, but everyone simply called him Dalton. Dalton was now Ameritech's Assistant Agent in Charge of the Atlanta office.

Halfway through the meal, Brody made his way to check in on the dog. He came back to Daisy with a smile.

"How is she?" Daisy asked.

"There's one puppy so far, and she's working on the second."

Josie overheard. "What are you talking about?" she boldly demanded. "Where is there a puppy?"

That got all of the children's attention.

Brody smiled. "Daisy and I found a dog in the woods, and she's about to have puppies and we brought her home."

"You did? Can I see?" Jamie said.

Brody nodded. "I can let you go in one person at a time, if you are very quiet and don't touch her or her puppies. Not yet anyway."

They started to get up right away.

"Wait," their sister Jordan said quickly. "After you finish eating."

"Awwwuuuhhh," they complained. "Can't we just go now? You're so mean."

Young Eric raised a brow. "Excuse me?"

They glanced at him. "Sorry," Jamie said immediately.

"Sorry," Josie whispered.

Young Eric reached out and patted Josie's head. "Don't worry. I understand. It's hard to resist puppies, but you'll have plenty of time to see

them. I'll go with you when you're finished eating."

Josie smiled up at him. Young Eric had rescued her, and himself, from kidnappers and she was still in hero worship mode. He knew he had to be careful with her fragile emotions. For that matter, he had to be careful with his own and with Jordan, who'd also been through hell.

"Well, I may not be a little kid," Gabe said. "But once all the kids have had a turn to see the doggie, then I'm goin' in there too!"

"I never doubted that, Gabe," Laynah quipped.

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November 26th, 8:30 PM, Tuesday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jericho walked with Rose up the giant porch steps to the front door of the Tanner home.

Rose turned and smiled. "Weird. I usually just invite you in, but for some reason, it feels different."

"Good," he said with a smile.

"Why is that good?"

"Because something *has* changed and you feel that change. Our relationship is changing and growing. Expanding, I guess you could say."

She frowned. "I don't know about all that."

He smiled. "I do. And you will, when you allow yourself to see it. The reason it feels different, like you said, is because it's not so casual anymore, like the casual friendship we'd fallen into. It changed, Rose, when I kissed you. And I'm about to do that again."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! But what if someone sees us?"

"I hope they do," he said softly.

Rose leaned against the screen door and looked up at the guy who was trying to mess with her heart. She sighed. "Well, Jericho Jones, I did have a very nice time."

"Well, RoseRose, I did too. Just being in your company, watching you as you speak, listening to your brilliant mind, your earnestness, your businesslike attitude that switches to playful and then back to business, really, everything about you, it's like an amusement park ride. So enjoyable and disappointing only when it's over." He reached out with his thumb to touch the corner of her mouth. "Hmm, you have some leftover chocolate right there."

She immediately licked her lips, which made him smile.

He reached out with one hand to touch her at the waist on her right side, and then let his hand slide down to the front of her hip.

She gasped. "What are you doing?"

He chuckled. "Sorry, I guess that was a little bold. I was checking to

see if you were carrying your sidearm where you said."

She snorted, which made him laugh again.

"Well, Rosey, I guess I need to let you go in and get some sleep."

She sighed. "I am tired. I actually really need to go over to the center and get some of the paperwork done."

"Tonight?"

She nodded.

He shook his head. "Absolutely not."

Her eyebrows rose.

"I mean," he went on, "your agent has been following us around all evening. He needs some rest, and so do you. Rose, I promise you, if you maybe go in a little earlier in the morning, you'll get done in one hour what might take you two hours tonight."

Rose sighed. "That's probably true."

"Go rest, babe. I'll see you in the morning to get done anything that needs doing before we head over to the high school for the big meeting."

She nodded.

He moved close and she looked up at him, her heart rate doubling.

"Good night, Rose," he said softly as he lowered his head and kissed her. He took his time, prolonging the kiss as much as possible. He was certain it was more than he should do on a first date. She swayed slightly and he held her tighter. Finally, he lifted his head and stepped back.

He shook his head. "You are intoxicating."

She smiled. "Good night, Jericho."

Dreamily, she opened the front door and slipped inside.

She headed straight to the stairs, but stopped when she heard her father's voice in his office.

"Yes, right, and send that report first thing in the morning and that should cover it. I'll look it over and advise. No, you were absolutely right. Good work, Agent Birk."

Keegan looked up as Rose peeked her head inside the door of his office. "Hi, honey."

"Hi, Dad. Workin' late?"

He nodded. "Some things can't wait." He smiled at her. "Looks like things went well on your date."

Her eyes narrowed. He pointed to the monitor up on the wall opposite his desk.

She frowned. "Daaaddy," she whined.

"Sorry, honey, but I know that you know the camera is there. I got a notice there was someone at the door. I just glanced up. I saw it was you.

I tried not to watch, but looked up at one point and he was kissing you. I immediately looked away. I promise."

"Yeah, right."

He frowned. "I don't lie, little lady, and really I have no desire to watch a full-grown man kiss my baby girl."

She giggled and then sighed. "Well, I'm tired. I'm gonna go try to get some sleep. Another big day tomorrow."

He nodded and stood and opened his arms. She came to him and hugged him and kissed his cheek. "Is Mom okay?"

"She's great and I'm goin' in the morning to get her and bring her and the babies home."

"I'm so glad she's gonna make it home for Thanksgiving."

"Me too. Things could be a whole lot worse, so, I'm so very grateful." He kissed the top of her head. "Now, go to bed."

"Yes, sir," she said with a laugh.

Wearily she made her way to the stairs. There was a light bloodstain on the wood of the floor at the bottom of the steps. They'd used hydrogen peroxide and it had lightened it up but she could still see the stain. She looked up at the place where she'd been told Gabe found her mom. To think of her mom lying there, in pain, probably very much afraid that she was gonna have to leave her family. Rose shuddered and continued up to the hallway.

Gabe was just coming out of Iris' room. "Hey, little bro," Rose said softly. "Did you get her to sleep?"

He nodded. "I think so. She wanted to sleep with me again, but, like, I need to sleep too."

Rose smiled. "Oh, I understand."

Heather opened the door of her room and looked out in the hallway. "Oh, good, Rose, you're home. We're having a meeting, so come in."

Rose sighed wearily. "Okey dokie then."

Gabe started to his room.

"And you too, Gabe, if you don't mind."

He looked up, surprised. "Me?"

"Yes, you. Do you know another Gabe?"

He grinned. "Yes. There's the guy on my old football team, and the guy at the grocery store and then— there's the angel."

She rolled her eyes. "Get in here, little boy."

They went into the room. Heather had a seat in her desk chair and swirled it around to face the bed. The other five siblings sat on the bed in various positions.

Heather drew a deep breath. "Okay, everyone, I have something I

want to discuss with you. It's kind of about me, but it also can affect you too, so I wanted to run it by you and see what you think."

When no one responded, she went on.

"So, my last name is Anderson, as are all but one of my sisters, or, uh, I mean, two of my sisters now. And I know and understand why my name has remained Anderson. When Daddy married our mother, he wanted to honor our biological father by allowing us to keep his name. And I guess that is indeed a way to honor him. But in some ways, it also keeps us, meaning me, Rose, Violet, Daisy and Lily, it keeps us in the past, like, in the mode of mourning and honoring the man who gave us life. In a few months, or I guess probably in about six months or so, I will be sending out wedding invitations, inviting people we know and love, to see me, Heather, who is the daughter of Keegan Tanner, who was raised, loved and cared for, by Keegan Tanner, to get married. I will marry Nolan Sawyer, who is the son of Thomas Sawyer. I am the daughter of Keegan and Elizabeth Tanner. My name should be Heather Tanner."

Her sisters all sat up straighter as she finally got to her point.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful to my biological father. I know he was a good man. I know he died a hero. I know he loved our mother and he loved us for the short time he knew us. But to be honest, I'm the oldest and I have almost no recollection of the man. He's just a vague shadow in my memory. I was loved and raised by a man named Keegan Tanner. And I love that man as my father. I love him with all my heart. He's the only father I've ever known. Gabe, I don't know how you would feel about this. You were Dad's first biologically born child. You've always had the privilege of being a Tanner. Our own mother has the privilege of being a Tanner. But us girls, we don't get that privilege."

Gabe blinked up at his sister. "Heather, I have never like, lorded it over you, or acted like, condescending toward you, have I? It has never crossed my mind that you were anything other than my older sister whom I truly love."

"I know that, Gabe. And I truly love you too. And I've never thought those things of you, nor have I been like, resentful of you. Still, there have been many times over the years that I felt, I don't know, I guess I felt left out. Maybe jealous. Though I know the reason for keeping our biological father's last name, I also always wanted to be a full-fledged member of the Tanner family." She looked at her sisters. "Am I the only one who's ever felt this way? Am I just being bitter or contentious? Am I the only one?"

"No," Rose said quickly. "You're not the only one. There have been many times over my life that I wanted my father's name. And Mom would

probably say that I *have* my father's name. But Keegan Tanner is my father. Like you said, Heather, he's the only father I've ever known, and I've always wanted to be his daughter in name. I know he loves me. I know he loves us. And I would love to have his name. Would that bother you, Gabe?"

"No! It wouldn't bother me at all. Not even one single bit. And listening to what you're saying, I completely understand why you would want this. It's nice, I guess, to honor Bradley Anderson. I met him when I was in that coma. He's a really nice guy and he knows and understands that my father is your father. He wanted our mom to move on, to remarry, to be happy. He wouldn't want you to stay in a perpetual state of mourning his death by keeping his name. I don't know why we haven't brought this up before now. I mean, all these years, have you been feeling this way?"

The girls all sniffed and dabbed at their eyes.

Violet shook her head. "I don't know that I've felt this way, I mean, like Heather said, I understood and just accepted it. But I guess I secretly yearned to have my father's name too."

"Lily and Daisy," Heather said, "what are your feelings?"

"Daddy, Keegan Tanner, is the only father we've ever known. He's the one who supports us, cares for us, disciplines us, protects us and loves us. I would take on the Tanner name in a half-second," Lily said.

Daisy sniffed. "I usually just accept my fate, no matter what that is. I usually just go with the flow. Life is what it is. So, all this time, I just accepted that I have to have my biological father's name. I didn't really question it. But then someone, just today, made me think about who *I* am, what kind of person *I* am, and I think that this individual person who is Daisy should definitely be Daisy Tanner, named after the man who has been everything to me."

"Okay, so if we're all agreed that this is a worthwhile pursuit, I intend to do just that," Heather said. "I want to change my name to Tanner as soon as possible so that I can be a 'Tanner' on my wedding invitation. I realize this is silly in a way, because right after that, I'll be taking on my husband's name. But even if it's for only a few months, I still want to legally be a Tanner. Now, I can go about this two ways. The first is I can just petition the courts to legally change my name from Anderson to Tanner. The second, and the way I really want to go, is I can ask Daddy if he will— adopt— me." As she said the words, her voice broke.

Her siblings all jumped up from the bed and put their arms around her for a giant group hug.

"I'm sorry," she said, "for being so emotional. But as I said the words

I realized just how much I've wanted this for so long. I've been yearning for this, for Dad to adopt me."

Gabe got pretty emotional at those words and he had to step back and clear his throat. "I'm sorry, guys, that I've never thought about what this would mean to you. And I just realized that if I feel guilty and sorry for not realizing this, then Dad is gonna feel that way too."

"Which brings us to the next problem or decision," Rose said. "How do we go about asking Dad if he'll adopt us?"

"And you have to think about Mom too," Lily said.

Heather nodded. "I don't want to alienate Mom. So, maybe we should talk to Mom first, before we present it to Dad. We need to make sure that she's okay with it. Because if she's not okay with it, then I guess we'll shelve it, because I don't want to hurt her feelings."

Gabe thought about that. No way. No way was he gonna let them push down this beautiful and righteous desire, shelve it to think about another day. They brought him in on this, and he intended to make sure that his sisters became his sisters legally. He'd been blessed to be a Tanner his whole life. They deserved that too.

He drew a deep breath. "Hey, my sisters," he said lovingly. "Mom will be fine with it and Dad will too. I guarantee it. And I love it too because it would be so cool to finally not have to explain to people why we have different last names," he joked, trying to lighten the mood.

It worked. They all giggled.

"Yes, poor Gabe, life has been so hard for him," Rose jested.

"That's right," Violet said. "Let's get this done for Gabe's sake."

"Right," Heather said, "because everything is always about Gabe."

He grinned. "*Now* y'all are gettin' it."

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November 27th, 6:00 AM, Wednesday Morning
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Ricky came up behind his wife as she stood in the bathroom, looking in the mirror, straightening her blouse, smoothing her hair, then spraying on some light cologne.

That brought him closer, to sniff and then nuzzle her neck. He raised his head and looked into her eyes in the mirror with a smile. "In case I haven't said it lately, I want you to know that I love you more than ever. I'm so proud to call you my wife."

Bree smiled at him in the mirror. "I love you too, Ricky Kino. And I'm proud to have you as my husband."

He sighed and then smiled. "Remember waaay back when you wanted

to call me your brother?"

She frowned. "Ricky Kino, why bring that up?"

"Because that was such a hard time for me and it's good to remember the hard times so that we can appreciate the good times even more."

She nodded. "Well, Ricky, there have been a whole lotta hard times, so choose a different one to reminisce about."

He chuckled and then turned her around. "Feisty as always, my love."

She rested her hands up on his broad shoulders, and he circled her slim waist with his hands. He brought her forward and kissed her.

She sighed. "So, are you excited about going to see our new house?"

He nodded. "Yes, because I have a feeling it will be a place where we're gonna make a lot of awesome memories."

She smiled. "Me too. I'm so happy that we decided to do this."

"Well, with the way things seem to be going with Gabe and Taylor, I think having our own place nearby is a must."

"Me too. So, let's get to it. I've been very patient so far. We've been here two days and I haven't even asked to drive over for a peek."

"Well, you knew there was no time."

"Right, and if we don't hurry today, there still won't be time, so let's go. The big meeting is at eleven and Rose wants us there by 10:00."

Ricky nodded. "Okay, then let's hit the road. You wanna pick up some breakfast on the way?"

She shook her head. "Not on the way. Let's go to the house, make a list, then grab something to eat before the meeting."

He sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

She giggled. "You sound so disappointed. Are you hungry?"

He nodded. "Sure, but that's okay. There are people in this world who haven't eaten for days, so, I can certainly wait a few hours."

"That reminds me, Rick, what you said in our prayer this morning, you got me all choked up."

He grinned. "I know. I heard you sniff."

Before she could get mad, he kissed her quickly, and they headed out. At the bottom of the stairs they were stopped by Jodi, who held a paper bag out to them with a smile.

"Good morning, you two," Jodi said. "I know you must be so excited about seeing your house in person! Lily made you some breakfast. She said if Ricky Kino is anything like her brother, he's gonna be thinkin' about breakfast."

Ricky chuckled. "What a smart young lady."

Jodi smiled. "Let John and me know if there's anything you need. And take pictures. But I have to confess, John and I have driven past the

place several times over the past few months and it looks amazing."

Bree smiled. "Oh, I can't wait. Come on, Ricky, let's go!"

John came in the door right then and held the keys out to Ricky. "Here ya go, Rick, I pulled your rental around to the front."

"Ya know, the service at this joint is top notch," Ricky quipped.

"We aim to please," John said. "Have fun, neighbor."

"Neighbor," Ricky repeated with a nod. "That sounds pretty cool."

"It is pretty cool."

They headed out. Ricky helped his wife into the vehicle, got in and drove away, out the large iron gate of the Inn, to the right, down to the paved road and turned right, then to the state road and turned right.

They then drove 4.2 miles and turned left onto County Line Road, drove two miles and then turned right onto Magnolia Drive and one more right onto Taylor Mill. The name of the street being one reason they bought the property. Once on Taylor Mill, the new Kino property began almost immediately on the left. It was now surrounded by a pillared fence. The pillars were made of white brick; the ironwork was also white. It ran along the entire property line. From the corner it ran up off to the side of the property and disappeared over the hill and around a bend. Along the front of the property it continued for almost a mile, broken up right in the center by a beautiful large white brick entrance wall with a motorized white iron gate. The landscaping along the large walls was lovely and Bree could imagine it being filled with flowers in the spring.

Ricky lowered the window, punched in the code and drove through the gate as it swung wide.

The drive was lovely, lined on either side by dogwood trees that were currently bare, but Bree had seen the pictures of how they'll look in spring and it was very exciting.

They drove up the long straight drive that led toward the exact middle of the house. As they approached, the house loomed large on the hill. The drive came to the beginning of a circle and changed from concrete to cobbled brick and it was extremely charming. It circled around to the front of the house in a roundabout type setup. One could park on the circle and head up the steps to the house, or continue on around the circle, and turn right which led off toward the left side of the home, that led to a large garage that was probably a carriage house at one time, with all the same charm as the architecture of the home.

The home itself was giant. White with black shutters. Six, wide, white, fluted columns stood stately along the front of the house, then more columns continued down each side and across the back. There was a

balcony that circled the entire home, giving shelter to the wide porch beneath. It was truly a magnificent, old southern home, built in the eighteen hundreds, with much history, both good and bad. They would work hard to bless the home and the land and bring nothing but light to the surrounding area and all who entered their abode.

They parked in front and went to the wide staircase that led to the beautiful, arched double door front entryway. Halfway up the thirteen steps leading toward the front door, Bree and Ricky stopped and turned to take more pictures. Standing on those stairs, looking out to the left or right of the tree-lined drive, was a lovely, lush expanse of green. Off to the left from where they stood, was a lovely reflection pond with a stately oak next to it. Under that oak was a small bench, and attached to that oak was a wooden swing. That area alone had been the selling point in Bree's mind. She could see Eric and Jordan, or Taylor and Gabe out there under that tree, or meandering around the hundred and thirty acres of land. If she went a little further into the future, she could see them, pushing their own children on that swing.

The home had only been a little over two million dollars and they would spend about a million in renovations, inside and out, including a giant, luxurious pool and outdoor living spaces and cabanas. The extra land had been an additional six hundred thousand. It was incredible. To buy a home like this in Cali would be closer to thirty million or more. When they weren't here, they would use the hotel experts, Lisa Stewart and Jodi Appel, to possibly manage the property and maybe even offer it as a vacation destination in certain circumstances. For sure though, they intended to eventually build cottages on the property. A little Kino village for all of their family and friends.

They stood before the front door. Ricky put in the code on the lock box and removed the keys. He smiled at Bree. "Shall we pray before we go in?"

She smiled and nodded.

"You want to, or shall I?" he said.

"You," she said softly, as her eyes filled with tears.

He took her in his arms, held her close, and prayed. He gave thanks. He asked to know God's will for this place. He blessed the home and property with the light of Christ. He asked to use it for the building of God's kingdom and for the training of God's warriors in one way or another. He asked it to be a sanctuary from the darkness of the world. And he did it all in Jesus' name.

They unlocked the door and went in. It took their breath away. The feel, the light, the spirit that was there, immediately made them emotional.

"Wow," Bree said softly. "I mean, ya just don't get it on the internet. Even when the designer sent all her photos, I just didn't get how big, how elegant, how stately the place is."

"They did a great job," Ricky said.

They stood in a giant entrance foyer that was larger than their own living room, which had many times been compared to a hotel lobby, so that meant this little entrance foyer was vast. There were beautiful hardwood floors. The space was so large that from where they stood by the door, they could see three large 11-by-16-foot area rugs in a row, and still see plenty of the shiny hardwood floors they lay on. The rugs were done in blues and whites. There were benches against the walls in the area of the second large area rug. Above the benches were gigantic gold-framed mirrors. There were two large crystal chandeliers. The walls were trimmed with amazing, intricately detailed trim-work.

Looking forward as far as they could see, trying to take it all in, they could actually see all the way to the back of the house where there were three giant windows looking out over the back of the property.

To the right of the front door was the beginning of a grand staircase. To the left of the door was the same. Their eyes followed the circular stairway on either side up to a balcony area, which was very high, because the ceilings where they currently stood were twenty-foot ceilings.

"I don't think I can take it all in," Bree said softly.

Ricky smiled. "Let's try."

They walked straight toward the rear of the home from the area between the two staircases, where the first area rug lay, past two giant columns, to the next area rug. Beautiful padded benches were against opposite walls. Above those benches were giant mirrors. At the last area rug was a seating area with two large settees facing each other and two smaller chairs with a beautiful antique table between them. They peered out the giant windows to the greens and golds and browns outside.

If they were to turn left from there, they would head to the kitchen. Instead, they turned right, where they came upon first, another large living area, which they had the designer turn into a den for casual living. Also on that side of the home was a music room, a large library/study and two bathrooms and two large bedrooms. They meandered through the large rooms, always taking time to peek out the windows to get a feel of where that room was in respect to the property.

Finally, they came back to that center area and then headed to the left, to find an enormous and beautifully updated, state-of-the-art kitchen. It had loads of natural light, so bright and airy and it had doors that led

outside and another door that came in from the garage. Turning left out of the kitchen, leading back toward the front of the house was a dining room with three giant dining room tables. Each table was laden with an opulent flower arrangement and each had its own buffet against the side wall. Through an open arched doorway on the other side of the dining room was what could only be called a ballroom. A large open room, with mirrors and columns. One of the walls had a lovely mural with dogwood blossoms framing a lake. The entrance to the ballroom was through intricately carved pocket doors that led back to the front entrance foyer. Ricky pushed the doors open and they stood back in the foyer. The whole thing was more than Bree could've ever imagined.

Bree just stood there shaking her head.

"You okay, babe?" Ricky asked.

"I thought our house back in Cali was giant, fancy, extraordinary. I almost felt guilty living there. Next to this, it seems small and humble. I really did not get the gist of how this home is when I saw it online when we purchased it or with all the pictures the designer sent us as she worked. This place is just amazing."

Ricky nodded. "It is something. Very, very nice. There's only one thing it doesn't have."

Bree raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"The ocean."

She nodded. "You're right. But the time we spend here, it still is gonna be a really nice time."

"Yes, it is, Bree. Mostly because anytime with you is nice."

The low key of his voice had her looking into his eyes. She smiled. "Okay, I get it. Yes, I'm blown away by all of this grandeur and it might take me a little bit of time to get used to it, but I promise I won't let materialism take over my life or my mind. What is it you always say? We could live in tents in the desert and be just as happy?"

He nodded. "Right. And I'm thinking we might do some camping soon to make sure we remember that."

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Haggai 2:8-9

"'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the Lord Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the Lord Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Lord Almighty."

Chapter Ten

November 27th, 6:45 AM, Wednesday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe galloped noisily down the stairs as he had much of his life. He headed straight to the kitchen, and straight to the refrigerator and grabbed a gallon of raw milk and a large square Tupperware container filled with blueberry breakfast muffins. He set those things on the counter, grabbed a large glass from the cabinet, filled it with raw milk, opened the muffin container and picked one up. Smiling, he looked heavenward. "Thank you, Father, so very much, and I *really* mean that. Bless this food, in Jesus' name, amen."

He took a huge bite and chased it with half the glass of milk. He filled the glass again and put the milk back in the refrigerator. Took another bite of muffin and raised the glass.

"Gabe."

He whirled at his father's deep voice. "Hey! Good morning, Dad."

Keegan smiled. "Good morning. Come to my office, please."

Gabe nodded and put the container of muffins away, grabbed his muffin and milk and followed his father into the office wondering if he was in trouble for something. He was surprised to see Agent Key sitting there. "Oh, hey, Agent Key! I didn't know you were already here."

"I just arrived and was gonna wait outside, but your dad asked me to come in."

"So, what's up, Dad?"

Keegan held up a finger. "Jason, okay, he's here," he said.

"Good morning, Gabe." Jason's voice sounded over the speaker.

"Morning, Chief Lee," Gabe replied formally, realizing they were in work mode. "But it's the middle of the night for you, which means something important is going down."

"You're correct in that it's the middle of the night. I was working on something most of the night and before I went to bed I had to brief your dad, and since he heard you clunk down the stairs like a herd of elephants I asked him to get you for the briefing."

Gabe glanced at his father. "Sorry if I was noisy."

Keegan smiled. "No worries. He's just teasing you. I love that sound."

Gabe grinned.

"So, probably after today, you won't need a bodyguard anymore, once we round up all the players. We found the source of our troubles."

"You found the guy in the SUV?"

"Yes, but he wasn't the source. The source was a seventy-five-year-old woman named Beatriz Black, who is the mother of Dr. Julian Black and lives in Brazil."

Gabe's mouth and eyes opened wide.

"Gabe, as you might know, Grandmaster Kino went after Black's money. All of his assets were frozen. Eric did that to keep Black from being able to control people, or to hire people, but he was able to get around that. We found that before his assets were frozen he had funneled a lot of his billions to two people. One, the woman who worked for him, Marilyn Monroe, and two, his mother. We requested that his cell be raided again. That took a minute because we were accused of harassing the man."

"Everyone is so backward in their thinking," Gabe said. "It's him who's harassing us."

"Yes, Gabe, the world is backward. There are a bunch of scriptures about that, how the world would call good evil and evil good. And another one I like to use is in Isaiah chapter five, 'woe to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right.' That one fits this well. Anyway, we raided him, confiscated more cell phones, found he was bribing a guard, who was giving letters to a woman for Black. That woman was Patricia Monroe, sister of Marilyn Monroe, the one who handled the whole operation for Black as far as the IVF for the babies and the one currently serving a life sentence for the murder of some of those children and the ten women who gave birth to them.

"The Monroes are originally from Brazil and their family is closely connected to the Blacks. But there is no one left of the Blacks beyond Beatriz and Julian. She and her husband only had one child, and Julian never married or had children, as far as we know. Black's father was killed about five years ago. The rumor is that Julian himself killed his own father when the man disagreed with what Julian was doing. Their family was once very powerful. Thankfully, they are at the end of their reign. They're out of money thanks to their one and only son."

Gabe frowned. "Okay, but like, why does this Mrs. Black hate *me* so much? I mean, I didn't have anything to do with all of this stuff, other than just being close to Taylor."

"We've been trying to understand the answer to that question. Let me go back. Patricia Monroe was working with Beatriz Black who was still

in Brazil up until a few weeks ago. We found her in a Los Angeles hotel. Beatriz Black had a giant folder in her possession of everything her son has done or accomplished, mostly in pictures. Pictures of all the people he was involved with in each aspect of his downfall. And she feels like your picture is always there. At least lately, over this past year. You saved Taylor on the beach. You saved Taylor at the school. You were part of bringing Grandmaster Kino back to life. She told Patricia that Grandmaster Kino is a nobody. That you are pulling all the strings."

Gabe's eyes widened. "That's crazy. Does she know I'm only a kid?"

"She appears to know everything about you. Where you live. Who your family is. What they do for a living. What your future plans are. Who your friends are. How close you are with the Kinos. She watches you obsessively on social media. Gabe, she's totally fan-girling you, except instead of love, she hates you with a passion."

Gabe shook his head. "This doesn't make any sense. Not that I'd want her to go after anyone else but me, but I mean really, how crazy is her line of thinking?"

Keegan nodded at his son. "I'd like to say it was pure insanity, but this is more than that, Gabe. You are a bright light, and the bad guys see that. Remember, Satan and his minions, they knew Jesus instantly, when he was on earth. They knew instantly that he was the Son of God. 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world....' I think there is something important you have to do in this world. The demon who has Beatriz Black recognizes your light and wants to put an end to it, by putting an end to you."

Gabe shook his head sadly. "So, since I choose to serve God, to serve Jesus and because I've become popular on social media, I'm gonna be a target of these demons?"

Keegan shrugged. "Honestly— yes."

Gabe sighed. "But, you all, everyone in my family, everyone in the Kino family, every one of my neighbors, almost all of Ameritech, we all serve God. Why focus on little old me?"

"You, Gabe," Jason began, "are more powerful than you know. We appreciate your humility, but you need to accept the idea that the light in you is bright. I know you don't know what your big calling is yet, but it must be important to have so many people try to end you. It reminds me of that line in the *Wizard of Oz* when Glinda, who essentially represents an angel, tells Dorothy to hold on to the ruby slippers. She says, 'They must be very powerful or she wouldn't want them so badly.' The bad witch represents a demon, and in this scenario, you are Dorothy, or

actually, the ruby slippers. You have this light and this calling, that you don't even realize how powerful it is."

"Sometimes I just wish I was normal."

"So, you'd rather not be one of God's warriors?" Keegan asked.

Gabe sighed. "No, I really didn't mean that. Like Joey said, I can't hide under a bushel. But it's freakin' hard sometimes."

Keegan nodded. "Jesus didn't promise His disciples that everything would be coming up roses for them. He didn't say it would be easy. It was actually just the opposite. He told them that they would have hard trials in this world. But He also said, 'Take heart, I have overcome the world.'"

Gabe nodded. "I understand that. At least I think I do. But how important could what I do or say or pursue possibly be?"

"Well, Gabe," Jason said, "Grandmaster Kino didn't know when he first began teaching Justin and me martial arts in his parents' backyard that one day it would lead to teaching millions of people around the world. And he didn't know that would lead to hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of people learning about Jesus and becoming disciples of Jesus. He had no idea that would happen. He took each step of his life in faith, not knowing what was coming or what would happen. And just look what he created, or what God created through him.

"The same thing happened to me when I started a little security company. I had no idea I was creating a giant, worldwide company, the largest security company in the world. And it was Grandmaster Kino who set me on that path. Now, how many of the forty thousand people who work for me, how many have been touched by God? So you, Gabe, keep walking in faith and doing what you're doing. Right now, you have no idea what you're creating. Like I said, the demons recognize how bright your light is. Don't be afraid. And Gabe, you've already had a huge influence on the world. When all those people prayed for you, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, some for the very first time in their lives. Millions of people. So, you're already having a giant effect on the world, and this is only the beginning."

Gabe drew a deep breath, accepting in his mind the challenges God has set before him. He looked up. "So, what now? You say you caught all these people?"

"Yes," Jason answered. "Beatriz Black has been arrested for conspiracy to commit murder, as has Patricia Monroe and the guy in the SUV, whose name is Jose Reis Santoro Alves, another old friend of the Black family. Actually the nephew of the old butler of the family."

"Butler," Gabe muttered, shaking his head. "So, I'm good to go now? I don't have to wear this vest anymore? I don't need a bodyguard?" He

glanced at Agent Key. “No offense, Agent Key.”

The agent smiled. “None taken, though, it’s been a cush job.”

Gabe chuckled.

“Actually, we’re gonna hang with the vest and the agent for a few more days. We don’t know if anyone else was hired before we arrested Alves. Just a precaution. You can deal for a few more days, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Gabe said brightly.

Keegan nodded. “Yes, he can. So, Jason, if you’re done, we’re gonna let you get some sleep.”

“Much appreciated. And Keegan, good job.”

“I didn’t do much. I’ve been at the hospital with Elizabeth.”

“I know good and well you were on the phone coordinating everything with Joey and Dalton and Carlos, so good job. And again, congratulations on the two new little ones.”

“Thanks, Jason. Good night.”

They disconnected. Keegan looked up at Gabe and Agent Key. “So, son, what were your transportation plans today?”

“Agent Key said he’d drive me around today.”

Keegan nodded. “Well, I’m taking Mom’s van to the hospital to collect her and the babies. If you’d like, you can drive my car today. Or Agent Key can, whatever you two decide.”

“I’ll ride shotgun,” Agent Key said.

Gabe nodded.

“Are you heading over to the Center now?” Keegan asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m headed there too. Rose wanted me to go over some things with her before I leave for the hospital.”

Gabe nodded. “I’m gonna go to the Inn and pick up Taylor and her agent on my way out.” He glanced at the time. “And I’m late.” He quickly took out his phone and texted Taylor.

Keegan laughed. “Sorry I delayed you. You two get going. I’m right behind you.”

“Yes, sir,” Gabe said as he rose. He took his glass into the kitchen and ran upstairs to grab a coat and a minute later, Gabe and Agent Key were in Keegan’s SUV and headed to the Inn.

They pulled up in front and Taylor and her agent came out immediately and loaded up.

Agent Key jumped out and held the door for Taylor, then he jumped in the backseat with Agent Pratt. Gabe smiled at his girl. “Good morning, Tay.” He leaned over and kissed her. “Sorry I’m late, but I had a consultation with Jason and my dad.”

"No worries. I was busy pigging out at breakfast anyway. Your sister, she can really cook. I'm sure Miss Maddie is proud of her."

Gabe smiled as he thought about Lily. She was the quietest sister. She loved to cook and was now a graduate of culinary school. She always tried to nurture him, to feed him and he had a soft spot for her, because she was so much like their mom.

They pulled out of the Inn gate just as his father passed by in the van. They followed him all the way to the Center. Gabe looked at the building as they drove up. He found he liked looking at it and seeing his name on the building. He also liked seeing the banner that read "*Feeding of the Five Thousand - Thanksgiving Day.*" Only he couldn't read it because the top left zip tie had broken, however that could happen. He frowned.

"Well," Gabe said. "The first thing I have to do is fix that sign."

Agent Key nodded. "I'll go in and get the ladder because I wanna ask Rose to pull the video from that camera, so we can see how that happened."

Gabe nodded, put his arm around Taylor and looked up at the building. "It's so weird, Tay. I never thought all the times I came to this building, that one day I would own it, that it would have my name on it. Do you think I'm being prideful?"

She smiled and hugged him. "Just the fact that you ask that tells me you're not."

He turned to her and kissed her softly. Agent Pratt turned to watch what looked like five high school kids walk by on the other side of the street. They were headed north on Main Street. Probably headed to have breakfast, Agent Pratt thought. One of them glanced in his direction and then went back to talking with his buddies. Just as he expected, they took a right at the corner and headed toward the *Church Street Diner.*

He returned his attention to Taylor as she pulled back from kissing her boyfriend.

She shivered. "It's really cold today," she said, her teeth chattering.

Gabe nodded and put his arm around her. "It's usually only in the low forties this time of year. It's been colder than usual. But I hear it's goin' up to almost sixty next week."

"That's crazy," Taylor said.

Gabe shrugged. "I'm used to it. I like when it gets cold though."

"Really? Why?"

"Because cuddling up with someone in front of a fire is really nice."

"And just who have you cuddled up with, cuz it wasn't me."

Agent Pratt tried to keep from laughing at the mistake young Gabe had just made. Gabe looked relieved when Agent Key tried to come out

the door with the ladder and Gabe ran to hold the door open for him. They placed the forty-foot ladder against the building and set the braces.

Key handed Gabe some nylon ties. "Here, I brought these."

Gabe took them and stuffed them in his coat pocket. "I'm goin' up, don't let the ladder fall."

"Your dad said to be careful."

Gabe snorted.

He started up the ladder, realizing it was much higher than it looked.

He got to the sign and examined the problem. The nylon tie holding the little metal ring to the stud in the brick was severed. So weird. How in the world could that even happen? He pulled a tie from his pocket and quickly reattached the banner to the building. He gave it a tug and then, all hell broke loose.

Agent Pratt looked up to see the five boys from earlier come back to the corner and start across the street– right at them– at a run.

"Trouble coming at us," Pratt said quickly.

Key whirled, took in the situation immediately. "Gun. Get Taylor inside and get help."

Agent Pratt immediately obeyed, grabbing Taylor by the wrist and running her full speed toward the front doors of the building. At the same time a shot rang out.

Gabe lost his grip for a second as a bullet pinged against the ladder. He grabbed for a rung as he started to fall, and found himself dangling beneath the underside of the ladder, hanging onto one of the rungs. He tried to see what was happening. He saw Taylor running toward the doors. Saw her slip down. Saw the agent help her up. He saw a group of guys running at Agent Key full speed. One of them had a gun and fired at Gabe again and thankfully missed again. Agent Key pulled his weapon and began firing at the advancing group, standing his ground. One of them fell, and then another, but the other three bowled him over.

He fought hard, fought well, bashing noses and gouging eyes and punching throats. Gabe was trying to get down the ladder so he could help Agent Key. He was coming down, hand over hand when someone fired again. Gabe lost his grip and fell, knocking the breath out of him.

He blinked as he looked up. He didn't hear anything and he wondered if Agent Key was alive. All he knew was some guy was standing over him. "Finally, you little punk," he said with a heavy Spanish accent. He didn't say another thing, just pointed a revolver at Gabe and fired twice. That's all Gabe remembered as his body contracted with the pain.

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Rose and her father were all the way in the back of the community

center when they heard a shot. Rose wasn't sure what she heard, but Keegan knew immediately that it was a gunshot. He started toward the hallway. Then he heard Taylor screaming, "Mr. Tanner! Mr. Tanner!"

She came running down the corridor. "Some guys... Gabe... he's on a ladder. Some guys!"

Keegan ran toward the front of the building, drawing his weapon as he ran. Agent Pratt and Agent Thompson right behind him. They flew out the front doors. Keegan quickly took in the situation.

Agent Key lay face down in the grass to the left. He wasn't moving. Two other bodies lay on the grass. A third was trying to crawl away.

He ran farther out of the building and looked to his right. Gabe lay at the bottom of the ladder, flat on his back. A man stood over him, pointed a gun at Gabe and fired twice, then moved the gun to point at Gabe's head obviously getting ready to deliver the kill shot.

At the first two shots, Gabe's body contracted twice, his hands and feet flying out. All of this happened within the one second it took Keegan to pull the trigger of his own gun. He did so and the man fell. Keegan felt like his own heart might explode. Kevlar can protect, but two shots at close range, it would be a miracle if Gabe survived.

While Keegan rushed to Gabe's side, Agents Thompson and Pratt rushed to Agent Key's side. They gently turned Key over and checked him for wounds. He had a hole in his shoulder, and a big gash on his head. His eyes blinked open. "Gabe," he uttered softly. "Did he make it?"

Agent Thompson sighed. "He's down. I'll go see. Agent Pratt, detain that guy that's crawling away."

Pratt did as ordered and Thompson went to where Keegan was kneeling over his son. He saw him rip Gabe's shirt open. Two bullets were lodged in Gabe's vest. It didn't appear that they'd penetrated. Keegan ran his hand over Gabe's chest and leaned over to see if he was breathing and if his heart was actually beating, because that kind of shock could stop a heart quickly.

"He's alive," Keegan muttered. "He's gonna be okay." He looked up at the agent.

"That's incredible," Thompson said. "I mean, really, even with the vest, that's incredible. There could be some internal bleeding."

Keegan nodded, but somehow knew Gabe was gonna be okay. He immediately sent up a prayer of gratitude.

Thompson hurried back to tell Key that Gabe was okay.

Gabe moaned and opened his eyes. "Dad?"

"You're okay, Gabe. You're okay."

"Man," Gabe said slowly as he grimaced. "It really hurts to get shot,

even wearing a vest."

Keegan smiled. "I know. Feels like you've been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer."

Gabe nodded and closed his eyes. "Good description." He breathed deeply several times, then opened his eyes again. "Help me up."

"Just stay down a minute or two, please."

"Gabe."

He glanced past his father toward the person who called his name so softly. "Tay, I'm okay. I'm not hurt."

She sniffed. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. I'm sure. Well, I mean, I'm not bleeding." He tried to rise up again. "Where is Key? Is he okay?"

"He's okay," Jericho said as he knelt down beside Gabe. "Paramedics are pulling up. They'll see to him. You lie down and let me take your blood pressure."

Gabe nodded and closed his eyes again. "Dad?"

"I'm here."

"So, does this mean it's over?" he said, his voice just a whisper. "Did we catch any of these guys?"

"We have one. There were three kills. How many were there all together?"

"I think there were five, so that means one got away. Key would know for sure how many. How bad is he hurt?"

"He took one in the shoulder, and got a gash on the head. He'll do," Keegan said.

"I need to see him," Gabe said.

"Gabe," Rose said sharply. "You just lie still and let Jericho check you over. Did you fall off the ladder?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"Did you break anything? I mean, does anything hurt? Like your back? An arm? A leg? Your head?"

He shook his head. "No. Don't think I broke anything. But yeah, somethin' hurts. It feels just like I got shot in the chest," he said with a slight chuckle.

"Gabriel Tanner, this is not funny," Rose scolded.

"Sorry, Rosie," he mumbled. "Okay, to be honest, maybe I tweaked my ankle a little, like, from the way I landed."

"Blood pressure is good," Jericho said a minute later. He took his pulse and smiled. "Boy, you are one healthy kid."

Gabe smiled. "Clean living."

"Rose, can I just have him wave to the camera and tell everyone he's

okay?" Isla said.

Gabriel frowned as he looked up to see Isla August standing behind his sister. Rose looked at Gabe's confused expression. "She was here for a meeting with me this morning. And when we heard the commotion she asked if she could go live with breaking news."

Gabe nodded and looked up at the camera guy next to Isla. "Hey, everyone." He smiled. "Just another day in the life of Gabe Tanner. I'm okay, but my friend and bodyguard, Agent Key, was shot, so please pray for him." He stopped and sighed, as the words, 'be a light,' came into his mind, and then, 'what would Jesus do.' "And also," Gabe went on, "let's pray for these guys who tried to hurt me today. I think they don't know what they're doing. They don't realize that they're actually fighting against God, probably because they don't realize that God is real and not just a figment of our imagination. So, let's pray for the people who are so consumed with hatred and pray they will see the light."

Isla wiped tears from her eyes and looked at the camera. "As always, Gabe Tanner, you just got me all emotional."

Gabe smiled and closed his eyes as fatigue overcame him.

"Let's let him rest," Rose said as she looked around and realized the place was swarming with Pine Forest police, EMS personnel, Pine County Sheriff Tyson Stewart and several deputies, Mayor Bradbury, Joey and Dalton, Jeffy and Cam and Rose's sisters and a crowd of onlookers.

Jeffy headed straight to Gabe and knelt beside him. She placed her hands on his chest and her body gave a slight jerk. Cam placed his hands on Jeffy's shoulders.

"Do we need to transport, Dr. Kino?" Jericho asked.

She shook her head. "Normally, I would want to take him in and do an MRI to make sure there are no internal injuries. Two shots to the chest, even without penetration, can damage the heart and lungs, even break ribs. But miraculously, and I mean that literally, there are no internal injuries other than there will be some major bruising."

"Thanks, Miss Jeffy," Gabe said softly. "Cuz I sure didn't want to go to the hospital. Let me just tell you how grateful and blessed I am to have the world's most famous doctor take care of me."

She smiled. "It's one of my callings in life."

"What is?"

"To take care of Gabe Tanner."

He laughed softly.

She patted his chest. "No, I'm not kidding. I've never told anyone this except my husband, but back last August, after you came out of your coma and you let me touch you and read you, I heard God's voice and He

specifically told me to take care of and watch over Gabriel Tanner, as if he were my own."

Gabe's eyes filled.

Jeffy smiled. "So, I'll always be here for you, Gabe. You won't be able to get rid of me."

Gabe sniffed, and wiped at his eyes and got himself under control, then looked up at Rose. "Uh, what time is it? Don't we have to get to the high school for the big meeting?"

Rose smiled. "It's not even nine o'clock yet. I want everyone there by ten. You're gonna need to go get another shirt and Dad's gotta go get Mom. Let's move, people."

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November 27th , 9:30 AM, Wednesday Morning

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

The police had finally left the area. There was crime scene tape still there, but they promised it would be moved by the end of the day, once the crime scene had been thoroughly processed. Gabe finally was able to pull away from the dozens of people who wanted to hug him and cry over him, or ruffle his hair and tease him.

Peyton started out teasing him but ended up as one of the criers. Mark and Joey Adams praised him for taking it all in stride as one of God's warriors. Grandmaster Kino and Miss Shelley, and John Appel bolstered him and prayed over him. His own father left to pick up his mother. His sisters loved on him and cried over him.

Agent Key was taken to the hospital to have a bullet removed from his shoulder. Rose's Agent Thompson was reassigned to stay with Gabe, though they were pretty sure all the bad guys were finished. The one who'd gotten away was easily identifiable because he was pretty banged up in the face, thanks to Agent Key, so he was taken into custody thirty minutes later as he tried to buy medical supplies from a drugstore.

While Gabe headed back to the house with Taylor, Agent Thompson and Agent Pratt, Rose and Daisy went inside the Center to finish gathering the supplies they needed for the meeting at the high school. Jericho followed Rose into her office, while Daisy, accompanied by Agent McRee and Brody Smith, went to the front desk and finished filling a few small boxes with what she needed. One of the aprons. A name tag. Printed schedules of the shifts for food servers and for food providers. Printed schedules for performances. Printed schedules of the shifts for hospitality and who is assigned to what tables. Instructions for the cleanup and maintenance crews. And finally, napkins to go with the three giant boxes, each filled with twenty-four dozen Krispy Kreme Donuts, donated by a

local businessman.

Pretty much everyone else left to head over to the high school and get set up to welcome and scan in the codes of all of the volunteers, for each had been vetted and sent a code. Only a few people were still at the Center, milling around the front lobby. Jewell Brooks and her children because she'd become good friends with Rebecca Murphy who was gathering some decorations for the podium at the high school.

Daisy looked up at the door when the tiny ding announced the door being opened. She frowned.

Brody immediately looked to see to whom she was directing such a harsh stare. It was a guy. Probably in his twenties, who looked sharp, bright, personable and was smiling.

"Who's that?" Brody whispered to McRee.

The agent shook his head. "Never seen him before."

The man approached the desk and nodded at the two men with a smile, then turned his smile on Daisy. "Hello, Daisy."

She sighed. "Mike, what are you doing here?"

He frowned. "I sent you all an email telling you I'd be here."

"Did you?" She shrugged. "Well, we've been a little busy. Guess I missed it."

"All four of you missed it?" he asked dubiously.

She shrugged. "So, we're a little busy right now, Mike. You'll have to come back later."

"Yes, I saw that your brother got himself into trouble once again." He shook his head. "You people and your guns."

Her brow furrowed. "Gabe wasn't carrying," she defended. "But someone tried to shoot him and it was a good thing Agent Key and my father had their guns. And," she patted her hip, "I have mine. But I know you just don't get it with that closed mind of yours."

He smiled. "Okay, now, there's no reason for you to get all testy."

"You started it with your snide remark about my brother. Now, we're busy and I'm gonna have to ask you to vacate the premises."

He nodded. "Okay, well, you know you're under contract to do the Christmas ad for *Twin Wave Beauty*, and I need to speak with all four of you about it."

She sighed. "Fine, but not now. The next few days are gonna be absolutely full, not even one minute to spare for you. There was no specific time given and we are in the middle of a huge event, so, you'll just have to wait."

He nodded amiably. "That's fair. Still, there may not have been a specific time, but there was a general time, which was the first week after

Thanksgiving. So, I guess I'll just grab a room at the Inn and wait and enjoy a 'good old-fashioned country Thanksgiving' while I do." He didn't say it in a friendly way, but in a derisive way, making fun of the country theme and a southern accent.

Daisy laughed. "There is no room at the Inn, and there will be no Thanksgiving dinner there anyway, because we're all working this event."

He frowned. "What is this big event you keep talking about?"

She shook her head. "It's all over the news. Catch up."

He glared at her. "You're all so much like your father."

She smiled sweetly. "Why, thank you, Mike," she said in a sweet southern drawl.

"Okay, I see you don't want to play nice. I figured that anyway."

"You're the one making snide comments."

"Is Rose here?" He finally asked what he really wanted to know.

"Yes, but I'm sure she doesn't want to see you."

"Nevertheless, will you ask her to come to the front?"

"She doesn't have time for you right now."

"She needs to make time."

"The lady said she doesn't have time," Brody finally said. "And she's asked you to leave."

He looked at the large guy standing next to the front counter, then smiled at him. "Well now, you're a good-looking guy. Ever thought about doing some modeling?"

Brody shook his head. "You're playing a dangerous game."

Mike shrugged. "Maybe. You look so familiar."

Daisy picked up her phone and texted Rose, and a second later she came charging out the door of her office, Jericho right behind.

Mike looked up with a huge smile. "And there she is," he said brightly. "The one that got away. Hello, Rose."

"Hello, Mike, and let me adjust your thinking. You're the one that Gabe allowed to get away, with your life."

He looked her over, totally ignoring that she'd even spoken. "I see you're still carrying a weapon."

"Yes, I am, and now that I've shot one man, it will be a lot easier to take out another, if needs be," she warned with her eyebrows raised.

Daisy giggled and grabbed one of her boxes and turned to leave. Brody picked up one of the big boxes and followed her. Outside the building Brody spoke as they walked to the parking lot. "Okay, so, who is the guy with the attitude?"

She sighed. "His name is Mike Moreland. He's Rose's ex and he's a total piece of work. He's an advertising consultant and us twins did an ad

for him this past summer and he and Rose struck up a relationship that didn't end well."

"I'm surprised by that," he said.

"We all were, but why are you surprised?"

"He doesn't seem like her type."

Daisy nodded. "I think Rose was impressed by the way he'd pulled himself up by the bootstraps, so to speak, and she was trying to keep an open mind. In the end, he pretty much said she was all beauty and no brains, and if she'd go to bed with him, he'd make her a millionaire ten times over, or something like that."

"Wow. He propositions her and says she has no brains? Rose?"

Daisy nodded. "Right? He's very narcissistic. And Gabe didn't like him because he was a snarky, anti-gun, condescending prick, and Mike didn't like Gabe, because Gabe got all the attention, and was younger than him but could see through all his BS."

"How old is the guy?"

Daisy put the smaller box in her car and pointed to a pickup truck. "The big boxes are goin' in Jericho's truck." She smiled. "He's twenty-five, or he was the last time I saw him."

Brody lifted the large box over the side of the truck and into the bed.

They headed back into the building. Mike was still there and was talking to Rose about the location for the ad they were gonna do.

"Well, that's all fine and good, Mike, now, like I said, I'm kinda in a hurry right now."

He nodded. "Okay," he said as he moved close to her. "But maybe, you and me, maybe we could grab a drink at Joe's," he said softly as he reached out to touch her hair.

Jericho moved in a flash and caught Mike's wrist in an iron grip and pulled it away from her. Mike looked up at him as if he was only seeing him for the first time. "You got a problem?" Mike asked, trying to pull his wrist free.

"Don't touch her," Jericho warned.

"Who are you?" Mike asked pompously. "Are you another one of those agents?" He glanced at Rose. "Oh, I see." He shook his head. "So, you've moved on. I must say, Rose, you move fast." He cried out as Jericho tightened his grip.

"Who is this guy?" Mike demanded.

"I'm the guy who's gonna do you bodily harm if you touch her again."

"Rose?" Mike pleaded.

Rose smiled. "You can let him go, Jericho. He's hardly a threat to anyone. He's just a little man who talks big."

Jericho let go of Mike's arm.

"I do more than talk big," Mike argued. "I put my money where my mouth is. How much money does your new little boy make, huh?"

Jericho smiled. "Oh, I understand you now. But you must know that your money means nothing to Rose."

Mike looked Jericho up and down and turned to Rose again. "So, you finally decided to put out."

Rose gasped. Jericho moved forward and grabbed him by the front of his coat. "Jericho, please, don't hurt him. He's just an idiot and I don't pay any attention to the stupid things he says. Please, let him go."

Jericho released him and spoke softly. "Keep it civil, or you're goin' down," he warned.

Rose smiled. "You're so insecure, little Mikey," she began, the words she used making the others standing around chuckle. "My sisters and I will honor the contract, and then our relationship will be completely over and we can sever all ties. But I just want to say this: my family and I have a lot of pull on social media."

"Yes, I know," he replied. "Remember, I used your relationship with your brother as a means to get hits for *Twin Wave*."

"Yes, I know," Rose said. "But let me finish. You really should think twice before you play your little unethical games, harassing me about going to bed with you, insulting me about going to bed with someone else. If I used the power I have to tell the world the things you say to me, I could ruin your little million-dollar advertising business in a twenty-four-hour period. You've taken on the wrong family, Mikey. And really, that was stupid of you, because you did your research, but you didn't integrate the information into your little brain. We could end you, but lucky for you, we're not vindictive.

"Now, I will speak to you about the time, place and date of the shoot on Friday afternoon. You may call me at about 4:00 PM. Until then, I'm in a hurry and you will leave this building on your own two feet immediately, or my," she hesitated a moment, "my boyfriend will escort you out, and that won't be too much fun for you."

He stepped forward briefly, as if he would touch her again, looked at Jericho, thought better of it, and nodded at Rose. "Fine. I'm leaving and I will speak to you on Friday."

"Bye-bye," Rose said sweetly.

He turned and headed to the door.

"Bye-bye," Daisy called.

Daisy looked up at Agent McRee. "I was worried that you were gonna do something to him."

He shook his head. “I’m not supposed to interfere in your personal life affairs, unless it appears you are in danger or aren’t able to deal with a problem. It appeared to me that you and Rose were dealing just fine. And then there was your second line of defense, Brody and Jericho. I was good for simply standing here and looking very handsome,” he said as he straightened his suit coat.

They all laughed.

“And you did that very well,” Daisy replied sweetly.

“Okay, everyone,” Rose said. “We’re gonna be a few minutes late. Let’s load up and head out.”

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Proverbs 11:9

“With his mouth the godless man
would destroy his neighbor,
but by knowledge the righteous are delivered.”

Chapter Eleven

November 27th, Wednesday Morning
Pine Forest High School, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jordan sighed deeply as she watched the group of people in the back hall of the high school gym. They were all standing around waiting to be called to line up. Except for herself, pretty much everyone else was standing, milling around, talking to each other. Their group was a large one. When it was time they would all line up and be ushered into the seats across the front of the podium on the floor of the gym.

Mayor Bradbury and his wife, John Appel, Chaz Stewart, with Melaynah, Charlie, Matthew and Aralyn. Both Jodi Appel and Lisa Stewart and her newborn twins, were currently at the Tanner house, helping Mrs. Tanner who'd just been delivered to the house by her husband. He'd been assured that Jodi and Lisa could take care of her and her new babies until Mr. Tanner, Gabe and his sisters could return.

Also in the back hall waiting to line up, was Jordan's mom, with Josie and Jamie, Rebecca Murphy with Lucas and Peyton, Mr. Tanner, with Iris in his arms, next to Gabe, Heather, Nolan, Rose, Violet, Daisy and Lily. Mark and Bella Adams, with JoJo, Logan, and Emily. Then Joey and Breez Adams with Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. Grandmaster Kino and Shelley Kino, and their five, Nate, Noah, Abraham, Manny and Angelina. There was Cam and Jeffy Wallace, with their new Elijah.

Then Toby Nash, Caroline, Grace and Brody Smith, and with them were two country icons, Luke Harrison and Bryant Zachary. And then were Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams and Taylor and young Eric and Jordan would walk in with him only because she's on crutches and he wants to be sure she's okay. And after them will be the introduction of ten of the UGA baseball team.

Everyone will walk in with their family grouping, but then the young adult type people will sit off to one side in a row, while Peyton and the baseball team will go to sit on the other side in a row.

So that meant, young Eric and Jordan, Gabe and Taylor, Logan and JoJo, Brody and Grace, Daisy, Lily and Violet, would sit off to the right of the main group and the baseball team would sit off to the left of the

main group.

Jordan sighed. In her line of vision were some amazing people. Rose, who at only twenty-three years of age was so amazingly competent in what she was doing. And her sister Violet who was an accomplished pianist and so good at getting children to sing. And Daisy, a computer expert. And Brody and Peyton, baseball superstars, Gabe, who was good at everything, including being humble, and Jordan didn't want to leave out Taylor, who fit Gabe perfectly because she too was good at anything she put her mind to, and she was the perfect partner for Gabe.

Then there was JoJo, who was gonna go pro, but was taking his injury all in stride. Logan was a musical genius with a voice that could melt butter. Her eyes shifted back to Lily, who could cook as if she'd been doing it for forty years.

Of all those people, Jordan's mind settled on Lily. She was beautiful like her sisters and mother, but sweeter than everyone. So very sweet and kind and motherly. As if she could sense Jordan thinking about her, she turned and smiled. Jordan smiled back, and Lily came to her.

"How ya feelin', you gorgeous girl?" Lily said.

Jordan blushed. Next to Lily, Jordan felt very plain. "I'm good," Jordan replied.

"Does your foot give you any more pain?"

Jordan shook her head. "Not really. Every once in a while if I stand up for too long."

Lily reached over and gently touched Jordan's head. "What you went through, Jordan, when that guy attacked you, bless your heart, you were so strong. I think I would've just collapsed in fear or exhaustion and I'd probably be dead. But you, Jordan, you fought him so hard."

Jordan gave a nervous smile. "Thanks."

"Oh, goodness, did I mess up? I mean, you probably don't want to think about it."

"No, it's okay. I don't mind."

"Well anyway, you're so young, and so strong, and so brave and so freakin' beautiful, young Eric is such a lucky guy to have you."

Jordan smiled up at her. "That's very sweet for you to say."

"Oh, I'm not bein' sweet, honey, I'm just sayin' exactly what I think. I wish you and I had time to spend together, cuz I know we'd be just absolute best friends."

Jordan giggled. "I don't know. I can be pretty, uh, crude I guess you could say."

Lily laughed. "Oh, can't we all."

"So, Lily, let me ask you something," Jordan said.

Lily knelt down so Jordan wouldn't have to look up. "Okay, shoot."

"What do you want to do? I mean, what are like, your goals in life?"

Lily's eyes opened wide. "Wow, that's a loaded question. Hmm, let me see if I can say it in a few sentences. Hmm," she said again as she thought. "Well, my main thing is, I love God and want to serve Him. And then, I love to cook and I've thought about opening my own restaurant or diner here in town. I would just call it *Lily's*, or maybe, *Lily's Place*. But that's just what I'd work on until I find the love of my life."

"Really? What do you mean?"

"I mean, the most important thing to me, the most value I could have, in my opinion, is not to be a brilliant businesswoman, or a brilliant restauranteur, or even a brilliant chef. The most valuable thing I can do is to raise a family and make the happiest memories with them that I can make. That's real life."

"Wow, I mean, that surprises me."

"Why?"

"Because you're so beautiful and so talented."

"Am I? Hmph. But really, what does that have to do with anything? If I am what you say, I'll use that to be the best wife and mom ever. If I can create what my parents have created, then *that* is when I'll feel like I'm doing something fulfilling. Our family, our giant family, we are so happy when we're together. When Heather comes home and Gabe comes home, and we're all together at a family dinner, it's like, I don't know, pure heaven. The love is palpable. The laughter is never-ending. Of course, Gabe has a lot to do with that. But still, we all know it can't last forever. Heather is gonna get married and go away again. We're all gonna find someone and get married and move to our own homes. The family dynamic, as we know it, is gonna change."

Lily sighed. "So, the only way to hold on to that is to let it go and start a family of my own and be the best wife and the best mother I could ever be. Of course, I'll have to find a mate who believes like me, whom I can trust to share my faith and my hopes and my dreams. Someone who will help me make all this happen, make a family that is heaven to be around. It's gonna take a special guy."

"Lily, what you describe is so beautiful."

She smiled. "Right?"

Jordan giggled. "Yep, I can see Gabe in you."

"I'm not making light of it, though. I really feel like the most value I can add to this world is by creating an amazing family that does what my current family does, which is spread the light of Jesus throughout the

world, teach people to pray, feed five thousand."

Jordan nodded.

Lily went on. "And aren't you so lucky that you've found someone like young Eric, someone you trust to love the Lord and to always strive to do what's right? He's so strong and not afraid and he loves you to distraction."

Jordan smiled. "That's what I'm worried about."

Lily frowned. "What?"

Jordan shook her head. "Oh, I didn't mean to say that. Just thinkin' out loud. I may have shared too much."

Lily looked into Jordan's eyes. "Oh, sweetie, maybe you need to share. Maybe that's why I got such a strong feeling to come over and talk to you."

Jordan swallowed, trying to keep her eyes from tearing up, but wasn't very successful. She shook her head.

"Talk to me, Jordan. I won't judge you."

Jordan blinked and looked into her angelic blue eyes. "When Three and I met, I was going to college thinking I was gonna get a business degree and open a *June Flower Kino Wellness Center*. I was going to college on a softball scholarship, which I worked very hard to get. I think Three liked me because I seemed to have my act together. I think he liked me because I was strong and standing on my own and trying to take care of my mother and sister and brother, though I wasn't doing the best job of that, at least I was trying. I think he liked that I had goals and plans for my life." She stopped and sniffed, and wiped at her eyes.

"And then all kinds of things started to happen. Things that changed my perspective. And now, here I am, not even sure if I can rehab and keep my scholarship. Not sure if I even want to continue on in college. I really struggled with my grades. Dr. Kino helped tutor me and I passed my exams, but truly, it was a huge struggle and not one I want to repeat."

Lily nodded. "Okay. But do you think it might have been a struggle because of all the things you were going through?"

She sighed. "Maybe. But I've lost some confidence. I might not be as smart as I once thought I was."

"Jordan, I can tell that you have a brilliant mind. I can tell that you're a deep thinker."

Jordan shrugged. "Or maybe it was just too hard and I can't do it."

Lily nodded. "Okay then, let's pretend that's true, just to save an argument, and so, what does that mean? You mean you might want to drop out of school?"

"Yes, or maybe change my major. I wanted to open a clinic because

my father died of cancer. It seemed noble. But now I'm not sure if my heart is in it, and if it's not, I'd be miserable. So, I shouldn't do it, but if I don't, will Three think I've just gotten lazy? Will he think I wasn't the person he thought I was? Should I just force myself to go to college and hope I can make it through somehow?"

"No."

"Wow, you answered that fast."

"Because I know that living a lie is never the right choice. Look, I know I'm young, too young to give sound advice probably, but God sent me over to talk to you for a reason and that's the one thing I know, that you can't live a lie. You can't try to become someone you're not to please or impress someone else. And Jordan, young Eric loves you for you. I'm sure of that. I've known him since I was four years old and he was just two and I tried to get him to sit on my lap."

Jordan smiled at the thought.

"He was like the opposite of me. I was blond and blue-eyed. He was dark-haired and had those beautiful dark eyes. I was quiet and shy and he was loud and brave and even flamboyant. I thought he was the cutest little guy in the world. The point is, I've watched that cute little boy grow up into a gorgeous hunk of a man, and I've watched him go through many girlfriends, but no one, not one, has been like he can't live without them. Only you. And I know him well enough to know that because he loves you, he wants only your happiness."

Jordan smiled.

"And if you're not happy going into business, then figure out what makes you happy and do it."

Jordan sighed. "But what if— what if what makes me happy is the thought of just living with Eric, loving him, having his babies, doing his laundry, playing ball with the kids, cooking them dinner, helping the kids with their homework, is that job of being wife and mother, is it valuable enough for him to even want me?"

Lily's brow furrowed. "Valuable enough? Are you asking if what you offer has value? So, Jordan, are you talking about money? Are you thinking maybe that because you won't be bringing in a paycheck then you're not valuable?"

Jordan shrugged. "Maybe."

"Jordan, you have to know that he doesn't give two figs about you making money. I mean, he wouldn't stop you if that's what you wanted to do, but I'm pretty sure he doesn't count your value by how much money you can bring in. To be brutally honest, he's heir to a billionaire and he

sure doesn't need your darn money."

"But what if he thinks I'm with him for his money? I mean, if I had these plans to go to college and open a clinic, and all of a sudden, I don't want to do that anymore, it looks like I've decided to let him support me."

"Wow. Well, first, what's wrong with that? He can support you easily. And you would take care of him and his children in ways that only a good wife and a good mother can. Jordan, if you were only with him for his money, well, don't you think he could see through that? I mean, he's really smart."

Jordan nodded. "Yes, of course, I guess he could." She laughed. "He recently told me that he's fairly intelligent."

Lily snorted. "Fairly is an understatement."

"Right. And so maybe he'll realize what a dolt I am and go find someone smarter."

"Jordan, my sweet new friend, you are not a dolt. You are bright and beautiful and loving and kind and down-to-earth and perfect. I don't know you well and even I can tell that you are perfect for Eric."

She bit her lip as she thought. That's what he'd said many times, that she was perfect for him.

Lily smoothed Jordan's dark blond hair. "I think you need to share these thoughts with him. Or if you can't share with him, then talk to Grandmaster Kino or to young Eric's dad, or even better, his mom."

Jordan nodded. "I think you're right."

Lily smiled. "And then you have to call me and let me know how that discussion went."

Jordan smiled. "I will." She looked past Lily as Eric approached.

He smiled at her so kindly. "Hey, Two-three. Are you okay? I looked across and saw your face and you had a pained expression."

She nodded. "I'm fine. Lily and I were just talking and I got a little choked up."

He knelt down in front of her and cupped her cheek in his large hand and brushed at a bit of moisture with his thumb.

Lily smiled. "Ah, to be so in love," she moaned. "It's kinda sick how mushy you two are."

Eric chuckled. "I can't help it. She's messed me up for life. I love her and I can't stop."

Lily looked at Jordan pointedly.

"Okay, everyone," Rose said. "We have almost six hundred volunteers sitting in the bleachers on the east side of the gym and they've all been treated to donuts and water and are anxiously awaiting getting to meet the amazing people who are making this happen. So, everyone line

up like you were told, and I'm gonna go in and start the meeting."

"Yes, ma'am," several people chirped.

Rose marched out and stepped up onto the podium and placed her papers on the lectern. The people were already applauding and she hadn't even spoken yet. She looked up a second, asked for the Holy Spirit and then smiled at Isla and began to speak. "Hello, everyone. Thank you for that kind welcome. Welcome to Pine Forest, Georgia and right now to Pine Forest High School. We are excited to get started with this meeting. I'd like to open with prayer, but before we do, let me introduce the people who have come together to help make this happen. The first person is a man who has a very big vision for our little town. He's put in the work to grow this town and he's seen it grow by leaps and bounds and he's seen that people are deciding to stay here rather than rush off to the big cities. I'm grateful that when I told him about what I'd like to do, he assured me immediately that we could make this happen. Everyone welcome, Mayor Bradbury and his sweet wife, Adrianne Bradbury."

The mayor and his wife walked out and waved at the applauding crowd and went to their seats.

"Next, a member of our city council, owner of *Appel Martial Arts* based right here in Pine Forest, part owner of the *Pine Forest Country Inn*, a former Marine Raider, though I know that there is no former, once a Marine always a Marine..."

"Oohrah," someone yelled out, making everyone laugh.

"Master John Appel."

John walked out, waved and stood in front of his seat.

"John's wife, Miss Jodi Appel couldn't be here because she felt strongly that she needs to be at my house with my mother who just gave birth to twins on Monday and just got home today. I'm always grateful to the people over on *County Road 182*, recently renamed *Country Inn Lane*. Our neighbors are awesome. Also, let me just mention that the Appels' only child, Jacob Appel is currently deployed in Afghanistan and is the youngest Marine Raider on record."

She smiled at the standing ovation.

"Jake is married to our other neighbor, Melaynah Stewart, who graduated from Pine Forest High School and helps to run the Stewart ranch and is starting an equestrian business, teaching kids to ride, and also will be opening a boarding barn and stable business."

Melaynah walked out.

"Next, Laynah's father, another Marine, another member of our city council, older brother to our county Sheriff, our friendly local rancher and

supplier of the best organic, grass-fed beef, father of six amazing children, Charles Anthony Stewart the Third, known lovingly as Chaz, and with him are Charlie the fourth, Matt, and Aralyn."

As the Stewart family walked out, Rose continued. "The Stewart mom, Lisa Stewart, and her two new additions, Jonathon and Lachlyn are not here with us because they too are with my mother, helping her, cuz like, that's what us folks in Pine Forest do, we help our neighbors. Lisa Stewart, many of you may not know, is the owner of a large hotel chain, Golden Hotels. She is also the co-owner of the *Pine Forest Country Inn and Cottages* and the new *Pine Forest Town Inn* coming soon. It was Lisa Stewart's vision when she first moved here twenty-something years ago, to open the Inn so that people who live in big cities can come and experience the nostalgia and warm fuzzies of living in a small town. We love her for that vision.

"Next is a new friend of ours, Ms. Jewell Brooks, who is a dear friend of the Kino family, and now a dear friend of ours. She is opening a restaurant just south of Los Angeles and is an amazing chef. She is the mother of three gorgeous kids, Jordan, Josie and Jamie.

"The eldest of the Brooks children, Jordan, will be walking in later because she's on crutches right now. And let me just let you know that she got hurt when her strong self fought off a serial rapist who'd been terrorizing the UCLA campus, and because of her, he was caught. Please everyone, welcome the Brooks family."

Jewell, Josie and Jamie walked in. Jordan smiled at her family as they walked out across the gym. And then, sweet ten-year-old Josie tripped over her own feet and fell flat on her face.

Jordan gasped and young Eric started forward, but he was beat out by young Matthew Stewart. The twelve-year-old jumped from his seat and rushed to Josie's side. He immediately took her hand and helped her up, then bent and brushed off her pants at her knees. He smiled up at her. "You okay, Josie?"

She nodded and smiled. "Yeah, but I'm like, really embarrassed."

He shook his head. "I fell like that once in front of the whole school. It happens."

He walked her to her seat and headed back to his own chair amidst loud applause and cheers. He grinned and stood in front of his chair and took a bow.

Jordan smiled as young Eric chuckled.

"Such gallantry. Moving on," Rose continued. "Next, we have the Murphy family. Rebecca Murphy was a beloved teacher at Pine Forest Elementary, but vacated her position to become the education

administrator at the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*. We are so happy to introduce her and her two children Peyton and Lucas. Lucas is a freshman at Pine Forest High School. He plays basketball and baseball. Peyton graduated from Pine Forest High School this past year and is on a full baseball scholarship at UGA. He'll be entering in a moment because he brought along the Georgia Bulldog baseball team to help us."

She stopped while everyone cheered for Georgia and waited until they finished barking. "Please welcome the Murphy family."

Rebecca and Lucas walked across the floor.

"Next let me introduce you to my family. My father, Keegan Tanner, also a Marine Raider, who runs the Eastern Division of Ameritech Security, and helps run our giant family. My mother, Elizabeth Tanner, or Lizzy Tanner as you know her on her albums, is a Grammy Award-winning singer, but we think of her as just our wonderful mom. As I've already stated my mother just gave birth to twins two days ago and is at home. But with us are myself, my older sister Heather and her fiancé Nolan Sawyer, my sister Violet, an accomplished pianist, my sister Daisy, who is a computer genius and is helping us out at the Center with PR, and maintaining the website and being my executive assistant. Also my sister Lily, who is an amazing chef and is currently overseeing the kitchen at the Inn, and my little sister, Iris, who works very hard at making our family smile every single day, and last but not least my brother, Gabriel, who is, well, too much to say."

She stopped talking because she couldn't be heard anyway over the roar of the crowd. She waved her family in and the crowd actually gave Gabe a standing ovation. He got to his seat, turned toward the crowd as they screamed his name, pointed upward and then patted his own chest to let them know two things. All glory be to God, and he was touched by their show of support. This made the applause and cheers get louder and he bowed his head.

This amazing reception made Rose tear up and when the crowd quieted she sniffed, cleared her throat. "Okay, moving along, next we have the Adams family. They were born and raised in a suburb of Atlanta. First, Mark Adams, a prominent LA attorney from the firm of Lee and Adams and one-time champion of the Kino Challenge is here with his beautiful wife Bella, his two famous sons, Heisman candidate and quarterback for the USC Trojans, JoJo Adams..."

She had to stop again while everyone cheered for the QB. She waved them in to start across the floor and stand in front of their seats. Once the applause and whistles died down she went on. "And JoJo's brother, who

is currently in school at UCLA and working on his first album, give it up for Logan Adams..."

Again, she had to stop talking until the deafening applause died down. "And let's not forget their little sister, Emily." Rose waited a beat while people awwed over and applauded for the beautiful little cherub who executed a perfect curtsy.

"Okay, moving along. We have another member of the Adams family, Mark's little brother Joey Adams..."

She had to wait again. When it was quiet she went on. "Joey Adams, an actor in several movies, the Kino Challenge Champion both for juniors for a few years and senior division for eight years, is currently second in charge at Ameritech Security. With him is his beautiful wife, the acclaimed artist, Breez Adams, and their three children, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger."

Once they got settled she went on. "Okay, the next family I want to introduce is, really, the man who started all of this, though he would never take that accolade because he's such a humble man. But almost everyone here can trace their success or their inspiration back to this man. He started a little martial arts school in his parents' backyard when he was still in high school. That school and those first students have touched millions upon millions of lives worldwide. Of course, I'm speaking of black belt hall-of-famer, Grandmaster Eric Kino!"

She waited again. "With Grandmaster Kino are his wife, a native Georgian and MART champion, Shelley Kino. Shelley is the mother of Breanna Adams..." Rose nodded and smiled and waited. "And Mark Adams and Joey Adams and Grandmaster Kino is the father of Ricky Kino..."

She laughed at how loud the applause got. "And together they have Dr. June Flower Kino..." She nodded and waited.

"And they also have five new little ones, which I'm sure, unless you've been hiding under a rock, I'm sure you know how they came into the world. Here they are, Angelina, Noah, Abraham, Emmanuel, and Nathaniel and the whole Kino family!"

Eric and Shelley and the five children entered and waved and took their seats.

"So, I've already mentioned her name, but let me start again. The next family is the Wallace family. Cameron Wallace played football for Oregon and then became the first JETT agent in Ameritech's special ops division. He protected Dr. Kino while she was under threat as she put together her medical breakthroughs, he is married to that woman, Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace, Nobel prize winner in medicine, and healer extraordinaire,

and she just had a baby, little Elijah, please welcome the Wallaces."

Rose waited. "Okay, calm down." She drew a breath. "Next, we're so grateful to know this amazing family. Grammy winning, People's Choice winning, heart-throb, Toby Nash is here!"

She waited. "And with him is his amazing and talented wife, Madame of the *New York School of Dance*, and judge and producer of *America Can Dance,* Caroline Smith!" She waited a few moments.

"Also with them are their two amazing children. A singer with three best-selling albums, Gospel music's own Gracie Nash! And last but not least, currently playing baseball for Tennessee...."

She stopped and laughed at the boos, offered in a friendly way. "We love him despite who he currently plays for, cuz who knows, he may end up playing for the Braves one day— Brody Smith!"

Amidst thundering applause, the Nash family walked across the floor and took their seats. Rose then went on to introduce two more country stars, Luke Harrison and Bryant Zachary.

"Okay, we're almost to the end. Also with us, I'm sure they need no introduction, but I will just say, that their whole family is here, Ricky Kino, Breanna Adams Kino, Eric Kino the Third, and Taylor Kino, and walking in with them is Eric's girlfriend, I spoke about her earlier, the one who fought the serial rapist and was injured, Jordan Brooks. Ricky and Breanna have made over a hundred and thirty movies between them, and are huge philanthropists, along with the rest of the people here. Young Eric has just won his first Kino Challenge, and his first movie will be out in two weeks. It's called *The Resurrection of Elijah Beck*. Our sweet friend Taylor Kino is still in high school and is making waves. And her boyfriend, who just happens to be my brother Gabe, is so lucky to have her in his life. Okay, Kino family, come on out."

The pros walked across the floor, smiling, and waving, tapping their hearts at the huge welcome. Taylor went to sit next to Gabe and young Eric and Jordan went to sit on the other side of him.

Rose went on to introduce the UGA baseball team and once they were all in and sitting, she called upon Toby Nash to open with prayer.

Everyone thrilled to hear the beautiful prayer spoken in the singer's deep southern voice. It was moving and inspiring.

Rose went back to the microphone. "Now, everyone, Mayor Bradbury has a message for us all, and then I want you to take out the packet that was given to you when you came in. After the mayor speaks we will quickly go over the agendas so that everyone knows exactly what they will be doing tomorrow, and when and where they will be doing it. Mayor

Bradbury, I turn the time over to you."

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November 27th, 3:00 PM, Wednesday Afternoon
Pine Forest High School Practice Field, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe shook his head to the question he'd just been asked, that being, "was he gonna play some ball with them."

"It's unbelievable that I had the opportunity to be back playing on this field and now I can't do it. Sorry. Jeffy says absolutely no way because I have body trauma, or something like that. Anyway, I really want to go home and see my mom, so you guys have fun."

"Well, we'll really miss your smart mouth, Gabe," Peyton said as Gabe walked away.

"I love you too, Peyton," he responded, making the guys laugh.

Logan, young Eric, Charlie, Matt, Peyton, Lucas, Jericho and two of his guys, Jalen and Max, Brody, Joey and Mark Adams, and the ten guys from the UGA baseball team chose up sides.

"Hey, guys, this is touch football," JoJo reminded them. "We have a big job to do tomorrow, so don't get hurt. No twisted ankles, no concussions. I'm flippin' a coin. Call it, Charlie."

"Heads," Charlie said quickly.

"Heads it is. Your team receives. Let's do this."

On the sidelines, of the females, only Melaynah braved the cold. Chaz, John, Ricky and Toby also stayed to watch the action.

Gabe got in his father's SUV and headed to the Tanner home. Agent Thompson followed him to make sure he arrived safely. On the way, Gabe called to check on Agent Key. His surgery went well, he was in his room and resting comfortably after he'd spoken to Chief Jason Lee, Deputy Chief Joey Adams, AAIC Dalton and Division Chief Tanner.

Gabe parked and stood outside of his home, looking up at the windows and the front door, at the fall decorations, at the right side yard where he'd played a million games of catch with his father or with Peyton.

The wind blew, ruffling his hair and making his cheeks and nose red and he smiled. This earth life, he thought, was wonderful in so many ways. He was alive to experience that cold air. His mother and new siblings were alive and on the other side of that door. His father and sisters were also alive and inside that home. It was such a beautiful feeling. He could almost feel complete. Except, he loved Taylor and was desperate to make a home and family with her. He knew he needed to focus on the present moment though, and so he did. He drew a deep breath, ran up the steps and inside to the warmth of the family home.

"There he is," Daisy said to Iris as Gabe came in the door.

Iris ran straight to him and he scooped her up, grunting in pain as he did. He held her off to one side. “There,” he mumbled, waiting for the pain to subside.

“Gabe, come and see. Mommy had the babies and they are so wittle and so cute.”

“But I thought you are so little and so cute.”

“I’m cute but I’m not wittle,” she argued.

He chuckled. “Okay. So where is Mommy?”

“She’s in the den.”

Gabe nodded and headed into the den. His mother was sitting in one of the two big rocking chairs his father had bought for her and she smiled up at him so sweetly as he came into the room. He smiled back. “Hey, Mom,” he said softly. Almost reverently. He came forward and placed a kiss on her cheek.

“Hi, Gabriel,” she whispered, as her eyes filled with tears.

“It’s been a rough couple of days, huh, Mom?”

She nodded. “It has, but here we are, all together.”

Gabe looked around. His father was standing behind the sofa, holding one of the babies. Heather was sitting on the sofa, holding the other. Nolan was across the room, beside the fireplace, watching, obviously trying not to be intrusive. Rose was kneeling at her mother’s side, on the side of the rocker. Violet, Daisy and Lily were gathered around.

“How are you feelin’, Mom?” Gabe asked.

“I’m feeling wonderful, sweetie. Maybe a little tired.”

“How about your back?”

“Actually, I haven’t thought much about my back, so, I guess that means it’s much better.”

Gabe took his mother’s hands and looked into her eyes. “Mom, I love you.” He drew a deep breath. “I love you and I’m so thankful for you.”

“And I love you, my sweet boy. You are so special, Gabe.”

“I know I’ve been a lot of trouble for you. I’m sorry about that.”

“What in the world are you talking about? You’ve been nothing but joy to me.”

He smiled and leaned forward to whisper. “So, I was wondering if I could speak to you privately sometime soon.”

Her brow furrowed. “What have you done now?”

He laughed. “Nothing really, Mom, but it’s important.”

She nodded. “Okay, how about when I go upstairs in a little bit.”

He nodded.

“Gabe,” Rose said. “Would you like to hold your brother?”

He nodded with a smile. “I really, really would like that.” He stood and carefully took the baby from his sister and stared at his face. He looked up, surprised. “He looks a lot like my baby pictures.”

“Yeah, he does,” Keegan said.

Gabe bounced his knees slightly. “Hey there, Isaiah. How ya doin’, bro? Gosh, you are so cute. So, listen, little guy, I gotta figure out a way to get here to see you, cuz you and me, we got so many cool things we gotta do.” He stopped talking for a minute and stared into the baby’s soft face. “Good grief, I can feel your spirit so strong. Oh wow, Isaiah, oh wow.” He looked up as his eyes filled with tears. Glancing around at the others in the room, he looked from face to face. “Do you feel that? He’s so strong. He’s so special.”

“Tell us what you feel,” Heather prodded.

He sniffed and winced a little. “It’s like, the Holy Spirit came through him and into me. It was like, strong love, strong emotion, maybe even power. He’s amazing. How am I gonna be able to ever leave and go back to train?” He shook his head in wonder. The baby reached a little fist out, making Gabe smile. He bounced him gently and after a few minutes of silently communing with his brother, he looked around. “Okay, I know I’m hogging him. Who wants him?”

“I do,” Lily said softly.

Gabe carefully handed the bundle over to her and looked up at his dad. “So, can I see Gentian?”

Keegan handed his daughter over to his son. “Hey, sweet girl,” Gabe whispered as he leaned down and kissed her cheek. “Oh, wow, you too, sis. You’re so strong, wow. I don’t know what’s happening, maybe because they’re so fresh from heaven. Yeah, that actually might be it. Because I feel like I did when I was in that green field when I could feel the presence of Jesus.” He swayed. “Uh, Dad, He’s here. He’s here.”

As Keegan moved forward toward his son, Gabe handed Gentian off to Daisy. He looked around him in a daze. He felt disoriented, as if he was in a whirlwind and he couldn’t fight it. He clutched at his chest before he went down.

Keegan quickly caught him and lowered him to the floor.

“Should I call 911?” Heather asked, her voice in a panic.

“Hold off a minute,” Keegan said quietly.

“Call Jeffy,” Lizzy said softly.

Keegan unbuttoned Gabe’s shirt to get eyes on his bruises and everyone gasped at the sight of his chest. It was pretty much black and blue with some red streaks mixed in. Keegan lowered his head to his son’s chest to try to listen to his heart.

Daisy immediately snapped off a few pics on her phone. “That looks terrible. Dad, is he okay?”

“He’s breathing. His heart is beating. Gabe, can you hear me?”

Gabe lay completely still, his eyes closed, his breathing steady.

“Jeffy was already on the way,” Heather said. “I’ll go let her in.”

She went to the front door and opened it as Jeffy and Cam came up the drive and jumped from the car. “He’s in here, in the den, on the floor. He just passed out.”

Jeffy came in and went straight to Gabe and dropped on her knees. “Oh, wow,” she said softly as she looked around. “The power emanating in this room is intense.”

She leaned over and gently touched his forehead and then she moaned as tears gathered in her eyes. “Wow. He’s so strong. So powerful. He’s here. He’s here.”

The family looked around at each other as they recognized the same words Gabe had just spoken.

Jeffy nodded as if someone asked her a question and she laid her hands on Gabe’s badly bruised chest. “In Jesus’ name,” she murmured. She was breathing hard, as if she’d just run a race. “Yes, I will,” she said. Leaning over as if she were too tired to keep her head up, she laid her head on his chest. Her eyes closed and she too was still.

Cam touched her neck briefly.

A minute later, Jeffy’s eyes opened and she rose up off Gabe’s chest and everyone again made a gasping sound of surprise. A few seconds later the entire Tanner family was weeping. All but Gentian, Isaiah and Iris who were awake and seemed to be glowing with light.

Gabe sighed, his eyes blinked open and he sat up slowly. He ran his hand over his chest and shook his head. “What happened?”

“You were just healed,” Jeffy said. “The power of the strong spirits of your new brother and sister, they asked Jesus to heal you, and He came and He did. I could feel Him so strong. And these two spirits are so strong. Wow, Tanner family, I once again have to say that I am so honored to know you, and so honored that God has asked me to take care of Gabe. I feel so blessed.” She smiled at the confused look on Gabe’s face. “Look at your chest.”

He looked down and every single bruise was gone. Not even a slight mark was left.

“Jesus told me to tell you all that you have borne witness to His healing of Gabe. That this will help you in the years to come. Remember this day. You saw the bruises. You see that in just a matter of seconds,

they are no more. He was here. He is real. Remember that when your faith is being tested. Share this miracle with everyone you know."

"Let me get an after pic," Daisy said.

Gabe opened his arms and smiled.

Daisy took a picture and looked at it and her mouth opened wide. "You guys, look at this."

Everyone gathered around. In the photo was the slight reflection, in shades of white, of a smiling, bearded man, just above and to the right of Gabe's head. Someone could simply call it an anomaly, but they all knew to not deny God.

Gabe shook his head. "I don't understand. I am so unworthy." He stood. "Thank you, Dr. Kino." He nodded at Cam. "Thanks, Cam."

"Truly our pleasure," Cam replied.

Gabe looked around at his family. "I, uh, I'm sorry, everyone, but I need to go to my room." He didn't wait for permission but just turned and left the room.

Silently, they watched him go.

It was Lizzy who spoke first. "Honey, will you go to him?"

Keegan nodded. "Soon. Give him time. He's processing."

"Yeah, I think I need to process too," Nolan said softly.

"I think we're all gonna need some time to process what just happened," Jeffy offered.

"Even you?" Rose asked. "I mean, you've been at the center of a bunch of miracles, right?"

"I've seen many miracles," Jeffy said with a nod. "And yet, I don't think I'll ever really get used to it. At least not while I'm in human form. It's always such a wonder and such a beautiful thing. It always touches me somewhere deep in my soul in a way I can't describe. It's funny though, I mean, Jesus has shown me time and again that He is real, that God exists, and yet, still, I'm blown away when I see miracles in action."

Keegan nodded. "I think we forget sometimes, how amazing God is, as we go about the daily process of living, doing mundane chores, interacting with our families, changing the oil in the car, cutting the grass, putting up Christmas decorations, cooking breakfast, going to work. We have to take care of the business of being human. But it gets much easier, the burden gets so much lighter, when we see the miracles taking place in our lives and we are given the knowing that God is real. There is a purpose to life."

Jeffy grinned. "Mr. Tanner, you sound so much like my father."

Keegan frowned and looked down. When he looked back up he had tears in his eyes. "That is a beautiful compliment. Maybe I'm doing

something right."

"Oh, Daddy," Violet said. "In our eyes, you do everything right. We love you so much."

He had to clear his throat. "I love you too, kiddos."

Cam smiled. "Awesome moment, Tanners. Thanks for letting Jeffy and me witness it."

Heather smiled at Nolan. "Life around here is never dull."

"I can see that. What a special family I'm marrying into," Nolan said.

Heather nodded. "They are special. Nolan, maybe this is a good time to give them our news."

"What news is that?" Lizzy asked.

Heather gave a sly smile. "Well, ya know the old Buckner ranch five miles east of here?"

"Yes, I do," Lizzy said. "And I happen to know about it because Chaz and Lisa just bought the place."

Heather smiled. "Well, you're right. They did buy the property. And they did it for me."

"What?" Keegan said.

Nolan stepped forward. "When we came here for Jake and Laynah's wedding, Heather got talking to Mrs. Stewart. Heather apparently was always really close to her because of Heather and Melaynah both loving horses so much. And Heather was always wanting to take care of Laynah and was like a big sister to her."

Lizzy nodded. "Right, and..."

Heather giggled. "And when Nolan and I were complaining about having to go back to Tennessee, the Stewarts told us there was land for sale and we could start a ranch right here in Pine Forest."

"At first, we didn't take it seriously," Nolan went on. "I mean, my father's ranch is supposed to be my legacy, but my father and I don't always see eye to eye on how to run things. He'll still give me my inheritance when the time comes, but he dared me to try to strike out and do things on my own like he did, and put my own ideas into practice, and I began to think seriously about doing that."

Keegan and Lizzy eyed each other.

"But you're a veterinarian, right?" Lizzy asked.

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am, but I also help to run my father's ranch. Anyway, so, we talked to Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, and they said they would buy the land before anyone else took it. They didn't want some land developer to get their hands on it. They said we could lease to buy the ranch from them. With mine and Heather's knowledge together, we think

we can make a go of it."

Rose grinned. "That means you're not leaving?"

Heather nodded. "That's exactly what that means. I mean, we'll need to go back up and pack our things, and actually move down here. There's a house on the property but it needs extensive renovations. But we can do it. I know we can. We're not afraid of hard work."

Nolan cleared his throat. "So, after Thanksgiving, we'll go back to Tennessee and pack up Heather's apartment, and my things and we'll be back before Christmas. I'll move into the house and Heather will stay here until we're married. It might be a little tight for a while, but I can do this. I can take care of my wife, and uh, eventually a family."

Keegan sighed. "Heather, you and I need to talk about this privately before you leave."

"Are you upset, Dad?"

"No, not at all. I'm elated that you two are making this decision. However, there are some things you haven't thought of, and I want to discuss them with you. Nolan, when I have her permission to share them with you, I will do so. I just can't openly break a father-daughter confidence. So, don't take offense."

"No, sir, I know you always have your daughter's best interests in mind, so I'm not offended at all."

"Good answer," Rose quipped.

"So then," Keegan began, "have you set a wedding date?"

"Not an exact date, but sometime next summer," Heather replied.

Lizzy sniffed and wiped back the tears. "So, all this means you'll be here to see your new brother and sister grow up."

Heather nodded. "I will. Isn't that amazing! I'm so happy!"

"Me too," Violet said as she and her sisters all squealed and rushed to hug their sister.

Jeffy smiled. "Well, this is wonderful news, indeed."

"Cam, Jeffy," Keegan began. "Thank you for rushing over here so quickly. You always seem to come so fast where Gabe is concerned."

Jeffy nodded. "God told me to take care of Gabe. It's one of my callings, and I do it gladly. He's special. I know you know that. But I can't stress it enough."

"You're pretty special yourself," Lizzy said softly.

"That she is," Cam agreed.

"Well, I guess I'd better get back to my own baby," Jeffy said. She bent down to kiss the cheeks of the two new babies, patted Iris' head and smiled at everyone else. "Okay, Tanner family, guess I'll see you first thing in the morning!"

"It's gonna be so awesome," Rose said happily.
Jeffy nodded. "I think so too."

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Acts 3:16

"By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see."

Chapter Twelve

November 27th, 4:30 PM, Wednesday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe opened his eyes. He'd fallen asleep while he was praying. Reaching for his phone, he yawned as he checked the time. 4:30 PM. He'd slept for about thirty minutes. He was still trying to grasp what had happened. He was healed, instantaneously, a little over an hour ago, healed right in front of everyone's eyes. God sent Dr. Jeffy to look after him and to heal him and to let everyone see it happen. It wasn't the first time he'd been healed. Three months ago, he'd been dying in a hospital from an infection. He'd slipped into a coma. He'd visited Jesus in another place. He didn't know if it was heaven, or just a holding place, but he knew it was beautiful and peaceful and filled with light.

Jesus spoke to him, face to face, and healed him. He also healed Grandmaster Kino. It happened for everyone to see. It was kinda weird. That was a flat-out miracle and it's like, we shrug and just go on with life like it was nothing. It's like living an earthly life with day-to-day living, mundane things, eating, sleeping, working, brushing your teeth or working out, it grounds you. Still, when things get tough, it's good to be able to remember, to keep in mind, that God is real. He's not some airy fairy idea that someone made up. And Gabe knew that he was very blessed to be able to have seen so many miracles.

Rising, he went to take a shower and stood there gazing into the bathroom mirror. His chest had not even one slight bruise on it, not anymore. Running his hand over the skin, he whispered another, "Thank You, Jesus."

After his shower, instead of dressing, he slipped on some pajama bottoms and an old *Pine Forest High School* T-shirt, combed his wet hair out of his face and went in search of his mother because he had a mission to accomplish for the sake of his sisters. She was easy to find because he could hear her singing. He went to stand by his parents' open bedroom door and listened.

"And if that looking glass gets broke, Papa's gonna buy you a billy goat. And if that billy goat won't pull, Papa's gonna buy you a cart and

bull. And if that cart and bull turn over..."

"Daddy's gonna buy you a dog named Rover," Gabe sang softly as he joined his mother in song.

His mom looked over at him and smiled. She had his brother in her arms, his face pointing down as she bounced him softly up and down to the rhythm of the song.

They finished the song together. "And if that dog named Rover won't bark, Daddy's gonna buy you a horse and cart. And if that horse and cart fall down, you'll still be the sweetest little baby in town."

Lizzy softly laid Isaiah in his bassinet, checked on Gentian who was already asleep, and smiled up at her eldest son. "Hey, sweet boy. I love it when you sing with me."

"And I love singing with you, Mom. I will sing with you any ol' time you want."

She nodded and then frowned. "Unless you're not home."

He nodded with a sigh. "Unless that."

"Well, this homecoming for you was not what I had planned at all. I was so excited about you coming home."

"That's okay. I mean, I'm just glad that you're alive and well and so are the babies. It could've had a much worse ending."

She smiled sweetly and patted the bed. "So, come in and talk to me, my sweet little Gabe."

He chuckled at her words and looked around. "Where's Dad?"

"In his office."

"Can we close the door?"

"Sure. Is this really serious?"

"Well, it's important, and right now, Dad can't know."

"Oh. Okay."

Gabe closed the door, and went to each bassinet to get another look at his siblings, then took a seat on the bed. His mother sat in the other plush rocking chair that his father had purchased. One for downstairs and one for this room. He drew a deep breath. "So, Mom, I was invited into a meeting last night with my sisters in Heather's room, and after hearing what they had to say, I promised myself that somehow I would make what they want to happen, happen."

"Okay."

"And to do that, I have to get you to agree to their request. They don't know that I'm talking to you first. So, when they come to make the request, just hear them out."

"Okay— and what's the request?"

Gabe sighed. “Also, last night they said they were gonna talk to you about it, but if you weren’t on board with it, they would shelve it. Because they love you, and honor you, and don’t want to cause you any pain or distress.”

“Okay, Gabe, you’re starting to scare me.”

“I’m just saying all that first because what they want might upset you and I guess I’m asking you to stay calm and hear them out, or like, hear me out.”

Lizzy’s brow furrowed. “And this is a secret from your dad, and the girls don’t know that you’re in here talking to me.”

“Right.”

“And you wanna talk to me about something they want from me.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, right, but it’s not a physical thing.”

“Maybe you’d better just spit it out.”

He nodded and went on to explain the whole conversation his sisters had the night before. When he finished, his mother’s eyes were wide and they did indeed fill with tears like he knew they would.

“Mom,” Gabe said softly. “Please don’t be upset. They don’t mean to hurt you. They will abide by anything you say.”

“It’s not that, Gabe,” Lizzy said as she sniffed back the tears. “It’s just that I had no idea they felt that way. But I should have known. How selfish of me. They’re right. I left them with their father’s name to continue mourning him their whole lives, while I moved on to marry your father and changed my name to Tanner. And of course they felt left out. Though, your dad and I felt we were doing the right thing to honor Bradley, a good man who died trying to save other men, we were instead punishing our daughters. I’m so stupid, so blind. How could I have not seen?”

“I knew you were gonna feel that way, because I felt that way. I also wondered how did I not freakin’ see this? I felt guilty. And I knew if I felt guilty that you and Dad are gonna feel guilty.”

Lizzy nodded as she wiped at her tears.

“I don’t know how to comfort you about this, Mom. I mean, I can get what you and Dad were thinking so I can defend it. It wasn’t a punishment. The girls said they *had* to continue to mourn their dad, but I realize you and Dad didn’t have them keep the Anderson name to mourn him. It was to honor him, and I think that distinction needs to be made. It wasn’t a punishment.”

“No, it wasn’t, and I hate that they feel like it was such a burden.”

Gabe nodded. “So, Mom, the thing I was gonna ask you to do is, when they come to you about it, don’t turn them down.”

“I won’t,” she said as she grabbed another tissue.

"And, they're gonna feel bad that you're like, what's the word, distressed I guess. They're gonna feel bad that you're so distressed and that will add to their trauma, so, yeah, maybe tell them you're sorry you didn't realize it, and then give them permission, but like, don't get all emotional, because they'll feel really bad that they made you upset."

Lizzy cried harder. "Oh, Gabe, you're so smart."

He shook his head. "Not so much. And in that meeting last night I felt bad, and I felt guilty, and I thought my sisters thought that I've kind of lorded it over them all this time, since I was a Tanner and they weren't."

"Oh, no," Lizzy said as another wave of tears started.

"But they said they didn't ever feel that way. And I hope they're not just sayin' that so that I won't feel bad." He took a deep breath. "Anyway, so, they're gonna ask you if it's okay to ask Dad if he'll adopt them."

"Okay, and do you know when they want to ask me?"

"No, I just know they wanted to do it ASAP. That's why I didn't want to waste any time talking to you about it, because they may even come and ask you as early as tonight and I wanted to prepare you and make sure you won't be angry and make sure you say 'yes.'"

She nodded and sniffed again. "Of course I wouldn't be angry, and of course, I will say yes. Thank you, sweetie, for coming to tell me this." She shook her head. "All this time, they've been hurting all this time." She broke into another crying jag.

"Mom, I am so sorry that I upset you."

"Gabriel Tanner, what is goin' on here?"

Gabe and Lizzy both looked up as Keegan came into the room.

"Oh, hi, Dad," Gabe muttered. He looked quickly at his mother to remind her that it would be a surprise for his father when the girls ask him. "Um, I had to talk to Mom about some things."

"You know she just got home from the hospital today?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know she just gave birth to two babies?"

"Yes, sir. I was right there when it happened."

His eyes narrowed at the slightly sarcastic retort.

Gabe's eyes grew wide. "I, uh, didn't mean that like it sounded."

Keegan gave a slight nod. "And knowing that your mom just gave birth, and knowing that her emotions are gonna be a little out of whack, you still felt like you should talk to her about whatever it was that has her so upset?"

Gabe blinked, and glanced at his mother. "I'm sorry, Mom. Sorry, Dad. I guess the timing is a little off."

"Oh, sweetie, it's okay," Lizzy said.

"It is not okay," Keegan insisted.

Gabe sighed. "I'm sorry, Dad. It was important, and it couldn't wait."

"What was so important that it can't wait?"

Gabe's face paled. "Um, I mean, it's like, personal."

Keegan stood for several seconds and finally blew out a breath. "Fine. Well, I'd appreciate if you didn't upset your mother at this special time."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir." He schooled his emotions so that his father wouldn't see his anguish.

Keegan did notice, however, and he sighed. "Gabe, maybe I'm a little on edge. Sorry if I came on too strong. We almost lost your mom, we almost lost Rose, and we almost lost you again today, and I think I need to get my own emotions under control."

"Sorry, Dad, to cause you so much trouble. I don't know how to make it stop, other than kowtow to the demons, and you know I can't do that."

"Yes, son, I know."

"Well, I guess I'll go down and see what's for dinner."

"We were loaded down with casseroles today," Lizzy said quickly. "Take your pick of them. They're on the counter. Try all of them if you want. Y'all just make sure they're put away before you go to bed."

"Are you and Dad gonna come down and eat?"

"Yes, of course," Keegan said.

"Can Taylor come over?"

"Absolutely," Lizzy said. "I can't wait to see her."

"She was here the day I got home," Gabe supplied.

"Oh, well, I didn't really notice who was here," Lizzy said. "Please ask her to come, and her mom too. But that's about all the company I can take right now."

"Well, if you're gonna ask Taylor and Bree, then ask Ricky too, because he won't let them come alone anyway," Keegan said.

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And don't worry about company, sweetheart. All you have to do is come downstairs and sit and eat. We'll take care of everything. And if you want me to, I'll carry you down."

She smiled. "It's okay. Jeffy says that walking slowly will help my back to heal."

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November 27th, 5:15 PM, Wednesday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jordan sat at the breakfast table talking quietly with her brother and sister about the new puppies and just how adorable they are. She was

thinking about her discussion with Lily, who right now was working side by side with Jordan's mother and the Inn kitchen staff, as they prepared a giant meal for the guests.

Both Lily and Jordan's mom knew exactly what they wanted to do in life. Actually, Jordan knew too, she was just apprehensive about admitting it. Was she lazy? Was she slothful? Was she unmotivated? What was wrong with her? She was worried that maybe she was falling into what happened back when she was fourteen and ended up missing a whole year of school. She was told it was a form of depression. Post-traumatic depression. Was it happening all over again? She looked up when the Inn front doors opened and the guys all came back from playing football.

She turned and smiled at Three as he came through the door. He headed straight to her. His nose and cheeks were pink. "Hey, Three! How was football?"

"It was cold." He bent down and kissed her.

She put her hands on his cheeks. "Oh, you really are cold! What's the temperature?"

He pulled out his phone. "It's not so bad. Says it's only thirty-nine degrees right now, but it feels colder than that."

"The humidity makes it feel colder," John Appel said as he headed into the kitchen. "I'm gonna see if my Jodi has some hot cider or hot cocoa ready."

"You know I do," Jodi said with a grin as she came out of the kitchen with a tray of mugs.

Everyone gathered around.

"The cider is only apple cider. It's non-alcoholic," Jodi explained. "But it's yummy!"

Everyone grabbed a mug. Young Eric grabbed two and took one to Jordan. "Here ya go, babe. I thought you'd want the chocolate."

She nodded. "Thanks."

He frowned. "You okay?"

Jordan nodded. "Um, Three, can we talk?"

"Talk? Sure. What about?"

"We need to find a private place."

Young Eric frowned but nodded. "Okay. Just a minute." He took a giant swallow of his cider and went into the kitchen.

"Miss Jodi?"

"Yes, sir, young Eric, whatcha need?"

"Um, aren't a few of the cottages empty?"

She nodded.

"I was wondering if maybe I could get the key to one of them so Jordan and I could go and have a private talk."

"A talk, huh?" she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

He glanced around at others in the kitchen and looked down. "Yes, ma'am. I mean, really. She's a little down and wants to have a long, private talk."

Jodi nodded. "I was just teasing."

Ms. Brooks turned. "Is she okay?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. I think it's just boyfriend/girlfriend type stuff."

Jodi smiled. "Well, talking it out is always good. How about cottage number three. Isn't that what Jordan calls you?"

He smiled and nodded.

"Can you grab the key from the front counter, in the middle drawer, and the slot marked..."

"I'm guessing it's marked 'three'," he said with a grin.

She giggled. "So smart, this one."

"Thanks, Miss Jodi."

"No worries, oh, and take the keys to the golf cart. Take the green one. So, Jordan won't have to walk."

"Awesome, thanks again, Miss Jodi."

"You're so very welcome. Inside the cottage the thermostat is on the wall to the left of the door. Oh, and dinner will be ready in about an hour."

"Yes, ma'am."

Young Eric went back to Jordan and nodded at her. "Finish up your hot chocolate, we're goin' out." He took another big gulp of his cider and placed the mug on the table, and quickly went to grab the keys. Jordan finished her hot chocolate and he took both mugs to the kitchen. He then helped Jordan put on her coat and they headed out the door. They got on the cart and drove the short distance to Cottage #3.

Eric helped Jordan up the two steps to the tiny front porch of the cottage and opened the door.

"Wow, this place is so adorable," she said. "It's like a tiny little fairy home. I love it."

Eric smiled, went immediately to the thermostat and cranked up the heat, then turned and helped her take off her coat. He sat her down on the small sofa and sat next to her, but turned slightly, so he could see her.

Before he said a thing, he leaned over, took her face in his hands and kissed her softly, warmly, for several seconds. He pulled back with a smile. "Okay, babe, what's up?"

She nodded, swallowed, and drew a deep breath. "I, um, today, I had a long talk with Lily, while we were waiting to go into the gym."

He nodded. “Yes, I saw you two talking.”

“She’s just the nicest person.”

He nodded. “She’s always been super sweet.”

Jordan smiled. “Yeah, she said if we lived closer together, she and I would probably be best friends. I really like her.”

“Okay.”

“And she told me that I should tell you the things that she and I talked about. Well, she said I should tell you, or your father, or your grandfather or your mom.”

“This sounds serious,” he murmured.

She nodded.

“Jordan, are you about to break up with me?”

“What? No! Of course not. But...”

“But?”

She blinked up at him. “But– well, I mean, you might be about to break up with me.”

“Nope. Not ever.”

She shook her head. “What if I had an affair with another guy?”

His eyes opened wide. “Wow, well, that hurts, but I still wouldn’t break up with you. Who are we talking about?”

“Who?”

“Who are you having an affair with?”

“I’m not, silly, that was just an example.”

“Whew,” he said with a smile.

She rolled her eyes at him.

He shrugged. “Okay, so, Lily suggested you talk to someone about whatever it is you spoke to her about, and you chose me?”

She nodded.

“Okay, then, talk to me, babe.”

She sighed, looked up into his eyes and looked down, wringing her hands together.

“Jordan, are you afraid to tell me something?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Well, you know I would never, ever hurt you, right?”

“Yes. I’m not afraid because I thought you’d hurt me.”

“So, then, just spill it.”

She nodded. “I’m trying.”

“Jordan, have your feelings for me changed?”

She shook her head. “My feelings for you would never change, except for they grow stronger every day. But your feelings for me might change.”

"Why? I just told you I wouldn't leave you even if you got with someone else."

"But your feelings might change because— I've changed."

He was silent. Looked into her eyes. "How have you changed?"

She drew a deep breath. "Remember when we first met? And you liked me and some of the reasons you liked me I think, were because I had my act together. I was going to school, I'd earned a scholarship, I was an athlete, I was going to open a wellness clinic using Dr. Kino's protocols, I was helping my mom and siblings the best I could. I was doing things."

She got silent so he tried to prod her on. "Okay, and so, how have you changed?"

"I don't know if I can explain it. I wanted to go to college and open a clinic mostly because I thought it was something worthwhile, and something I could do to honor my father. And it sounded like a really like, commendable thing to do. And I knew I had to do something, I mean, something to earn money, to help my mom, and to support myself. But then, things started to happen, like, things with Peter, and you got taken, and Josie got taken, and my priorities and perspectives began to change."

He nodded. "And don't forget that you yourself also went through quite a bit of trauma."

She nodded. "Yes, I did. And now, I don't even know if I'm gonna be able to rehab and play softball, which means I'd lose my scholarship, which means I can't go to school."

"Jordan, we *will* rehab that foot and you *will* be able to play softball. But, if you lose your scholarship, I'll just pay your way through college."

She shook her head. "That's just it, Three. I don't even know if I still want to go to college. Or maybe if I do still go, I might end up changing my major. Or, well, I just don't know. I've realized that I'm not as smart as I thought I was."

"Jordan, you are highly intelligent."

She shook her head. "I'm really not. I've really struggled with my grades this first semester."

"Well, babe, you've had a whole lot goin' on."

She sighed. "Still, I just don't know if my heart is in it. I asked Lily if maybe I should just keep going, work my way through it, force myself to do it, even though I'm thinking I want to go down a different path."

"And what did she say?" Eric asked.

"She gave an emphatic 'no.' She said never ever force yourself to do something that you truly don't want to do, or that your heart isn't truly into, just to please or impress someone else."

"Okay. I agree with that– pretty much, or to a certain extent. Unless

it's just fear holding you back. Like, being out of your comfort zone. Then you do need to force yourself to get past the fear. Anyway, so, what is it you want to do?"

Jordan's eyes grew wide. She'd told Lily that she just wanted to be with Eric. Take care of him. Be a mother to his children. Marry him. But he hadn't asked her yet, so, how could she tell him that?

"Jordan?"

"I, uh, I can't really tell you that right now."

"Why not? I feel like I can tell *you* anything."

"Because, well, for now you'll just have to accept that I can't tell you right now."

"Ooookaaay." He frowned and then shrugged. "So then, what is there to talk about? You don't want to go to college? Don't go." He said the words softly, not harshly, because he knew her emotions were tender.

Jordan sighed. "But if I don't go, will you think less of me? Will your opinion of me go down?"

He shrugged. "It depends. I mean, we all have to progress in life. Going to college doesn't have to be the way to do that, especially not anymore. But, if you start playing video games and pig out on cold pizza and binge watch TV series, then we may have to have a little come-to-Jesus talk."

She gave a soft laugh.

"But you know I'm just teasing. So, tell me, Jordan, if you don't go to college, what would you like to do instead?"

Again, she couldn't tell him what she was thinking. She sighed. "Well, the main thing, I already said, I can't tell you, but, I mean, I do want to learn things."

"Like what?"

"Like, I want to learn how to cook. I want to learn about good nutrition, like Jeffy teaches in her books. I want to learn about martial arts and other forms of physical conditioning. I want to learn about gardening. I want to learn about the Bible and about God and Jesus. I do want to learn how to speak and write properly."

"I think you do that well already. But Jordan, all those things you just mentioned, those are awesome goals."

She nodded. "But I wish I could learn them without going to college."

"You can. Look, you seem to have a thing about college. Now, that could be because you experienced trauma there. Trauma at the frat house, trauma when you were attacked. But if the thought of college is really distasteful to you, that's not a big deal. Don't go. Lately college is nothing

more than indoctrination camps anyway, because Satan is working really hard on the young people of this world.

"Still, information, the things you want to learn are available to you in all kinds of formats. From private study courses, to private seminars or webinars, to online tutoring, in-person tutoring, tech schools. And of course, as far as the martial arts, Granddad has already offered to teach you. That's the best you can get in that area. And Jeffy can give you her books and she could teach you some things, answer any questions you have. When she designed her protocols, she made it easy enough so that everyone could read and study and put two and two together."

"Even dummies like me?"

"Stop saying that. Jordan. You're not dumb. You struggled a little with math. That's not dumb. Lots of people struggle with math. So, babe, don't go to college. That doesn't make me think less of you."

She sighed. "But then again," Jordan began anew. "I do so love to play softball and I so much wanted you to see me play. I mean, I saw you train and become the Kino Challenge Champion. You were magnificent. I will never forget the images of you working out to failure and then keeping on going. I wanted to show you that I was really good too, at what I did. I was an awesome pitcher. And not bad as a hitter either."

"I totally believe you and I love to see you do both, so, let's rehab that foot and get you back on the diamond."

She nodded.

He raised his eyebrows. "But, that means you have to go back to school and keep your grades up."

She nodded with a frown. "So, maybe if I do *that*, I could at least change my major."

"Yeah, or you don't have to choose a major at all. Just study the liberal arts. Not the *liberal* arts, but the liberal arts," he said with a laugh.

"But what if I'm unable to get back on the field?"

"Okay, well, we can devise a backup plan. Either way, Jordan, I will be here for you. I am not leaving you. I'm here for the long run."

"I guess I'm feeling kind of ashamed, because I had my life somewhat together and now it feels like it's falling apart, or like I'm falling apart."

"It might feel that way, but I guarantee you're gonna feel a lot better about yourself once you're literally back on your feet. Think of JoJo. He's a little at loose ends right now. Once he regains use of his arm, he'll feel more like himself. And right now, do you think less of him?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not."

He raised his eyebrows at her.

She sighed.

He nodded. “I have to say, though, Two-three, that I’m concerned that there are things you don’t feel you can tell me. But rather than feel sorry for myself about that, I’m gonna encourage you to talk to Mom, or Dad, or Granddad or your own mom about those things.”

She nodded. “Maybe I will. And really, it’s not that I can’t tell you. I just can’t tell you— right now.”

“Then when?”

She smiled. “I’m not sure, but once I tell you, you’ll understand why I had to wait.”

He sighed, looked her over and took her hands. “Babe, you do know I love you?”

She offered a slight smile and nodded.

“And you know how beautiful you are?”

She sighed, unsure of what to answer. Because she was definitely feeling inferior lately.

“Jordan, I don’t know what’s been going through your head. So, let me just say, babe, you are so very beautiful. Your gorgeous blond hair, your perfect face, those gray, stormy eyes, your beautiful lips and smile, that killer athlete’s body. It’s all I can do to not pick you up and take you back to that bedroom.”

She smiled at the thought. “You’re pretty perfect yourself, with your dark brown hair, your handsome face, those big brown eyes, that gorgeous mouth and that killer athlete’s body.”

He nodded, rose quickly, scooped her up and took her back to the bedroom.

“Oh my goodness,” she said breathlessly. “Are we really gonna do this?”

“Am I really gonna kiss you? Yes. Yes I am. I promise I won’t go any further, because that’s how much I love you.”

He laid her on the bed, eased down beside her, turned toward her and took her mouth fiercely.

Jordan moaned. She’d needed this closeness. Needed to feel his heart beat close to hers. She needed him so badly and didn’t know how she was ever gonna live without him. The need was so strong that her eyes filled with tears and spilled over.

“Baby, why are you crying?” he asked softly.

She sniffed back the tears. “Because, Three, I love you so much. I can’t hold it in. I love you and I’m so blessed to have you in my life, and like, thank you, God, for bringing us together. Thank You for my tire goin’ flat. Thank You that I fell and Eric saw me. Thank You, thank You,

thank You, God. Thank You that he's so strong. Thank You that he treats me so well. Thank You that he's so close to You, God. Just thank You."

Eric rolled toward her and looked down at her lovely face. He gently wiped away the tears. "And thank You, Father God, for Jordan, for finding me the perfect companion to spend my life with, and for bringing her to me now, so early, while we're young, because that gives us even more time to be together. How blessed are we for that? Thank You that she's survived some pretty horrific attacks. Several within only a few months. And bless her, Father, heal her, Father, physically and emotionally. Wrap her in Your loving arms, Father, in Jesus' mighty name."

"Amen," Jordan whispered.

He kissed her again, then rolled off and pulled her close to him.

"This feels so right," he murmured.

"It does," she agreed as she closed her eyes and snuggled up to his rock-hard body. Their eyes closed in perfect bliss and relaxation.

It was the pounding on the door that jolted Eric awake.

"Oh, shoot, we must've fallen asleep."

Eric ran to the door and opened it to his father.

"Dad, sorry, we fell asleep."

"Do you have your phones turned off?"

Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. It was a serious discussion."

Ricky was texting and nodding his head. He finally looked back up at his son. "Well, we're all glad to know that you two are okay."

"Dad, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make everyone worry."

"Hey, it happens. So, dinner is ready."

"Will you tell them to start without us? We'll be on our way. I need to go wake Jordan."

"They have started without you. Come on back as soon as you can. So, is everything okay?"

Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. I guess. I told Jordan she might need to counsel with you or Mom or Granddad. She has some problems that she says she can't discuss with me."

"Okay. Hmm, I'll have your mom feel her out."

"Thanks, Dad."

Ricky turned to leave. "You two head inside, your mom, Taylor and I are gonna go see the Tanners."

"Oh, well, lucky you. Okay, we're on our way."

"Don't feel left out. Lizzy only felt like she could handle a few extra people her first night home, and Gabe wanted Taylor, and Lizzy wanted your mom, and of course, I couldn't let them go alone."

Young Eric smiled. "I don't feel left out. But Jordan and I are gonna

make plans to go to that little nursery at the Center tomorrow and get a look at the new babies."

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November 27th, 9:00 PM, Wednesday Night

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lizzy and her five grown daughters turned at the soft knock on the door. "Just a minute," Lizzy called.

"I'm not sure that I like being locked out of my own bedroom," Keegan warned.

Giggling, Lily rushed to the door and opened it. "Sorry, Daddy. Girl talk, ya know."

He nodded. "I get it, but it's been a long day for your mom, for all of you, really, and I want everyone in bed within the next five minutes. We have a huge, very long and very hard day tomorrow."

"Okay, we're going," Violet said as she came forward and kissed her father's cheek. "Goodnight, Daddy. I love you so much."

"Good night, Vi, I love you too."

One by one, all five girls kissed his cheek, confessed their love, and left the room. Heather was the last. She kissed Keegan's cheek, and then stood there looking into his eyes.

"Daddy, I know I'm getting older and about to get married, but I will always, always be your little girl. I hope that's okay."

His brows rose. "Okay? I hope it's okay that I will always think of you as my little girl."

She gave a soft laugh. "That's more than okay with me." She frowned. "About what you said earlier today, needing to talk to me. Can you give me a hint of what you wanted to talk to me about? I mean, the curiosity might keep me from being able to sleep."

He smiled. "I was going to remind you that your mother and I have set a very nice nest egg aside for each of you girls. And those nest eggs have grown considerably. Whatever you need to buy that land, you actually already have. Though, I don't want you to spend your money frivolously, it will relieve some stress and pressure to know that it's there as you enter into your new endeavors in building a ranch. This is your money. But in a good marriage, you will decide together with your husband, where and when it should be spent."

"Daddy, I knew you had money put away for us, but I completely forgot about it. How much is it?"

He smiled. "It's a few million. And before you start spending it in your head, we need to have a serious in-depth discussion about finances."

She nodded. “Yes, sir.” She threw her arms around him. “Thank you, Daddy. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Heather. Now, get some sleep.”

She frowned. “One more thing, Dad. Do you think that you love me as much as you love Iris?”

He frowned. “What in the world? What are you talking about? Of course I do. Why would you ask that?”

Heather glanced past her father to where her mother sat on the bed, dabbing at her eyes. Her mom smiled at her.

She sighed. “Just making sure. I mean, I’m not your blood daughter.”

“You are my daughter, Heather. Blood or not. You are mine and I love you with all that’s in me.”

She smiled. “Okay, you just remember that.” She quickly ran out of the bedroom.

Keegan turned to look at his wife. “What was that all about? Do the girls think I don’t love them? Is that what you were all in here whispering about? Because if that’s the case, I’m gonna go get every single one of them and give them a talking to.”

Lizzy giggled. “No, it’s not like that. It’s Thanksgiving time, and as they’re thinking about what they’re thankful for, they’re just realizing how much they love you, Keegan. They always have. Ever since that first day with you in that hospital bed in our home up in Tyler Springs.”

He nodded as he undressed. “Good times. Hard times. And I love them too, since that first day. You know that, right?”

She smiled. “I do. And Keegan, what you just told Heather, a few million? It’s more than that.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but she doesn’t need to know that right now.”

Lizzy nodded in understanding and then smiled. “Gotcha. Now, you come over here and cuddle with me before the babies want to nurse again, because I love you too.”

He climbed into bed and pulled her close. “Just a few days away from you and it feels like it’s been months.”

“Let’s make up for lost time,” she whispered.

“Great idea,” he said as he kissed his wife.

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November 28th, 6:00 AM, Thanksgiving Day

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Heather, Rose, Violet, Daisy and Lily sat around the kitchen table. They’d already had breakfast. Gabe was standing at the counter, gobbling down another breakfast muffin, anxiously awaiting his father to come downstairs. Iris was in her booster chair at the kitchen table, drinking her

juice and carefully putting it down because it had no top on it because she insisted she was a big girl now. Lizzy was busy loading a diaper bag with essentials for the day. They all looked up when they heard their father's footsteps on the stairs.

He got to the kitchen and stopped. "Well! Good morning, everyone! I was thinking everything was so quiet, I'm gonna have to go around and pull everyone out of bed."

"Good morning, Dad," Gabe chirped. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Morning, Daddy," the girls all greeted.

"Your breakfast is ready, Dad. It's a big day so you have to eat a good breakfast," Heather said.

Keegan nodded. He looked around with a puzzled look on his face. "Have I walked into the Twilight Zone?"

They giggled.

"I usually have to convince the rest of you to eat breakfast. What's going on?"

"Eat first, Daddy, and then we want to talk to you a minute."

He glanced at the time.

"We have time because we're all ready to walk out the door," Lizzy said. "And the babies are ready too. I'll just need your help to get them into their car seats."

Keegan nodded. "Well, this is a nice treat. Okay, what's for breakfast?"

Rose set a plate of eggs and gravy biscuits in front of him.

"Looks delicious."

Everyone pointed at Lily.

"Actually, Lily," Keegan said. "What are *you* doing here?"

She smiled. "I actually took the morning off. Jewell said she could cover for me."

He closed his eyes and blessed his food, then took a bite and sighed with pleasure. "So, why would you need Jewell to cover for you? What's the special occasion? Because it's Thanksgiving?"

"No. I needed to be here for this little talk we're about to have."

He looked from face to face. "Well, no one looks like they're dreading the talk, so, is this good news?"

"Eat, Daddy, and we'll tell you."

He made quick work of his breakfast while the family spoke about the exciting day to come. He finally finished, which only took a few minutes though it seemed to the girls like he was eating in slow motion. Rose took his plate away and asked him if he needed anything else.

He shook his head. “No. Now, what’s up?”

It was Heather who began. “So, Dad, as you know, Nolan and I are getting married sometime this next summer. About six or seven or maybe even eight months from now.”

“Yes, and where is Nolan? He’s been here every morning so far.”

“He’s giving our family some privacy,” Heather replied. “Daddy, I love you. We all love you so much. My sisters have given me permission to speak for them in what I’m about to say, or, actually, in what I’m about to ask of you.”

Keegan looked around the table at the five angelic faces who all looked so much like their mother. They used to be five little cherubs. Now, they truly looked just like their mother at the time that he’d met her. He looked into the eyes of each girl and saw nothing but love. He glanced up at Gabe, who wasn’t sitting at the table, but standing, apparently on his phone. Keegan smiled and nodded. “Go on.”

Heather smiled and drew a deep breath. “Dad, you’ve been the best dad ever. The best father any girl could ever ask for. You take such good care of us. We love that we feel so safe and secure when you’re around, and even when you’re not around because you’ve taught us so well. We know you love us and care about us. You show that every day. You work so hard, tirelessly, into the night, and then get up earlier than everyone. You don’t yell at us because your discipline comes from a place of calmness and love and a sense of responsibility. I wouldn’t, we wouldn’t even know all those things except you’ve been such a good teacher in what we should look for in our own choice of mates.”

She stopped and looked around. “You’ve made us feel like we truly belong to you.”

His brow furrowed. “That’s because you do.”

She nodded. “We do, and you’ve given us everything we could ever want except for one thing. It’s something you gave our mom, it’s something you gave Gabe, and Iris, and Gentian, and Isaiah.”

He looked around again. Lizzy was also on her phone, taking pictures, and she had tears running down her face.

“Daddy, you’re the only father we’ve ever known. I can’t remember my biological father. Neither can my sisters. Dad, I know you honor him by having us keep his name, we understand the sentiment behind it. We also understand that when you met Mom, you were presented with an instant family and you didn’t feel like you should come and assert yourself. But Daddy, we feel like we’ve honored our biological father long enough. We want to honor you. We want to be a full part of this family. And we want you to give us the one thing that we really crave, and that

is—your name."

She stopped because her father's eyes immediately moistened. He cleared his throat, and shook his head slowly, trying to get control of his emotions. This show of emotion made Heather immediately start to cry. She looked around at her sisters who all were crying.

She sniffed back the tears. "Mom, she got to change her name to Tanner, like eighteen years ago. Our other siblings were born Tanners," she said, now sobbing, "and Daddy, we just wanted to ask you if you would consider, I mean, would you adopt us?"

He raised his head and looked from face to face. "My flowers," he said softly, his voice breaking. "My sweet girls, I would be so honored to legally adopt you, to give you my name." He stood and held out his arms and all five girls stood and rushed into them.

Gabe, still on his phone, watched through the lens as he videoed, tears running down his face as well. Lizzy continued taking pictures.

The girls finally backed away again. Keegan glanced at his wife. "I'm guessing you've discussed this with your mom and she's okay with it?"

"Yes, sir," Heather said. "She's all for it. You see, Dad, I'll be sending out wedding invitations this next year sometime, and I so wanted my invitation to say 'Keegan and Elizabeth Tanner request the honor of your presence at the wedding of their daughter, Heather Tanner, to Nolan Sawyer, etcetera.' It means the world to me."

Keegan stood back and placed his hands on Heather's shoulders. "Heather, the legal adoption process takes a month or two, but I want to announce to you that from this moment forward, you are Heather Tanner."

"Oh, Daddy," she said as he hugged her hard.

He let go and turned to Rose and held his arms out. "And you, Rose, from this moment forward, are Rose Tanner."

Rose nodded as her eyes filled with tears. She hugged her father.

Keegan then turned to Violet. "And you, my lovely young lady, are now Violet Tanner."

She hugged him hard and laid her head against his chest. "I love you, Daddy. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure," he murmured. He set her away and turned to Lily. "From now on, you are Lily Tanner."

She sniffed and nodded and hugged him. "I love you so much, Daddy. I didn't realize how happy this would make me feel."

"Love you too, baby girl." He turned and smiled at Daisy. "Come here, sweet girl." He smiled as she came to him. "You are now Daisy Tanner, from this moment forward."

Daisy nodded and sniffed. She stepped forward and gently laid her head on his chest. “I love you so much, Daddy,” she whispered.

“I love you too, sweetheart.”

Iris smacked her spoon down on the table. “And I am now Iwis Tanner,” she yelled, making everyone laugh.

Keegan smiled at her. “Yes, you are, my little flower girl. Give Daddy a kiss,” he said as he leaned down and puckered up.

She gave him a kiss making a huge smacking sound.

“And Mom,” Heather began. “I want you to know how much we appreciate you understanding and agreeing so quickly. We thought talking to you about it would be much harder.”

Lizzy chuckled. “Well, girls, I have to be honest. It would’ve been a little harder, but your brother came to me first to prepare me for your presentation. He wanted to be sure that I would have no problem with it.”

Everyone turned to look at Gabe. He shrugged. “I, uh, wasn’t trying to intrude. I just wanted to make sure you got what you wanted and I knew Mom would feel bad about not giving you the Tanner name when you told her how much it meant to you and how you wanted it all this time, so, I thought I’d better pave the way.”

“All this time?” Keegan asked.

Gabe nodded. “Yeah, apparently, they’ve always felt left out.”

Keegan shook his head. “I didn’t realize that. I thought you wanted to honor your father. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Dad, Mom, don’t worry about that. We understood,” Daisy said. “We were not like, all traumatized or anything like that.”

Keegan nodded and then looked up at Gabe. “So, son, when I reprimanded you last night for upsetting your mom, you were talking to her about this?”

Gabe hung his head. “Uh, yes, sir. Sorry. I knew it was gonna happen fast and I knew I needed to explain it to Mom. I know the timing was bad with her just getting home from the hospital.”

“Gabe, I’m the one who’s sorry. I misjudged you. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“No need for all that, Dad. I love the way you always protect Mom, even from us rotten kids.”

Lizzy laughed. “There is nothing rotten about my kids. You’re all just the best.”

“And it’s getting too sugary for me,” Rose said. “Besides, it’s time to leave. Let’s get going. We have a big day and I don’t wanna be late.”

Keegan nodded. “Okay, then, back to business. But quick family prayer first. We need to bless this day.”

They stood in a circle, clasped hands, and Keegan led them in a prayer of thanksgiving, a blessing of protection, and a request for wisdom as they served and ministered to five thousand of God's children.

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Psalm 128:1-4

"Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him.
You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity
will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within
your house; your children will be like olive shoots
around your table. Yes, this will be the blessing
for the man who fears the Lord."

Chapter Thirteen

November 28th, 10:00 AM, Thanksgiving Day
Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

The Center was filled with the most amazing aromas. Roasted turkey and chicken, stuffing, mashed potatoes, yeast rolls and dozens more fixin's. In one hour, doors would open and the first people would begin arriving. Some of them from right here in Pine Forest. The meal wasn't just for homeless people, but people who are struggling financially, families out of work, the widowed or elderly who are alone. No one would be turned away.

Not all the volunteers were here yet. They would arrive in shifts as the center became busier and busier. Except all of the Tanners, Kinos, Adams, Appels, Stewarts, Wallaces, Brooks, and Murphys were present as were Jericho and his five employees and the Mayor, and Sheriff Tyson and his family, and fifty Ameritech agents who'd been invited to bring their families so that they wouldn't be away from their families on Thanksgiving Day. Isla August and her camera crew were also present. And soon other news stations would be arriving.

Everyone present had worked hard all morning and were now gathered in the gym to pray together and to bless the event.

Rose looked the group over. They all looked so nice in their pretty purple aprons. The aprons were worn by all the volunteers so that a person attending the event could easily identify someone who could help them if they needed anything or if they had a question. Each person wore a little stick-on name tag. Rose smiled. They all looked so sharp.

They stood in a large huddle, resting their hands on the shoulder of the ones in front of them. Grandmaster Kino, who stood in the center, was handed a microphone and he began to pray, and the room became hushed as his voice seemed to resonate around the walls and into each of their hearts. The Spirit was strong this day. Rose recognized that Grandmaster Kino prayed for pretty much the same thing her father had prayed for in their home this morning. She smiled. She loved it. She loved God. She loved these people. She loved the people who were coming. Her whole being seemed to be filled with love and compassion and well,

thanksgiving, and the tears came again.

When she heard more sniffs, she realized she wasn't the only one, which thrilled her. They hadn't even opened the doors yet and hearts were already being touched. The prayer ended with loud 'amens' and the mic was handed back to Rose. "Thank you so much, Grandmaster Kino. You never fail to bring the Spirit in. Now everyone, don't run off, we wanna get a picture and we have one more little item of business we need to take care of, since we're here, all together, all of our families that Grandmaster Kino likes to call God's warriors. So, if you'll all spread out a little and put the little ones in front, and you too, Mom, since you're in the wheelchair holding the babies, you be in front too."

Once several pictures had been taken, Jordan was asked to step out of line and come forward, something about her crutches being in the way. They had her come sit in a chair out in front of everyone. She made a face but still did as ordered, feeling a little confused and a little embarrassed. JoJo and Logan and Gabe and Brody were smiling and laughing and pushed young Eric out of the line and handed him the microphone.

Young Eric stumbled out to stand beside Jordan. He righted himself, held the microphone to his lips and began to speak. "Hey, everyone, so, I wanted to do this with the people I love most in the world present. Actually, not all of them are here, but we have some video calls goin' right now. Gabe, who do you have?"

He held up his phone. "I have the Davises."

"Uncle Joey, who do you have?"

"I have the Lees, they're all together, Justin, Lori, Jason, Angel, Kimmie and Jensen and new little baby Jay."

"Cool. Logan, who do you have?"

"I have Melody and her whole family."

"Awesome and JoJo, were you able to get Alec and Desi?"

JoJo held up his phone. "They're right here."

"Fantastic. Okay, so, everyone, I wanted to tell you a little bit about my girlfriend, Jordan Brooks." He turned to face her and smiled at the look of confusion and shock on her reddening face.

He laughed and then the smile disappeared as he got serious. "Jordan here, is the love of my life. I love her more than my own life. She has totally and completely stolen my heart. It wasn't just a coincidence that she had a flat tire on the highway and I saw her and stopped to help. It happened exactly as it was supposed to happen. I used a few pickup lines," he said with a smile, making everyone chuckle, "and got her to come to my mother's and Taylor's birthday party. She was hesitant. I think she

actually compared me to Ted Bundy." He stopped again while everyone laughed. "Still, I think I knew that very day, that Jordan was perfect. She was perfect for me in every way. Beautiful inside and out. Funny. Smart," he said pointedly at her.

Jordan softly shook her head.

"Her sweet spirit is so strong. And I know she too, is one of God's warriors. She didn't know God when I first met her, but she knows Him now. And her heart is so full of love and kindness and a yearning to be close to God," he smiled, "and close to me, and who could object to that?"

The crowd laughed.

"And I wanna be close to her. Not just now, but for always."

He nodded at JoJo. "Bro, hand your phone off and come hold the mic for me."

JoJo handed his phone to his father and came and held the mic to young Eric's mouth. Young Eric turned to Jordan, pulled a velvet box from his pocket and knelt in front of her where she sat in the chair.

Her eyes and mouth were both open wide, and her face was a lovely shade of pink.

"Jordan Brooks, I know we're young. I'm gonna be twenty-one in a few weeks and you're only nineteen. But I spoke to your mom and..."

"You did?"

He nodded with a smile. "Of course. I had to clear any obstacles. And she wanted to make sure I was gonna treat you well and take good care of you, and she said she didn't have to think about it, because she knew that from the first time she met me."

"You da man," Gabe said, making everyone laugh.

"Anyway, because we're young, I also counseled with my mother and father, my grandfather, and my Father in heaven to make sure that I was doing the right thing and Jordan, I've been assured by all of the above, that I am. That you and me, we're the right thing. There's no need to wait until we're older. You and I being together is God's will for us, and when it's God's will, you can't go wrong." He smiled as he watched Jordan blink and tears spill over her cheeks.

"Jordan, I love you with all of my heart and soul, and so, I want to know..." He stopped because he was suddenly completely overcome with emotion. He cleared his throat. "Jordan, will you marry me?"

JoJo switched the mic to Jordan's mouth.

She sniffed. Shook her head. "I don't deserve you, Three, but I'm selfish and I love you too. Yes, I'll marry you."

There was a huge whoop and cheers and applause from the audience as young Eric took the ring from the box and slid it onto Jordan's finger.

She looked down at it and her eyes opened wide. “Oh, wow, Three, this is beautiful, and...” She looked up at him.

He smiled. “Don’t you dare say it.”

She giggled. “Okay. But, I mean, it has...” She looked closer. “It has eight diamonds!”

He frowned. “Jordan, that’s not eight diamonds. That’s three, two, and three.”

She started crying again. “Oh, Three, oh wow.” She looked into his eyes. “You are so freakin’ amazing!”

He laughed and pulled her up to stand, moved in close and kissed her thoroughly right there in front of everyone as they cheered and applauded and whistled.

Taylor broke free from the group and ran to Jordan. She almost bowled her over as she hugged her. “Oh, Jordan,” she screamed. “You’re gonna be my sister! Oh, I’m so happy. I love you so much.”

Jordan hugged Taylor and cried with her.

“Are you happy, Jordan?” Taylor asked.

She sniffed. “I’m so happy. I love your brother so much.” She glanced over at him as he was being hugged and congratulated by his brothers and the other men.

Bree approached. She smiled warmly at Jordan. “I’m so happy Eric found you, Jordan. Welcome to our family.”

Jordan started crying all over again. “Thank you, Mrs. Kino.”

“Thank you, Jordan. We all love you very much. And we love your mom and your brother and sister, so, this is just perfect.”

Jewell approached her daughter, reached out and touched her cheek. “Oh, my sweet girl, I’m so happy for you.”

Jordan hugged her mother. “Oh, Mama, can you believe it? I’m gonna get married? I love him so much.”

“I know you do, and I also know that he’s gonna take such good care of my daughter.”

Jamie and Josie hugged their sister. “I can’t believe you’re getting married,” Josie said. “And I’m glad it’s Eric because I love him.”

Jordan smiled. “I know you do, and he loves you too, Josie and now, he’ll be your brother.”

“It’s so cool,” Jamie said. “This is totally awesome.”

“Yes, it is,” Jordan agreed.

Ricky approached and took Jordan’s hands in his. “Hey there, beautiful. So, first, thanks for saying ‘yes.’ I don’t know what he would’ve done if you’d turned him down.”

Jordan giggled. "I would never deny him."

"Yes, I know," he said with a knowing smile. "And second, I couldn't think of a better young lady to be my son's companion, so I'm really happy for you both."

He held out his arms and she went into them. She sighed. Being hugged by Ricky Kino gave her such a feeling of peace and well-being. "This is how I always imagined it would feel being hugged by my own father if he hadn't passed away."

He smiled at her and nodded. "I'll be your father now," he said softly.

She blinked as the tears came again.

He nodded behind her. "Okay, now, go see your friends. They're being very patient."

Jordan turned to see all five Anderson girls—who she didn't yet know were now the Tanner girls—and Melaynah Appel waiting on her. She grinned and held up her hand and they all screamed and pulled her into their huddle.

Young Eric watched Jordan. He knew he'd done the right thing, but as he watched his girl laughing and glowing and being congratulated, the Spirit filled him, and it confirmed it, he'd absolutely done the right thing. He sighed. Jordan Brooks will be his wife. Logan and JoJo interrupted Eric's thoughts as they hugged him. JoJo put his arm around young Eric. "Bro, how do you feel?"

"Like I'm the happiest guy in the world."

JoJo nodded. "I'm really happy for ya, bro."

Rose pulled away from the group of girls. "Okay, everyone, we'll have to finish all the wedding talk later. Doors open in thirty minutes. It's time to put your game faces on."

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November 28th, 10:59 AM, Thanksgiving Day

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose hugged Daisy and smiled up at Jericho. "Okay, so here we go. One minute and counting."

Jericho put his hands on her shoulders. "We got this, babe." He quickly leaned down and kissed her lips.

Rose's face turned pink, but she smiled. She glanced at her phone and shoved it into her apron pocket and went to the door. There was not a large group of people lined up to come in, which was disappointing. There seemed to be only one lone figure coming up the walk. Rose unlocked the door and stepped out.

"Well, hello there, Miss Edna Dillon!"

The elderly woman planted her cane and frowned up at her. "Which

one are you?"

Rose gave a soft laugh. "I'm Rose."

"Ah, yes, Maddie used to talk about you. She said you were an imp and strong-willed and bossy."

"Yep, that's me to a 'T'."

Miss Edna smiled then. "I miss her, that Maddie."

"Me too," Rose said softly.

"Well, young lady, you're gonna be hard-pressed to have a Thanksgiving meal as good as hers."

"You are certainly right about that, Miss Edna. But she taught my sister Lily well, and gave her all of her recipes, so, maybe it'll be somewhat like Maddie used to make."

"Well, we'll just see about that." Edna shook her head. "That Maddie, so sweet, too sweet if you ask me. That was part of her problem. She was three years younger than me and I watched her when she had that girl. Louise just ran all over her."

"Well, she must've learned her lesson because she was very strict when I was growing up. So, Miss Edna, I'm so happy that you came to join us today."

"Well, when you get to be ninety years old, sometimes you don't have anyone around to fellowship with, so I decided to come here today."

"I'm so glad you did."

The woman looked up at the building. "You know, I taught here for thirty years."

"Yes, ma'am, I know. Do you miss it?"

The woman looked up sharply. "Teaching? Not for a minute."

Rose laughed, and they both turned and looked back to see some more people coming up the walk.

Rose opened the door for Miss Edna and ushered her in.

Jenny Stewart, Sheriff Tyson's wife stood there ready to escort Miss Edna to her seat.

"Miss Edna, you remember Jenny Stewart?"

"Of course I do. I'm not senile. I worried about Jenny goin' down the wrong path, but then she married that handsome Stewart boy, and I knew she was gonna do just fine."

Jenny smiled.

"Well, Miss Edna," Rose said. "You're our number one today."

Edna nodded. "Yep, I usually am."

Rose laughed. "Well, today, that makes you special, number one of five thousand, and we have a special seat just for you and Jenny will take

you back. Just head through the doors."

"Hello, Miss Edna," Mayor Bradbury greeted as Jenny and the elderly woman came into the lobby.

She nodded. "Mayor. Mrs. Bradbury. The both of you are doing a fine job." She allowed them to shake her hand.

Edna nodded. "Fine, now, no more talking, I can't dawdle. There's some people coming up the walk and I don't want them to pass me."

Jenny giggled. "Alright then, Miss Edna, come this way."

Rose watched her help the old woman toward the cafeteria and then turned to greet the people coming toward the door. She recognized a few of them. The Walton family, dad, mom, and four children. He'd been injured on the job. Fallen off a roof, and the family was struggling. Hopefully, they could bless that family today. She smiled and opened the door for them. "Welcome, welcome, I'm so glad you could come today."

"Thank you," Mrs. Walton said. "We're looking forward to it."

"Good, come in, come in. Hey, guys," she said to the young children.

She looked past them to see a few more people coming up the walk. She didn't recognize them, but she smiled and greeted them. And then a bus pulled up to the front walk. It was loaded. Totally packed. And Rose's eyes filled with gratitude and tears. She looked heavenward a moment. "It's really happening, isn't it, Father? Thank you and please help us to know how to serve all these people well."

The bus doors opened and people of all shapes, sizes, and ages started filing off the bus. Several Ameritech agents stood nearby watching and listening. They were told to try to not look too intimidating, and Rose noted that they did have smiles on their faces. Rose smiled as the people approached. "Welcome, everyone! Hello! Welcome! Happy Thanksgiving to you all."

Another bus pulled up, again, totally packed. Rose's heart swelled.

"Rose," she heard Jericho behind her. "Our greeters are here," he said, as he motioned toward Reverend Brown and his wife from Pine Forest Baptist Church. "And you are needed to start the ball rolling."

Rose nodded and smiled at the Reverend. "Okay, I'm leaving it in your hands, Reverend Brown."

She stood back and watched them move into place just inside the entrance doors.

"Hello! Welcome," the Reverend's deep voice boomed as the people came in.

"Oh, I'm so glad you could come," Mrs. Brown said sweetly.

Next the Mayor and his wife did the same.

Rose sighed, and trusting that everyone was in good hands, she

nodded. Jericho smiled at her and took her hand. “You have all the right people in all the right places. Come on, it’s time to start the show.”

Rose headed back to the cafeteria. She drew a deep breath, enjoying the delicious aromas of roasted turkeys and chickens and pumpkin pies and sweet potato pies and pecan pies and yeast rolls baking.

She smiled at Miss Edna where she sat in the center seat of the center table, and then went to the microphone and smiled at her brother who stood waiting for her and at Isla who was live. “Hey, everyone,” she said. “Good morning and Happy Thanksgiving. All the people working right now at all of your different stations, you don’t have to come to the cafeteria. Just no matter where you are, the gym, the tents, the kitchen or even outside, we’re about to have a blessing on the food. There’s lots of people coming through the doors so we need to start serving. Our number one person today was Miss Edna Dillon, who reminded me today that she used to teach in this very building way back about sixty years ago and she taught for thirty years and it’s just so fitting to have her be the first person we will serve today.”

Rose stopped and smiled as she watched Isla’s cameraman get a nice shot of Miss Edna.

“So, everyone, just stop where you are, bow your heads, and my brother, Gabriel Tanner, whose name is on this building, is going to pray and bless the food for us. Gabe, it’s all yours.”

She handed the microphone to Gabe. He took it and smiled at her and bowed his head.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,” Gabe began. “Father, first, I just wanna tell you how grateful we are for the circumstances that make this whole thing possible. Father, thank You for this amazing building, the Community Center, and thank you for the Kinos, who saw this building and decided they could put it to good use rather than have it sit empty. We’re grateful for the Kinos and all they do, and Father, we’re grateful for my sister Rose and her vision for this day. We’re grateful for all the people that You are gonna send to us today and for the opportunity we have to feed Your sheep. Father, we pray for Your blessing on every single person who walks through these doors today.”

He stopped and drew a deep breath as his body filled with the Holy Spirit. His eyes filled, his voice choked up, and his words resounded throughout. “Father, I hear You. I hear You. Every– single– person who walks through these doors today will be blessed, will be healed in some way, whether that be physically, financially, emotionally, and most importantly, spiritually. God is with us today. Jesus is with us today. You

will be healed. You will be moved. Miracles will occur in this building today." He had to stop and sniff and get himself under control. "So, um, thank You for the food so generously donated today. Thank You, Father, for the many hearts and hands that have prepared this food, the food that is here now and all the rest that will be coming in all day. We ask Your blessing upon it, and upon all of us. Be with us. Let us know Your will. We love You. We do. I do. I love You. Help us to love one another. In Jesus' mighty name we pray, Amen."

He stood there silently, mic in hand as he thought about what just happened, what he'd said in his prayer. It scared him. He'd been overcome with the Spirit and the words had just popped out of his mouth. He sincerely hoped what he'd said would happen. He hoped he hadn't been just talking. He looked up to hand the mic back to his sister. She had tears in her eyes.

"My little brother, Gabriel, you are indeed an angel."

He frowned. He didn't want to confide what he was thinking to her. "I don't know about that," he mumbled.

Rose smiled and put the mic to her lips. "Okay, people, you know what you're supposed to do. Let's get these people some food. And in about thirty minutes, we're gonna hear some fine music from the joint choir of *Upton Church of Christ and Upton Methodist Church*. Enjoy."

She laid the mic on the piano and went to check on the kitchen.

Gabe looked up as his father approached. He nodded at him.

Keegan put his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "Feeling worried?"

Gabe nodded. "Thanks, Dad, for understanding. I hope I didn't like, overstep. I hope I didn't speak a lie."

Before Keegan could respond, Grandmaster Kino also walked up to Gabe. The three stood together. "Gabe, that was a fine prayer and with a little bit of prophecy added in."

"Thank you, sir," Gabe said to Grandmaster Kino.

"He's feeling a little like he went too far," Keegan explained.

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "Did you feel God's presence as you spoke the words?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, now it's time for you to show some faith. God spoke through you. I felt like He asked me to come to you and tell you to stop doubting. Everything will turn out exactly as you said. I know that I felt every word you said, felt it powerfully."

Keegan nodded. "I did too, son."

"We all did," young Eric said as he approached. "Now, the place is filling up and we need to get to our stations."

Gabe nodded. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

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November 28th, 12:00 PM, Thanksgiving Day

Rose made her rounds, checking on anything that had to be done. Jericho had taken it upon himself to be her right-hand man. Whatever she pointed out needed to be corrected, he went and made the correction himself or spoke to the people involved and got them to make the correction. So far it had been small things like icing down more drinks, or placing more information cards on the tables or more utensils.

The music pros had everything running like clockwork. The first choir to sing had started in the cafeteria and moved to the gym and then to the tents and were now enjoying their own meals while the next choir had begun. Soon, there was a special number coming up, and later there would be big stars performing. Rose and her sisters had talked last night about big stars performing at this event and treating it like they would if they were in front of a paying crowd. It was so heartwarming.

Currently Rose stood in the corner of the gym trying to take in what was happening. Grandmaster Kino had his hands on a man’s head, and was praying over him. He finished and then knelt in front of him. He smiled at the man, which made Rose smile. She’d always loved his smile. He had the kindest smile of anyone she’d ever seen. She wondered what was being said. What counsel he offered. The man suddenly stood and hugged Grandmaster Kino. Rose’s heart filled.

She looked around at the other pastors, ministers, and counselors who’d each been assigned to minister to several tables. There were a lot of conversations going on, a lot of praying going on. Information being exchanged. Counsel being given.

Rose turned her head to glance over at Taylor Kino, who was bringing drinks out to people with the help of Charlie Stewart. They were moving fast, like they had all the energy in the world.

At a table close to where Grandmaster Kino spoke to another man now, Shelley Kino was directing little Abraham to set a dessert plate down in front of a woman, and then Shelley herself set down three more plates. Rose knew that Grandmaster Kino and Shelley were taking turns getting their children from the playroom and bringing them out to teach them how to serve others— literally, Rose thought with a smile.

Buses filled with people were continuing to arrive. So far they’d filled the cafeteria, the gym and almost all of the tables in the tents out back and their count was a little over one thousand. Miss Edna had said she was heading home to digest but might be back to listen to some more music.

The hospitality group, namely, the Kinos, the Tanners, the Appels, the Stewarts, the Nash/Smiths and the UGA baseball team were busy taking turns visiting their assigned group of tables, some here, some in the cafeteria and some in the tents. Gabe was making his rounds to each place, and Taylor was near him, he'd insisted, to keep an eye on her. He'd said if he didn't know she was okay, he wouldn't be able to concentrate on the people. So, Taylor served drinks and helped in each area Gabe visited.

So many people wanted to talk to Gabe, and Rose watched him laugh and pray and chat with hundreds of people. Soon, it would be time for him and Taylor to go eat. She noticed that he kept an eye on Taylor as she worked her way around the tables, delivering drinks or plates of food or desserts. She loved how protective he was of her, the girl who was probably his future wife, which would make her Rose's future sister-in-law. So cool.

It was now noon, and currently the *Pine Forest Community Church Choir* was singing. They would move to each venue. Violet had made sure there was a piano in the cafeteria, a piano in the gym, and a really nice electric keyboard in the tents. In thirty minutes there would be a special musical number put together by Logan, Gracie Nash, Violet, Gabe and Taylor, young Eric, JoJo, the Kino children, Matthew and Aralyn Stewart, Sophia, Kelstyn, Ledger, and Emily Adams, and Josie and Jamie Brooks. Rose was really looking forward to that. She'd heard bits and pieces of it as they'd rehearsed and it was gonna be awesome.

Rose turned to see Jordan come in on her crutches. She was smiling brightly and headed toward young Eric as he brought food out to a family. Eric placed the plates down and spoke sweetly to a little girl and patted her on the head. As he rose up he saw Jordan headed toward him. He turned with a smile, but then, someone scooted their chair out just as Jordan was going by and she went down hard. There was a loud "ooh," from several people as she hit the hard floor.

Eric was at her side within seconds, scooping her and her crutches up and carrying her out to the lobby. He sat her back in the chair she'd been sitting in all day as she'd directed her siblings, Josie and Jamie and also Matthew Stewart in giving out the gift bags to the departing diners.

"Hey, Two-three, you okay, baby?"

"Just embarrassed."

"Aw, babe, that wasn't too bad. It's not like you tripped over your own two feet. Now THAT would be embarrassing," he joked.

She giggled.

He knelt down in front of her. "So, are you hurt?" he asked as he put his hands on either side of her cast as if he could tell.

She shook her head. “Surprisingly, it doesn’t hurt a bit.”

“Really? Well, that’s cool.”

“Yeah, because the other day, after that guy hurt me and threw me in the pool, I was hurting a lot.”

“But you said the x-rays showed that the breaks were still aligned and healing well, right?”

She nodded. “Yes. And they must be because I don’t feel the slightest bit of pain.”

“Awesome.” He put his hand on her cheek. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you too.”

“Thanks for saying ‘yes’ to me earlier today.”

She laughed. “Thanks for asking me to spend the rest of my life with you.” She frowned. “And now, we need to talk, because I have something to tell you.”

He frowned. “Uh oh, that doesn’t sound good.”

She smiled. “It’s not bad. It’s just about our earlier discussion. You know, about what Lily and I talked about.”

“Oh, about the college thing?”

“Well, yes and no. Let’s make some time later tonight.”

“Okay. I’ll see if I can get the number three key again.”

She giggled. “Just because we’re now engaged doesn’t mean you can take advantage of me.”

“Ouch, that hurts, Jordan,” he said as he dramatically placed his hand over his heart. “I would never do that. If we fall, it would be because we fell together.”

“Well, then, we’re not gonna fall, because— I love you that much,” Jordan said.

Young Eric smiled and placed his hand over his heart. “Perfect. You are so freakin’ perfect.”

“Excuse me, but the lady said there were some coats and blankets and clothes out here for people.”

Young Eric rose and nodded with a smile at a thin, haggard, middle-aged woman. He led the woman over to the far side of the lobby where mounds of clothing and coats and shoes and blankets had been sorted out according to sizes and genders. He asked her if he could help her find anything in particular but she shook her head. He figured she was embarrassed and he nodded and left her to it, but stopped suddenly and went back to her. “Ma’am?”

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to say that God loves you, Jesus loves you and

everything is gonna be okay."

"Well, if God loves us so much, why does he let bad things happen?"

She didn't say the words in a challenging way, but more like in a weary way.

Young Eric smiled kindly. "God doesn't say that bad things won't happen to us. He doesn't guarantee that life will be easy. But through it all, He is right there with you. Like Daniel in the lion's den. He didn't take away the den or the lions, but he was right there with Daniel, and somehow, he survived. We're gonna survive."

"Yeah, well, what do you know about trying to survive?"

"I know a lot about it. I know that if God hadn't been with me a few months ago, I would've been buried alive by an evil man who wanted to put an end to me. And right now, I can say that I'm glad that happened to me, if only for the chance to get to share it with you."

The woman frowned as she thought about what he said he'd been through. "Buried alive, huh?"

He nodded.

She shuddered. "That's like, my worst nightmare."

He nodded emphatically. "Mine too," he agreed quickly.

She finally smiled.

"So, do you have a family?"

She shook her head. "I used to live with my momma but she died and I'm like, disabled." She touched her head. "Like, I can't think straight. And I didn't know how to get the house we lived in, so, I had to move out and I get some disability income but it's not enough to get a place to live."

Eric nodded. "How long ago did your mother pass?"

"A little while ago."

"Do you remember if it was this year or many years ago?"

"Oh, it was this year, but I can't really remember the date."

"So, where have you been staying?"

"Here and there."

"I see. Would you mind if I get your name and information and your mother's name and the address where you used to live?"

"No, I don't mind."

"Okay." He went to get one of the papers all of the people had been asked to fill out.

"Did you fill out one of these papers?"

"No. It looked complicated and sometimes I can't think straight."

"Gotcha. Well, let me help you fill it out. And, did you come here on a bus?"

"No, I walked from down the highway a ways."

He nodded. “Alright. Let’s get this filled out.”

Jordan watched him with pride as he helped the woman. The woman didn’t know yet that she’d just lucked out big time. In only a few minutes he had her paper all filled out and the woman directed to the next person who was finding shelter for those who had nowhere to go. He came back to Jordan, folding her paper and shoving it inside his apron pocket instead of placing it in the large boxes where all the others’ papers were deposited.

Jordan smiled as he approached her. “How many of those papers do you have in that pocket?”

He grinned and shrugged. “Only a few, really. Because sometimes I’m not the best one to help. But this one, I think I can.”

He knelt down in front of her again. “So, Two-three, why did you come into the gym earlier anyway?”

“Oh, I was told by Violet to come and get you to help me find a seat up close in the gym because you were getting ready to perform.”

He frowned and glanced at the big clock on the wall over Daisy’s desk. “Oh, wow, it’s almost time.” He stood and held out his hand to pull her up. “Do you wanna walk or do you want me to carry you?”

She laughed. “Well, as much as I love being in your arms, I’d prefer to walk.”

He shrugged. “Have it your way. This time,” he added.

Young Eric just barely got Jordan settled when Toby came to the stage and picked up the mic. “Okay, everyone, Hello and happy Thanksgiving. I’m Toby Nash and...” He had to stop and wait for the applause to end. “Well, thank you for that. You’re very kind. So, our family, and when I say that, I mean my family plus the Kinos, the Adams, the Stewarts, the Appels, the Davises, the Lees and the Tanners, we’ve sort of become a big family. The Davises and Lees actually aren’t with us today but they’re joining us online. The rest of these families, well, our children, they wanted to perform a special number, in hopes of blessing you with a few smiles and they promise that if you will join in at the end when they ask you to sing with them, you will be filled with joy.

“Now, don’t worry,” Toby went on, “if you’re not here in the gym, like the others who are performing today, they’ll come to the cafeteria and then to the tents out back too. Let me introduce to you, my children Gracie Nash and Brody Smith.”

The two raised their hands.

“And the Adams children, JoJo, Logan, Emily, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger.” JoJo and Logan waved and the little ones also waved and a few of them jumped up and down in exuberant energy.

"The Kino children, young Eric, Taylor, Angelina, Noah, Abe, Manny, and Nate." He smiled. "Whew, I think I got them all."

"Also part of the Kino family, the new additions, Josie and Jamie Brooks." He stopped and smiled as the two waved, smiling brightly.

"The Stewart children, Matthew and Aralyn. The Stewarts actually have four other children too; Melaynah and Charlie, but they were working so hard they weren't able to get to practices and they have two new ones," he said as he smiled at the Stewart family, standing to the side, Lisa and Chaz each holding a baby in their arms.

"And, the Tanner children, Violet, Iris, and Gabe. Of course you know there are a bunch more of the Tanner children, but they too were busy with other things. And I'm not gonna try to name them all."

Toby took a moment to smile at Lizzy Tanner who was off to the side in a wheelchair with both of her new babies in her arms. Keegan stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders in a loving and protective gesture.

"And now, without further ado, a special song for you all!"

Toby handed his mic over to Logan who placed it in his mic stand.

Gracie also had her mic in a mic stand as both she and Logan were playing guitar. Gabe, Taylor, Brody, young Eric and JoJo held mics in their hands.

It was Brody who put the microphone to his mouth and Logan and Grace began to strum their guitars.

"Hello, everyone," he said, his voice deep and buttery soft, like his father's.

Daisy smiled as her heart did a little flip-flop listening to him.

"I'm Brody Smith, Toby Nash is my father and all of us kids of the families represented up here want to wish you a very Happy Thanksgiving. We're grateful for all of you today. We've put together a little song for you. These little ones have some pretty tiny voices, so, let's all be very quiet so that we can hear them."

Brody and JoJo then jumped down off the small stage. All of the young children were lined up across the front of the stage. Everyone smiled as Taylor had to quickly rearrange the children into the right order. She smiled out at the diners and also at all of the families of everyone on stage who'd come from all of their different stations to watch their children perform. Logan and Gracie continued to softly strum their guitars as they waited for the children to get right.

JoJo then placed his mic in front of Iris Tanner's mouth. He nodded at her with a smile. She smiled back, not a bit shy. They'd chosen her to start for that reason, and because she seemed at almost three years of age, to be taking after her mother, with a beautiful sweet voice with perfect

pitch. She opened her mouth as Logan and Gracie stopped strumming, and her voice rang out clear and strong.

"Lord– I– tank you– fo– sunshine," she sang with exaggerated slowness, not at all with the regular beat of the song, which was exactly how they planned it.

Violet hit a chord on the piano and Logan and Gracie strummed their guitars. At the other end of the stage, Brody held his mic to Angelina Kino's mouth.

"Tank– You– God– fo– wain."

JoJo held his mic up to Noah, who was standing next to Iris.

"Tank– You– God– fo– joy."

Brody switched his mic to Abe, who was standing next to Angelina.

"Tank– You– God– fo– wuv."

Seven-year-olds Sophia Adams and Aralyn Stewart sang the last line together, loudly and slowly, thanking God for the beautiful day He had given them.

Then Nate Kino yelled, "One, two, three!"

Everyone laughed.

Logan and Grace on their guitars and Violet on the piano started in again, picking up the pace as the children repeated their little song. This time, almost four-year-old Kelstyn Adams helped her just-turned-three-year-old brother Ledger sing his part. Almost four-year-old Emily Adams helped little Manny Kino with his.

Manny got one of his words mixed up and Emily leaned close and whispered it in his ear. He tried again, very slowly, and when he got it right, everyone clapped. Manny grinned so big that he forgot he was supposed to keep singing.

Then all the children sang the ending together, thanking God for their families, their food, their friends and the beautiful day.

Brody pointed at Nate.

Nate's eyes opened wide. He took a huge breath.

"ONE, TWO, THREE!"

Everyone burst out laughing again, and the music took off.

This time, the older kids joined in. Matthew Stewart, Josie and Jamie Brooks took microphones and started a happy little back-and-forth with the younger children. Gabe and Taylor joined them. Then JoJo and Brody.

The words were simple. Be happy. Trust God. Don't let the hard things steal your joy. God is there when the sun is shining and He is there when it rains.

The toddlers didn't always get the words right, but that only made it

better. Angelina sang loudly even when she was a few words behind everyone else. Noah bounced up and down while he sang. Abe kept watching Brody to make sure the microphone stayed close enough to his mouth. Ledger clapped completely off beat.

And Iris sang every word she knew as if she were performing for a stadium full of people.

Logan laughed as he played. Grace was laughing too. Even Violet had trouble keeping her eyes on the music because she kept looking over at the children.

Then the music changed again.

JoJo and Brody began singing Three Little Birds, with Logan joining them in his smooth, deep voice. They didn't need to sing much before people recognized it. Some began swaying. Others clapped along.

When that song ended, Violet played a beautiful bridge on the piano and Logan moved them into Beautiful Day.

One by one, the children sang their little thank-yous to God.

"Tank You fo Mommy," Angelina sang.

Noah took his turn. "Tank You fo Daddy."

Abe thought hard for a moment. "Tank You fo my food."

Manny grinned. "Tank You fo my famiwy."

Ledger shouted, "Tank You fo evwybody!"

The crowd laughed and applauded.

Iris grabbed the microphone with both hands when it came to her. "Tank You, God, fo wuvin' us!"

That one got them.

Gabe looked down and blinked hard. Taylor wiped at her eyes. Daisy was openly crying and smiling at the same time.

Logan picked up the song again, his beautiful voice filling the gym. Grace joined him in harmony. Then Gabe and Taylor. Then Brody and JoJo. One by one, the older children joined in until the whole stage was filled with voices.

Logan motioned toward the crowd and invited them to join in. They didn't need the exact words. They simply sang along where they could, clapped, raised their hands and praised God together.

The little ones clapped their hands, jumped around and sang at the tops of their lungs. They were getting pretty excited, so JoJo and Brody moved closer to make sure no one fell off the stage.

Nate waited until the music softened again. Everyone looked at him. He knew it was his moment. "ONE, TWO, THREE!"

The whole gym erupted in laughter.

Violet struck the keys, Grace and Logan hit their guitars and

everybody sang one more time.

By the end, almost everyone in the gym was either singing, clapping, laughing or crying. The Spirit was strong.

It was indeed a beautiful day.

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Colossians 3:16

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

Chapter Fourteen

After the last song, Brody followed little Iris Tanner as she ran to her sister Daisy and reached her hands up. Daisy obeyed the command and lifted her sister onto her hip. The group had just finished singing in all three places, cafeteria, gym and tents and had been dismissed.

"Daisy, did you hear me sing? Did I sing good?"

Daisy laughed. "Yes, you did, sweet girl, and I know that you know you did because I just heard Mom and Dad and Rose and Lily and Heather and Nolan all tell you how well you sang, so I don't know why you need me to tell you too."

Iris frowned for only a few seconds. "Because—dey are not Daisy. You are Daisy."

Daisy and Brody both laughed. "Okay," Daisy said. "You had to hear it from me too. I get it. And you were awesome and I love the whole song so much it made me cry."

"Me too!" Iris declared exuberantly, making Daisy laugh again.

"Mommy says I have to go eat with the famiwy now."

"Okay, flower girl, go eat. I'll be there soon."

She set her little sister down and watched her run to join the family at a table. She sighed.

"Tired?" Brody asked.

Daisy looked up at the handsome guy and nodded. "I am. I need a cup of coffee or something. I'm so sleepy and we're not even halfway through the day."

Brody thought. "Well, it's almost one o'clock. We probably have at least six more hours to go before everyone leaves, and then there's gonna be a few hours of cleanup. Have you eaten?"

She shook her head. "No time to eat."

He frowned. "So, I know you and I have just started talking, but I think anyone, even a stranger, would tell you that you're gonna need to eat something with such a hard day ahead."

"I'm too tired to eat."

"Go sit down with your family, Daisy, and let me get you a plate. I won't load it down so that it makes you even sleepier. I'll just get you

some protein and some veggies. How's that?"

"You would do that for me?" she said.

"Silly question." He took her hand. "Come on." He led her to the table where almost the entire Tanner family was sitting down to eat, minus Gabe and Taylor who'd already eaten, mostly because Gabe just could not wait any longer.

He held her chair and she sat down. The rest of the family already had their plates of food. She looked around at her family. Her father and mother were smiling at each other. Rose and Heather each held a baby. Nolan looked on over Heather's shoulder, in awe of the tiny human. Iris was being a good girl and eating her food. She'd always had a healthy appetite. Violet and CJ were smiling and talking about something. Lily was eating some pecan pie, explaining that she'd been sneaking bites of food in the kitchen all day.

Keegan looked up at Daisy and smiled at her. "Whatcha thinkin' about, sweetheart?"

Daisy sighed. "Just feeling thankful for my family. I love you guys."

"We love you too," Lily said quickly. "Where's your food?"

Brody approached just as she asked and placed a plate in front of her. "Here ya go, Daisy," Brody said softly. He then placed a cup of coffee in front of her and cream and sugar. "What else can I get you?"

"Nothing. Can you sit with me?"

He frowned. "As much as I want to, I have a station to work right now. My family isn't scheduled to eat for another hour."

Daisy frowned. "Oh. Well, anyway, thank you so much, Brody, for your help. I really appreciate it."

"The pleasure is mine," he said softly. "See you later." He smiled and nodded at the rest of the family. "Happy Thanksgiving, Tanner family." He turned and walked away.

Daisy watched him go, her eyes lingering on his muscular, athletic body. She looked back at her family who were all staring at her with quizzical expressions. "What?"

"Something goin' on there?" Lizzy asked.

Daisy smiled. "Maybe."

Her sisters all sighed.

"Lucky you, Daisy," Lily said.

"We had a talk yesterday. It was nice. Apparently, he's liked me for a pretty long while. I think he's a good guy."

Keegan nodded. "He's a good guy for sure."

"Then you approve?"

"We'll see," he said with a smile and a wink.

"You really should date him a few times before you ask Daddy if he approves," Rose said.

Daisy nodded. "Well, anyway, he's totally hot."

Keegan sighed and shook his head.

Lizzy giggled.

Her sisters agreed.

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November 28th, 3:00 PM, Thanksgiving Day

Jeffy went from room to room. Before she entered each one she stood outside the door and opened herself. There were four rooms set aside for those who needed immediate medical care. Some local nurses and doctors had volunteered their time to offer assistance in this area. They didn't have to volunteer their whole day. Just a shift of a few hours and then back to their families. Jeffy was in charge of this part of the event and she was monitoring it closely, except for the time she spent nursing her sweet Eli. Currently, the baby was sound asleep in his father's arms.

Jeffy closed her eyes, breathed deeply and opened the door. She smiled brightly at a woman and her two children. The woman was slim, probably young, though she looked worn and tired. She had longish, scraggly brownish hair back in a band. The children were small and thin. The girl had blond hair also scraggly. The boy had short dark hair.

"Ms. Booker, this is Dr. Kino," the young nurse said.

The woman nodded warily but offered a slight smile. "You're a doctor? You look so young."

Jeffy smiled. "Don't worry. I've been a doctor a long time. So, what seems to be the trouble?"

"This is Derek," the nurse offered. "He's five years old and he's running a fever of 102.6."

Jeffy bent and smiled at the boy. She laid a hand on his head and briefly closed her eyes. "Derek, does your ear hurt?"

He nodded.

Ms. Booker's brow creased. "How did you know that without looking in his ear?" she asked.

"Like I said, I've been a doctor a long time," she said as she did a quick exam.

When she finished, she smiled at the mom. "He has an ear infection. I'm going to give you some medicine for him. Did you fill out the paper that was on the table?"

The woman nodded. "Yes."

"Did you come here on a bus?"

"Yes."

Jeffy nodded and looked at the other child. "Hello."

The small girl smiled. "Hi."

"What's your name?"

The little girl hid behind her mother's leg.

Jeffy smiled. "I bet I can guess."

The girl blinked at her.

"I bet your name is Snow White."

The girl smiled but shook her head.

"Hmm, then it must be Elsa."

The girl's mouth opened wide.

"Am I right?"

Elsa nodded.

"How old are you?" Jeffy asked.

"I'm four."

"Did you eat some good food today?"

She nodded.

"I'm so glad. Did you get some dessert?"

"Yes, but I want more."

Jeffy smiled. "Then maybe we can talk your mom into one more trip to the dessert table."

"I didn't want to be a hog," Ms. Booker said.

"Nonsense. There's plenty of food. And for you and your family, from now on, you're gonna have plenty of food."

The woman frowned, but Jeffy went on. "Now, I know you've filled out the form, but may I ask where you're staying right now?"

"There's a friend who's letting us stay in her basement. But she was going away to see family this week, and I heard about this thing today down here and I got on the bus."

"I'm so glad you did. Ms. Booker, don't worry. Your life is about to turn around."

"How? Why do you say that?"

"Because I just know things." She reached out and took her hand and squeezed it.

"I don't see how things are gonna get better. I can't even find a job."

Jeffy's eyes filled. "Your mother raised you and she passed away last year. Your boyfriend left you for another woman and hasn't paid you any child support for the children. Life seems hard. Macey, Jesus loves you. He wants you to know that."

"How, how did you know all that? How did you know my

nickname?"

Jeffy smiled. "Sometimes God talks to me. And right now He's telling me that He wants you to turn your life around. He's gonna help you. He wants you to remember Him, like you used to know Him when you were young, when you used to go to the youth program at church. Before you met the man you call Rek. God's will for you is that you live a Godly life. Pure and wholesome. Relations are reserved for marriage. God is about to work miracles in your life. I promise. For now, He wants you to know that He sees you. He knows you." Jeffy paused. "And that the problem with your ankle, which is a stress fracture, is now healed, and the endometriosis that causes you so much trouble, is now gone."

The woman began to cry and Jeffy put her arms around her. "You're in God's hands. He wants you to pray, and to listen. He's got you, Macey." She reached into her pocket and gave her a card. "This is how you can reach me, anytime, day or night. I'm so glad God prompted you to get on that bus. God loves you and your sweet children. He's waiting for you to come back to Him."

Jeffy let go and stepped back. "Now, the nurse will get you some medicine for Derek, and then you go get some dessert for yourself and the kids. It's a beautiful day, Macey. Be grateful."

Jeffy smiled at the nurse who was looking at her with such wonder, and then she left the room and headed next door to a room she knew was occupied with a nurse, a doctor and a man riddled with arthritis.

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November 28th, 4:00 PM, Thanksgiving Day

Rose smiled as she surveyed the current activity out in the overflow tents. John Appel and Keegan Tanner had their hands laid on the head of an older man, blessing or healing, she wasn't sure what, but it was a beautiful thing to witness.

Jericho placed his arm around Rose's shoulder. "How ya doin', RoseRose?"

She turned and smiled at him. "I am wonderful. I'm so grateful. Just look at this. I feel the spirit so strong. I mean, it feels like Jesus is right here. I feel Him everywhere."

Jericho nodded. "Me too. A minute ago in the cafeteria, Ricky and his father prayed over a woman in a wheelchair and took away the pain she'd had in her hip for ten years. She stood and walked pain-free. It was incredible."

Rose's eyes filled. "Oh, Jericho, this event, this thing, I'm so grateful for what's taking place." She turned and laid her head on his chest.

Jericho hugged her tight, then took her face in his hands and tilted it

up so he could look into her eyes. “I’m grateful too, RoseRose, and I’m so impressed with what you put together here. The thought and prayer and work that you must have put into it, it’s totally impressive.”

She shook her head. “It’s not me. You know that. This is all God.”

“But He worked through you, Rose. You are a favored daughter of God.” He bent down and softly kissed her lips and smiled. “I’m so proud to know you.”

They were interrupted by the Mayor.

“There you are, Rose Anderson.”

Rose smiled. “Hello, Mayor Bradbury. Oh, and by the way, I’m being adopted by my father and from now on my name is Rose Tanner.”

The Mayor nodded solemnly. “That’s a lovely thing. Well, Rose Tanner, what is our count and do we have any more buses arriving?”

She smiled. “We passed five thousand just a few minutes ago. And yes, we have several more busses on the way that will be arriving in about an hour, and we have some more of the volunteer families to feed, so, we’re gonna be well over our goal.” She stopped because her voice choked with emotion. “We made it, Mayor Bradbury, and I can’t thank you enough. You got rid of a lot of the obstacles and got the whole town involved and I think this will be something everyone in Pine Forest will always remember.”

“Well, I know my wife and I will never forget it and ya know, we may have to try for an annual event, or maybe at least biennial. My kids down in Florida and up in West Virginia have been watching the livestream on Gabe’s website and they are blown away by what we’ve accomplished here today. And we’ve made national news, and I’m thinking we’re gonna have to build some more Inns and maybe more motels up on the highway and also I’m thinkin’ this year, maybe up our game for the Christmas festivals and pageants.”

“I think you’re right.”

“But we want to maintain our small town persona, so it’s gonna be a fine line we’ll have to walk.”

Rose nodded. “I suppose the town council will keep us in line in that way. Still, I see some amazing opportunities and lovely things happening here in Pine Forest. But, if it keeps growing as it has been lately, we also might have to build another high school.”

“Yes, thanks to your brother, and also thanks to the Kinos having a home here now, a new high school is already being discussed.”

Rose smiled. “That Gabe, even if he is my brother, I have to say, he’s one fine young man.”

Mayor Bradbury nodded. “Because he comes from a fine family.” He turned to Jericho. “So, Mr. Jones, how’s the EMS and firefighter schooling going?”

Jericho smiled and nodded. “It’s going well, but from what I see, you’re gonna have to bring on more bodies.”

The mayor nodded. “We’ve already started a hiring campaign. Maybe you’d like to look at our hiring process and see if we need to improve or adjust it.”

Jericho nodded. “I can do that.”

“Wonderful.” He looked over the large man. “So, I heard a rumor, Mr. Jones.”

Jericho smiled. “Call me Jericho or JJ or Jay,” Jericho offered.

Mayor Bradbury nodded. “JJ is old southern town sounding.”

Jericho chuckled. “So, what is the rumor?”

“I heard you might be planning on staying here in Pine Forest.”

Rose’s eyes opened wide as she turned to look up at Jericho.

He smiled. “I’ve known for some time now that I can’t keep traveling around forever. I want a home. I’m thinking of hiring more employees and sending them out. Opening an office and sending my employees out to do the training or even better, maybe open a training facility and have them come here to train.”

“And you’re thinking about having that office or training facility here, like in Pine Forest?”

Jericho nodded. “It’s a perfect central location for the state, though I do have contracts out all over the country. If I can make the jump, I’d like to stay here. It’s the perfect town, and...” He turned and smiled at Rose. “And there’s some great people living here.”

Mayor Bradbury smiled. “Yes, there are.”

The three looked up as an announcement came on the loudspeaker. “Rose Tanner, you’re needed in the gym ASAP.”

Rose smiled. “Well, I guess I need to get back to work. Are you headed home now, Mayor?”

He shook his head. “No, my wife says we’re staying until after Toby Nash, Luke Harrison and Bryant Zachary have performed.”

Rose laughed. “Well, they’re getting ready now. It won’t be too much longer.”

“Until then I’ll go greet more people at the door.”

“Thank you, Mayor,” Rose said as she hurried off.

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November 28th, 5:30 PM, Thanksgiving Day
Gym, Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe leaned his weary head against the concrete wall in the back of the gym. Taylor stood right in front of him, leaning back against him. He had both his arms locked around her. He nuzzled her cheek. “Feels good to be still for a moment and listen to such amazing music.”

Taylor sighed and nodded. “I could stay like this forever.”

“Me too, Tay. I feel so good right now. Tired. But good.”

“Me too,” young Eric said. He was standing right next to Gabe, Jordan in front of him with his arms around her.

Jordan suddenly turned in his arms and put her arms up around his neck. “Today has seemed like a dream. Beginning with your proposal and ending listening to these amazing musicians, taking care of thousands of people, working beside some of the most amazing people in the world.”

Young Eric smiled at her and lowered his head. He was tired and he didn’t care that there were people all around. He kissed her a long time and only stopped when he heard shouting out in the lobby area.

Gabe heard it too and both of them told the girls to stay there and took off running toward the lobby. When they got there they stopped short and tried to assess the situation.

A Pine Forest police officer was being held in a headlock, a gun placed against his head. Ameritech agents surrounded the two men. Daisy was on the floor face down. She wasn’t moving.

Rose and Jericho, Keegan, John, Joey, Chaz, Lily and Brody arrived almost all at the same time. Still others continued arriving. Ricky, Melaynah, Jodi, Nolan.

Keegan calmly drew his weapon and trained it on the man. “Whatever your problem, man, let’s talk it out, because as things stand right now, it’s not gonna end well, not for you anyway.”

Gabe watched his father and knew he was telling the truth. This man was about to die, and his father was gonna have to kill a man on Thanksgiving Day. Gabe glanced at Rose and saw the horror on her face that this one demon would ruin her whole day. And then it hit him. Demon. Like the one who’d come after him at breakfast a few days ago.

Gabe stepped out. “Wait, Dad. Don’t kill him.”

He held his hands out in front of him. Jesus, he thought, please be with me. He opened his mouth. “I rebuke you in the name of Jesus Christ.”

He only said it once. The words resounded around the room as if they’d been on a speaker system. The man looked at Gabe, his eyes growing large. He lowered the gun— and was immediately taken, wrestled to the ground. Keegan and Brody rushed to Daisy’s side and turned her

over. She had a cut on her head.

"Baby girl," Keegan said softly, running his hand over her face then reaching down to her neck to check her pulse.

Jeffy rushed to her side, laid a hand on her head, closed her eyes and nodded. "There you are. Come on out of it, sweetie. That's right. Come on, you're good."

Daisy opened her eyes and immediately raised a hand to her head.

Brody took Daisy's hand. "Daisy, be still and let Dr. Kino fix your head, okay?"

She looked up into his concerned eyes, smiled and nodded.

Jericho set his medical box down next to Jeffy. "Tell me what you need and I'll pull it out."

As Jeffy worked on Daisy's head, Keegan spoke to her.

"Do you remember what happened?" Keegan asked his daughter.

"I, uh, I saw this guy coming up the walk, he was yelling at no one in particular. Yelling and cursing and acting crazy. I could see he was gonna cause trouble. The agents stopped him, and I thought they had it under control and they would have, but then Officer Jim just walked right up to the guy. I don't know why he did that. It didn't make any sense. It was as if he thought he could just cuff him and take him away. But the crazy guy immediately grabbed him, put him in a headlock and held a gun to his head. He started pushing him forward toward the door and the agent yelled at me to lock the doors and I tried, but he got to the door before I could lock it and he slammed the door into my head." She winced as Jeffy cleaned the wound.

"Thank goodness you're okay," Brody said.

Jeffy finished with a row of three butterfly bandages, then put gauze over it and taped it in place. "There ya go, sweetie. You'll probably have some bruising and a headache later tonight, but you'll be fine. Do you feel like you can stand?"

Daisy nodded. Keegan started to lift her up, but backed off when Brody also bent to lift her up. He nodded at the younger man. Brody lifted her to her feet.

"Brody, take Daisy in and make her sit and watch the music. I don't want her working the rest of the night," Jeffy ordered.

"But, we still have to finish with our diners and clean up and pack up food and..."

"I don't need you," Rose said. "I have hundreds of cleanup volunteers. Not that I don't think you're important, but for cleanup, I have it covered."

She sighed. "Okay." She smiled at Brody. "I can't believe your dad

is still playing."

Brody smiled. "The show must go on. If he stopped playing the whole crowd would be in a panic to see what was happening. Better that he kept playing. If shots had been fired, it might be different. Come on, I'm gonna pretend that this is our first date."

Daisy's cheeks turned pink as the people in her family chuckled. Brody put his arm around her as he escorted her away. They went back to the gym and as soon as they entered, Brody gave his father a thumbs up. Toby nodded with a smile.

They sat together off to one side of the stage. Brody looked Daisy over. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She turned and smiled at him. "Yep. It hurts, but I'm okay. It could've been a lot worse."

"Yeah, like if your father had to pull the trigger. Gabe was amazing."

"Why? What happened? What did he do?"

"Oh, that's right. You didn't see." He sighed. "Well, your father was about to shoot the guy, but Gabe stepped forward and rebuked him. When he did, it was so weird. I mean, his voice sounded so loud. And the guy literally just dropped his arm, put the gun down by his side and the agents took him down. Daisy, your brother..." He stopped and shook his head. "He's really a special guy."

Daisy smiled. "Yes, I know. He's had some amazing things happen to him over this year. Things you probably haven't even heard about."

"Then maybe you can fill me in."

"I will, Brody."

"Good. That gives me an excuse to call you."

She nodded as she thought about the fact that he wanted to call her. "So, are you leaving tomorrow?"

"No. We're sticking around until early Monday morning cuz I have to be in class on Tuesday morning by 9:10."

"Fun stuff."

"It's not so bad."

"What class is it?"

"It's a public speaking class."

"Oh! Well, that sounds like fun."

"Hmm, don't know about fun, but it's a necessity, I think. Tuesday I have to actually give a speech, and I'm still working on it."

"Oh cool! Well, maybe you can give it for us and we'll all give you some feedback."

"Us? Us who?"

"This whole extended family we have."

He gave a soft laugh. "I don't think I'm ready for that."

"Sooner than you think you're gonna be speaking to reporters and sports people, doing interviews. Might as well jump in."

He smiled. "We'll see."

"Are you shy?"

"No, I mean, not really."

"Okay then."

"Are you shy?" he asked Daisy.

"Yes. Well, I used to be. Shy as a Daisy they used to say, instead of 'fresh.' But I'm better now, though I'm still a little more low-key than like, Rose or Heather."

"I think you're just you, and I think that's perfect."

She looked into his eyes. He looked a lot like his father. Very thick, dark hair, trimmed neatly on the sides and longer on the top. Very dark blue eyes. Her brother Gabe also had dark hair and blue eyes, but Gabe's eyes were a mesmerizing bright blue. Both of them had long dark lashes. Brody was taller than Gabe by at least three inches, maybe more. He was a country boy. Usually wore blue jeans and athletic shoes. Sometimes a casual T-shirt and sometimes a knit type shirt that showed off his physique. She and her sisters all agreed—Brody was hot. And her twin, Lily, said she was lucky. She felt lucky—actually, blessed. And now that he'd let her know that he was interested, she was becoming pretty interested herself.

"This is one of my favorites," Brody said.

She shook her head and made herself pay attention to the music. She nodded. "Makes me wanna dance."

"Do you like to dance?" he asked.

"I do."

"Me too, of course, I had a good teacher."

"Your mom is amazing. And she helped Gabe and Taylor so much."

Brody looked around to see where she was but he didn't see her. He did see Gabe and Taylor, dancing together in the back of the gym. They were really good together.

The singing stopped for a minute and his father spoke into the mic. "We have a couple back there in the back who know just how to dance to this music. Whaddya say we invite them up to dance here on stage and show us how it's done!"

Everyone clapped and hollered and finally young Eric and Logan pushed Gabe and Taylor up to the front. Once they were on stage, Toby and his friends started playing and singing again and Gabe and Taylor

danced. It was a version of the dancing they did on TV several weeks ago. When the song ended, Gabe couldn't hold back and he kissed Taylor in front of everyone.

Out in front of the stage Isla smiled at her cameraman. "Well, that'll be another viral video. This whole day has been absolutely amazing. I'm so glad we've been able to share it with the world."

"Ya can't go wrong getting the Kinos or the Tanners live on anything. They never disappoint," he answered.

"No—never," Isla said.

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November 28th, 8:30 PM, Thanksgiving Evening
Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

The loud shrieks coming from the gym made Rose stop by to glance in on her way back from her last round. Josie and Jamie Brooks, Sophia Adams, all four Stewart children, Matthew, Aralyn, Charlie and Melaynah, though Laynah's last name was now Appel, Lucas and Peyton Murphy, and Gabe and Taylor, had started a pickup game of indoor football while they waited for the inspection and for everyone to gather their personal belongings. Rose shook her head. "Where do they get the energy?" she mumbled, wishing for some of that energy herself right now.

She sighed. It was done. Over. She headed back to the lobby. Everyone else was there, standing around talking softly. They were all tired. She glanced around. All the younger children were sound asleep and being held by a parent or sibling. Joey Adams held Ledger while his wife Breez held Kelstyn. Mark Adams held Em. Grandmaster Kino held Noah, while his wife Shelley held Angelina, young Eric held Nate, Logan held Manny and Jodi Appel held Abe. Each of them bounced slightly or swayed slightly, keeping them asleep.

Cam held little Eli, Chaz held his tiny Lachlyn while his wife Lisa held Jonathon, Lizzy was back in her wheelchair but had neither baby in her arms. Her husband, Keegan, held Iris as she slept on his shoulder. Violet and CJ cooed over twin Isaiah, while Gentian was being cooed over by Miss Caro as her husband Toby looked on over her shoulder. Grace asked if she could hold her and Caro frowned and reluctantly gave her up, making Rose smile.

Jewell Brooks, Rebecca Murphy, Lily and Daisy joined her as she came to the front desk of the lobby. "So, how'd we do?" Lily asked.

Rose nodded. "It all looks great, and when the men come tomorrow and take down the tents, it will be complete."

"Yep," Lily said with a laugh. "And then we can get started on

Christmas decorations."

Daisy moaned.

"Well, don't forget we have a video shoot to do for Mike this next week," Lily said.

"I wish I could forget," Rose said.

Ricky Kino came over to the five of them and put his arms around Rose and Lily. "Ladies, I am so impressed with what you pulled off here today. Rose, your leadership was exemplary. Lily, Jewell and Rebecca, what you pulled off in the kitchen was absolutely amazing, and Daisy, you executed Rose's orders with precision and skill, and tried to lock out a bad guy on the side. You all were amazing and you have my gratitude for so much hard work."

Bree heard what her husband said and came over to the group. "I totally agree with my husband. You ladies were amazing."

Rose smiled. "Thank you, and I'd like to take credit but I really can't. God placed the idea on my heart and all of you people made it happen."

Ricky smiled. "Well, let's gather up the kiddos and go get some rest."

"Okay, but, well, I'd like to call them in here to the lobby and while I have our families right here, I'd like to say a few words. Would that be okay?" Rose asked.

"Absolutely," Ricky said. "I'll go get them."

The kids obeyed Ricky immediately and they all filed into the lobby.

Rose smiled at the crowd. "Hey, everyone. I know you're all tired and ready to get home and get to bed..."

"Not me," Jamie said loudly making everyone chuckle.

"I just want to tell you all how grateful I am for your hard work, for your absolute willingness to work on this project. Without you all, it couldn't have happened. Today, this amazing group came together to change the lives of so many people. I'm so grateful for you, I'm so grateful to know you. I'm so grateful that you allowed me, just a young girl with almost no experience, to share my vision with you and *you* made it happen. I think we can say that this event has been a great success. I know some of you worked hard behind the scenes, with no one noticing. Like Aunt Jodi and Uncle John. They are always so low-key, so quiet, and they just work so hard at taking care of everyone."

"Agreed," a few of the men all said quietly, knowing better than to cheer or applaud while children were sleeping.

"I can really say that about everyone here, but I won't hold you much longer. I thought you might want to know the total count of people served today. It was seven thousand, one hundred and twenty-seven."

There was a quiet murmur of approval and lots of smiles.

"And of that number, the people who weren't volunteers and/or family members of volunteers, we still took care of five thousand, eight hundred and ninety-three. And as you know, we didn't just feed them. We counseled them, we changed their lives, we healed them, we got them into shelters or housing, we provided them with clothing and so many other resources. Don't think I don't know that some of you have provided a great deal of your own money and resources to help these people."

"Move on, Rose, before you take away our blessings," Ricky jested.

"Sorry. I just didn't want any of you to leave here tonight without you knowing how much I appreciate you and all that you do. Grandmaster Kino is always calling this group, plus the Davises and Lees, God's warriors. Well, I agree. Today, you went on the battlefield and fought and won a mighty battle. Mayor Bradbury said he's heard from a lot of people that they want to emulate what we did here today. And Isla said that the comments on social media sound like what we did is sweeping the nation and other towns are planning big events. Oh, and by the way, Mr. Adams says that two other small towns, one in West Virginia and one in Texas have purchased properties and are opening their own Gabe Tanner Community Centers under the guidance and directions that we are providing."

"Which Mr. Adams?" Lizzy asked.

"Oh, Mr. Mark Adams. You know, since his people are running the foundation. Anyway, he said the new community centers have to go by Gabe's guidelines, kind of like a franchise. It's amazing the effect our boy is having on this world."

Gabe sighed. "Okay, stop."

Everyone laughed.

"Sorry, little brother. I'm just so amazed by you." She looked around. "And really by all of you. So amazed and so grateful. I just wanted to say those things before you all leave tonight."

"So, what's gonna happen to all of that leftover food?" Lisa asked.

Rebecca Murphy answered. "We have people coming tomorrow morning to pick it up and take it to several different shelters."

"So, then, I guess I'm done," Rose said.

"Rose," Grandmaster Kino said softly. "Before we leave, can we have a prayer? I'd hate to leave without it."

"Oh! Yes, of course. I should've thought about that."

"Whom would you like to call on to say it?" he asked.

"Oh, well, Grandmaster Kino, would you mind?"

He smiled. "I never mind praying, I just don't want to deprive

someone else of the opportunity."

"Please pray, Grandmaster Kino," John Appel said. "Don't deny *us* the opportunity to hear *you* pray." He gave a slight bow to his teacher. "At one point this year, we thought we would never hear you pray again, so, we ask now, please, pray."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "As you wish." He continued to softly bounce Noah on his shoulder as he bowed his head to pray. "Father, dear Father, our family here comes before You at this time at the close of this extraordinary day, to give You thanks for all that has taken place. Thank You for the opportunity to feed Your flock. Thank You for presenting to us some of the ones who belong to You and thank You for giving us the resources and the ideas as to how we can best serve them and You.

"We love You, Father. We love You, Jesus. We want to serve You always. We know, for those who came here today, the work is only just beginning. So help us to recognize the best way to help them and Father, if it be Thy will, help what happened here today to inspire people all over the world to also feed Your flock. Father, we also know that whenever we try to serve You, Satan and his demons try to stop us, and hurt us, so Father, make us strong. Send Your angels to protect us as we go about doing Your work.

"Still, no matter how hard the work may become, we promise here and now that we will gladly and courageously pick up our crosses and bear them. Daily we put on Your armor, on ourselves and on our children. And speaking of our children, Father, thank You so much for these brand new beautiful spirits who are present with us today. We are so grateful. They are so fresh from being in Your presence and we are so grateful for them. Protect them. Lead us, Father, guide us, walk beside us. We pray, as always in the mighty name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen."

The group uttered a soft 'amen,' and began gathering their coats and purses and hats and boxes of items to take home.

"By the way," Bree called out, "you're all invited to our new home for dinner tomorrow night."

"Oh, yay," Jodi said. "I was hoping there would be an invitation soon, but I didn't think it would be this soon."

"The designers did an excellent job and the place is move-in ready," Bree explained. "And we'd like to give back to you for the amazing hospitality you've shown us at the Inn."

"Hmm, so, if the place is move-in ready, does that mean you're gonna spend the next few days before you fly home, at your new house?"

"We are gonna stay at the Inn a few days, but we're not gonna fly home as early as we thought. We're actually gonna stay here at our new

home an extra week and let Taylor take her classes online for that week."

"We are?" Taylor said with a huge smile.

Gabe grinned and put his arm around her. "This is awesome."

Jordan frowned. "Um, but I have to be back at school on Monday."

Young Eric nodded. "I'm going back with you, Jordan. I promise to make sure you make it back to school. But, do you still want to talk tonight?"

She nodded. "Yes. If I can stay awake."

Lily smiled at the conversation. Jordan was so beautiful and so sweet. She didn't even know she was beautiful. She was such a down-to-earth girl and that was probably why Lily liked her so much.

Everyone headed out, loaded up in different cars and vans and headed home. Jericho stayed, helped Rose lock up and then escorted her to her car. She smiled up at him.

He smiled kindly at her. "It's been quite a day."

She nodded. "It has." She sighed and leaned against the side of her car. "I'm almost too tired to drive home."

"Let me take you home then."

"That would be silly."

"I don't think it would be silly. I think it would be easy and the logical thing to do, because I was probably gonna follow you home anyway."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Just a feeling I have and I usually try to not ignore the little whisperings I get."

She sighed. "Okay, who am I to interfere with your whisperings?"

"Good. But first, I have to do this." He moved forward, took her in his arms and kissed her. When he lifted his head he looked her over and nodded his head.

"What are you nodding about?" Rose asked.

"That kissing you was every bit as good as I remembered. Actually, it's getting better every time."

She sighed because she felt the same way. Kissing him was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Kissing Mike had been almost a chore. She kept doing it because she thought it was just her and that it would get better. But now she could see that there was really nothing ever between Mike and her, and she shouldn't have been kissing him at all. She'd just been so lonely and latched on to him.

"I see the wheels turning in your head, Rose. What are you thinking about? Are you not feeling the same way?"

"Actually, I am. I was thinking about my ex, and how he never made

me feel the things you make me feel. I was feeling kind of ashamed that I ever allowed him to kiss me in the first place. And I was thinking that I deserved him insisting I go to bed with him, after all, I allowed him to kiss me." She sighed. "I was much more innocent, though it's only been a few months, but I feel like I've grown a whole lot older."

"You are young, sweetheart. Young and innocent and gorgeous and sexy and beautiful and brilliantly smart."

She sighed. "Well, you say all the right things anyway."

"Well, I mean them and you sound a little jaded."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's natural since your last relationship. Let me just say that I see your worth, Rose. I do. Give it time."

"I will." She smiled. "So, are you really thinking about staying here in Pine Forest?"

He nodded. "Yes, I am thinking about it. I've been talking to my guys, trying to work out a business plan."

"My father could help you with that."

He nodded. "Maybe I'll talk to him."

She yawned. "I bet he's wondering where I am." She touched her pocket looking for her phone. Then realized she didn't even have her purse. "I must've left my purse on the counter in the lobby."

"Hmm, more proof that I should be driving you home. I'll go get it. Stay right here. What's the code?"

She told him and he headed to the door. She watched him. He was such a good guy. Big, strong, handsome, faithful, clever, and he seemed to be very intent on protecting her and taking care of her. He reminded her a lot of her father, which was a huge compliment.

Just as he disappeared inside the building, a car pulled into the parking lot. It pulled up right beside her. Rose touched her hip to make sure her gun was still there. Then she recognized the driver. Mike Moreland got out of the car, his smile wide.

"Well, I was right," he said quickly.

"Right about what?"

"That you would be the last one to leave and that I might be able to catch you alone."

"I told you to call me tomorrow after four. I'm too tired to talk to you right now."

"I wanted to speak with you in person. I wanted to see your beautiful eyes when I told you that I'm sorry for how things ended between us. I'm sorry for the things I said and I hope you'll give me a second chance."

Rose snorted. "How stupid do you think I am? I know exactly what

you're thinking and why you're saying that and I have to tell you, Mike, it won't matter what you say, I'm not interested."

"Why? Because of that overgrown cowboy you've been seeing?"

"He's not a cowboy, he's a brilliant businessman like you imagine yourself to be, only he's much smarter than you."

She stopped and smiled at the hint of anger in his eyes. "Still, Mike, he's not why I'm turning you down. I'm turning you down because I straight up don't like you. I now recognize your narcissistic behavior and your condescending attitude. You think you're better than everyone else, and that makes you nothing but pitiful in my eyes."

"You used to like me," he tried to reason. "So, what changed?"

"You. Or, actually, you didn't change at all. You just showed your true colors. Look, Mike, my father tried to tell you that there were certain ways to be a man. He understood that you didn't have a father in your home to teach you how to be a man, and you obviously didn't take my father's advice. And I have to say that what you've figured out on your own, it's not gonna work for you. You're gonna have a miserable life if you keep going down this path. You need to do some soul-searching and figure out what will bring you happiness."

"You say that like you think you've figured it all out."

"I don't know everything, but I do know that money cannot buy happiness. God knows that and He teaches us that. And I also know that my relationship with Jesus brings me amazing joy and fills my life with love and with good people, that is, good people who are not narcissistic or arrogant."

"So, does your relationship with the giant genie in the sky pay your bills?"

"And we're done. Go home, Mike." She turned to walk back to the building to find Jericho and see what was taking him so long, but Mike grabbed her hand and jerked her back to him.

"Let me go," she said fiercely. Instinctively, she reached with her free hand to touch the gun at her waist.

"Whaddya gonna do, Rose? Thinking about shooting me?"

"She may not, but I'd have no problem doing that."

Mike turned, startled to hear the male voice.

Jericho sighed. "Still, I don't have to shoot you. It wouldn't take much to put you down. Now let her go."

"What if I say 'no'?"

Jericho grabbed him by the front of his shirt, jerked him away from Rose, pulled him over to his car and let go. He then straightened Mike's

shirt, smoothed out the shoulders and smiled at him. He opened the door to Mike's car and shoved him into the seat. "Bye-bye. I suggest you leave before I have you arrested."

"You manhandled me, so it's your word against mine."

"There are cameras everywhere on this building. The story will easily unfold. If you think our police department doesn't think I have a right to defend my woman, then you're mistaken. And yeah, she's *my* woman, so stop barking up that tree. Go away."

He stood there until Mike started his car and drove away. Then he turned back to Rose. She was smiling.

"You okay?"

"Sure. But I'm glad you came back. I didn't want to have to shoot him. What took you so long?"

"Your purse wasn't in the lobby. Or your office. It was on a counter in the kitchen."

She shook her head and sighed. "Wow. I am so sorry. Don't know how I did that."

"You did it because you're totally worn out, RoseRose."

She pulled her phone from her purse and smiled. "Yep, my dad wants to know what's taking me so long to come home." Sighing, she put the phone back in her purse.

"Aren't you gonna answer him?"

"I'm too tired."

"Give me the phone."

She shrugged and unlocked the phone and handed it to him.

He quickly sent a text for her and handed the phone back to her. She read the text and looked up at him and smiled.

~~Hey, Mr. Tanner, this is Jericho. Rose left her purse inside but we found it and I'm gonna see her home. Be there in a few.

He opened the passenger side of his truck, lifted her up into his arms, and placed her in the seat. He stood on the running board and buckled her in, taking a few seconds to quickly kiss her. Then he got behind the wheel, started the truck so it would warm up and he could turn on the heat.

"So, what did your little friend have to say?"

"He actually apologized for what he said the night we ended things, and wanted me to give him another chance. And then he called you an overgrown cowboy and called Jesus a giant genie in the sky."

Jericho sighed and shook his head. "Are you upset?"

She shrugged. "Not really. Though, I do hope he finds the truth one day. He has some good qualities and Dad says he is like he is because he had no father in the home and no one to teach him how to be a man."

"Then we should keep him in our prayers," Jericho said.

Rose smiled and yawned. "Brownie points for you."

He grinned. "Cool. So, me and the guys will be back over here in the morning to take down the tents. Anything else you'd like us to take care of while we're on our mini-vacation?"

"No, you've already done so much and I can't thank you enough. When do you start up with the training again?"

"Monday."

"Oh." She sighed. "Well anyway, it was actually very nice having you around this week."

"It was nice being around. Maybe I can see you on Saturday?"

"We'll see. My sister wasn't kidding. We really do have to get the fall decorations down and start decorating for Christmas. Our town is known for the pageants and holiday booths and all kinds of activities like caroling, and wreath-making, and the different churches put on productions and this year, we will too."

"We who?"

"We, the Center."

He nodded. "That's cool. Okay, well, suppose I help you with some Christmas decorating and then will you let me take you out?"

"Out? You mean, like on a date?"

"That's what I mean."

"Where?"

"Well, the Dillon House here in town is nice. We could go to the Ritz first for appetizers and then have a late dinner at the Dillon House, or we could go to a movie, or bowling, or Joe's."

She laughed. "Tell ya what, you decide and let me know so I'll know how to dress."

"Which one sounds best for you?"

She smiled. "I'm a simple girl, Jericho. Anything is fine. I can have fun partying and dancing at a fancy nightclub all the way down to an afternoon at the shooting range."

"Well, then I'll have to make sure I eventually get in those two things and everything in between."

"That's gonna take a lot of dates."

He smiled. "Yeah, it will."

She frowned. "Ya know, one of my favorite things to do involves being with family, with my sisters. I wish you and CJ got along better."

He nodded. "Me too. I love him. He was my best friend. I have no problem with him. The fact that he has a problem with me doesn't make

sense. I didn't do anything to him except..." He stopped. Shook his head.

"Except what? Will you tell me?"

"I didn't want to say anything until CJ told you, or I guess told Violet himself what went down. I figure if he doesn't want her to know, then it's not my place to say anything."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, of course," he said.

"Will you believe me if I say that I won't say anything to Vi if you'll just tell me what's going on?"

He sighed. "I'd believe you, but it would make it hard on you to keep that promise."

"I don't care if it's hard on me. Please tell me. It must be hard on you too, to keep it all bottled up. You said you didn't do anything to him except— something. So what was that something? Trust me, Jericho, and share this part of you with me. So, what was the thing you did?"

He frowned. Sighed. "I..." he blew out a breath. "I saved his life."

✞✞✞

Galatians 6:9-10

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Chapter Fifteen

Rose blinked several times, waiting for Jericho to go on. When he didn't, she shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense. Why would that make him mad at you, or want to separate himself from you?"

"I know it doesn't make any sense and I'm as surprised as you at how he seems to feel about me. And I have to say, it hurts. He and I were very close. I mean, we did everything together. We went through elementary school, middle school and high school together. We played ball together. Went to proms together, went on double dates together, and even spent holidays at each other's homes."

"So, when did you lose contact with each other?"

He sighed. "The end of our senior year of high school. Right after graduation."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"When I visited him in the hospital."

"Maybe you'd better start at the beginning."

He nodded. "Maybe I'd better."

Rose listened wide-eyed as Jericho told her the story of what happened after his high school graduation. It was the catalyst that made him who he was today. It was heartbreaking, and when he finished the telling, Rose had tears streaming down her face.

Jericho remained stoic. He glanced at Rose and leaned over to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "I'm sorry it upset you."

She sniffed and shook her head. "It's just that, I can't imagine going through that. The loss, it's unbearable."

"We can do all things through Christ, right?"

She nodded. "Yes. You're right."

He glanced at the clock. It was almost ten. "I need to get you home before your father comes looking for us." He put the truck in reverse and backed out of the space.

Rose sniffed again and sat up straighter as she yawned and stretched.

"I shouldn't have kept you up so late. You're so tired."

"It was worth it, to hear what you had to say and to try to understand what CJ is thinking and feeling."

They rode silently the rest of the way and when Jericho rode through the gates at the Tanner home, Rose was sound asleep.

He pulled off toward the left of the drive in front of the house so that he could turn around. He put the truck in park and went around to open her door. The cool air rushing in woke her.

Rose opened her big blue eyes and blinked up at Jericho. He helped her down from the truck and grabbed up her purse and handed it to her.

She stood there looking up at him. He took her face in his hands. "Rose, in case I haven't said it enough, you were awesome today."

She smiled. "You were awesome too. I felt like I could depend on you for anything."

"You can," he murmured as he bent down and kissed her softly. It was only supposed to be a quick kiss, but she put her arms up around his neck. The kiss turned passionate. She moaned softly and he lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Jericho stepped back and closed the door and then moved forward and braced her against the side of the truck.

Inside his bedroom, Keegan got a notice, picked up his phone and looked at the front of house camera. He sighed and shook his head. It was hard to watch a man kiss his daughter, knowing the feelings the man was probably having, the thoughts he was thinking. Not that Jericho wasn't a good guy. He was— and he would probably make Rose very happy, and that was what he wanted for his daughters, their happiness.

Still, he was about to adopt all five girls as his, and he was going to lose them very quickly. Heather was engaged. Violet and Rose seemed to be having serious relationships. Daisy and Brody were interested in each other. That only left Lily. They were young, but not too young to marry. Daisy and Lily were about to be twenty-three. Rose and Violet about to be twenty-four. And Heather would soon be twenty-five.

Six months ago, none of them were in a relationship. Well, Heather was but she hadn't told them yet. Now, it appeared it was all happening much too fast. Way too fast for his liking. And his son, too, was dating the girl he'd probably end up marrying. Life was suddenly going by so fast. Wasn't it just yesterday that he was kissing Lizzy like that, and Rose was a little imp of a four-year-old demanding he tell her a story?

Keegan glanced over at his wife as she slept in the rocker while nursing their infant son. His heart swelled. Oh, how he loved this family and he prayed every single day that he would be worthy to meet every challenge and to teach his children and bring them close to God. He lifted his heart as he had the thought. *Please, Jesus*, he prayed silently, *lead me and guide me that I might be equal to the task.*

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November 29th, 6:00 AM, Friday Morning
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

JoJo slept like the dead and woke Friday morning feeling refreshed and actually better than he'd felt in a long time. He didn't feel the usual aches and pains he usually felt in the mornings, usually because of football practices or games. He sat up, and swung his feet to the floor. It was a little chilly this morning. They'd all been allowed to sleep in as a reward for working so hard yesterday, but they still had lots to do today.

He bowed his head and thanked God for another day and asked how he could serve Him today. Quickly making his bed he glanced over at Brody who was just stirring.

"Good morning, Brody," JoJo said.

"Mornin'," Brody muttered.

A minute later JoJo hit the shower. He thought about what the week would bring as he lathered his light brown hair. He had to be back at school on Monday. So did Logan and Jordan. Brody had to be back by Tuesday. They had almost three weeks of school before Christmas break. His team would be playing in the Rose Bowl against...? For some reason he couldn't remember the answer to that question. Sighing, he exited the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist.

He brushed his teeth and wet his face to shave. The shaving cream smelled fresh and he smiled and picked up his razor and stroked it down his cheek. Suddenly, his mouth dropped open and the razor fell from his grasp. Staring in the mirror in shock, he called out. "Brody!"

"Yeah!" Brody answered.

JoJo shook his head and called again, this time in a panic. "Brody!" he yelled louder.

Brody burst through the bathroom door. "Jo, you okay?"

JoJo stared into the mirror, his breaths coming in great gasps. "Brody, I, I was shaving."

Brody nodded. "Okay."

JoJo shifted his gaze from his own reflection in the mirror to Brody's reflection. "I was shaving, Brody, with my right hand. I wasn't thinking about it. I was on automatic. Brody, I haven't been able to use my right hand to shave. I haven't been able to do anything with it, and just now, in the shower, oh, dear Father, in the shower, I used both my hands to wash my hair. Both hands."

"What are you saying, Jo? Are you saying your shoulder has been healed?"

He nodded. “I think so. Brody, I think I have been healed,” he said excitedly. He lifted his right arm up to shoulder height. “Look at this! Look at this. I can’t do this. But I’m doing it.”

“Can you go any higher?”

JoJo gingerly raised his arm up over his head. “Yes! Brody, I think I was healed. How else can I explain it? It was a type VI shoulder separation. That is the worst and it requires surgery and twelve weeks of recovery and rehabilitation.” His eyes filled. “Oh wow, I need to go speak to Aunt Jeffy.”

“Want me to go get her?”

He nodded. “Yes, and my father, and my brothers.”

Seconds later it seemed everyone was in the bathroom with him, hugging him and being so happy for him and praising God. The happiness JoJo felt, the elation was almost surreal. No, it was surreal. Wait, he thought as he stared into the mirror again. He was now alone and looking into the mirror.

Someone else was there—a man. He grinned at JoJo. “Did you think he would heal you too? Did you think he loves you too? He didn’t heal your mother and he won’t heal you.” JoJo shook his head in horror as the man’s face contorted into an evil mask. JoJo tried to lift his arm again and the pain shot through his shoulder. “He doesn’t love you.”

“Leave me,” JoJo commanded. “Leave! In the name of Jesus, leave!”

“You can’t fight me.” He jumped onto JoJo.

JoJo wrestled him away and punched him in the face over and over as he yelled for someone in the house to come and help him.

Brody sat up from a deep sleep when he heard JoJo yell. He rushed to his bedside. “JoJo, wake up.”

JoJo was yelling something, telling someone to leave. Brody realized he was trying to rebuke something. He put his hands on JoJo’s chest and prayed. He looked up when the door burst open and Mark and Joey and young Eric and Logan came through the door.

JoJo opened his eyes and looked up at Brody’s face. He was breathing hard, as if he’d been running or as if he’d been in a big fight, and he had. Brody moved away to allow JoJo’s father to get to him.

“What happened, son?” Mark asked.

JoJo shuddered. “It was a dream, only it was real. Some guy, I swear it was Satan, he jumped on me. The whole dream was so real.” His voice broke for a second.

Young Eric and Logan came in and sat on the bed with him, putting their arms around him.

“Tell us about it,” his Uncle Joey said.

JoJo looked up into his father's eyes. "It seemed so real. In the dream I woke up as usual and went to take a shower. I was thinking that I felt really good. No aches and pains. Full of energy. The best I'd felt in a long time. Then I started to shave, and realized I was using my right hand. I called Brody to come in and told him I think I've been healed. I raised my arm above my head with no pain and I was like, really happy. Everyone came into the bathroom, which now, I realize was silly, but in the dream you were all there, praising God and excited for me that my shoulder had actually been healed."

He shook his head. "But then, suddenly I was all alone and the pain was back and I could see a man in the mirror, and he was saying that God didn't love me and He won't heal me and He didn't love my mother and didn't heal her either and I was just like that, just like her, unworthy. I was unloved by God and he like, transformed into this evil red and green face, like half demon, half lizard. Then he jumped on me and was trying to like, get inside me and I was fighting him as hard as I could but wasn't making much headway and I called out to try to get some help and I was trying to rebuke him but he was so strong. But then, Brody put his hands on me and started praying. He was speaking very loudly and it calmed me immediately."

"I wasn't praying out loud, Jo," Brody said softly.

"Well, in my dream you were very loud. You said, 'In Jesus' name, I rebuke you, now leave! In Jesus' name, in Jesus' name. Jesus, help JoJo.' And I felt the demon leave."

Brody nodded. "Well, that was pretty much what I was saying—but like, it was in my head."

JoJo shook his head. "It was very real. And–" He paused and thought a moment. "I seem to have a knowing right now, that the demon was right. I'm not gonna be healed. God is not going to heal me." His eyes filled. "Maybe, I'm not gonna be healed because I'm not worthy."

Mark sighed. "No, JoJo, that's not the reason. If that were so, then no one would ever be healed."

JoJo nodded.

"Son, this demon came to you to try to make you feel unworthy, to use this to destroy your faith or send you into a depression, or anything it can do to destroy you. God loves you, I know He does. And He loved Beth too. We've had many talks about her. You know she was a strong, good person with a heart filled with love."

"But am I cursed, Dad? I mean, am I cursed because I came into being through a one-night stand?"

Mark's eyes closed with the pain. He drew a breath. There were always consequences. "That one-night stand gave your mother a moment of love and closeness to another human being that she never experienced again. It was what she needed at that time in her life. And no, JoJo, you are not cursed. You came into being because it was God's plan that you be here, with me, with this family. My sin, and the sin of your mother, is not heaped on an innocent child. I'm sorry, JoJo, but then again, I'm not. If Beth hadn't come to me that night, you wouldn't exist. And I know of a surety that you were supposed to exist. You were not a mistake. You are a great blessing. I thought I'd made sure you understood that your entire life. Please, know, Joseph Carter Adams, that you were meant to be."

JoJo nodded. "Really, Dad, I do know that. I'm sorry I even said what I did. It was a moment of weakness and I certainly didn't mean to make you feel bad." He drew a deep breath and blew it out.

"This was an attack," Joey said. "Plain and simple."

Mark nodded. "And why do the dark forces attack us?"

"To put out our light," young Eric answered. "And the brighter our light, the harder they work, so, that tells me, Jo, that your light must be shining really bright right now."

"I agree," Logan said. "And you must be about to do something big and amazing for the bad guys to come at you like that."

JoJo sighed. "Thanks, guys. I appreciate the sentiment."

"It's not them just trying to make you feel better," Mark said. "They speak the truth. Accept it."

"Okay," JoJo said softly. "Well, if that's the truth then I will just say that I won't let them put out my light. And I'll keep trying to know God's will for me and do what I have to do."

"You guys are awesome," Brody said.

JoJo smiled. "Thanks, Brody, for your help. I think it was your strength that drove the demon away."

"I agree, and add my thanks to that," young Eric said.

"Well, guys, we have things to do today, so let's get to it," Joey said. "But before we do, shall we have a prayer?"

JoJo nodded. "Yes, that would be helpful. Dad? Will you pray?"

"Of course," Mark said and took his son's hands, bowed his head and prayed a powerful prayer, giving thanks, rebuking darkness, and vowing to strive to do God's will in all things and to be strong.

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Young Eric started back to his room and saw Jordan peeking out the door. He smiled at her.

"Is everybody okay?" she asked quietly.

He nodded. “Yeah, JoJo had a bad dream, that was probably really an attack by demons, and it was rebuked by Brody. But he’s okay.”

Jordan nodded as she tried to understand. “That sounds very scary.”

“It can be.” He moved close to her. “Is Taylor in the room?”

Jordan shook her head. “No, she had a very early breakfast date with Gabe and Peyton.”

He smiled. “Cool!” He came into the room, lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed, sat down beside her and kissed her.

“Good morning,” he said.

She smiled. “Good morning, my husband-to-be.”

He grinned, then reverently brushed her hair back from her face. “So, do you still want to have a talk with me?”

“Yes, at least, I think I do. Sorry I was so sleepy last night and we didn’t get to go to Cottage Three again.”

“We were all tired last night, so it’s no problem. But what do you mean, you think you do? You said you were gonna tell me something and I’m not letting you off the hook.”

She smiled. “You think you can boss me around now?”

He chuckled. “No. But you did promise you would tell me what you were thinking.”

“I did, so I guess I will. But I need to shower and dress and have breakfast with my mom and siblings and do what I can to help Miss Jodi, even with my foot in a cast. The Inn is booked solid starting next week for Christmas and it’s the first year without Miss Maddie to help decorate. And then Miss Lisa is not gonna be completely up to speed since she’s nursing the twins, but Melaynah is gonna pitch in and my mom and Josie are gonna pitch in, and I said, even with my bad foot I can also pitch in.”

“Awesome. And how is the foot feeling? Any pain from the spill you took yesterday?”

She shook her head. “Nope. No pain at all. As a matter of fact, look at this.” She stood and walked on her cast across the room.

His eyes opened wide. “Wow! And no pain?”

She shook her head. “None. It’s almost like me taking that fall made my foot better instead of hurting me.”

Eric sighed. “It wasn’t you taking the fall that made it better.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to say just yet, but I think I want Aunt Jeffy to take a look at you.”

“Okay. But I feel fine.”

He nodded. “Good. I’m so glad. I love you, Jordan.”

She smiled. “I love you too, Three.”

He smiled. “Too—three. I like the way that works out.”

She giggled. “Ya know, you’re a lot like your dad.”

“Well, that’s a compliment.”

“Yes, it is. But I was really talking about your dad jokes.”

“Oh, does that mean I’m getting old?”

“Hmm, about to be twenty-one. Yes. Sooo old.”

Young Eric smiled. “I think I’m gonna stay here today and help you ladies get started on Christmas decorations. I know that Master Appel is gonna be helping to take down the tents and I think you might need someone to pull boxes out of storage and hang lights or garland or whatever.”

“They won’t miss you at the Center?”

“I doubt it. I’ll tell Dad. He’ll agree that I should stay here.”

“Awesome. Another whole day with you. I’m so happy.”

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November 29th, 7:00 AM, Friday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Brody strode down the dirt road from the Inn to the Stewart ranch. Once inside the gate, he headed straight toward the front barn where Laynah and Jake had been married. He finally got to the back corner where they’d made a little area for momma dog and her puppies. She’d given birth to nine puppies. Four of them looked like their momma, a golden color. Five of them were black with a little bit of white and gold under their chins and on their paws. All of them were just about the cutest puppies you could ever imagine.

Brody went about feeding the momma and refreshing her water.

“Hey!”

He turned at the soft voice and smiled. “Good mornin’, Daisy! I didn’t expect you to be down here.”

She shrugged. “Well, I went to the Inn looking for breakfast and you, and they told me you were down seeing to the puppies, so I came on down,” she said as she squatted down next to the wooden box and stroked a few of the soft heads and bellies, then moved to pet the momma. “How ya doin’, girl? Are you lovin’ your little babies? Well, they are so cute. You did so good, sweet momma.”

Brody watched her and his heart swelled. She was so sweet. So kind. So thoughtful. So beautiful. She looked up at him and offered a bright smile and it literally took his breath away.

“Aren’t they just the sweetest?” she said brightly.

He nodded. “They are and you are.”

She laughed. “Right.”

He frowned. “You don’t think you’re sweet?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. I’m just— me. Sometimes I can be nice. Sometimes, I can be downright mean.”

He chuckled. “I bet that’s fun to see.”

“Oh no, it’s not pretty.”

He brushed his hand over her hair. “Daisy, there’s not a thing about you that’s not pretty.”

She shook her head. “So, Brody, tell me, what is it about me that has kept you interested all these years? I mean, really, I’m not special. I have a sister that looks exactly like me. And I have three other sisters that look very similar to me.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. “You *are* special, Daisy. And I don’t think you look exactly like anyone. To me, you stand out. You’re like that little piece of gold in a pan full of dirt, easy to see. You stand out.”

“That’s really not true. If Lily and I were to exchange places you wouldn’t even be able to tell.”

“I bet you I would.”

“What if I told you that I *am* Lily, and this was a test.”

“I’d say you’re lyin’ because I know you, Daisy.”

She smiled then shook her head. “I don’t get it.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I don’t think you know your own worth. I mean, you know you’re a child of God, but you don’t think you’re special and I’m trying to tell you, that you are. You’re not just like your sisters. You are unique.”

She sighed and blinked up at him.

“Well, good morning!”

They both turned to see Laynah walk into the barn.

“Hi, Bugs,” Daisy said.

“I was just on my way down to ride and thought I’d stop in to see the new babies.” She came to the momma and loved on her first then bent down to stroke the puppies. “You guys are just so cute, aren’t ya now?”

“So, have you heard from Jake lately?” Brody asked.

She shook her head. “I heard from him on my birthday, last Friday, and again Sunday night. He was supposed to call me yesterday, but he didn’t, which means they got called out on Thanksgiving and that doesn’t bode well.”

“Oh, Bugs,” Daisy said and went to hug her.

“Thanks, Daisy. I’ve been praying all night and I get a feeling of

peace, so I think he's okay. Maybe just held up." She gave her head a shake causing her mane of red hair to shift beautifully in the morning light. "Anyway, I was gonna go ride a bit. Would you two like to ride too? Santana would love to have a male rider."

Brody smiled and turned to Daisy. "You wanna ride?"

She nodded. "Sure."

He touched her bandaged head. "What about your head? Are you okay to ride?"

She laughed. "Yes, of course. I'm pretty tough."

"I don't doubt that a bit, but it's bruising. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm sure."

"Alright then! Let's go for a ride," Brody said excitedly.

The three went to the stables and saddled Santana, Honey and Dusty. Brody took Santana, Laynah took Honey and Daisy took Dusty. They saddled up and took off across the west pasture, the cold wind blowing in their faces, hooves pounding the cold ground. Brody allowed Santana his head and they sprinted out in front. Laynah and Daisy slowed to a trot and then a walk and watched as Santana flew out of sight.

Melaynah smiled at Daisy. "So, Daisy girl, you and Brody, huh?"

Daisy smiled. "I think so. I've never really considered it. I mean I've always thought he was cute, but always thought he wasn't interested because I'm a little older."

"Yeah, but only a little."

"Right. And now that I know he's interested in me, it makes him VERY interesting to me. The things he says to me, I mean..."

"What? What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I can't explain it. Anyway. I think he's interesting, and good and kind and..."

"And totally a hottie," Laynah put in.

"Yeah, he is."

"Come on, let's catch up," Laynah said as she kicked her horse into a gallop.

Daisy followed. As they came over the rise Brody came trotting back to them. "Thought I'd lost you ladies there for a second."

They smiled. "Girl talk."

He smiled. "I see. Well, girls, try to keep up," he said as he kicked Santana and the powerful horse surged forward. "Race you back to the stable," he called as he left them. The girls turned their horses and took off after him.

Once all the horses were brushed and watered and fed, Melaynah thanked them for their help and bid them goodbye. Brody took Daisy's

hand and started back. “Are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

“Good. Let’s go back to the Inn and pig out.”

“Oh, I’d love to,” she said with a grin.

They stopped in the barn and checked on the dogs once more. She reached over and petted the puppies one more time. “Bye-bye, sweet babies,” she purred.

Brody had to take a deep breath. He wished he didn’t have to leave on Monday. He tugged on her hand. “Are you coming to the Kinos’ new house tonight for dinner?”

“Yes, my whole family will be there.”

“Good. And so, what are you doing the rest of the day? I mean like, before dinner?”

She laughed. “Helping Rose at the Center. We’re gonna get started on decorating for Christmas.”

“Okay. Would you like some help?”

“Sure. We never turn down help.”

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Same Day, Same Time

Church Street Diner, Pine Forest, Georgia

Taylor smiled as she watched and listened to Gabe and Peyton reminisce about high school and the baseball they’d played together and all the things that had taken place over the past year. It was obvious to her that Peyton had huge respect and love for Gabe and that Gabe had a huge amount of love and respect for Peyton.

Peyton suddenly turned his attention to Taylor. “I’m sorry, Taylor. We’re ignoring you.”

She smiled. “No, it’s fine. I love listening to you two talk. I love your friendship. Besides, I think I owe my relationship with Gabe to you.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, if I hadn’t overheard you talking on the phone to Gabe that day when you said I was hot and told him to turn the phone toward me, I might not have thought twice about Gabe.”

“Wow. Thanks,” Gabe said.

She laughed. “And, he might not have thought about me along those lines either. Then again, I think Gabe and I were meant to be and somehow, God would’ve knocked me in the head and like, made sure I understood that Gabe and I were supposed to be together.”

Gabe smiled. “You got that right.”

Peyton looked back and forth between them. “So, like, is this it? I

mean, so, will I be getting an invitation in the mail?"

Gabe chuckled. "Not anytime soon. She has to graduate high school and figure out what she wants to do after high school and I have to train with Ameritech starting this January and go to school. I have a lot to accomplish, and right now it's too soon to decide whether we'll do that together, or go a different route."

Taylor frowned. "He thinks I'm too young to know what I want to do right now. But I'm not. And I'll eventually be able to say 'I told ya so,' and I can't wait for that to happen."

"I'm taking it slow. But if God talks to me and tells me to do something, I will act immediately," Gabe assured them both. He glanced down at the beautiful girl who was frowning. "Look, if I could marry her and take her away with me right now, I'd do it. But I owe her the time and respect to try to do things right and not make whirlwind decisions."

Peyton nodded. "I get it. Maybe God will send *me* a new girlfriend."

Taylor smiled. "I'll get to work on that right away."

"Uh, thanks, but no thanks, Taylor. I prefer to work alone."

She giggled and looked up as two young girls actually approached their table.

"Hey, Gabe, hey Peyton," a pretty blonde said.

"Hey, Chandra," Peyton answered, not exactly in a friendly tone.

"It's so nice to see you guys, like, in person," the other girl said.

"Yeah, we watched your livestream yesterday, Gabe. To think you two were right there in our high school all that time and we didn't ever get together."

"Yeah, just think," Gabe said. He nodded at Taylor. "Tay, this is Chandra and Leah. They were in my graduating class."

Taylor smiled sweetly and nodded. "Oh, yes, I think I remember you actually. I saw you at the prom. I think you, Leah, had on that gorgeous pink dress and you, Chandra, had on that sparkly green dress, right?"

Both of their mouths fell open.

"Wow," Chandra said. "You have a good memory."

Taylor grinned. "Yeah, I've always been pretty observant."

"So, did you graduate too?" Leah asked.

"No. I'm a senior at Brookside High in Newport Beach, Cali."

"And you're here visiting your boyfriend for Thanksgiving?"

She smiled, because it was so much more than that. "Well, first, we had to help at the big event we had yesterday at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* at Gabe's Community Center, and then also, yes, I'm visiting, but, well, my whole family is visiting because the Tanners and Appels and Stewarts are like family to us."

"Really?"

"We've known them a long time," Taylor added. "I've known them all my life."

"Gabe, how did we not know this?" Chandra said.

Gabe's lips pressed tightly together. "What was I supposed to do? Go around announcing that my family and the Kinos are good friends?"

"I would have," Leah said.

Taylor giggled. "Lovin' the honesty. Anyway, Leah and Chandra, it's so nice to meet you," Taylor said sweetly. "We're gonna finish up our breakfast because we have a ton of work to do today."

"Oh, well, okay. So, can we get an autograph and a picture?"

"Absolutely," Taylor purred. "But who do you want? Gabe's or Peyton's or mine?"

"All three," Chandra said.

They quickly signed napkins for the girls, took several selfies and finally, the girls took their leave.

Gabe blew out a breath. "They've known me and Peyton forever, so I can't believe they want our autograph. That's weird, but Tay, you're such a pro. How do you do that?"

"Do what? I was just being friendly. Ya never know how what you say to someone will affect them later. Everyone knows that I love Jesus. Will what I say make them see that in a good light, or in a bad light? I'm not trying to make friends. I'm trying to set a good example of kindness, and though sometimes it's hard to remember when all people want is to know someone famous, I try to keep in mind that God may have sent them to me for a reason."

Gabe smiled at his girl, then turned to Peyton. "And that, my friend, is why I am so freakin' in love with this girl."

"What are you talkin' about, Gabe? You do that exact same thing."

Gabe shook his head. "Not all the time, and I was pretty frustrated with those two just now."

"I could see that, Gabe," Taylor said. "Which is why I jumped in. See? We work so well together."

Gabe smiled. "Yeah, we do." He covered her hand with his.

Peyton rolled his eyes. "Too sweet for me." He rose. "Come on, guys, we have to go help get those tents down."

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"Eleven. Okay, that is actually box number eleven," Brody said as he set it in the lobby.

"Well, Rose didn't know what we would need or how we could use

stuff, so she just ordered a bunch of stuff online and had it delivered," Daisy explained.

"These boxes haven't even been opened," Brody said.

"I know. We didn't have time. So this will be kind of fun to see what we have, decide where to put it, and then put it where we decide and then make a list of what else we'll need."

He sighed and nodded. "Okay, then, let's get to it."

Rose pointed at the largest box. "Biggest first."

"Yes, ma'am," Brody said.

He pulled out his pocket knife and opened the box for her. Rose smiled in delight. The box held giant, beautifully decorated Christmas wreaths. They were huge. Maybe five feet in diameter.

"Oh, these are even prettier in person than they were on the website. There should be eight of them."

Brody dug through the box. "Yep. Eight. Where do you want them?"

"Well, I was thinking two on the front of the building, one on either side of the sign."

Brody nodded. "I'll get a ladder. How about the other six?"

"Hmm, what do you think, Daisy?"

"I think we definitely need one right up there above the wall behind the welcome counter. Of course, we'll need to take down all the fall stuff first. And maybe, another one on the opposite wall, up there," she said pointing to the wall just above their heads.

"Yes, I agree," Rose said. "And then at least two in the gym, maybe on the walls on either side of the stage, and two in the cafeteria somewhere."

"That makes eight. I'll get started on it," Brody said. "But first, let me open the rest of the boxes for you."

Daisy watched him as he cut open the packing tape on the boxes. She shook her head. He was just a guy, cutting boxes open. She could do that as well, though not as quickly. So, why was everything he was doing getting to her? He was so very masculine. So powerful. But so kind and sweet, helping two girls decorate for Christmas. She sighed, then looked up at her sister who was grinning at her with her eyebrows raised. Daisy blushed and shrugged.

Brody looked up. "Okay, there ya go, ladies. Have at it."

They all looked up as Heather and Nolan came through the doors into the lobby.

"Hey, guys," Heather said. "Nolan and I have finished helping Mom and the two sweetest little babies in the world get situated for the day, so put us to work."

"Is Dad with Mom? Because he's not out back doing the tents."

"No, he's working. Something went down in Mobile, Alabama. So he's gonna be busy with that most of the day. And Violet is with Mom now and Aunt Jodi and Lily already sent over breakfast and lunch so all Violet has to do is some laundry and holding and rocking sweet, four-day-old babies, and see to Iris."

"Lucky her," Rose said. "Okay, so, Nolan, if you'd like, I'm sure you and Brody can knock out hanging the wreaths. Heather, Daisy and I were about to look through these boxes and decide what can go where."

"Oooh, sounds like fun. Let's do it!" Heather said.

"So, where's Jericho?" Nolan asked.

"He's out back helping take down tents. It's actually a huge project."

"Well okay then, Brody, I'm all yours," Nolan quipped, making the girls laugh.

"Good, let's show these Georgia girls how us Tennesseans can get things done quickly."

Rose snorted. "Good luck with that."

"Tools?" Brody asked.

"Look in the utility closet. There are a couple of toolboxes and some things on the shelf that might be handy. But the banner out there is already attached to metal rings in the brick, and it needs to come down."

"Gotcha. We'll be back soon," Brody said as he lifted two of the wreaths and then he and Nolan went to grab a ladder.

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November 29th, 2:00 PM, Friday Afternoon

Tanner home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe came galloping down the stairs and headed back to the den. He smiled as he entered the room. His mother was nursing one of the babies, a receiving blanket draped over her shoulder for modesty. She looked up and smiled at him. "Well, don't you look handsome!"

He smiled and came to kiss her cheek. "Thanks, Mom."

"Ooh, and you smell good too!"

Gabe smiled. "Thanks. You doing okay?"

"I'm doing great," she said softly.

He bent over to peer at the baby sleeping beside her on a blanket on the sofa. Gently, he scooped up his baby sister. "Hey, Gentian," he cooed softly. "How ya doin', sweet girl?"

Lizzy smiled contentedly. Her son's love for his family always touched her.

He looked around. "Where's Iris?"

"Violet took her for a walk. She was about to go stir crazy."

"Front or back?"

"Back, why?"

"Oh, well, I was gonna go see her before Mr. Kino gets here. Is Dad still in his office?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what happened?"

"No, but I know someone was hurt and I know Joey and Jason are also working on it."

"Sounds bad."

There was a knock on the front door and Gabe nuzzled his sister's cheek. "Let's go see who's at the door, huh?" he whispered, though he knew who it was.

He opened the front door and ushered Taylor, young Eric and Jordan inside out of the cold.

The girls immediately started softly cooing at the baby. "Can I hold her?" Jordan asked.

Gabe nodded and handed her the baby. Taylor smiled at Gabe. "You look very nice," she said as she looked him over. He wore dark blue slacks, black shoes, a bright blue sweater that matched his eyes over a white collared shirt.

Gabe smiled. "Thanks, Tay. And you look beautiful as usual."

She wore an off-white colored knit dress that had silvery threads all through it, making the material sparkle. The dress came to about mid-thigh. She had on white boots and had on a white coat. Her long dark hair tumbled around her shoulders in thick curls.

She smiled. "Thanks. Is it okay if I go say 'hi' to your mom?"

Gabe nodded. "Of course. Go on back. She's in the den." He turned to Jordan. "She's something, isn't she?"

"You mean, Taylor or this little sweetie?"

"I meant the baby," he said with a laugh.

Young Eric chuckled as he peered at the baby Jordan held. "She's very cool, Gabe. Isn't it amazing, that like, this tiny human was created by your parents and is now here in this world?"

Gabe nodded reverently. He looked young Eric and Jordan over. They too had dressed up for the evening. Jordan wore a simple brown sweater dress with a row of buttons all the way to the hem, with black tights and brown suede boots and a tan coat. Her blond hair was down, flowing around her shoulders. She was beautiful. Young Eric had on tan slacks and a brown, tan, gray and black long-sleeved polo shirt and a tan sport coat.

Gabe took the baby back. "Y'all come back and see my mom."

They followed Gabe back to the den. Lizzy smiled at them as they came in. “Oh my, you all look so nice,” she said.

“Hey, Mrs. Tanner,” young Eric greeted cheerfully. “Did you ever get to meet Jordan?”

“Actually, yes. We met yesterday officially.” She smiled at the girl. “Hey, Jordan. It’s so nice to see you again, and I’m so happy for you and Eric. That proposal was such a great way to start such a wonderful day. Jordan, you are a beautiful young lady. Eric, you’re a lucky guy.”

“I’m a lucky girl.”

“It’s not luck,” young Eric said quickly. “God brought us together.”

“Indeed He did,” Lizzy agreed. “Well, are you all ready to go see your new home?”

Taylor smiled. “I can’t wait. I intend to spend a lot of time in this home. I hope my parents are thinking along the same lines.”

“Well,” Lizzy began. “They wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of buying that property if they didn’t intend to spend some time here, so that part is exciting, but don’t be too disappointed if it’s not a lot of time at first. You’re still in school, and Gabe’s gonna be training out in California. You wouldn’t want to be here and him out there without you, would you?”

She frowned. “No. I just want to be with him.”

Lizzy smiled sympathetically. “That’s so sweet, and I understand completely. When he’s not here we miss him so much.” Her eyes teared up and she looked up at her son. “And I know his time being here with us as our son is growing short.”

“Mom,” Gabe said quickly. He bent down and kissed her cheek again. “It’s gonna be okay.”

She sniffed and laughed and waved it away. “Don’t pay attention to me. Postpartum hormones.”

Young Eric pulled out his phone when it buzzed and quickly answered a text. “Dad’s here.”

“Okay, kiddos, go see your home, and the rest of us will be there in a few hours. Eric, ask your mom if there’s anything she needs, let us know and we’ll bring it with us or stop to get it.”

“I will. Bye, Mrs. Tanner.”

“See you soon, Mrs. Tanner,” Taylor added.

“Bye,” Jordan said.

“Bye, Mom,” Gabe said as he heard the back door slam and heard little footsteps running toward the den.

“Gabe, Gabe,” Iris screamed.

He turned and picked her up and tossed her into the air.

"There's my little flower," he said as he jostled her around and gave her a huge kiss on the cheek.

"Gabe, will you pway with me?"

He sighed. "Sweetie, I have to go somewhere right now."

"I don't want you to go. You always go."

He swallowed. "Iris, I promise, tomorrow morning, you and me will put on our coats and go to the park over next to the Center and we'll play our favorite game. But right now, I have to go."

"Where is you goin'?"

"I'm going over to Taylor's house."

Iris looked over at Taylor.

"Hi, Iris," Taylor said with a smile.

"Hi."

Taylor knelt down. "Can I have a hug? You haven't given me a hug today at all."

Gabe set her down and she ran into Taylor's arms.

Taylor sighed. "Oh, wow, I feel so much better now. I was feeling kind of sad today and I didn't know why, but now I know it's because I didn't get a hug from you today." She tickled her tummy.

Iris giggled.

"So, guess what? At my new house, my mom says it's like a princess lives there. And your mom is gonna bring you over in just a little while. So, I want you to put on your prettiest dress, and fix your hair, and when you get to my house you and me will walk around and find the best princess looking parts of the house. Okay? And when we find the best part, we'll pretend to be princesses, you and me together. And Gabe can be the prince. How does that sound?"

Iris nodded. "Okay. Mommy, when is we going?"

Lizzy smiled. "In a few hours."

"Mommy, will you help me get dwessed?"

Violet, who'd been standing in the doorway, moved forward then. "I'll help you, honey. Come on, let's go see if we can find the best dress." She looked at the four standing there. "Hey, guys, you'd better go on while the gettin's good."

"Thanks, Vi," Gabe said. They headed out.

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November 29th, 2:00 PM, Friday Afternoon

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose looked around the front lobby with a smile, then nodded at her helpers, Nolan, Heather, Daisy, Brody and finally, Jericho, who'd come to help after the tents were down. "You guys, it's lookin' great. Thank you

so much for the help."

"So, we're done?" Brody asked.

She smiled. "Aww, how sweet, but not hardly. But it's a good start and your help has been invaluable." She looked up at the huge wreaths. "They are perfect and make a huge impact. And all the garland that you guys put up along the walls there and in the gym and in the cafeteria and along the hallways. I mean, you got all the hard work out of the way. I can't thank you enough."

Daisy nodded. "Now, all us girls have to do is decorate about ten classrooms, get some Christmas trees and put on the lights and decorate them, and then just set out all the little things."

"Right," Rose said. "And we'll get the children to help decorate the trees and we're gonna have them make decorations and also make large different kinds of paper trees stuck to the walls. And then, when the lights come in, we'll have to get them up."

"We left the lights up on the front of the building and on the walls in the gym and cafeteria and up there," Brody said, pointing to the wall above the counter.

"Yes, and thank you so much, but we have lots more lights coming in. We'll add to the front of the building and decorate the trees out there in the front."

Brody sighed. "Well, I don't think you ladies should get up on those high ladders. I'd feel terrible if you had an accident."

"Don't worry, Brody, I'll make sure my guys and I are around to take care of it," Jericho answered.

"You guys don't think I can climb a ladder?" Rose said.

"Oh, I know you can. I watched you do it. That's how I met you."

Rose smiled as she remembered the large, handsome man who stopped to help her put up the banner.

"But," Jericho continued. "I'd like to help you when the lights come in, if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind," she said.

Daisy and Heather giggled.

"Nolan, you should see how this town is gonna change in about four or five days," Heather said. "Lights, garlands, Christmas trees, bows, nativities everywhere. It's spectacular in an old-fashioned homey sort of way. Not all silvery and glitter, but still, very pretty. It's a huge attraction for the Inn, just like the Fourth of July is, and there are so many activities and bazaars and choirs and pageants. We really celebrate Jesus' birthday."

"Actually, I will see it," he said. "Since we'll be home for Christmas

for sure this year."

Heather smiled. "I'm so happy we're coming home."

"Well, shoot, that makes me want to come here for Christmas too," Brody said.

"You usually celebrate with your grandparents, right?" Daisy asked.

He nodded. "Yes, and my Uncle Ben and Aunt Molly and their families. I have several younger cousins. Grace and I are the oldest of the bunch. And the Stillwaters, old friends of my grandparents, sometimes they come too with their grown kids whom I call Uncle Paul and Aunt Lynn and their families."

"Wow, that's a lot of people. Well, as much as I'd love to spend the holiday with you, Brody, it sounds like your family does it up big."

He nodded, frowning. "Yep. But maybe I can come down for a little while after Christmas."

Her eyes lit up. "That would be awesome!"

Heather and Rose smiled at each other. It looked like their little sister had herself a very handsome boyfriend.

Rose pulled out her phone and looked at the time. "I need to get home and get all cleaned up for the fancy dinner tonight at the Kinos."

"I can't wait to see their place," Heather said.

"I've driven by a few times and from the outside, it looks completely refurbished," Daisy said.

Rose smiled. "Well, knowing the Kinos, the inside will be beautiful and classy."

"She hired a designer from Georgia," Daisy began, "to make sure she kept with the Southern heritage that the house represents."

"I guess we need to go then," Brody said. "Daisy, will you drop me off at the Inn?"

"Yes, I will, and when you're ready, why don't you come on over to the house and get me and we can drive to the Kinos together? We can call it our second date."

He laughed. "Sounds good."

"Rose?" Jericho said. "May I pick you up? We can call it our second date too."

She giggled. "Yes. That sounds wonderful."

Psalm 133:1

"A Song of Ascents. Of David. Behold, how good
and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"

Chapter Sixteen

November 29th, 4:00 PM, Friday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose stood in her and Violet's room, looking at herself in the full-length mirror. She wrinkled up her nose as she turned back and forth. Violet came out of the bathroom.

"What's wrong, Rose? It looks really cute."

Rose sighed. "But, is it really me?"

Violet laughed. "Good grief, Rose, what are you talking about?"

She shrugged. "It has ruffles at the shoulder and at the hem. I'm really not the ruff-ly type."

"Why aren't you? Because you ride and shoot and climb ladders and trees and play ball?"

"Maybe."

"Pretend it's my dress. Would you like it for me?"

"Well, yes, I mean, I like ruffles. I just don't know if they match my personality."

"You like ruffles, Rose, then wear ruffles. That *is* your personality, the fact that you don't like being put in a box. Don't put yourself in a box. Ruffles are feminine and you are feminine. Not all the time, but some of the time. So wear them. I think you look really pretty."

Violet looked her sister over. The dress was definitely feminine. It was a frothy, rose-colored confection with ruffles at the sleeves, the material crisscrossed over her breasts and tied at her waist, a tiny bow off to one side. Then down that side was the full split skirt that divided about mid-thigh and came to just above her knees. The bottom ruffle started at the split and covered the entire hem. It was utterly feminine.

Rose nodded as she turned to see the back. "Okay, then, I guess I'll wear it." She looked at her sister. "Oh, wow, Vi, you look gorgeous."

Violet smiled. "Thanks. I saw this dress and I couldn't resist it because of the violets."

Rose looked her over. Vi too had ruffles. The first row was along the neckline of a white dress covered with tiny purple violets. The dress hugged her body and then had two tiers of ruffles that ended just above the

knee. She wore white boots and her long, blond hair was up in a messy bun with little wisps coming down around her face.

Rose's phone buzzed and she scooped it up off her dresser, looked at the number and frowned. Well, she did say for him to call after 4:00 PM and it was 4:15. "Record this," she said to Violet. Violet nodded and Rose hit the button and put it on speaker. "Hello, Mike."

"Hey, gorgeous."

"I wish you would stop calling me that."

"Why? It's true. You are one gorgeous chick."

Violet rolled her eyes. Rose sighed. "So, you said you would call to tell us about the shoot. When and where?"

"Straight to the point," he complained. "Okay, well, I've decided to do it along Main Street in a few days, just as soon as they get all their decorations put up. I'll call again when I have the exact time."

"Did you ask the Mayor about that?"

"I'm a pro, Rose, so of course I did. I admit though, he gave his okay because you and your sisters are part of the Tanner family."

"Whatever."

"And I've spoken with the *Main Street Market* owner. What a dumb hick, but his wife understood how important it would be to their business to say that they carry *Twin Wave Beauty* products."

Rose sighed. "Darnell Burton is not a dumb hick. He's an Army vet, who served his country and came home with a brain injury. Things are a little harder for him, but he works it out and gets things done. We're all grateful that his father was able to turn the store over to Darnell. He's a super good guy, with a wife and kids and I have to say that I just hate your condescending attitude. When are you gonna learn how to treat people?"

"I know how to treat you," he said provocatively.

"You have proven, Mike, that you really know nothing about me."

"So tell me, are you really into that overgrown cowboy?"

"I already told you, he's not a cowboy. And how I feel about him is none of your business."

"Well, I don't like him."

"Well, I don't care. And you'd better get used to him because he'll be there at the shoot."

"I didn't give you permission to bring someone to the shoot."

"I don't need your permission. It's in the contract."

"Where?"

"The part about us having someone on hand to look after our interests and protect us from harm."

"That's a stretch."

"It's in the contract. Jericho, an EMS specialist, will be there to look after my interests. And, by the way, Agent Blackmon will be there to look after Violet's."

"Doesn't matter. I'm not interested in either you or Violet."

Rose eyed her sister, trying not to laugh.

"But that Daisy, she is sexy as hell."

Rose's eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare talk about my little sister like that, you pig, or you're gonna lose your contract. If we feel threatened or unsafe in any way, the contract is null and void. Actually, I hope you do continue to talk like that, because I'd love an excuse to not have to work with you ever again."

"You do that, and I'll fix it so that you'll never model again."

Rose snorted. "Neither I nor my sisters care about that at all. But just know, if we wanted to model, we would. We don't need your little rinky-dink company. And you're the one who'd better be careful, because I have the power to hurt you bad, Mike. You have no idea how powerful I am, and how a word from me to the Lees and the Kinos and my father, will end your career. And might even end *you*. As a matter of fact, the only reason we'll honor the contract is because we don't want *Twin Wave Beauty* to suffer here at the holidays. We're doing it for them, not for you. But keep it up, and they can sue *you* for loss of revenue."

Violet nodded her head, her eyes dancing.

Mike sighed. "I know you think that."

"If you're dumb enough to test me, go ahead."

He sighed heavily. "Anyway, I'll be in touch with an exact date and time, but we'll say tentatively Wednesday, December fourth. Shoot will be around ten in the morning so you girls will have to be at the *Main Street Market* by eight."

"Let me know if that changes. Goodbye, Mike."

Before he could say anything else she hung up. "Oh, he just makes me so mad. How can I have misjudged his character so poorly?"

"Um, let me turn off the recording," Violet answered.

Rose grinned. "Oh, sorry. AirDrop me that file, please."

"You got it, sis."

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Daisy came downstairs and peeked out the window. She didn't see Brody coming yet.

"Well, sweet girl, you look absolutely beautiful."

Daisy turned at her father's voice. "Hey, Daddy. Thank you. You look really nice yourself."

He straightened his tie and nodded. “Thanks.”

“So, did you get everything straight today, I mean with work and all?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Can I ask what happened?”

He shook his head. “It’s better if you don’t know.”

“I’m not a child.”

“No, I can see that.” He sighed. “Okay, so, someone lost their life, and one of our agents was responsible. Another of our agents was injured and taken hostage when they saved the client and one of our sharpshooters finally took out the bad guy. Is that enough information?”

Daisy’s eyes teared. “Wow, I guess you were right. It really is better if I don’t know.”

“I was right? I’m gonna write a memo to the whole family.”

“Very funny, Daddy.”

He got serious and looked her over. “Honey, you really do look all grown up and very beautiful. I hate to see my girls all growing up so quickly.” He came to stand next to her as Daisy went to peek out the window again. “You expecting someone?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Brody should be here any minute and he’s gonna ride with me to the Kinos’.”

Keegan sighed and nodded. “So, this thing between you and Brody, how serious is it?”

“I don’t know.”

He took her hands and turned her to him. “Tell me all about it like you used to.”

She sighed and looked down at her feet, then leaned her head against her father’s chest. “This is nice.”

“Yes, it is. The last time you stood here like this in this room was after the senior prom and your date dropped you off and then he went out to a big after party.”

She sighed. “And I couldn’t go and I was crying and talking about how stupid it looked to the other kids, and how mad I was at you. But you know what, Dad? Now that I’m older, I’m really glad you wouldn’t let me go. Who knows what would have happened. You were protecting me and teaching me and I’m really grateful that you had the strength to do that, even knowing I would be mad at you.”

He smiled and squeezed her hands. “When we love someone, sometimes the things we have to do to help them are difficult. So, tell me, Daisy, about things between you and Brody.”

“Well, Daddy, I don’t even know what to say. We had a long talk. He told me he’s had his eye on me since we were little kids. He says he sees

me. He sees ME. Not Lily. Not my sisters. But me. And for some reason, when he told me that, I realized that he was aware that I needed to hear that. He told me I was unique."

"So, he's about to graduate college. Why has he waited so long to tell you all this?"

"He said at first, he was too shy, and he thought since I was a little older than him that I probably wouldn't be interested anyway. Then he said he compared every girl he met to me, and it ruined him for everyone. He said he had a long talk with his father who gave him the courage to talk to me, and he tried, at the wedding, but I was too busy. He did ask me to dance though, and that was nice."

"And this time, he made it a point to speak to you?"

"Yes. And we had a long talk and he told me how he feels and asked if I would let him take me out so we could get to know each other and I said 'yes.'"

"Except you live in different states."

"Right. But he's gonna try to come down the week after Christmas and spend some time with me. And I haven't told him yet, but, if things work out, I might travel up to Tennessee to see some of his games."

"I see." He tilted her face up so he could see her eyes. "So, Daisy, tell me what you think of him. I mean, besides him being what you girls call—a hottie."

She giggled. "Oh, well, it was kinda weird, Dad. Once I knew how he thought of me, it was like, my heart opened. Either I began to feel things, or, I wanted to feel things. But, Daddy, he's so kind. He's very mature. He loves God. He tries hard to do what God wants him to do, which means he tries hard to listen and know God's will for him. He's a hard worker. He loves his family. He honors his mother and sister. He loves his father. But most of all, Daddy, he sees me." Her voice choked on the emotion and she dabbed at her eyes. "I've always felt like such a nobody."

"What? Baby girl, I've always loved you. Always."

"I know. You didn't make me feel that way, like a nobody. I just did it all on my own. It was how I thought of myself. I was not only a twin, but the second born of the second set of twins. It wasn't like I was, woe is me, nobody loves me. But I was like, I'm not special. I'm just me. But then when Brody talked to me, Daddy, he made me feel like I was special. Like I *was* someone important."

Keegan nodded, thinking that was definitely a point for Brody. "That's because you are special, baby girl, and I'm glad he helped you to see that." He put both his arms around her and held her tight. He sighed.

"You know, it's hard on me, to see my little girls grow up and hear them talk about their possible mates. Sometimes I wish that we could go back ten, twenty years and live them all over again."

"Me too, Daddy. Well, some of the things we can leave out. Like, Gabe getting kidnapped."

He chuckled. "Yeah, that was hard, but we can't leave that out. That is God honing that boy into a warrior."

"So, you're saying it was God who made the girl kidnap Gabe?"

"No, but God allowed it and He used it. And Gabe came out of that fire stronger and more faithful."

Daisy nodded and then looked up as her sisters all came downstairs at the same time. She backed away from her father's embrace.

"Sorry," Heather said. "Did we interrupt a father/daughter moment?"

"Yes, but that's okay, my little flowers," Keegan answered. "Come stand over here so I can see how beautiful you all are."

They paraded in front of him. He looked them over with a smile. Heather wore a pale purple dress that was like a cable-knit sweater and form-fitting. Her athletic body made it stunning on her, though Keegan wasn't sure if he liked that. Rose wore a very feminine, rose-colored dress which he really liked. Violet also wore a very soft, feminine dress with little purple flowers on it. Lily wore a burnt-orange colored dress with a bouquet of white lilies printed on it. Her dress had little short sleeves and hung loosely to her knees. Daisy's dress, like Violet's, was white. But instead of being covered with tiny purple flowers, it had one large daisy in the middle, and instead of being loose and feminine, it fit her body closely. She too wore the white boots. He sighed. Brody was gonna appreciate her outfit.

Keegan put a smile on his face. "My girls, you are absolutely lovely. Almost as beautiful as your mother."

"Awww," they all said in appreciation of his remark.

"Me too, Daddy," Iris said as she came down the stairs. "Mommy fixed my hair and Violet found my princess crown, I forgot what it was called, but Mommy fixed it in my hair so it won't come loose and how do I wook, Daddy?"

He looked over her frothy confection of purple and white paired with black patent leather shoes with white tights. "You look like a real princess. And it's called a tiara."

"Oh, yeah, a teerah."

"I guess that's close enough," he mumbled. He scooped her up. "Is Mommy almost ready?"

"Yes. She said she had to feed the babies one more time."

He nodded just as there was a knock on the door. Daisy smoothed her hair and opened the front door. Two guys stood there, Brody and Jericho.

Daisy smiled. “Hi, guys! Don’t you two look very handsome!”

Brody had to clear his throat. “Hello, Daisy. Wow. I mean, uh, wow, you look amazing.”

She blushed. “Thank you. Y’all come in.”

Rose smoothed her dress as she watched Jericho come in the door. Their eyes met immediately. He smiled. She smiled back.

“Rose,” he said softly. “You are absolutely beautiful.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

His eyes traveled to her midsection and she giggled, knowing he was looking to see if she had her gun tucked in there somewhere.

He turned to Keegan, as did Brody.

“Hello, guys,” Keegan said as he stood and offered his hand.

He shook Jericho’s hand first. “Sir, nice to see you as always,” Jericho said.

“You too, Jericho.” Keegan immediately turned to Brody.

“Brody,” Keegan said. “I’ve known you a long time, young man, but it’s very nice to see you in this particular capacity.”

Brody swallowed hard and nodded. “Uh, thank you, sir. It’s very nice to be here in this particular capacity,” he said, making everyone chuckle.

There was another knock on the door and this time Violet answered. She opened the door to let CJ enter the room.

“Violet, you look amazing,” he murmured.

“Thanks, CJ. You look really nice too.”

CJ immediately came to Keegan. “Sir, I hope everything turned out down in Mobile.”

He nodded. “Our guy is gonna be okay and the client is safe.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Thank God,” Keegan said.

Jericho stepped forward to shake CJ’s hand. “Hey, CJ, nice to see you,” he said.

CJ nodded and shook his hand.

Rose watched, trying to understand CJ’s mindset, after what Jericho told her and it hit her. He wasn’t mad at Jericho. He was ashamed.

CJ then turned and shook Brody’s hand.

Another knock on the door brought Nolan into the mix. He too exclaimed over how beautiful Heather looked and then added in how the other girls looked amazing. He shook his future father-in-law’s hand and then he asked a question that got the ball rolling. “So, who’s riding with

Heather and me?"

"Me, me," Iris chanted. "And Lily, you have to ride with me."

Lily smiled. "Okay, little flower. I'll ride with you."

"Good," Keegan said with a nod. "Well, I'm gonna go up and help Lizzy. We'll be there shortly. Taylor called Lizzy and we have to make a quick stop. But we'll see you all there. Oh, and Heather, get Iris's car seat out of my car."

"Will do."

"Who knows the way?" Nolan asked.

"All of us girls do," Rose answered. "So, see you there in about five minutes."

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November 29th, 5:30 PM, Friday Evening

Kino Plantation House, Pine Forest, Georgia

They'd toured the entire home and had now walked across the side yard to one of the outbuildings. This was the third group. The first one was mostly the women, and led by Bree. The second was mostly the men, and led by Ricky. This one was mostly young people, and led by young Eric and Taylor and Gabe and Jordan, repeating the information that they'd learned just a little earlier.

Everyone had fallen in love with the giant home and beautiful surroundings. The old trees, the small lake, the swing under the tree, the fields as far as one could see.

Jericho was trying hard to pay attention to what young Eric was saying. "So, I'm told that this building used to be where they would pull the guests' carriages in. The residents had a separate carriage house attached, which is no longer here. The original owners of this plantation grew rice, indigo and eventually cotton and sugarcane. This was one of the largest plantations, originally over seven hundred acres, and yes, they did own slaves. There are still some of the slave quarters about a half mile that way." He pointed across the fields. "The plantation belonged to the Ellis family, one of the richest plantation-owning families in middle Georgia, and we know that because there are horse stalls included in the carriage house, and even quarters for the coachmen, which was a luxury only the wealthiest could afford."

Jericho wasn't listening. He had his eyes on the most beautiful girl in the world. Rose was so lovely in that pink dress, though when he'd called it pink he was told that it was a dusky rose color. As she moved and turned, the light layers of fabric would shift around her, showing parts of her thigh and that was making his mouth go dry. He needed to touch, so he reached out and took her hand gently in his. She turned her head and

smiled at him.

He motioned toward the horse stalls with a questioning look on his face. She smiled and nodded and he pulled her around the corner. The stalls were completely empty of course, though a bit dusty.

Jericho pressed her up against the dusty wall, and with her hand still in his, he braced his hand against the wall just above her head, leaned forward and kissed her. He pulled away, breathing hard. "I'm sorry, but I thought if I didn't do that right now, I was gonna die."

She gave a soft laugh. "Anything else you just need to do?"

His eyes grew dark. "Yes, but that will have to wait. Still..."

He reached down to the split in her dress and grabbed her leg, just under her knee and pulled it up against his thigh, leaned against her and kissed her again. This time she gave a soft moan, which encouraged him to kiss her several more times. When he pulled away, they both were breathing hard.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

She sighed. "Jericho, don't be sorry. I have to tell you, that, well, I mean, the way you make me feel, no one has ever made me feel that way."

"I'm glad to hear that. How many?"

"How many?"

"How many guys have kissed you? How many am I up against?"

"I've kissed a few guys. Had a few high school boyfriends, but honestly, Jericho, they never made me feel anything except maybe curious as to why kissing and stuff was such a big deal. I tried to feel it, like with a guy I dated briefly in college. And I tried hard to feel it with Mike, because he said I was prudish."

"You're not a prude. He just wasn't man enough to make you feel what you're supposed to feel."

"And what am I supposed to feel?"

He breathed deep. "Like— you would give me anything."

Her mouth opened.

"Did I shock *you* this time?"

"No, it's just that, you just described how I feel when you kiss me."

He stepped back, breathing hard again and shaking his head.

"Did I just shock *you*?"

He smiled as he drew a deep breath. "Maybe. I'm just trying to get myself under control."

"Oh." She smiled.

He shook his head in wonder. "I love how honest you are."

"Is there any other way to be?"

He pulled her away from the wall and cupped her face in his hand. "You, RoseRose, are absolutely the most amazing woman I've ever met. I adore you. And I'm gonna fight to win your heart."

"You do that, Jericho. But it won't be much of a fight."

He smiled. Kissed her. And they headed back to join the group who'd started back toward the house.

As soon as the group came back to the house, Iris came running.

"Gabe, Taywor, which is the pwincess woom?"

Gabe scooped her up. "Wouldn't you like to know."

She giggled. "Yes."

"Well, you're gonna have to be patient because dinner is ready and you have to eat your food first."

She frowned and opened her mouth, but Gabe raised an eyebrow at her and she didn't protest. Not verbally, anyway.

Ricky Kino spoke to the crowd of people. "Welcome, everyone, to our new Georgia home. We're so happy and excited to be able to say that. My father met Shelley here in Georgia, my wife grew up in Georgia, my brothers were born in Georgia, the Appels made Georgia their home twenty-some-odd years ago, the Stewarts were born and raised in Georgia, except Lisa, but she was conceived right here in Pine Forest, and found her way back home. Caro was born and raised in Georgia, Lizzy was born and raised in Georgia and so were all of her children. The Murphys were all born and raised in Georgia. It just seemed fitting that we have a home near the people we consider our family. You are welcome here anytime and we're so happy to be able to have you all over for dinner tonight.

"We have fifty-five people here tonight, and each of the three dining tables will seat eighteen, so that is fifty-four, but we added a chair to the end of a table, so everyone will have a seat. Of course, this doesn't include the five tiny new babies. Anyway, if you'll just serve yourselves at the buffets and sit where you want, that would be great. Bree, do you want to tell them what they're eating?"

Bree smiled. "First let me just say that I only did what the chef told me to do. Ms. Jewell Brooks, Jordan's mom, is the chef responsible for this amazing meal. She's been working at it all day. And we both have to say thank you to the Inn for letting us borrow some cooking supplies, pans, utensils, etcetera. So, Jewell has prepared for us seared venison backstrap, lobster ravioli, purple sweet potato medallions, grilled peach green bean and feta salad, caramel cake, red velvet cake and her famous oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. I'm so grateful for her talent. Let's all give her a hand."

Bree waited until they quieted and smiled at her husband. "Back to

you, Ricky."

"Okay then. Dad, if I may call on you to bless the food?"

"No."

"Uh, no?"

Grandmaster Kino smiled. "Okay, so, don't think I don't appreciate the honor and respect you're showing to me by asking me to pray, Rick, but this is the first meal in *your* new home, YOUR new home, and I think it only fitting that you say the blessing tonight, son. Your respect for me is duly noted."

Ricky nodded. "Very well then. *I'll* say the blessing."

Everyone bowed their heads, some held hands, and Ricky prayed a beautiful, humble, powerful prayer, blessing the food and the people and the house and grounds, asking God to renew and reestablish the entire property to a place of light and love and goodness and righteousness.

The food was amazing and many adulations were heaped upon Jewell. The conversations taking place were delightful, as was always expected when this dynamic group of people get together. There happened to be eighteen young adults, Grace Nash and her brother Brody Smith, Laynah Appel, Heather and Nolan, Rose and Jericho, Violet and CJ, Lily, Daisy, Gabe and Taylor, young Eric and Jordan, JoJo and Logan and Peyton Murphy, so they all sat at one table.

Young Eric, Jordan, Heather, Nolan, and Melaynah discussed possible wedding dates and plans. Grace and Logan discussed music, and possibly doing an album together and what songs they would write or cover for it. Daisy and Brody shared their own softly spoken conversation about when they might be able to see each other. Violet and CJ too, spoke quietly to each other. Rose and Jericho discussed his future plans for his company and her Christmas plans for the Center. Gabe, Taylor, Peyton and JoJo talked sports. It was Taylor who noticed that Lily was sitting quietly, just watching and listening.

"Lily," Taylor began. "Are you still thinking about opening a diner or restaurant in Pine Forest?"

"Probably," she answered. "Right now, my first loyalty is to the Inn, but I guess I'll eventually make the transition. Find a location. Train someone at the Inn, though I may still oversee everything. It was Miss Maddie and the Inn that gave me my start, so, I wouldn't leave them unless they're fully taken care of."

Taylor nodded. "That makes sense. Ya know, my dad has invested in several restaurants and they always do really well. He knows what he's doing. You should talk to him about it. He could probably help you

develop a plan. He's helping Ms. Brooks open her restaurant."

"That's awesome. She's so good."

"So are you," Taylor said. "Just ask anyone who's eaten at the Inn lately. You are good, Lily."

She smiled. "Thanks, Taylor. And you are a sweetheart."

Gabe smiled, because she definitely was a sweetheart and may one day be Lily's sister-in-law.

When dinner was over, Bree allowed everyone to clear their place, but refused help in the kitchen. It was Shelley who had the guts to argue with her daughter. "You are not gonna do the dishes for over fifty people while I stand idly by, so just move over."

"Thank you, Shelley," Breez said. "Cuz I didn't want to have to get rude with my sister-in-law."

"Me neither," Bella said.

"You're pregnant. Go sit down."

Bella's eyebrows rose. "I'm not incapacitated. So move over."

"And there's no way you can keep me from helping," Jodi said.

"Or any of us," all the young women said.

So, Bree ended up allowing them all to pitch in, and in only thirty minutes the entire kitchen and dining room were spotless, tiny babies were nursed and the group had moved into the ballroom, or what Iris had been told is the princess room.

Logan got to the piano first and began to play. Then Grace sat down next to him and they jammed for a few minutes, while Taylor videoed livestream for Gabe's website. Then JoJo took Taylor's phone and videoed her and Gabe dancing to the song they'd danced to on *America Can Dance* as Grace and Logan played it.

That got everyone to beg Miss Caro to dance with Toby.

"What dance would you like?" she asked.

"How about a waltz," Brody called out.

Waltzes weren't Logan's specialty, but there was a concert pianist right here in the room, so, everyone begged Violet to play the piano. She sat and played a waltz and then a rumba, and then a dozen other requests.

Caroline and Toby were mesmerizing. Even better, Caro got all the little ones up to dance, boys and girls. All the girls were now wearing tiaras because Taylor, thoughtful as always, had asked Mrs. Tanner to stop and pick up some birthday party tiaras at the store so that all the little girls could be princesses and not just Iris.

The room was full of light, just as Ricky had prayed. The girls who were a little older, Sophia and Aralyn, wore the tiaras given them and said they were the queens. Iris, Angelina, Emily and Kelstyn were the

princesses. Josie and Taylor led the little girls to dance in a big circle. Gabe and young Eric rounded up the little boys, Manny, Nate, Noah, Abe and Ledger to be princes who were warriors. Eight-year-old Jamie however, was having none of it at first, until Matt Stewart moved forward and took Josie's hands and began to dance with her.

"A man needs to learn how to dance," young Eric told Jamie, and finally, he too got on the dance floor.

They all were having a splendid time.

CJ moved to stand behind Violet. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Violet, every time you play, it sends chills all over me. You are so talented, sweetheart."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to smile up at him. Continuing on for several more tunes, she started on *Unchained Melody*. CJ gently placed his hands on her shoulders, and she couldn't help it—the tears came to her eyes. Her breath started coming harder, as if she'd been running. He put his lips near her ear. "Are you okay? What's wrong, babe?"

She caught Grace's eyes and motioned to her to come close. Grace came immediately, concern on her face. "Can you take over for me?" Violet asked.

Grace nodded and slid in beside her. "Sure, sweetie, go ahead, maybe get some air."

Violet nodded and rose from the piano. She turned to CJ.

"What's wrong, Vi?"

She sniffed. "We need to talk."

He drew a deep breath. "Wanna go for a walk?"

She nodded.

CJ went to get her coat and then stopped by to speak with Keegan. "Mr. Tanner, I am gonna take Violet outside for a walk. She says she needs to talk, and I think it's about New York."

Keegan nodded with understanding.

Ricky also nodded. "Don't go out on the property. We haven't been over it yet and don't know what dangers are out there."

"Maybe walk down the front drive?" CJ asked.

Ricky nodded. "Yeah, that'd be better for now."

CJ took the coat to Violet and helped her put it on.

"What's going on?" Rose came to ask immediately.

"She wants to talk," CJ said quickly.

Rose nodded and smiled encouragingly at her sister.

CJ opened the front door and ushered Violet outside.

He took her hand and walked her down the wide concrete steps. Smiled kindly. “Okay, babe. I’m listening.”

She nodded and drew a deep breath. “I need to tell you what happened in New York.”

“Okay.”

“I was eighteen. I worked so hard in high school to maintain a 4.0 GPA. I seemed to have a knack for the piano. It just came naturally to me. I ate, slept and dreamed piano. I intended to study music in college and a friend of mine suggested I apply to Juilliard in New York. I actually laughed at her. Juilliard says they have like, a seven percent admission rate, but it’s actually more like five percent. I applied almost as a joke.”

She turned to look at CJ with a smile. “I almost passed out when I got accepted. I couldn’t believe it. I was so honored. So excited. So naive,” she added sadly.

“It’s expensive, but my father was willing to foot the bill because I was so excited. Neither he nor my mom wanted me to go so far away. You know, small town country girl up in the New York jungle. But after a trip or two up there, I convinced them that I’d be okay. I’d be living in the Residence Hall on campus. I would be okay.” She became silent as she thought about what to say.

“And so, I guess that didn’t end up being the case?” CJ prodded.

She sighed. “No. Well, at first everything seemed to be awesome. Just perfect. And one of my professors, Professor Damian Popov, he, he really liked me. He claimed I was the most talented student he’d ever taught.”

“That doesn’t surprise me a bit.”

“Well, it was all a lie.” She winced as she tried to get the words out.

CJ put his arm around her. “Go ahead, sweetheart. I got you.”

She drew a breath. “Professor Popov would come up to me while I was playing a piece and he’d put his hands on my shoulders, and then slide them down my arms, and whisper in my ear, telling me I need to feel the music more, that I won’t ever get better if I didn’t feel the pulse of the music. He would move his hands from my shoulders to slide down, like, to my upper chest.” Without thinking, she moved her fingertips to touch the space just below her collarbone.

CJ’s lips pressed tightly together but he kept quiet.

“I’d tell him that I was uncomfortable with that. He’d tell me I was being Victorian. He used that word a lot. He said if I wanted to be the best I had to feel the music. He said music was as old as time and came from the oldest rhythm there was, which was the rhythm of a man and woman making love. He’d whisper in my ear while I’m playing, asking me to think about certain parts of my body.” Her voice broke.

"Okay, baby, you don't have to tell me anymore," he said quickly.

She sniffed and shook her head. "I need to, I need to get it out."

He nodded. "Alright then, I'm listening."

"I almost got used to him putting his hands on me. It was never in intimate places, but always very close. One day, he told me he was gonna offer me something that only a few of his students ever get offered."

"And what was that?" he asked when she went silent.

"Private lessons. Only a few others and I would be invited to come to his apartment for private lessons. He would work with me extensively and I would move to the top of the class very quickly. It would be incredible because all the top students were males. But I was different. I was special and I was the most beautiful student he'd ever had and the most talented. It was meant to be. I was gonna be a big star.

"I was flattered. I was so dumb. I think about it now, and I realize how easy it is to see what he was doing. But I was so innocent, and excited that I could make my parents and my siblings proud of me. Rose was down in Florida going to school for marine biology, and..."

"Really? I didn't know that."

Violet shrugged. "It turns out she wasn't really that interested in it, but thought it was different and far away from me. She was always trying to be different from me, you know, to establish her own identity. Anyway, we still spoke on a regular basis and I called her to tell her about this amazing opportunity I'd been offered, and she was not at all happy about it. I guess she didn't see the world through the same rose-colored glasses that I did. She was immediately suspicious. And that made me mad at her. We had words and finally, I hung up on her."

"I had no idea that you ever fought with any of your siblings."

She gave a soft laugh. "Rose and I love each other with every part of our soul, but we did fight a lot. I mean, she was very rebellious and strong and I was the opposite and I irritated her, and sometimes, I admit, she irritated me. But we do love each other. Fiercely. Which is really why we fought. She was fiercely protective of me and I didn't want to hear it."

"So, did you go to the private lessons?"

She sighed. "Yes."

"What happened?"

"Nothing at first. He taught like he always did. I learned. He maybe touched me a little more, like, he kissed my cheek when I accomplished a difficult piece. But that was it."

CJ kept quiet because that obviously wasn't the end of the drama.

"I called Rose and told her and rubbed it in that nothing happened.

But she insisted he was just biding his time, that he was grooming me and that he'd probably done this before with other students. I was exasperated with her. I went a second time and still, nothing happened except he tried to kiss me. He said he'd fallen in love with me. He said my light and my spirit were strong and he felt like we were meant to be together."

CJ swallowed. "And so, he tried to kiss you. Did he accomplish it?"

"No, I mean briefly, but I pushed him away. I explained to him that I wasn't feeling that way. He said he understood that I was devout in my faith and he wanted me to pray about it and he hoped and prayed with all his might that I would give him a chance. So, I called Rose again and told her what he'd said. She told me to not believe him. I told her she just didn't think anyone could possibly love me. I was so blinded."

"Not blinded, Vi. It's called brainwashing."

Violet nodded. "Rose asked me when was the next time I was supposed to have another private lesson. I told her the following night at 6:00 PM. And then— Rose hung up on me. I didn't know it at the time but she immediately gathered her things, came all the way home and went straight to Dad.

"The next day I went for my private lesson again. We just went over some old stuff, trying to perfect what I was playing, and he got mad at me. He said I wasn't listening to him. He said I wasn't even trying to feel the music." She stopped and wiped tears from her eyes. "He got these scarves. Like these long, see-through type scarves. I'm not even sure they were scarves. Maybe sheer curtains. He tied one around each of my wrists and would pull on them when he felt I wasn't stroking the keys right. Then he tied one around my eyes and told me to only feel the music."

She stopped again, breathing hard. "He put his hands on my shoulders and arms and hands then on my face and then he tilted my head back and tried to kiss me again. I pulled away," she said, tears now running freely down her cheeks. "And that made him mad. He began to yell at me and tell me how lucky I am to have him teach me and how other girls appreciate it and I should show a little appreciation too. When I tried to get up, he grabbed me in a headlock and pulled me backward. I remember hearing the bench tip over. I tried to fight him, but he was squeezing off my air and I passed out.

"He dragged me into his bedroom and used the scarves he'd tied around my wrists to tie me to the bed." She stopped and hiccupped.

CJ tried to take her in his arms but she pushed away.

"I, I woke up and I was tied to the bed and he was kneeling over me. I tried to scream but he pulled the scarf that had been over my eyes down to cover my mouth and wrapped the long ends more times around my

mouth. It finally dawned on me that he intended to take me against my will. I began to worry if he could possibly kill me. I was terrified. He pushed my skirt up, I was, I was, so scared. He cursed because he heard someone knocking on his door. And then, the door burst open and my father and Rose and a few other people, police and Ameritech agents, they all came rushing into the room.

"They had to keep my father from killing the professor. All I can remember really after that was Rose helping to untie me and holding me so tight I could barely breathe. I cried, she cried and we didn't let go of each other for the whole rest of the process of speaking to the police, speaking to my Dad, gathering my things from the dorm and going home."

She stopped suddenly and looked up at CJ, her eyes big, then turned and ran away about ten feet and threw up.

CJ came to her and smoothed her hair back off her forehead. "Okay, honey, it's okay. I got you. I swear it's gonna be okay." He reached in his pocket for a handkerchief he always carried and handed it to her. "Here."

She sniffed, nodded and accepted it, wiped her eyes and then her mouth. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"You have nothing to be sorry about. Violet, I'm so sorry that happened to you."

"It was all my fault."

"Stop it. It was not your fault. Yes, you were naive. You were right, you were an innocent country girl. No place for you in New York. But it wasn't your fault. That guy was a predator. He took advantage of the beautiful young girls that came to him with their hopes and dreams. May I ask, what happened to him?"

She swallowed. "I went to court and testified against him and because I did several others did. But many of the women he actually did have relations with had no proof and he was found not guilty on those counts, and he ended up only getting four years. Four years! He'll be out of jail in one more year."

And then I'll have access to him, CJ thought. He pulled Violet into his arms and up against his chest. "Baby, it's over. I'll never let anyone hurt you again."

She sniffed. "CJ, I don't want to go back inside. My face is all puffy. Will you take me home?"

"Of course, babe, whatever you want." He took out his phone and texted his boss.

~~Violet wants to go home. I'm gonna take her there and stay with her until you guys get home.

~Got it. Did she come clean?

~~Yes, sir. And I think I want to murder someone.

~Get in line.

~~Violet says to ask Rose to grab her purse for her. It's by the piano.

~Roger that. Tell Violet that Jeffy picked up on her distress and spoke to her father and that Grandmaster Kino wants to speak with her sometime tomorrow.

~~Copy that.

✝✝✝

Inside the ballroom, the party continued. Brody asked Daisy to dance and was pleasantly surprised that she was a great dancer. Of course, he knew the Tanners could dance because Gabe said on his website that the reason he could dance was because he and his sisters used to put on little shows for their parents. Brody spun Daisy and dipped her and she laughed.

Caro watched them dance. She sighed. Brody seemed happy and she knew it was him being with Daisy that made him feel that way. She was happy to see her son smile and laugh and not seem so serious. She looked over at her daughter Grace, who was currently playing the piano with her father. Sweet Grace was twenty-five years old and had been in three serious relationships and all three had fallen apart when she'd let the guys know there would be no premarital sex. Two of them had also been Christian guys, but for some reason, they believed it was okay to have sex before marriage. After all, most of the world did it. Grace had let them know that because the world did it, it didn't make it right.

Grace had been the result of Caro and Toby having premarital sex. In Caro's defense, she didn't know Jesus at that time. Toby did, but he'd fallen away. He says she was the one who brought him back into the fold, the return of the prodigal son. Their daughter, Grace, was bound and determined to do things right, and that made Caroline happy. Grace however, seemed lonely. So, she focused on her music. She'd opted to use her father's name and Gracie Nash was becoming more and more known in the world of gospel/country/Christian music. Like her father, she played guitar, piano, and organ.

Caro smiled as Toby rose and allowed Logan to sit and play with Grace on the piano. They immediately went into a jive on the piano and Brody nodded at Daisy who smiled and nodded back. They started to swing dance and they were really good, though it was obvious they'd never danced this type of dance together before.

The little ones went crazy dancing and jumping around. Gabe and Taylor were awesome. Then they split, as they were known to do since prom, and Gabe grabbed Lily to dance with him and Taylor grabbed JoJo

to dance with her. Ricky was dancing with Bree, and Shelley and Eric were dancing with their little ones. Mark was dancing with his wife, Bella, and Joey with his wife, Breez. Young Eric was trying to get Ms. Jewell to dance with him but she was refusing, so he finally got little Josie to dance with him.

Toby stepped back next to his wife and looked over the room. He noticed when Brody and Daisy stopped dancing and his son leaned down and whispered something in Daisy's ear. Brody caught his father's eye and pointed to the back door. Toby nodded with a smile. He hoped they would be able to work out their long-distance situation. For the first time in a long time, Brody actually seemed happy.

✝✝✝

Psalm 149:3

"Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!"

Chapter Seventeen

Brody took Daisy's hand. "Wanna get some air?"

"Let's do it," she said.

"I'll get our coats," he said as he left her standing in the giant entrance foyer. He returned moments later and helped her put her coat on. They went back down to the rear of the house and out the side kitchen door and headed into the giant backyard.

"Wanna head out toward the rear of the property?" Brody asked.

"Sure."

He took her hand and they walked across the thick grass in silence. Daisy breathed deeply.

He smiled down at her. "Are you having a good time?"

"I'm having so much fun."

"You're a great dancer."

"So are you. I love to dance. When I'm dancing it feels like I can come out of my shell a bit."

"I like that, and I'll remember that," Brody said.

"So," Daisy began. "Even though you've liked me for a long time, you don't know everything about me?"

"Of course not. Our families only see each other a few times a year. I know little things about you, but not big things. I know the important things."

"Like what?"

"Like what I've already told you. You love God first, you love your family, you're selfless, you're strong, you think logically, you have conservative values, you work hard, you're modest, you're down to earth, you're humble, you're smart. Daisy, I could go on and on."

"Well, don't."

"Why not?"

"I wish I hadn't asked. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I mean, sort of embarrassed."

"Okay. Let's talk about me. What do you think about me? I mean, now that you know I like you, what do you know about me?"

She sighed. "You love God, you love Jesus, you love your family,

you're selfless, you're strong-minded, you're confident yet humble, you're smart, you're kind, you love animals, and mostly, you see me."

He smiled. "I do see you, Daisy. And I'm glad you realize it."

She smiled and turned to see how far they'd walked from the house because it was overcast and very dark. "Wow, we must be walking fast because I can barely see the lights from the house."

"I have long legs, but you've been keeping up pretty well."

Ironically, after Brody said those words, their next step brought them both crashing through a panel of rotted wood. Brody landed first and Daisy landed right on top of him with a giant, "Ooof."

Brody grunted as he sat up quickly. "Daisy, are you okay? Tell me you're okay!"

She groaned and pushed her hands against his chest to raise herself off him. "I'm okay. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

"What happened? Where are we?" Daisy asked.

"Well..."

"Well what?"

He chuckled. "I think we've fallen into an old well." He sat up and tried to see her face but it was too dark. He pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight. "Let me see you so I can be sure you're not hurt."

Daisy turned to face the light, squinting at the brightness of it. He touched her face. "Nothing hurts?"

"I think I banged up my knee, but nothing bad."

He shined the light on her legs and saw a trickle of blood running down from her left knee. He sighed and then shined the light upward. He frowned. "Hmm, I'd say we're about ten or twelve feet down."

"How are we gonna get out?"

He checked his signal. "Okay, Daisy, don't panic, but I don't have any bars. No reception."

"Let me check my phone. Oh, wait, my phone is in my purse. Oh no, oh Brody, are we gonna be stuck in here?"

He put his arm around her. "No, *we* are not gonna be stuck in here. *I'm* gonna be stuck in here. Listen to me, I'm gonna get *you* out and you go get help for me."

"Oh, Lord, Brody, are there snakes in here?" she suddenly asked as she leapt up into his arms, trying to get her feet off the ground.

He tried not to laugh. "No, no snakes. You've been watching *Raiders* haven't you?"

She squeezed him harder, locking her arms around his neck. "Are you

absolutely sure?"

He pointed the phone down. "Yes. See for yourself."

She looked down and saw only dirt. Loosening her grip, she allowed her feet to stretch out and touch the ground.

Brody put his hands on her face. "Okay, now, Daisy, stop looking so scared. We're gonna be okay."

She nodded. "Okay. Okay. Dear Jesus, please help us."

"Daisy, you're shaking like a leaf. It's gonna be okay." He hugged her. "Stay calm now. It's okay, I promise."

She buried her face against his chest. "Stay calm, stay calm," she muttered softly, making him chuckle.

He patted her back and held her a few moments, trying not to laugh at what seemed to be irrational fear. "Okay, all better?"

She nodded. "Yes. Sorry. I think I might be a little claustrophobic."

"Okay, that's good motivation. Here's what's gonna happen. I'm gonna kneel down and you get on my shoulders. I'll stand up and then you raise up to stand up on my shoulders. I'm 6'4" and you're what again?"

"I'm 5'5"."

"Good, that's almost twelve feet. I'm not sure how deep we are, but once I lift you up, if you're too low to climb out, I'll let you stand on my hands and I'll lift my hands up above my head, we'll count to three and I'll toss you up. Got it?"

"I think so."

"Okay, let's see what we got," he said calmly. He knelt down and she climbed up to sit on his shoulders. He stood. "Okay, now go slow and stand up on my shoulders." He grunted. "Wait a minute. You're gonna have to take the boots off." He lowered her back to the ground.

She took off her boots and they started again. Once she was standing on his shoulders her head came to the top of the hole. She reached up and grabbed the edge of the broken board they'd fallen through. "It's too high. I can't get leverage to pull myself up. I'm so sorry. If I were just stronger. I've always hated pull-ups."

"It's okay. Now listen, remember what I said? I want you to stand in my hands. I'm gonna put them right here next to my shoulders. Just move your right foot out a little wider and place your foot in my hand."

Daisy held on to the broken boards with her fingertips and moved her right foot out. He grasped it tightly in his hand and she felt such relief.

"Good job, Daisy. Okay, now the left foot."

She boldly placed her left foot in his left hand.

"Good job. Now hold on to the side of the dirt wall or if you can reach, to the ground above."

"I've got hold of the board. The one that broke."

"Good, okay. Don't lose your balance. I'm gonna slowly extend my arms and push you up."

"Okay, I'm ready."

He pushed upward and she moved up until her chest was almost even with the boards. "Okay, Brody, I think I can climb out, just give me a small push."

He tossed her up and she landed on her stomach, safely on the cold ground. "I'm out!" she exclaimed.

"Be careful standing up that you don't fall back in the hole."

"Okay, I'm safe," she said breathlessly. "I'll go get help."

"No, wait. Let me just toss you my phone and you can call someone."

"Oh, yeah, good idea," she said with a giggle.

She immediately called her father.

"Brody?"

"It's me, Daddy."

Keegan drew air into his lungs. "Daisy, where are you? Jeffy is going crazy. She said you fell but she couldn't figure out where."

"We did. Brody and I, we fell into an old well we think. He got me out, but he needs help to get out. Leave out the kitchen door and head out across the field, I think that would be south. I'll wave Brody's phone so you can see a light. You're gonna need rope or maybe just a ladder will do. A ladder would be better. He's only about twelve feet down, but it's too far to jump and there's no footholds to climb on."

She heard her father explaining the situation to the others. "Daisy?"

"Yes, sir."

"We're on the way, honey. Turn on the flashlight and wave the phone in the air."

"Yes, sir." She waved the phone over her head, back and forth.

"We see you," Keegan said. "Don't stop waving. Do you see our flashlights?"

"Yes, sir."

A minute later, Keegan and Toby arrived with a ladder. Toby placed the ladder in the hole and shined a light on it for his son. Brody quickly climbed out, Daisy's boots in hand. He looked into his father's eyes and shook his head, obviously ashamed that he'd fallen into a stupid hole and not protected his girl on a simple walk. Toby smiled. "Hey, don't feel bad. You couldn't have known there was an old well out here."

"I should've known there might be something dangerous lurking out here on such a large piece of property."

Ricky arrived with a hammer, a stake, and a piece of plywood. “I’ll just put this down for now.” He covered the hole and hammered the stake into the ground to bring notice to the area. “There,” he said. “So, guys, I’m sorry. I knew there might be dangers out here. I should’ve announced to the group to not go across the fields until we’ve had a chance to inspect the property.”

“Nonsense, Rick. I heard you tell Violet and CJ to stick to walking along the front drive. You warned us,” Keegan said.

Ricky shook his head. “Yes, I warned Violet and CJ, but I should’ve warned the entire group.”

“Well, maybe they should’ve let us know they were going out,” Keegan said pointedly to his daughter.

“Sorry, Daddy,” she said softly.

“Brody let me know,” Toby said. “So, really, this was my fault.”

“Everyone stop. I know you’re trying to help me save face, but it was my fault. I should’ve been more careful,” Brody said.

Daisy giggled. “Well, then, I guess really, the whole thing was *my* fault. I shouldn’t have been so distracting.”

The men all chuckled.

“Anyway,” Ricky began, “this is a lawsuit waiting to happen, so I need to inspect every inch of this property.”

“That would be impossible,” Toby said.

“Ok, so maybe hire someone to inspect it.”

“These days, people use drones to inspect their large properties,” Keegan supplied. “But ‘round here, we can just call some neighbors, get on some horses or ATVs and ride the property. It’d be a fun time.”

“Yep, that’s how it’s done in a small town, I guess,” Ricky said. “I think I’m liking it.”

Toby chuckled. “Well, there are good things and bad things to small towns, but you’ll learn.”

Brody took Daisy’s hand. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure.”

“Except your knee. Let’s get you back and doctored up.”

Daisy smiled. “Let’s do. Maybe Jeffy has some SpongeBob Band-Aids.”

He handed her the boots and helped her sit down to put them on. Toby and Ricky started back to the house. Keegan waited and when Brody stood and helped Daisy to her feet, he looked at the man.

“Mr. Tanner, I’m sorry I let Daisy get hurt.”

Keegan smiled. “Things happen,” he said. “There were several times my Lizzy got hurt, and it was my fault. But nothing to do except move

forward. This was nothing. If this is all that ever happens, consider yourself blessed. Don't beat yourself up."

"Thank you, sir."

"Stop all this," Daisy said. "The first thing you did when we fell was make sure I was okay. Then you rescued me from the snakes."

"There were snakes down there?" Keegan asked as they walked toward the house.

Brody laughed. "Invisible snakes."

Daisy giggled. "But I did panic a little, Daddy, and he calmed me down and told me exactly how he was gonna get me out. He took charge and he saved us."

"I saved you," Brody corrected. "And then you saved me."

"And that is exactly how a relationship works," Keegan stated.

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November 30th, 7:00 AM, Saturday Morning
Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

The sound of gunfire echoed through the early morning quiet calm of Pine Forest, Georgia. It was early and it was cold, but that didn't stop the large group of people from meeting at the Stewart ranch to shoot. The Stewarts, Appels, and some Tanners almost always did this on both Friday and Saturday mornings.

This morning the group also included the Kino, Adams and Nash/Smith menfolk, plus Jericho, CJ, Nolan and Cam. Gabe went first and just finished demonstrating his amazing skills, leaving pretty much everyone gaping.

Keegan, who rarely got to demonstrate his talents, took over and when he finished, it left no doubt why Gabe was as good as he was. Gabe would use his skills for Ameritech as a sniper/sharpshooter, and he was very much looking forward to the opportunity.

This was a farewell outing for the men. The Adams family would be leaving in a few hours to head back to California, along with young Eric and the Brooks family and the Wallace family. Grandmaster Kino and his family would also be leaving, though Grandmaster Kino was not attending the shooting challenges this morning. He was instead meeting with Violet Tanner to assess and heal and help her to overcome her trauma.

The only females who'd elected to come and shoot this morning were Taylor, Laynahbug, Rose, and Daisy. Heather was home, helping her mom. Lily was working. Violet was being counseled. Jeffy was meeting with Jordan to assess her foot, to see if she, too, had been healed on Thanksgiving Day, as many others had.

Other plans this day included Mark and Joey taking their families up to the little town just south of Atlanta, in the suburbs, to see the house they'd grown up in. Mark wanted to show his family the actual humble way that he'd grown up, but the house had always been in use. Currently, however, it was unoccupied. So this morning, they would take a trip down memory lane and then they would head to the airport to meet the Ameritech Jet that would take them back to Cali.

Brody and Daisy intended to take care of puppies and then go for another ride, have breakfast together at the Tanner home, attend the Saturday morning class at Appel Martial Arts, do some more decorating at the Center, take a walk up Main Street, go home and rest and then have dinner at Sally's Steakhouse.

Gabe and Taylor intended to say their goodbyes to everyone who was shooting, have breakfast at the Inn to say goodbye to everyone else, go get Iris and take her to play at the park that was next to the GTCC, (Gabe Tanner Community Center,) and then drop her off with Rose so that Gabe and Taylor could attend the Saturday morning Martial Arts class. Afterward, they would hit Sally's Steakhouse for lunch with Peyton, his little brother Lucas, and Charlie Stewart. The rest of the day would be played by ear, but Gabe was hoping to school Taylor on some college football by going over some games from the season.

Rose and Jericho would shoot, eat breakfast, do some shopping for more Christmas decorations and art supplies and then head to the Center to meet Rebecca Murphy because a group of children would be there in the afternoon to make decorations.

JETTs Joey Adams and Cam Wallace were next up to shoot and they too left people astounded, as well they should. Toby, Brody and Nolan, who didn't usually get an opportunity to share their shooting skills, had fun demonstrating their skills too with both sidearms and rifles. Chaz Stewart, his fourteen-year-old son Charlie, and John Appel didn't disappoint. Mark and Logan held their own. JoJo declined because he couldn't use his right arm, but Gabe said he could shoot left-handed and that he should learn to do just that. So, with Gabe's help, JoJo was able to squeeze off a few mags with his left hand. After JoJo, young Eric stepped forward with his dad and the two of them showed they too were skilled.

Rose was happy when Jericho showed that he too was no slouch with a firearm. After Jericho, of course, CJ too was extremely proficient.

What everyone was gawking at now though, was Rose and Laynah and their competence and mastery with both their sidearms and their ARs.

But Gabe stepped forward and shook his head at his sister. "Rose, go again, and I want you to fire two consecutive shots at the first target and

then squeeze off three shots at the second target, then go back to the first target and shoot twice more."

Rose nodded, loaded a new magazine and chambered it. She started to aim, but Gabe stopped her.

"No. Holster it and pull from your hip."

Keegan smiled. It sounded like Gabe was being pushy or bossy, but what he was actually doing was protecting his sister.

Rose nodded and holstered her gun.

"Go!" Gabe yelled, purposefully startling her.

She drew and performed the task he'd asked of her.

Gabe nodded. "Good job, sis. Proud of you. Try to get in the habit of firing at least twice, or three times moving from heart to head to heart."

She smiled at her brother. "I'll work on it."

He nodded, then turned to Laynah, who'd been raped earlier this year. "Laynah, your turn. Do the same drill."

She nodded and performed it beautifully.

"Good job, Bugs."

Gabe then turned to his other sister who was there. "Daisy, you do the same thing."

"Sir, yes, sir!" she quipped.

He shrugged. "Oh, uh, sorry. I got in a mode." He glanced up apologetically at his father. "Sorry if I got demanding."

"You don't have to apologize for trying to protect your family."

Daisy moved forward and pulled from her hip, but her gun jammed. Gabe stepped up, cleared the chamber. "I knew it was gonna jam. The way you chambered it was so gentle I thought you were patting a baby's head."

He released the magazine, cleared her chamber, reloaded the bullet and handed the magazine and gun back to her. "Here, start again, and this time chamber hard."

Daisy nodded. She loaded the magazine, chambered the gun, and holstered it.

"Go," Gabe yelled.

She quickly pulled the gun from the holster, aimed, pulled the trigger and nothing happened.

"Safety," Gabe said softly. "Do it again."

She drew a deep breath, blew it out, started over and correctly finished the drill.

"Good job, Daisy," Gabe said.

She sighed and went to stand next to Brody.

"Okay, Tay," Gabe said. "I know you haven't had time to work on it,

but show me what you can remember."

"Okay, but don't get mad if I mess up."

"Why would you say that? I wouldn't get mad at you."

"Well, you just yelled at your sisters."

The others chuckled as Gabe looked at Rose and Daisy. "Did I just yell at you?"

Rose giggled. "Yes, Gabe, and you hurt my feelings."

"Very funny. Tell her the truth so she doesn't think I'm a monster."

"Taylor, that wasn't yelling. He was just teaching. And I have to admit, he's qualified to do that," Rose said.

At those words, both Keegan and Joey looked at each other. Keegan was pretty sure they were thinking the same thing, because Gabe WAS a really good teacher when it came to firearms. Gabe wanted to be a JETT, and he would be. He would train hard and be one of the best. Still, maybe after he's had some experience under his belt, then using him in a teaching capacity would be good for the entire company. Maybe, after a while, that's where they should place him.

Taylor moved forward with the twenty-two her father had bought for her and laid it on the makeshift counter. She drew a deep breath and began. She went through all the steps Gabe had taught her and only had to be reminded to keep her finger off the trigger once. When she fired, her aim was much better. He asked her, very kindly, to go through two more magazines which she did. When she finished, she was quite pleased with herself, and Gabe was also quite pleased with her.

After that, a few of the men went again, trying out each other's firearms. Shortly thereafter, the Georgia people were hugging the Cali people and thanking them and promising to be in touch and to stay safe and to get together again soon. Then everyone gathered their guns and ammo and ear protection and eye protection and headed to start on their day. Most went to breakfast at the Inn.

Brody and Daisy went to check on the puppies. They'd taken precautions and blocked the dogs in using some pallets, worried that the gunfire may frighten the momma dog and she might leave her puppies. It seemed though, that all was well. Daisy scratched the momma's head. "Ya know, Brody, we really should at least name the momma here."

He nodded. "What shall we call her?"

Daisy pulled out her phone and did a search for good names for gold colored dogs. She began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Well," Daisy giggled. "I looked up top names for female dogs and a lot of them are names of people in our families."

He grinned. “Like what?”

“There’s Bella, Charlie, Daisy, Gracie, Lily, Molly, Rosie, Sophie.”

Brody chuckled.

“But there’s also Dixie, Georgia, Goldie and Honey.”

Brody nodded. “Well, Honey is out because that’s Laynah’s horse’s name, but Dixie, Georgia and Goldie are all good.”

Daisy pressed her lips together as she thought. “I think, ummm, I think Georgia, because you found her when you came down to Georgia.”

He nodded. “I like it. Georgia it is.” He bent down and scratched Georgia’s head. “So, that’s your new name, girl. Georgia. You are Georgia. Got it? Learn it. Remember it.”

Daisy giggled. “I promise to call her by her name when I come down every morning to feed her. I’m so glad the Stewarts allowed us to keep them here.”

He rose with Georgia’s bowl and went to the plastic tub he’d bought to hold the food. “Well, just so you know, in exchange, they’ve laid claim on one of the puppies.”

“And so do I,” Daisy said. “I promised Iris.”

“And so do I,” Brody said. “When they’re old enough, I’ll drive down and pick up whoever is left of the litter. And if no one wants Georgia, I’ll take her too.” He set her bowl down in the corner and then topped off her giant water bowl.

Daisy frowned.

“What? Do you want Georgia?”

She pouted. “Maybe, but I don’t know what Mom will think of that.”

Brody smiled. “Okay, we’ll figure it out. Let’s go down to the stables and saddle up. I’m gettin’ hungry.”

Daisy nodded and they headed to the stables. Brody saddled Santana and then helped Daisy finish saddling Dusty.

He started to help her mount, but remembered she didn’t need help. She was well accustomed to riding. Once she was up, he smiled up at her and touched her knee. “How’s your boo-boo?”

She laughed. “It’s okay. Mom says I’m gonna live.”

“Good to know,” he said as he mounted the large horse. He leaned down and patted Santana’s neck. “I know you miss your owner, but he won’t be back for several more months, so I hope I’ll do in a pinch.”

He nodded at Daisy and they headed out.

Daisy smiled as they kicked their horses into a canter. This was bliss. Riding in the cold wind. Her new guy right beside her, looking about as tough as a man could look as he rode the giant horse. She thought back to

the shooting and could see him with that rifle, his aim perfect and true.

Brody smiled at her. “Whatcha thinkin’ ‘bout, Daisy girl?”

She smiled at the name. “I was just wondering if you ever wear a cowboy type hat, like your dad does onstage.”

He smiled and nodded. “Yes, when I’m at home on the farm, like, when I go riding or when I’m helping out on the tractor.”

“Your family home is a farm, right?”

“Yes. Though, my father doesn’t do any of the farming. He never has, because he never really had the time because his singing career took off quickly. But my Uncle Ben, he came back home after college and has pretty much taken over the farm from my grandparents.”

“So, he lives up in the big house?”

Brody nodded. “Yes. That’s the house they all grew up in, my dad, Uncle Ben and Aunt Molly. But when my dad and mom married, they built the home on the other side of the property near the creek. You’ve been there before.”

She nodded. “I remember it. I mostly remember playing in the creek.”

“I remember you playing in the creek,” he said with a smile. “Especially the summer of your junior year in high school, and you, in that yellow bikini, you floored me.”

Daisy’s face reddened and she decided to change the subject. “So, your uncle is married, right?”

Brody nodded. “Yep. Uncle Ben lives in the big house with his wife and three kids.”

“Cool. How old are the kids?”

“Let’s see, Abby is fourteen, Penny is ten and Ivy is four.”

“All girls?”

Brody nodded. “They say they’re gonna try one more time for a boy and then if it doesn’t happen, that’ll be the last.”

“I hope they get a boy. Boys are cool. We were all so happy when Gabe came along and now we can’t imagine life without him.”

“Gabe’s a good guy.”

“Yeah he is. So,” Daisy began, “what do they grow on the farm?”

“Well, mostly hay and wheat, and non-GMO soybeans. Aunt Amber, Uncle Ben’s wife, wanted chickens and so they have about three hundred chickens and they get eggs and broilers.”

“Interesting.”

Brody slowed when they came to the woods. “Let’s stop for a minute.” He dismounted and helped Daisy down, then tied off the horses. Taking her hand, he led her over to sit on the ground, their backs against a large maple tree.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"So, what are *your* plans, Daisy?"

She sighed. "Like I said, I really don't have any right now. I'll continue to help Rose at the Center because we work well together and I'm good at what I do, which is maintaining the web presence and also, keeping things organized. Rose says I'm a jack-of-all-trades. I guess I am. I can pretty much do anything I put my mind to."

"I believe that. So, tell me, what do you think about baseball?"

She smiled at him. "I love baseball. Love to watch. Love to play. I played softball in high school."

"Really? Why didn't I know that? I would have loved to have come down and seen you play."

"It was no big deal. I wasn't that good."

"What position did you play?"

She laughed. "Right field."

He smiled. "Did you ever catch anything?"

She made a face. "Haha, yes. I wasn't that good, but I wasn't bad. I could catch. But Lily, now she could play. She played shortstop and she was awesome."

"How about hitting? Did you ever get a hit?"

"Yes, I got hits. I also struck out. I was okay. Enough about me. Tell me about you."

He shrugged. "Like I said, I'm getting a lot of attention. I have the third highest batting average in the nation and because I play third base, that makes me a commodity. People are saying I'll go third in the draft. We'll see. I don't like to speculate. But right now, my future looks promising in the MLB."

She turned to look up at him. "I'm proud of you, Brody. I know you've worked hard on your craft."

He sighed. "I have. I love to play, but I want more than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I want to help kids somehow, influence them, bring them to Jesus. I want to make it big so that I can show that you don't have to sell your soul to make it big. Sometimes, if it's God's will, you can still make it big. I want to be that person."

"So, no matter what, you'll never 'sell your soul' for the money or the fame or for whatever."

"Never. I'd rather be homeless and live under a bridge."

Daisy smiled.

They chatted for a few more minutes and finally, he stood. “I guess we need to get back.” He held his hand out to her and pulled her to her feet. She smiled up at him with her big blue eyes, her perfect skin and blond hair whipping around her face in the wind and her cheeks and lips rosy pink with the cold. He moved closer to her, reached up and touched her beautiful face.

He’d liked her, it seemed, forever. The urge to kiss her was almost overwhelming. The way she was looking at him, he almost thought maybe she wanted him to do it, but he had to remember that this relationship was very new. He didn’t want to scare her away, or make her think he was only thinking of a physical relationship. Because he’d wanted her as long as he could remember, and if and when he got her, he wanted it to be for eternity. He smiled and stroked his knuckles over her smooth cheek.

The moment passed. Sighing, he took her hand and they went back to the horses, mounted and rode back to the stables.

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Young Eric knocked on the door of Jordan’s room at the Inn.

“Come in,” Jordan called.

He entered the room and smiled at his girl and his Aunt Jeffy.

“You guys are back from shooting already?” Jeffy asked.

“Yeah, it was fun, but it’s pretty cold out there.”

“How did it go?”

“Well, Gabe was amazing as always. Everyone was actually really good. But the really impressive part was how Gabe handled teaching the girls to draw from the hip and stop an attacker. The girls were awesome, and that includes Taylor. My sister looked so tough pulling that gun and shooting multiple times at a target. It was great.” He came all the way in and sat down on the bed next to his sweet Jordan. “So, what do you think, Aunt Jeffy?”

“I guess you’re not talking about guns anymore?”

He laughed. “No. I’m talking about Jordan’s foot.”

She smiled. “Well, when you get back to California I want you to take her in to see the orthopedist so he can go gaga over what he finds, but what I’m saying is, Jordan’s foot is completely healed. All three breaks, aligned, and healed. All muscles and tendons completely aligned and healed. She’ll still have to rehab to strengthen the leg, but, young Eric, this girl is back.”

Jordan grinned and then burst into tears.

Young Eric whooped and hollered and then sat down beside her and hugged her hard against him. “Why are you crying, baby? I hope those are happy tears.”

She sniffed. “I’m not sure if they are. I mean, I just can’t believe it, Three. Why? Why would God heal me? I didn’t even ask Him to. I was willing to accept that I’d have to work my way back. I don’t deserve this. I don’t. I’m unworthy of this.”

“Jordan,” Jeffy said. “You are completely worthy of this amazing blessing, and those words you’re speaking, those are from the enemy. It’s the enemy trying to make you feel guilty, telling you that you are not worthy, that you are not loved. Well, listen to me, Jordan, God loves you and He has seen fit to heal you, for whatever reason. Are you gonna question His judgment?”

“Well, no, of course not.”

“Right, because we may not understand everything He does, but we have to show Him that we trust Him. Now, accept this healing with gratitude and further His kingdom by going and telling people what He has done for you. Tell your coaches and your teammates. Tell your mother and brother and sister, tell whomever God puts on your heart to tell.”

Jordan nodded and wiped at her tears. “I will. I promise.”

Jeffy smiled. “Good.”

“So, can we take the cast off now?” young Eric asked.

“You could, but I’d like you to leave it on until she goes to see the orthopedist. And you need to make that appointment as soon as possible.”

“Jordan?” young Eric asked. “So, like, do you mind waiting until we get back?”

Jordan giggled. “No, I don’t mind because I only have one of each of the shoes I brought.”

Young Eric chuckled. “Well okay then. So, whaddya say we go down and have a final giant breakfast of some of the best Southern cookin’ there is, and then we’ll say goodbye to everyone and come back up here and pack up?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jeffy said as she rose.

“I was talking to Jordan,” Eric quipped.

Jeffy turned and put her hand over her heart. “Ouch. I can’t believe it. Has Jordan replaced me in your heart, young Eric?”

He smiled. “No, no one could ever replace you, Aunt Jeffy.”

“Words, just words,” she said dramatically as she left the room.

“Thank you, Dr. Kino,” Jordan called after her.

Jeffy stuck her head back in. “It’s actually Dr. Wallace, but, we’re about to be related, so it’s Aunt Jeffy to you sweetie pie.”

Jordan smiled. Eric helped her up and they headed down to breakfast.

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Brody couldn't take his eyes off Daisy as she helped brush Santana down. She stroked him so lovingly and she spoke softly to the horse. Brody had thought about kissing her back at the woods. He'd had to make himself stop. But now that he was thinking about it again, he was mulling over the idea that he actually should kiss her, at least once, before this trip was over. He and his family were leaving early Monday morning. After that he wouldn't see her again for about three and a half weeks. He'd drive back down here after Christmas and stay until after New Year's.

Who knows what could happen during those three weeks that he was gone. Daisy could meet someone new, or she could lose interest. He needed to leave her with something to think about, and a kiss would be the perfect thing for her to think about. He smiled.

Daisy looked up at him. "What are you smiling at?"

"At you, Daisy. Just lovin' the fact that you and I are here together, spending time together."

"I like spending time with you, Brody. I'm really glad that you found the courage to come and talk to me, to tell me your thoughts and feelings."

"I am too," he said as they finished up and moved outside the stall and said goodbye to Santana.

He glanced at the ground, his eyebrows arching. "A snake!"

Daisy squealed and jumped up into his arms. "Where? Run! Go!"

Brody chuckled. She had her hands gripping his shoulders and her legs wrapped around him.

"Why are you laughing? Move!"

"I was just kidding," he said.

"What! Why? Why would you do that?"

He grinned. "To get you to do this," he said as he squeezed her tight.

She looked around at her position and smiled. "Well, if you wanted me in your arms, you could've just picked me up and hugged me. I wouldn't have minded."

"Really? Well then, that's another 'good to know' kinda thing that I'll put on my list."

"Okay, you do that. So, you can put me down now."

"Umm, no, I don't think I can," he said softly.

He turned and braced her back on the wall beside the stall door. He was breathing hard, and so was she. He leaned forward, pressing against her and lowered his head. She lifted her face to him. Finally, he was gonna kiss his girl, he thought.

"Yes, honey, I'm on my way in just a minute. Bye. Oops."

Chaz Stewart eyed the two kids in his stable as he ended his call and stuffed his phone in his pocket. "Well, hello there, kiddos. Sorry, didn't

mean to interrupt. Didn't know you were here."

"Um, hey, Mr. Stewart."

"Hey, Uncle Chaz," Daisy said sweetly as Brody gently eased her to stand back on her feet.

Chaz grinned. "So, it looks like you two are gettin' along just fine."

Brody smiled. "Yes, sir."

"Y'all gettin' ready to go ridin'?"

"No, sir, we just got back from ridin'. We were just finishing brushing down the horses."

Chaz nodded. "Did you happen to feed and water them?"

"Yes, sir," Daisy said.

Chaz nodded again and then grinned. "So, Brody, you're not thinking to emulate your father, are you?"

Brody's face reddened. He knew Mr. Stewart was talking about his father's and mother's excursion on a horse. He swallowed. "Uh, no, sir, well, I mean, not anytime soon."

Chaz grinned. "Ya gotta keep me informed of your progress."

Brody chuckled. "Yes, sir."

"What are y'all talking about?" Daisy asked.

"Nunya, young lady," Chaz said. "Man talk."

Brody took her hand. "Well, we're headed to the Tanners' house for breakfast."

"And I'm headed to the Inn in just a minute to join my family. Y'all have a great day."

"We will, thank you, sir," Brody said.

"Bye, Uncle Chaz," Daisy said as Brody practically dragged her away.

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The Adams families rode in two separate cars. They could've hired a limo where all six adults and four little ones in car seats would fit, but Mark didn't want to drive up to the little house on Allatoona Drive in a giant limo. So instead, they'd rented two vans and headed up to the house they'd grown up in until Mark was nine, and Joey seven.

"So, Dad," JoJo began as they headed out of Pine Forest on the state highway. "I only sort of remember the last time you showed me the house. I know I was pretty young. How old was I?"

"You were five or six."

"I really don't remember much about it. I do remember thinking it was small."

Mark nodded. "That's one of the reasons I want to show you. I grew up very poor. None of you did. I was used to a tiny house. I was used to

eating only beans and potatoes for dinner, or beans and rice. When we left Georgia and went out to live in your Grandad's big house, Joey and I were blown away. We were in awe. Every room seemed gigantic to us. And there was so much food to eat. Suddenly, we had clothes to wear that fit us and that weren't secondhand. We had cars and electronics. All things we'd never even considered owning."

JoJo nodded thoughtfully. "Wow, Dad, it makes me realize that we've been living a very blessed life."

"Yeah we have," Mark said.

Bella reached over and took Mark's hand and squeezed. "God blessed you, Mark."

Mark nodded. "He did indeed. And I used to feel guilty about it. I knew I had old friends that I'd left behind who were in as bad shape or even worse than we'd been, but now I've been able to reach out to them and be of service to them."

"And even though you were blessed, Mark, you still worked your way through school."

Mark nodded. "I wanted to do things on my own. I wanted to work my way through and take care of you too, JoJo. It was hard and it took me longer, but maybe I appreciate it more. I wanted to show you guys where I came from so you could get an idea of why I work so hard to help others pro bono. And also so that you'll see that with great opportunities comes great responsibility. God blesses some people with great wealth, like the Kinos. But they don't take it for granted. They use their money and power to help every single person that God puts in their path."

JoJo nodded thoughtfully. "I know that Logan and I have talked and we would like to use our skills and talents to help others too. Logan is pretty set on what he wants to do, right bro?"

"Yes. I want to write and sing songs that touch people's hearts and increase their faith or bring them new faith."

"As long as that is your focus," Mark began. "And not making money, and if it's God's will for you, then you will succeed, son."

Logan nodded and glanced at his brother. "So, Dad, why do you think that demon attacked JoJo yesterday? And why do you think he didn't get healed? I mean, even Jordan was miraculously healed."

"Don't worry about it, Logan," JoJo said. "I don't believe that demon. I know God loves me. I don't feel unworthy."

"Are you sure?"

JoJo smiled because Logan usually knew just what he was thinking. "Well, it crossed my mind that maybe God was mad at me. Ya know, like, when I'd yell at my receiver, or use bad language, or get caught up in pride

when things were going well. Maybe He brought me down a peg or two."

Bella smiled as she placed her hand on her belly. "Your humility, JoJo, is a beautiful thing."

Mark's phone rang and he accepted the call by hitting a button on his dash. "Hey, Gabe, go ahead and you're on speaker so don't say anything ugly about Jo."

Everyone chuckled at the old joke that everyone always used.

"Sorry to bother you guys during your family time, but I was playing with Iris at the park," Gabe began. "And I got dizzy and had to sit down and words came into my head and then God told me I had to call you, JoJo, and tell you the words."

"Okay, I'm listening," JoJo said.

"It's not your path," Gabe said.

"What's not my path?"

"You were just talking about why God didn't heal you, right?"

"Yes, and it's cool that you knew that?"

Gabe sighed. "God said it's not your path. If He healed you, you'd see it as a sign that God wants you to pursue football. But you'd already decided you didn't want to play football anymore because it was all about making money and because you'd miss your family. You already decided that because you were listening to God's inner urging. Being healed is not your path. God has a plan. Learn His will for you. Do His will for you."

JoJo's and Logan's eyes both filled.

JoJo nodded. "I will," he said softly.

"And be more confident that you are a favored son of God so that you will hear His voice, because He is speaking to you, but you don't think you're hearing God's voice. You are. Be confident. God loves you."

Gabe stopped, drew a deep breath. "That's it. That's all I got."

"Gabe," Bella said. "Thank you so much for listening to God and taking time to call JoJo to give him the message. We really do appreciate you and your sweet spirit."

"Aww, thanks, Mrs. Adams. I don't always get it right, but today it was pretty clear. Besides, JoJo and Logan, they're my brothers. I love them and I'd do anything for them."

"Ditto," Logan said quickly.

Mark smiled. The love and respect the boys have for each other is pretty inspirational, just like what Mark and Joey have for each other.

"Well, Gabe," JoJo said. "Thanks, bro. We're gonna miss you, but see you right after New Year's."

"Absolutely. Time for me to make something of myself."

JoJo rolled his eyes. Gabe Tanner was a superstar and didn't even realize it. He was ministering to maybe millions of kids every time he went live on his daily videos. He'd inspired a giant revival around the world. The *Feeding of the Five Thousand* was not his idea, but it was possible because he'd inspired people to donate to him, bringing about the creation of the *Gabe Tanner Foundation*, which brought about the Kinos' gift of the Community Center. The foundation pays the employees and the expenses of the community center, and others across the nation.

The foundation helps kids get on the right path and the Center just accomplished an enormous goal, setting an enormous example and offering an enormous challenge to other communities. Across the nation teens are working in service to their neighborhoods, mowing grass, planting gardens, cleaning out gutters, painting houses, washing cars, taking care of the elderly, all inspired by Gabe's daily and weekly challenges. And now, Gabe says he needs to 'make something of himself.' He just doesn't know.

"Yeah, Gabe," Logan said sarcastically. "You really do need to do something with your life. You'd better get goin' on that."

"I will. I promise. You guys have a safe trip home. Bye."

The Mark Adams family sat quietly for a few moments, as if they had to wait for Gabe's light to diminish.

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Proverbs 3:27

"Do not withhold good from those to whom
it is due, when it is in your power to act."

Chapter Eighteen

It was Mark who broke the silence that ensued after Gabe's call. "That boy is a trip."

"He's something else for sure," Logan agreed.

Mark nodded. "Anyway, so, if you'll look over to your right, that is the little strip mall where Master Brian had his own little martial arts studio." He pulled into the mall and drove over to where there was now a hair salon. "This little corner area was his studio and it was where your granddad trained your grandmother for the MART. As you guys know, a few years later, Master Brian decided to go into business with Master Appel and together they own a bunch of Appel Martial Arts Studios.

"During the year that Mom trained, right inside that studio, eight guys came in and attacked Eric. They beat him badly and hung him from a steel plate where the kicking bag had been hanging. It was a really bad time."

"So, Dad, that was the James and Tommy Crane episode, right?"

"Well, one of them, yes." He sighed and started to pull out, but Joey drove up beside him, so he waited while Joey probably told the same story to his wife.

They pulled away together and drove several miles from the strip mall, made a few turns. "Now," Mark said. "If you'll look over on your left up here, that is the elementary school that Joey and I went to." Again, Mark pulled into the parking lot.

Everyone looked, even Emily, who'd been asleep up until they'd stopped at the strip mall.

"Looks kinda run down," Bella said.

Mark nodded. "It actually looks like it's not in use anymore," he murmured.

"Hey, maybe it's time to buy another *Gabe Tanner Community Center,*" JoJo said in jest.

"Uh, yeah, well, we'd have to talk to Ricky or Eric about that. We have money, but not that kind of money."

"I wonder if it's for sale," Bella said softly.

"Let's find out," Mark said. "But if we buy another Community Center, we'd have to find someone to manage it, etcetera."

"It's just a thought," JoJo said. "Let's just look into it. Wasn't the foundation in charge of hiring Rose and Mrs. Murphy?"

"Yes, and I'd say they did a good job on that."

"I'd say the same thing. So, I mean, it couldn't hurt to look into it."

"Nope, couldn't hurt," Mark said. "And actually, the foundation has taken in so much money now, that if this building isn't too expensive, the foundation can actually buy it. I think I'll do some real research on the area and seriously look into it."

"Cool," Logan said. "I think it's cool that the school you went to as a kid could become a *Gabe Tanner Community Center*. I mean, it's kinda poetic, like a resurrection of sorts."

JoJo grinned at his brother. "You think everything is poetic."

Logan smiled and shrugged. "It's just where my mind goes."

"Which is why you write such beautiful songs," Bella said.

Logan smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

They drove on past and finally took a right onto Allatoona Drive. They pulled up in front of a tiny, split-level home. They got out of the car and stood looking up at the house as they waited for Joey to pull in behind them and get their kids out of the car.

Joey joined Mark as both of them smiled at the small house. "It looks really small," Joey said. "Even smaller than I remember."

"Looks the same to me," Mark said.

"So, Shelley donated the house to Angel's foundation to help homeless women?" Breez asked.

"Mom donated the *use* of the house. She still owns it. And right now, the house is empty because the woman who lived here got married and moved out just two weeks ago. Angel says someone else is moving in next week, just in time for Christmas," Joey answered. "A young family, mother, father and three children. The mother is sick with multiple sclerosis and needs care."

"Aww," Breez said. "We should do something special for them, since they'll be living in the same house that you grew up in. We should find out what's being done for them and see if we can assist. At least give them a nice Christmas."

Joey smiled. "I'll leave that to you. Talk to Angel, find out the circumstances and whatever you and Bella decide, I'm all in."

Breez smiled. "This will be awesome!"

JoJo smiled. Feeding five thousand plus people and listening to their stories, it's opening eyes and hearts. So, once again, Gabe is continuing to help people without even realizing it.

They went inside and Mark's and Joey's wives and children were

truly blown away by how tiny the home was. They showed their children their very small bedroom and explained how they had bunk beds. They took them through the house and told stories about their childhood. They talked about how after their mom was attacked in this very house, Eric paid to have the entire home renovated, and it was much nicer after that. They went out into the backyard and told the children about the trampoline and the first time they met Ricky he jumped on the tramp with them. They spent a good hour or so, talking and reminiscing.

When they left the house, most everyone was pretty silent, each thinking their own thoughts. They were hungry and decided they had time to eat before they headed to the airport to meet up with the Kinos and Wallaces. They spotted a small local restaurant and headed inside.

They sat near the back, but that didn't deter the people that spotted them. The first person was actually a part of the *Appel Martial Arts* umbrella. A young man, maybe mid-twenties, came to their table, a big smile on his face. He spoke to Joey. "Excuse me, but, Master Adams?"

Joey nodded and smiled. "Yes?"

"I'm so sorry to interrupt your meal with— " he gestured around. "Your family, I presume?"

Joey nodded again. "Yes." He stood, partly to be polite and partly to protect said family.

"I'm Jared Owens. I train at *Appel Martial Arts* just down the street and you came in there several years ago and spoke to the class and gave me some pointers. I'll never forget it and I just wanted to say thank you. In a way, you changed my whole life, and I promised myself if I ever saw you in person again, I'd tell you how grateful I am." He extended his hand and Joey shook it.

"May I ask, Jared, how me just giving you some pointers changed your life?"

"Yes, sir. I'm happy to share it with you, because I now share the story a lot," he said with a smile. "I was working on one of my kicks and you came over to instruct me. You asked me if I lived nearby and I told you that I did not. I told you that I lived with my mother and kid brother several miles away and that I'd gotten into trouble with the law and being in the class was part of my probation."

Joey nodded. "Ah, yes, I think I remember you now. I remember thinking that it was a wise decision on the judge's part, and then I learned from your Master that he was friends with the judge and that's why the judge had so much faith that you being in Master Dutton's class would change your attitude."

"And it did, sir. Master Dutton has been like a real father to me. But it was also something you said to me, Master Adams. You told me first, that anything worth doing was worth doing well and to practice that kick until I perfected it. And you told me no matter what I did to get into that trouble, whether I was guilty or innocent, it didn't matter. That sometimes things are put in our path to help us to learn or to grow or to get better.

"And I asked you who would put things in my path, and you said that God would, or He would allow it to happen, but that it wasn't to punish me, but to hone me because He loves me. And you said you understood that my life had been hard so far, and that it's how I handle it that will affect how the rest of my life will go. And like, at the time, I was all offended because I felt like it was unfair because I was innocent. I didn't steal that kid's bike, and here I was having to attend a stupid martial arts class. But you said, guilty or innocent. You said, if I was innocent and it seemed unfair, to remember that there was another man who went to the cross and He, too, was innocent. Was I better than Him? We all have crosses to bear. How do we handle it? What you said changed my life, and my mother's life and my little brother's life and now, that's what I do."

"What do you do?"

Jared smiled. "I change lives. I'm an instructor at *Appel Martial Arts* and I'm a youth pastor for the *Kingdom's Kids* at the *Church of Christ* over in Jonesboro."

Joey teared up as did the others at their table. "Jared, congratulations, young man. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, sir. And I'm sorry to interrupt your meal with your family, but if you're ever in town again, please come by if you have time."

"I'd love that."

Jared handed him a card and Joey put it away.

The young man started to turn away and turned back. "Oh my goodness, I just realized who you're with. Master Adams," Jared said as he extended his hand to Mark.

Mark stood and shook his hand.

Jared turned to JoJo and Logan. "And my *Kingdom Kids* are gonna be totally freaked out that I got to see JoJo Adams and Logan Adams. Logan, they follow you, because you're on Gabe Tanner's website all the time and they love Gabe and Taylor, and my kids are chomping at the bit to buy your first album."

Logan stood and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, Jared. Tell them all I'm depending on them."

"I will. And JoJo, we're all like, Georgia fans, but, we all love USC too because of you. We were crushed when you got hurt."

JoJo stood and shook his hand using his left hand. “It’s okay, I’ll recover. And tell your kids, whatever God’s will is for me, that’s all I want to do, so, if playing pro isn’t what He has for me, I’m good. I just want to do His will. I trust Him.”

Jared teared up. “That was beautiful and I will tell them exactly what you said.” He turned to smile at the women.

“Jared,” Joey went on. “This is my wife, Breez, Mark’s wife, Bella, Mark’s daughter, Em, and my children, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger.”

He nodded and smiled. “It’s so nice to meet you all, and again, sorry to interrupt and thank you all so much for your kindness. I’m gonna get out of your way.” He turned and walked away, then stopped and came back. “Oh, and what you all just did at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, you have inspired a nation. Okay, I’m done. Thanks again.” He turned and walked away.

They all sat back down and tried to finish their meal, but several minutes later two young guys approached the table.

“Excuse me,” one said. “But we couldn’t help but hear when that dude was talking to you. Are you JoJo Adams?”

JoJo stood and nodded. “Yes.”

“The quarterback?”

“Yes,” he said with a smile and a nod.

“Wow, well, we didn’t want to take up your time, but we’re big fans of yours. Can we get a pic and we’ll leave you alone? The guys are not gonna believe we spoke to you without a pic.”

“The guys?”

“The guys on our team. We play for Central Clayton High School.”

“Cool. What position?”

“I’m the quarterback, he’s my best receiver.”

JoJo smiled. “Well, don’t let the other guys know that. So, how’d your season go?”

“It was a rough year. Lots of injuries. We were six and four.”

JoJo nodded. “Juniors?”

“Yeah, we gotta make it happen this next year.”

“Well, good luck, and yes, let’s get a pic.”

They took the pic, shook hands and left.

Only a few minutes later a couple of girls almost giddy with excitement approached the table.

“Hey,” one said, smiling brightly. “We, uh, we’re so sorry to bother your family, but, I mean, you’re Logan Adams, right?”

Logan smiled and stood. “Yes.”

"Oh, Logan, we watch you on YouTube and on Gabe Tanner's website. You are amazing. I mean, so good."

Logan smiled. "Thank you so much."

"Thank YOU! And like, so, we were hoping you might sign our shirts and let us get a picture."

Joey and Mark grinned as Logan's face turned red. Breez smiled widely and Bella glowed with pride. One of the girls handed Logan a marker and pointed to her sleeve.

Logan quickly signed both girls' sleeves and took a selfie with them.

When the girls left, Mark spoke. "Everyone gobble up fast. We gotta get outta here. Next thing we know they'll be asking Phia to sign something."

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November 30th, 12:00 PM, Saturday Afternoon

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose smiled as she finished sending a joint text to her father and sisters, Daisy, Lily, and Violet. She read it over.

~~Mike called to give us the approximate time for the shoot. Tentatively this Wednesday, December 4th, at the Main Street Market at 8:00 AM. Not sure what he'll think of the wound on your forehead, Daisy. I didn't tell him. Also, I'm sending you all an audio file. I thought you should hear the other things Mike said to me, especially you, Daisy. Let me know what you think.

Rose sent the text and then sent the audio file to the same group.

"What are you grinning at?" Jericho asked her as he came into her office with a large box.

"I was thinking about the reactions that my father and sisters will have when they hear the audio file I just sent them."

"What's on the audio file? Iris being cute as usual?"

She glanced at her little sister who was curled up in a chair looking through a Christmas catalogue. Rose shook her head. "I wish. No, it's a recording of the conversation I had with Mike yesterday. He was his usual asinine self and I was smart enough to get Vi to record the whole thing."

"May I hear the whole thing?"

She shrugged. "Sure. But let me warn you, you're not gonna like it."

"I already assumed that."

Jericho listened carefully to the file, his face darkening. Finally, he took the ear bud from his ear and turned to her. "I truly hate the way he talks to you, Rose."

"Me too. He's maddening. He wasn't like that in the beginning. He was so charismatic. He's a good actor. He even had my father fooled."

"To do that, he must be a good actor, but, anyway, Rose, way to give it right back to him. Good job on that. The way you put him in his place, I mean, I think I just fell completely in love."

Rose smiled. "You shouldn't joke about something like that."

"Who says I'm joking?"

When she looked shocked, he went on quickly. "Anyway, he did say one thing that was absolutely correct."

"What?"

"You really are one gorgeous chick."

Rose snorted.

He grinned. "So, did you have plans for lunch before the big crowd of kids get here?"

"Well, Rebecca and I thought we'd order something and then try to talk you into going to pick it up for us."

"I'd be happy to do that for you, if I can pay."

"No, you can't. It's part of the expense of running this place."

"Then consider it my donation."

Rose sighed. "Okay, deal."

They both turned as Daisy and Brody strode into the Center and called Rose's name.

Iris' eyes lit up and she jumped out of the chair and went running to see her sister. "Daisy, Daisy," Iris called as she ran to her sister.

As usual, Daisy scooped her up and hugged her. "What are you up to, sweet girl?" Daisy said.

"I went to da swings wif Gabe and Taywor came wif us and we had fun and den Gabe tooked me here cuz he had to go do fighting and I couldn't go. But some more kids are coming over to make decowations fo da Christmas twee, and Awawyn is gonna come help. But not Phia or Kel or Angewina, cuz dey hadded to go back home." She ended with a very sad looking frown.

"Ahh, well, I'm sorry the other kids had to go back home," Daisy said. "I bet they are missing you too."

Iris smiled again. "I bet dey are too, but Taywor is gonna stay for anudder whole week!"

"Yay for Taylor," Daisy quipped.

"You mean yay for Gabe," Brody put in.

Iris smiled up at the big man. "Hi Bwody. Is you gonna stay too?"

He bent down. "Well, I'm only gonna stay for two more days. Today and tomorrow. And then I have to go home cuz I have to go to school."

She frowned. "Gabe doesn't have to go to his school anymore. He has

to go away to anudder school." She frowned, then smiled. "But he's gonna stay here for Chwistmas!"

"I'm so happy he's staying," Brody said. "You sure do love your brother, don't ya?"

She grinned. "I sure do."

They all laughed.

"I was about to send Jericho to pick up lunch. Can we get some lunch for you too?" Rose asked.

"Sure," Brody said. "But I get to pay."

"I already have it covered," Jericho said.

"What would you like?" Rose asked.

"I'm not picky. Whatever Jericho is having."

"Daisy?" Rose asked.

She smiled. "Whatever you're having."

Rose smiled. "So, what are you two up to today?"

"Well," Daisy began with a smile. "We're spending the whole day together. We just attended class with Master Appel."

"Really? How did that go?"

"It was awesome, actually," Brody said. "I'm a little rusty because it's been nothing but baseball since college, but it was a super hard workout, so that was good for me. And your brother, I mean, oh my gosh. Where does he get it?"

Rose nodded. "Ever since Grandmaster Kino took him under his wing to train him, he's been like, a beast. Unstoppable."

"Yeah, he was amazing. They did this little demonstration between Gabe and Master Appel, and it was mesmerizing. And Daisy," he stopped, shook his head. "I had no idea Daisy was as good as she is. I couldn't keep my eyes off her."

"I bet," Jericho put in.

Daisy made a face. "And then after class we took a walk up Main and talked to a bunch of people who were out decorating their storefronts. It was really nice, and everyone wanted to know about Brody."

"Of course they did," Rose said. "Small town people like to know what's goin' on and who's visiting their town."

"Anyway, and now we're here to volunteer to help with more decorating, and then we're goin' out tonight."

Jericho smiled. "So, finally, a real date."

"They've all been real," Daisy said. "We've been dancing to the music of a famous country star, we've been to dinner at the home of famous movie stars, we've gone horseback riding together, we've gone to breakfast together, we've taken care of puppies together, we've been to a

martial arts class together and we're about to have lunch together."

"I guess that means we're dating," Brody said firmly.

"I guess it does mean that," Daisy agreed with a sweet smile directed at the handsome guy next to her.

"How fun is that!" Rose added and then changed the subject. "Daisy," Rose began. "Did you get my text?"

"About the shoot? Yes. Maybe my hurt head will get me out of it."

"Maybe, but it's actually looking better and they might be able to cover it with makeup, or just shoot you from one side."

Daisy nodded.

"Did you listen to the audio file?" Jericho asked.

"Not yet."

"Well, you probably should. And let Brody listen too, just for fun."

Rose gave Jericho a dark look. "Jericho Jones, I think you like to make trouble!"

He grinned.

"Okay," Daisy said innocently, wondering what that was all about.

They went into the gym and sat in a couple of folding chairs by the door and played the audio.

When it was done, Daisy looked up at Brody. He didn't look too happy. She gave him a smile. "Brody, don't pay any attention to what he says. He only said it to get to Rose, not because he's actually attracted to me. If you stood us all up together, he probably wouldn't remember who was who, except for Rose. He just picked a name."

Brody nodded. "I get what you're saying and I'm sure you're right, still, I don't think I like the idea of you working with this guy, even for a day. I mean, I wish I could be here to keep an eye on you."

"Don't worry, I'll be okay. My dad will be there, and Jericho and CJ. He wouldn't dare show out on the shoot like he does when he thinks no one is watching. And my father was copied on this audio, so, who knows, the shoot might not happen at all, though as Rose says, we don't want to hurt *Twin Wave Beauty*."

Brody smiled. "I love that you ladies are thinking beyond yourselves to how your actions might affect others."

Rose shrugged. "Well, I'm sure *Twin Wave* didn't know what a jerk Mike is when they hired him, because *we,* too, were totally sold on his integrity. I'll give him that. He's a good salesman. He's also a narcissistic pig. But I don't hate him. He just doesn't know. He doesn't understand what's important. He's trying to fill a void and it's not working. In a way, I kinda feel sorry for him. But I have no idea how to help him."

Brody nodded. “Me neither, except to pray for him that the right lessons will be put in his path.”

Daisy smiled. “Well, if he tries anything while he’s here in Pine Forest, my father might end up being that lesson.”

Brody chuckled. “Wish I could stay, if only to see that.”

Daisy laughed. “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,” she quoted.

He nodded. “Let’s go see what we can do to help decorate until lunch gets here.”

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November 30th, 4:00 PM, Saturday Afternoon

Keith Home, Huntington Beach, California

Logan gathered the flowers from the front seat of his car, straightened his clothing, smoothed his hair and headed toward the front door. He’d called Mr. Keith to see if they were home, or more importantly, to see if Melody was home, made him promise to keep the secret and headed over after he stopped to buy flowers.

He drew a deep breath and rang the doorbell. He heard Melody call, “I got it, Mom!” He smiled. Perfect.

The door opened. “Delivery,” he said and then lowered the flowers.

There was an ear-splitting squeal. “Logan!” she screamed as she fumbled with the lock on the screen door.

She finally opened it and jumped into his arms. He stumbled back a few steps but held her tight and didn’t let go. He buried himself in the essence that was this amazing girl. Her hair smelled so good, her body pressed against him felt so good. He’d been trying to focus on the tasks at hand while he was gone, but now, now he was remembering how much he missed her, how much he cared for her, how much he craved being near her. He set her back a moment. “Let me just look at you,” he said softly.

She smiled up at him as he cupped her face in his hands. He looked deep into her eyes. “Wow, Mel, I sure missed you. I don’t think I can ever do that again.”

“Do what?”

“Go away from you for a whole week.”

She nodded. “Good. Don’t ever do that again. I tried so hard to do what you told me and concentrate on the present moment. But you were always there in the back of my mind. I’d wonder what you would be saying or thinking as we went and ministered to the homeless people.”

“I’m so proud of you for that, Melody. You and your whole family. I can’t wait to hear all the stories.”

“Good, then maybe you can stay for dinner,” came a voice inside the door. “You kids come inside,” Mr. Keith said.

Logan leaned forward and whispered, "I'm gonna need to get you alone very soon."

She giggled. "Let's make that happen."

"For now," he said as he leaned forward and kissed her. It was not just a short peck on the lips. Finally, he pulled away and sighed. "Oh, Melody, I've been craving that all week long and it did not disappoint."

She sighed. "Me too. Come on, let's go say 'hi' to the fam."

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November 30th, 7:52 PM, Saturday Evening

Sally's Steakhouse, Pine Forest, Georgia

Brody Smith stared across the table into the bright blue eyes of the girl who had haunted his dreams for about eighteen years, and that was saying a lot because they were both only twenty-two.

Daisy smiled as she spooned up another bite of cheesecake. "Umm, this stuff is so good."

He nodded. "Watching you eat it is also so good."

She gave a soft laugh. "So, what do you think about *Sally's Steakhouse*? Not bad for rural Georgia, right?"

"Not bad at all. Actually, really good. The service has been great. My steak was cooked perfectly. Your steak and lobster looked amazing."

"Oh, it *was* amazing," she said. "Of course, the beef is locally grown, which makes it even better."

He nodded.

She smiled. "You finished your dessert so fast. Want some of mine?"

He drew a breath. "I do— and I'll take some of your cheesecake too."

She giggled.

He smiled as she pushed her plate over to him.

"Go ahead and finish it for me. I'm full."

He smiled contentedly and scooped up a large bite.

"So, Brody, you've sure been smiling a lot. What are you thinking about that's making you smile so much?"

"You. I'm happy, Daisy. I'm really freakin' happy right now. I might be happier than I've ever been."

"Happy about you and me having dinner together?"

"Yes, that, and so much more. I'm so happy that I found the courage to talk to you. I'm so happy that you would even consider going out with me. I'm happy that the more I learn about you, the more I get to know you, the more I realize that I wasn't wrong about you. You are so sweet, so smart, so honest, so freakin' beautiful, hardworking, and most of all, so spiritual. I mean, I know you love Jesus, you show your faith in everything

you do and say. Being around you is like being in heaven."

"Wow. So, like, that's embarrassing. I hardly live up to all that."

"And humble," he added with a twinkle in his eye.

She reached across the table and held out her hand. He looked down at the offering, surprised, but still immediately took advantage of it. He gripped her delicate-looking hand in his big paw, and had to close his eyes a second or two to relish the sensation of utter contentment.

She wiggled her hand to get him to look at her, then smiled sweetly at him. "My turn for some heartfelt words."

His heart sped up, wondering what she would say, hoping it wasn't a "let's just be friends," kinda speech.

"So, Brody, it wouldn't be right for me to hear you practically pour your heart out, without being completely honest with you, Brody. And that's kind of the way I am, I like being honest, I like keeping it real. I don't like to play games or play coy, and so I want to tell you the things that are on *my* mind."

Oh brother, he thought, here we go. He'd obviously said too much. A guy who "pours his heart out" can't come across as cool or confident. He sighed and nodded. "I'm listening."

"First, all the things that you said about me, I could say the same type of things about you. You said I'm smart. Well, I think you are brilliant. You said I'm sweet and I won't say that about you because I don't want to emasculate you, but I will say that you're kind. You said I work hard, and I happen to know and understand how hard *you* have to work to be the outstanding athlete you are. I know how dedicated you have to be, and I've heard from your sister how hard you work at home to help on the ranch when you're not at school and how you support your family in all of their endeavors and how you barely have time to even eat before you fall into bed exhausted."

"When did you and my sister talk?"

"Well, she wasn't talking to me in particular, she was talking to all the women, bragging on her little brother."

He smiled.

Daisy smiled too and then went on. "You said I was pretty, and I'm wondering, Brody, I mean, surely you know that you are a very good-looking guy. When we walked up Main Street today, did you notice all the women staring at you?"

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"I'm not kidding. But I'll move on since that seems to make you uncomfortable."

"Good, and by the way, I didn't say you were pretty. I said you were

beautiful."

She chuckled. "I stand corrected. But really, Brody, what I'm getting at is, I understand what you've shared with me. I get that it was hard for you to do that. I understand that you like me, or that you're at the very least, interested in me, and I get that it may be more than just a passing interest. And the reason I get that is because I realize that you and I are on the same page spiritually. You are *not* trying to hook up with me. That is not your goal. Our goal, when we date someone, is to get to know them, and see if that person is a possible lifetime mate. Period. That's our goal. I understand that, and I think that's where you are too."

He nodded emphatically.

"So, Brody Smith, you check all the boxes so far. And I'm interested. If I were a puppy—my ears would be standing straight up and my tail would be wagging."

He chuckled at the image.

"So, how's that for being honest?" she continued. "Do I want you and me to work out? Yes, I do. If that scares you away, so be it. I have to be honest and like I said, I don't like to play games. You not only intrigue me, Brody, but you have touched my heart with the things you've said to me, the things you've shared with me. How can I not be flattered that of all the girls who have probably thrown themselves at you, the big, strong, good-looking athlete, you turn your attention on little ol' me? You make me feel like somebody. You make me feel like there really is hope that one day I can have what my parents have."

"And what is that?"

"A never-ending love story and a big family who loves God and strives hard to do His will."

"That's a beautiful thing, Daisy, and that happens to be exactly what I want. Exactly."

She looked into his eyes. He gazed into hers. Could this trip to Georgia to serve God have gone any better? He realized he hadn't let go of her hand. He gave it a squeeze and let go. "Well, what you just said, that is a huge relief."

"Relief?"

"I was thinking I would lay all my cards out and you would say 'thanks but no thanks.'"

"You seem to be the type to have more confidence than that."

"You're right and I do about most things. But I've liked you for so long, and you didn't seem to even notice me, I guess I lost a little confidence where you're concerned."

"I guess that's understandable. But you know, it's not that I didn't notice you. It's just that you being younger, I thought it wasn't meant to be. I did notice you, though. I remember Lily and I talking about you, saying we wished you were older because you were a really awesome, really good-lookin' hottie."

He sighed and smiled at her. He didn't know how to respond to that. "Um, you ready to get out of here?"

She giggled at his awkwardness. "Sure, I'm ready to go, but I'm not ready to go home."

He grinned. "And I'm happy about that too! So, if you don't wanna go home, where did you have in mind to go?"

She shrugged. "Doesn't really matter. I just wanna spend a little more time together. How about the little park next to the center?"

Brody agreed, paid the bill and ushered Daisy into his parents' SUV. They drove the short distance to the little park, and instead of parking on the vertical spaces along the street, he pulled into the side parking lot of the Center, to the farthest spot that was closest to the park. She knew he was trying to be a gentleman, and so waited on him to open her door for her. He smiled as he held his hand out and she placed her hand in his. He helped her from the car and they walked hand in hand along the walk that went around the perimeter of the park and at certain intervals, cut toward the center of the park. In the children's play area there were swings and a couple of slides, one much higher than the other and a few other fun things like six-inch-high balance beams and permanent hopscotch boards.

They pretty much walked and talked about anything and everything. Finally, she took a seat on the swing and he sat on the swing next to her and they swayed back and forth, exchanging bits of information about their lives. "So," he asked her, "you said you know how playing a sport requires dedication. I was wondering, besides martial arts and shooting, what other types of sports do you do? You told me about softball, and I think I remember something about you playing volleyball in high school."

She nodded. "Yes, I did. I was okay. I was short, so, like Taylor, I played libero. But I was okay. I was quick."

"Cool. Anything else?"

"Well, my junior and senior years I played basketball. Like I said, I was short, but I had a great vertical jump and I was quick. I didn't start. But when I was in, I did pretty well."

He smiled. "I can just see you on the court, playing defense, stealing the ball, in those cute little shorts."

She laughed. "Our basketball shorts were not little. They were long and baggy, and I was so short that mine came to my knees. But the

volleyball shorts *were* these tiny, tight, black shorts."

He smiled at the thought. "Oh, yeah, I guess I was thinking about the volleyball shorts."

She sighed. "So, I heard that you and your father and my brother have been asked to share your testimonies at church tomorrow about what you experienced at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*."

He looked at her, surprised. "How did you hear?"

"I heard Gabe talking to my father about it."

Brody sighed. "Well, they asked my dad because he's like, famous, ya know? And that's good for attendance. They asked your brother because he's local and he, too, is famous, though he swears he's not. I'm not quite sure why they asked me. I mean, Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams are gonna be at church."

"Yeah, but they spoke last time they were here. And why'd they ask you? I mean, you said it yourself, Brody. You said people are starting to know your name, to know who you are. If they do a search for you on the internet your pics and stats come up. You may not be over-the-top famous yet, but don't sell yourself short."

"Oh, I don't. Really, I don't. Not that being famous is my goal, because it most definitely is not. I know I'm in the limelight because of my family and because of baseball and I intend to be a good example of a Christian guy. And really, speaking at church is a great opportunity to do that and to try out my speech for school, because my school speech is about service to others and I can definitely use what happened here at the Center. Besides, I'll never turn down an opportunity to talk about my relationship with God."

Daisy nodded thoughtfully. "Brody, so, if something happened, like, you get injured, and you couldn't play ball anymore, what would you do?"

He nodded. It was a fair question. "Well, I'd go back down on my knees until I know what God wants me to do. I mean, I could work with children. I could work the farm. I'd find something to do."

"I wasn't really asking what you'd do for a living. I'm sure you have all kinds of paths you could take. I meant, like, how would you feel?"

"Oh, well, I'd feel some disappointment of course. Still, no matter what life throws at me, I'd trust God. He has a plan, and if He needs me to learn to pick up my cross and carry it, then that's what I'll do. I trust Jesus. He is my constant companion. I trust Him. JoJo and I talked about this the first night I was here. Actually, JoJo is a shining example of exactly what you're talking about."

Daisy nodded. Brody got off his swing and went around behind Daisy

to softly push her swing.

"Brody," Daisy said softly, looking up at him over her head.

"Hmm?"

"I agree that JoJo is a great guy, but I also think you are one really awesome guy, and I think God has great plans for you."

"Wow! Now, that is a really nice thing for someone to say to me. Thank you, Daisy."

"You're welcome," she said softly.

He brought her swing to a stop and came around in front of her.

He started to pull her up so that finally, he could kiss her. It'd been on his mind all day, but suddenly, he heard someone or something approaching from behind him and he quickly turned to protect her from whatever it was. He drew in a sharp breath as a large black dog approached. He stood his ground. "Well, hello there, boy," he said firmly.

The dog seemed a little afraid, but his tail was wagging. Brody knelt down and turned his back on the dog. "Be real still, Daisy," he said softly.

The dog sniffed around Brody's back. Brody held out his hand and the dog ducked his head under it to allow him to pet him. Brody scratched the dog's head and finally turned and spoke calmly to him.

"Brody," Daisy said. "Does he have a collar or tags?"

"No, do ya, fella, huh, boy?"

Daisy slowly stood from the swing so she could see the dog. "Hmm, ya know what, Brody? Don't you think this guy looks a lot like Georgia's black puppies?"

Brody studied the dog. "Actually, yes, he does. Or they look like him. Are you the papa dog? Is Georgia your girl, huh, boy?"

He smiled at Daisy. "You do know what we have to do, right?"

Daisy nodded. "Well, we have to rescue him. And I guess we also need to put his picture and Georgia's picture up at the post office and vet's office to make sure they don't have owners."

"I suppose we do need to do that too," Brody said.

"How do we get him to come with us?" Daisy asked.

"How would you feel about giving up your leftovers?"

She frowned. "Okay, now you're asking a lot, but I guess it's for a good cause."

"Go to the car and get the leftovers and we'll give him a little bit at a time until we can get him into the car."

✞✞✞

Ecclesiastes 3:19

"For what happens to the children of man
and what happens to the beasts is the same;

as one dies, so dies the other.
They all have the same breath,
and man has no advantage
over the beasts, for all is vanity.”

Chapter Nineteen

November 30th, 6:45 PM, Saturday Evening
Brooks Home, Hillcrest, California

"Ms. Brooks, that was so good. How in the world can you make something that good that fast?"

Jewell smiled. "Chicken Marsala is easy and quick, which is why I made it. Besides, I promised your mom I would make sure you're fed well while they're gone."

Young Eric grinned. "Really? Well, I'll have to tell my mom that I can take care of myself. Still, I mean, as long as you're cookin', I'm eating, because you really are a great chef. My dad is right about your restaurant. It's gonna take off and be the new hotspot for everyone."

Jordan smiled at her guy. Her fiancé. Her future husband. She couldn't help but imagine him sitting at her own table one day telling her what a great meal she cooked. There was only one problem with that. She couldn't cook. She looked up at her mom. "Ya know what, Mom? I just realized, you're gonna have to teach me to cook so I can feed my new husband when we get married."

Young Eric smiled at the thought. Jewell frowned. "Jordan Brooks, I've taught you to cook, sweetheart. But maybe we can work on some new dishes together and I'll give you a notebook of my recipes."

"Jordan doesn't cook as good as you, Mom," Jamie chirped with a wicked grin. "One time when she made meatloaf I almost threw up."

Jordan laughed.

Josie frowned. "That is not true. That meatloaf was really good, just a little dry. But it was good and so were the mashed potatoes."

"Aww, thank you, Josie," Jordan said.

Young Eric smiled at Jordan. "I promise to love whatever you cook for me as long as you promise to love what I cook for you."

She giggled. "I'm not promising anything."

Everyone laughed at that.

"Okay then," he said with a nod. "We'll just see who wins this battle of the Kino family cookers." He looked at Ms. Brooks as he rose from the table. "I'll do the dishes."

"You most certainly will not," Jewell said.

"Mom doesn't ever let anyone help her in the kitchen except us kids," Jordan explained.

"Well, I'm about to be one of her kids, right?"

"Right," Jewell said. "But please, you and Jordan go have your talk. I think Jamie needs to help me with the dishes."

Jamie frowned. "But..."

"Maybe it will help you to appreciate your sister's meatloaf," Jewell added, her eyebrows raised.

Young Eric caught Jamie's eye and gave him a shrug and a nod. Jamie huffed out a breath and rose to help.

"I'll clear the table," Josie said.

"Thank you, sweetie," Jewell replied. "Now, Eric, you said you and Jordan needed to have a long talk. Go talk."

"Yes, ma'am. And thanks again for the dinner."

"You're so welcome."

"Oh, and tomorrow after church, maybe you can come to dinner at the Grands' house?"

"We would love that," Jewell said. "As long as it's not too late. We have school the next day."

Groans from all three of her children.

Young Eric grinned. "No, ma'am, it won't be late. It'll probably be more like a late lunch than a dinner."

"Sounds wonderful."

Young Eric reached down and took Jordan's hand. "So, Two-three, where shall we talk?"

She sighed. "I want complete privacy."

"Okay, so, how about we go sit in my car?"

"Sounds good."

They walked outside and got in the car. Jordan sighed in apprehension and turned slightly so she could see his eyes.

Eric turned toward her and smiled. "Okay, babe, talk to me. And don't be nervous or afraid. I love you and whatever you have to say, we'll talk it out. No anger. No judgment."

"Wow. What made you think you need to say all that?"

He smiled. "The way you're twisting your hands together. The frown on your face. You seem troubled. Share it with me. I'm gonna be your husband and I want you to know you can tell me anything."

She nodded. "Okay. Well, there are several things to discuss on a few different subjects."

"Tell me the most important thing, the one that has you so troubled."

She gave a soft laugh. "They all have me troubled."

He raised his eyebrows but kept silent.

She drew a breath. "Remember we had a talk about me going to college or not going to college? And I told you that my priorities had changed somewhat?"

"Yes, and you said you couldn't tell me how they'd changed at that time but that you would eventually tell me."

"Right. And I couldn't because what I do about college had to do with what I truly wanted to do and I couldn't tell you what I truly wanted to do because you hadn't asked me to marry you yet."

He nodded. "Oh, oookaay."

"But now you have, so, I can tell you that I don't know if I want to go to college and have a career. I know it sounds lazy, but all I really want to do is be a wife to you and have your children and be the best mother to your children. I want to take care of my family and not leave you because I have to go off to work or to school."

He tried hard to keep a neutral look on his face.

She sighed. "I swear to you, Three, I'm not after your money. I don't want to be lazy and just let you support me. But if we're gonna be husband and wife, I think the best thing I can do is to take care of our family. Not leave the children with daycare workers while I have a career. I mean, I won't ask you to buy me expensive things. Just what we need to run a household. I don't need anything. I don't do fancy clothes and shoes, except maybe athletic shoes, and don't have like, expensive tastes, and..."

"Okay, babe. I get it." He couldn't hold it back. He chuckled.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I'm sorry. It's because if I had one wish, it would be exactly what you're saying to me."

"Um, which part?"

"That whole part about you wanting to stay home and take care of your family."

She nodded slowly. "So, you don't want me to go to work and help with expenses?"

He shook his head. "Listen, I know you're not trying to insult me, but living expenses are not gonna be a problem for us and no offense, but I don't need your paycheck. But I do need you, Two-three. I need you and love you and want you to be my mate, my partner in everything. Together, I think we can create the most amazing family. And the fact that you want to focus all of your energy on the home and family, it's wonderful and amazing and makes me even more excited, if that's even possible."

"But for some reason, I feel like, ashamed, or something."

He thought about her words a moment. "Do you think maybe you're feeling ashamed because you're buying into the feminist crap that makes girls feel that if they don't have a degree and a career being a girlboss, then they are stupid and backward and uninformed?"

Jordan sighed. "I don't think I feel that way. I mean, I'm not ashamed of wanting to raise a family. So, no, I don't think that's it. I'm not buying their 'crap' as you say."

He nodded, then tried to think about what his father or grandfather would say about her feeling ashamed. He briefly closed his eyes and asked God to help him. He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Do you think maybe instead of feeling ashamed, you're feeling guilty?"

She thought a moment. "I'm not sure. Guilty about what?"

"You tell me. What about your choice would make you feel guilty?"

She thought again and sighed. "Well, I mean, most people, when they get married, they need both paychecks in order to live. Housing is expensive. Cars. Insurance. Food. Gas. Power. They both have to work and it's difficult to raise a family. Take my mother and Peter for example."

Young Eric nodded. "That's true. They struggled. A whole lot of people struggle financially. My grandfather did at first. It's really because of his hard work that we are so blessed. We don't have to worry about those kinds of things."

She nodded. "So, I don't want to feel guilty."

"Then don't. Feel blessed."

She smiled.

"Listen, Jordan. It's true, our family has been very blessed. And I *would* feel guilty if we laid around being lazy, went partying all the time, went on extravagant vacations, owned a bunch of cars that just sat around looking pretty, or covered ourselves in jewelry or fancy clothes. We do have nice homes, but they're not the fanciest or gaudy. They're functional for our large families. We don't lay around like fat cats. We wake up early, we work hard all day, we strive to do the will of God. Granddad worked hard when he was young and his martial arts studios took off. I have to say, though, that his goal wasn't trying to make money. He was trying to use his own skills to take care of his family. I mean, that was one of his goals."

"One? What else?"

Young Eric shrugged. "He was trying to teach the world about honor and integrity and hard work and because he was doing God's will for him, God blessed him. And then my own father was painstakingly taught, by

my grandfather and his mom before she passed, to appreciate all that he had by taking trips to the desert, or to the mountains, and learning to live simply so that he didn't take things for granted. They also taught him about helping the less fortunate. There was this Bible verse drilled into us. Galatians 5:13."

She smiled. "What does it say?"

"It says: 'You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.' That's what we try to do. So, anyway, my dad as a kid, worked hard at his martial arts and was recognized for that hard work. That was a blessing, because not everyone is recognized in this Babylonish world for their hard work and good deeds. But Jordan, all of these blessings we don't take for granted. We work hard every day. We wake early. We keep our eyes open for what God puts in our path and we try very hard to do His will. To bless others. To teach others. We don't flaunt our wealth and we, or my father and grandfather, give away billions of dollars every year to help God's people.

"So, don't feel guilty, Jordan, that you're about to join the family in that pursuit. It's not gonna be a life of luxury and ease. I hope you feel ready to jump in and do all you can to help us bless other people. And part of that is to help me raise a family. My mother helped my father to raise a family. If Mom wasn't in the home, taking care of us, teaching us and being a mate and companion to my father, Taylor and I wouldn't be the people we are. We want the blessings to continue so that we can continue to live the legacy of teaching the world, of training God's warriors. Everyone has a role to play in that endeavor. We are a team. And I want you to co-captain our team. Don't feel guilty. It's a hard and tiring task ahead of us, but I knew almost immediately, Jordan, that you were perfect for the task. Perfect for me. I have so much respect and admiration for you. You have completely stolen my heart and I love you with my whole self. I love you forever."

She blinked up at him, trying to digest all he said. "Three, that was beautifully said. I didn't realize you were such an orator."

He gave a short laugh. "I prayed for help and apparently, God helped me to speak my heart. Anyway, Two-three, are you ready to wake up early every morning, work hard all day and do it again the next day and the next day and the next?"

She sighed. "Yes, I am ready. But hold on, I have other things I want to talk to you about."

"Okay, shoot."

She sighed. “Okay, and, well, now it’s gonna sound like I’m going back on what I originally said.”

He smiled. “Backtracking. No problem.”

“So, I said I want to just be your wife and mother of your children, but I also really, really want you to see me play ball. And like, God healed my foot, so I have no excuse, and it seems like He wants me to play ball.”

Young Eric nodded. “Then you should do it.”

“But, that means I have to go to college.”

“I understand that. It also means you have to get in there and strengthen that leg and foot and get back into the swing of practice. And that is hard work.”

“Yes, but I’m willing to do that hard work.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Well, I guess it’s not really a problem, but if I’m going back to school, I want to change degrees and learn about things that will help me as a wife and mother.”

He smiled. “Well, let’s ask Dad or Granddad about that. I’d automatically say you could look into elementary education or childhood development, but colleges have become so progressive with their liberal agendas, that I don’t trust them to teach you how to raise our children. I think your own brain and heart are best for that. Still, there might be courses you can take that will accomplish your goals and we’ll simply pray for discernment.”

She nodded. “Okay, we’ll pray and I’ll also ask Grandmaster Kino or your mom and dad for advice in that area.”

“Good. What else?”

She shrugged with a smile. “Well, I’d kinda like to know what *your* goals are, as far as like, your day job. You mentioned once that you were thinking about going back to school.”

He nodded. “Fair question. Good question. I guess first, let’s just see how well this movie does. It comes out in two weeks, actually the day before my birthday.”

“Oh wow, really? That’s a lucky sign.”

He nodded. “We’ll see.”

“Wait a minute, your birthday— isn’t it December fourteenth?”

“Yes, why?”

“And it’s on a Saturday, right?”

He smiled. He had a feeling that he knew what she was getting at but he merely nodded at her.

“So, that means your movie, it comes out on Friday the thirteenth!”

"Yep."

"Well, that's unlucky, right?"

He chuckled. "Some people think so. It's debated that Jesus died on a Friday on the thirteenth of Nisan. That may or may not be true. Still, I don't think Jesus dying on the cross was an unlucky thing. It was the blessing of His grace. His death blessed the whole world. Does that sound unlucky? And, there were twelve apostles plus Jesus, so that makes thirteen. That's not unlucky. They say, though it may be just folklore, that Judas Iscariot was the thirteenth guest to arrive at the Last Supper, so they think that means that thirteen is evil, but to me, that evil was necessary and again, brought about Christ's sacrifice and grace. In Norse mythology thirteen is evil, but we don't give credence to that. It is said that there are some bad things that happened on the thirteenth of the month. But I'm not gonna let them get under my skin. Anyway, with God on our side, there is nothing to fear. I'm not superstitious. I've done all I can. I leave the success of this movie in God's hands. I'm gonna say that my movie coming out on Friday the thirteenth means it's the beginning of something wonderful."

Jordan smiled. "Okay then, I'll believe that too."

"Good, and if it does well, I'll probably get a lot more offers. I already have some, and I've looked over the scripts, but I have to be very careful about choosing something because the message has to be something that furthers the Kingdom, and the writer, the director and I have to be on the same page."

"What if you're not exactly on the same page but they offer you like a whole lotta money?"

He shook his head. "My soul is not for sale."

"What if they tell you that you can't work if you insist on 'furthering the Kingdom'?"

"Then I won't work. But remember this: God also has a say in what I do or don't do. I leave it all up to Him, and I really do trust Him, and His light is more powerful than all the dark forces working against us."

She nodded. "You're such a good man, Three."

He smiled. "You know, you hardly ever call me a man."

"Sure I do."

"Nope. You usually call me a guy. And that's okay. I get it, I'm young. But it felt good for you to say what you just said. And in a few weeks, I *will* be a man, at least in the eyes of the world. And now, miss Jordan Brooks, I have a question for you."

"Okay, shoot," she said, imitating him.

"Shall we discuss when we want to do this thing?"

"What thing?"

He sighed. "Uh, this gettin' married thing."

"Oh, that thing," she said with a smile. "Well, what did you have in mind when you asked me?"

He chuckled. "I had in mind, 'please don't say no.'"

She laughed. "Oh, silly, I already told you that you would get a positive answer."

"But that could mean you're positively *not* gonna marry me."

She giggled. "No, really now, Three, when were you thinking?"

He raised his brows. "ASAP."

"Oh!"

"But I understand that you girls like to do the big thing, make all the plans, and you don't want to do it right in the middle of softball season, which starts in February, right?"

"Right."

"When does it end?"

"Not until the first week of June."

"Oh, wow, I didn't realize it lasted that long."

"So, does that mean you don't want to wait for it to be over?"

"We can wait. Or not. It's up to you, babe. Well, you and your mom and I guess my mom, oh, and Taylor. Ya gotta know she's gonna want to be in on this—big time."

Jordan nodded. "Okay, let me talk to everyone and see what they think about when and where and how, but you have to have input too. It's your day too."

Eric smiled and nodded his head. "As long as we're married by the end of the day, I'm good."

She giggled. "So, I guess, I mean the bride's family, well, they usually, I mean, traditionally..." She stopped, unsure of how to ask her next question.

He waited and then figured it out. "Oh, you know, my parents and grandparents are gonna wanna pay for everything, so you do it up as big as you want."

She sighed. "And now I feel guilty again."

"Don't be silly. I'll be the first grandchild to get married and they are gonna want to do it right. Whatever you want. Whatever you dreamed your wedding would be as a kid, you'll have it."

"Did your parents have a huge wedding?"

"No. They had a quiet ceremony with close family and friends."

"How about your grandparents?"

"They had a big party in Hawaii with my grandfather's family."

"Oh! Hawaii? Your family is from Hawaii? I didn't know that."

"Granddad is a native Hawaiian. He moved to Cali when he was in high school. So, tell me, Jordan, what was your dream wedding like when you were a kid? I mean, what did you imagine?"

She sighed. "Well, let's see. I always imagined a spring wedding, with lots of flowers, especially yellow roses. And I would wear this giant white frilly dress that like, took up the whole room."

His eyes danced as he imagined it.

"And I had flowers in my hair, and my hair was way down to my waist. And my husband had..."

"Had what? Why'd you stop?"

She shrugged. "And my husband had thick dark hair and big brown eyes and was very muscular with broad shoulders and a beautiful smile."

He smiled at her. "Do I come close?"

"You're perfect," she said.

"What else?"

"And there were lots of people and bridesmaids and flower girls and there was dancing and there was a band and all the food you could eat."

"Did you imagine an inside wedding or an outside wedding?"

"Hmm, it's like, sometimes I envisioned it outside, like, near a lake or something, and sometimes I imagined it being traditional, inside a big beautiful old church."

"I like it."

"Which one?"

"Both."

She smiled. "But if we wait until after softball, it won't be spring."

"I guess then we need to do it during softball. When are the games?"

She shook her head. "They are every Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday all the way through into June. There is no time off."

"Wow."

"Yeah, and also some Tuesdays too."

"You do all that and still keep your grades up?"

"Well, it's my first year and so, I don't know about that. But I know I need to change my major before the next semester."

"Well, there is definitely no time to squeeze a wedding in there, so, we wait until June, unless you'd rather wait longer."

She shook her head. "No, I don't want to wait. Let's do the first weekend after softball. Technically, that's still spring."

Eric pulled out his phone and checked his calendar and started laughing. "Perfect."

"What's so funny?"

"The second weekend in June, that Saturday, is June fourteenth, which is both my grandfather's and Gabe's birthdays."

She frowned. "Oh. Well, no, that's not perfect."

"Yes it is. I'm pretty sure that they'd be happy that we were married on their birthday. Last year, Jake and Laynah were married on June fifteenth. So we were all together anyway and we celebrated their birthdays the day before the wedding."

"Yes, but that's the day before. This time it would be the day of."

"That's even better, Jordan. Are you worried that it would take away from your special day?"

"No, I'm not worried about that, but my special day would take priority over their birthdays."

"They would love that."

"What if we do it the next weekend?" Jordan asked.

"Let's see, that would be the twenty-first, which technically is the first full day of summer."

She frowned.

He smiled. "Tell ya what. Let's ask Gabe and Granddad what they think about having our wedding on their birthdays, okay? And then we'll make the decision."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Okay." He leaned over and cupped her face in his left hand. "Is there anything else you want to talk about before I kiss you?"

She smiled. "Kiss me first and then there is one more thing."

He nodded and did as she said. When he pulled away his eyes were dark with longing. "It's a good thing you decided to stay at your mom's house this weekend and with your roommates after that."

"Why?"

"Because with my parents out of town, I don't think I'm strong enough to resist the temptation."

She pressed her lips together. "I don't believe that."

"You don't understand the pull you have on me."

She sighed. "Well, in just six months, you won't have to resist the temptation anymore."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Oh, man, Jordan, just the thought of being able to sleep with you, and make love to you, oh, wow." He sat back and had to get himself under control. It took him a minute or two. Finally, he looked over at the girl he was head over heels in love with. "So, babe, what was the last thing you wanted to discuss tonight?"

She sighed. “Well, I was wondering if you could come with me to school on Monday.”

His brow furrowed and then he grinned. “Why? Is it ‘bring your boyfriend to school’ day?”

She gave a soft laugh. “No, and it’s not even ‘bring your fiancé to school’ day either.”

He chuckled. “Okay, then why?”

She looked down.

He thought. “Are you still feeling a little uneasy?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry. I know it seems really wimpy.”

“I don’t think it’s wimpy, baby. I really don’t. Since you met me just three months ago, you’ve been through a lot. You were accosted by your stepfather. You’ve been drugged, twice. You were viciously attacked a few feet from your apartment, and then you travel all the way across the country and you’re attacked again. It’s not wimpy to feel a little insecure after all that. Unfortunately, I have personal appearances all week long and I can’t go to school with you. But you’ll have someone with you at all times, I promise.”

“Really? Who?”

“Not sure, hold on a minute.”

He pulled out his phone again. “Hey, Uncle Joey.”

“Eric. I see you’re still at Jordan’s house. Are you staying the night?”

“No, sir. I’m going home soon. I got treated to a delicious dinner. But I’m sitting here talking to Jordan and she’s pretty nervous about going back to school. Do you still have someone assigned to her?”

“Yes, we do. Agent Wyatt is still assigned and just needs to know if she’ll be leaving for school from her mother’s home, from your home, or from her apartment.”

“I can take her to school Monday morning and drop her off. If Agent Wyatt will meet us in front of the athletic complex, that would be great.”

“You got it. And where will she be staying at night?”

Young Eric sighed. “She’s gonna stay with her roommates at the apartment. It’s too far to drive home every day.”

“So, you gonna be okay in that big house all alone?”

Eric smiled. “I’ll survive.”

“You have so far. Keep up the good work.”

“Thanks, Uncle Joey. And have a great week.”

“You too, bud. Breez says she loves you.”

“Tell Aunt Breez I love her too.”

“And Sophia says she loves you too. I’m putting you on speaker.”

“Hey, Phia, I love you too, sweetie.”

"Me too," Kelstyn yelled.

"I love you too, Kel-bell."

"I love you," Ledger yelled really loud.

"Love you too, buddy boy," Eric answered. "Hey, guys, Jordan is sitting right here next to me."

"Love you, Jordan," Sophia and Breez yelled quickly.

Jordan laughed. "Love you too, everyone!"

"Love you, love you," Kel and Ledger chanted.

"We love you too, and I'm hanging up now," Eric said loudly.

He ended the call with a smile. He glanced at Jordan. "That's what you're marrying into."

"I know. Isn't it wonderful!"

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December 1st, 5:00 AM, Sunday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily woke, stretched and swung her feet over the side of her bed. She had to see to breakfast for the people still at the Inn. It would be a quick, light affair, since everyone at the Inn was headed to church this morning. She gave her help the day off because most of the people had left except for the Nash/Smiths. Lily and Jodi could feed everyone quickly.

She glanced up toward Daisy's bed and was surprised to see her sitting up, her legs tucked under her, gazing out the window into the early morning darkness.

She scooted onto the bed beside her and put her arm around her. "Daisy? You okay, sweetie?"

Daisy nodded. "I'm okay, I guess. Lily, I feel, kinda weird."

Lily rubbed her hand over Daisy's back. "Is this about Brody?"

"I guess."

"Are you sad?"

"No, not sad."

"Is it because you think you like him, or because you don't like him?"

"Oh, I like him, Lily. I like him a lot. I don't know how I can suddenly feel so much, but the things he says, he makes me feel things I've never felt before."

"Oh, Dais, that's awesome, isn't it?"

"I mean, I guess it is, but it's also bad because I didn't want to say goodbye to him last night. We spent the whole day together. We talked so much. We laughed so much. We had so much fun. And Lily, I really didn't want it to end."

Lily sighed. "So, like, did he kiss you?" she asked.

Daisy shook her head. “No. I mean, I’m pretty sure he was about to a couple of times, but we kept getting interrupted. Last night, we were at the *Main Street Park* and I know he was about to kiss me, but a big, black dog came up on us.”

“Oh! Was he vicious?”

Daisy gave a soft laugh. “No. He was hungry. I think he’s the daddy dog of Georgia’s puppies.”

“Georgia?”

“Yeah, we named the mama dog we found ‘Georgia’. And we think ‘Blackie’ is the dad. We brought him to the outbuilding at the Inn. Brody says he shouldn’t be introduced to the puppies until they’re about four weeks old, because sometimes the males are not very paternal. I promised Brody that I would take both dogs and the puppies to the vet, have them scanned for a chip and make sure they’re healthy. Also, we took pics of him and the mama and I’m gonna post them and see if anyone claims them. Anyway, that sort of took away the moment, so, we got the dogs settled, and Brody brought me home. I thought he might kiss me then, but he didn’t.”

“But you wanted him to, right?”

Daisy smiled. “Almost desperately.”

“Well, maybe he thinks it’s too soon. I mean, it’s only been like, five days since you even knew he liked you.”

“I know, Lily, but it seems longer. It’s so weird the way I feel. I’m trying to sort that out. Like, a guy tells me he likes me, and suddenly I like him too? I don’t know what to think about that. Am I desperate?”

“Maybe him telling you how he feels simply awakened you, or opened your eyes to what’s been standing in front of you all this time.”

Daisy nodded. “Maybe.” She smiled. “And I like the way that sounds. But anyway, when he brought me home, Gabe and Taylor and her parents were here, plus all of our family. They were watching football and were very loud and cheering and stuff, and Brody, of course, also started watching, and me too really, I mean, the Falcons were playing the Saints. Anyway, we didn’t have a chance to be together the rest of the night.”

“And I was up here sound asleep. I didn’t hear y’all at all.”

Daisy shook her head. “Don’t know how you slept through all that.”

Lily made a face. “Well, getting up somewhere between four and five in the morning will make you feel a little sleepy. I was in bed by eight. So, who won?”

“Saints.”

Lily made a face.

“You working today?” Daisy asked.

"Yes, but short shift. We're all goin' to church and only the Nash/Smiths are left at the Inn." She smiled at her sister. "You wanna come help? You'll get to see Brody," she teased.

Daisy shook her head. "I'd like to, but I have to shower and do my hair. I wanna look nice at church today."

Lily grinned. "I get it. Oh, sis, I really hope this all works out for you. It's fun, and exciting, and I want you to be happy and like, fulfilled."

Daisy smiled. "I want the same for you, Lily."

Lily sighed. "I'm not sure if it's in the cards for me."

Daisy turned to look sharply at her sister. "What are you talking about? Don't you want to find a great guy, get married, have children?"

"Yes, I do. But I don't want to leave Pine Forest. I want to stay here. And there are not a lot of eligible guys around here, ya know?"

"Lily, God will send you the right mate at the right time."

Lily sighed. "I guess I'll just have to trust Him. Until then, I'll work at the Inn and maybe look further into possibly opening my own diner in town one day. I gotta grow up and take care of myself."

"No you don't, Lily. I mean, you don't have to support yourself. Dad will take care of you. You have to know that."

"Well, I'm not gonna just sit around and do nothing all my life. I worked hard for my degree, and I want to do something with it."

"You have worked hard, and I'm so proud of you, sis."

"Thanks."

"And you are gonna use it, because your family is gonna be the most well-fed group in our whole family."

Lily sighed. "Whatever. But now I gotta get going. Aunt Jodi is gonna wonder where I am."

"Thanks for talking, Lily."

"You're welcome, Daisy, and we're not done. We have so much more to talk about. Like about six feet four inches more."

Daisy giggled. "See you at church," she said as Lily ran into the bathroom.

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December 1st, 9:30 AM, Sunday Morning

Community Church of Christ, Pine Forest, Georgia

Even though they were in several different cars, the Tanners pulled up to the Church at the same time. Keegan, Lizzy, Iris and the new babies in their van. Gabe and Taylor in his dad's SUV. Heather, Nolan, Daisy and Lily in Nolan's Tahoe, Rose and Jericho in his truck, and Violet and CJ in his car.

Ricky and Bree arrived in their rental and pulled in next to Toby, Caroline and Grace in their Range Rover.

Brody headed straight for Daisy as she got out of the vehicle. He stopped short as he looked her over. “Daisy, you look so pretty,” he said softly and looked over at Lily. “You too, Lily.”

She laughed. “Thanks.”

Daisy looked him up and down. “You look really handsome, Brody, in that suit and tie.”

He straightened the tie and nodded. “Thanks. So, may I escort the two of you into church?” he asked as he offered an arm to each girl.

“Why thank you, kind sir,” Lily drawled as she hooked her hand in the bend of his arm.

Daisy did the same on the other side and he glanced down at her and smiled warmly.

Grace came out of the church doors as they approached wearing a big smile. “Hey, you guys! Don’t you look special, Brody, with two gorgeous girls on your arm.”

“Yes, I do. Where ya headed, sis?”

“To ask Violet for a huge favor,” she said as she ran down the sidewalk toward the parking lot.

“Hmm,” Lily said. “That sounds suspiciously like they might need a pianist for the service.”

Brody nodded, held the door open and stood aside as the ladies entered. The foyer was crowded. The *Pine Forest Community Church of Christ* was a large church that held a large congregation. As usual, when word got around that the Kinos, Gabe and Taylor, and today, the Nash/Smiths were gonna be there, people who didn’t usually come to church came crawling out of the woodwork.

An assistant pastor came toward them and greeted them. “Daisy, Lily, nice to see you. And you’re Brody Nash, right?”

Brody shook his hand. “Close enough.”

“Welcome, welcome. We’re so happy you came today.” He pointed toward the doors to the chapel. “You’re welcome to head in if you’d like. We have three rows reserved for the Tanners, Nashes, and Kinos.”

“Thank you,” Brody said, then looked at the girls. “Do you want to go sit or wait on your family?”

“I’ll wait,” Lily said. “You two go on in.”

Daisy smiled and nodded. They got to the reserved seats and Daisy headed for the second row. “My family will take the third row and they pretty much take up the entire row and half of another, so, let’s sit here.”

Brody unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat down next to Daisy. She turned to him with a smile. “So, are you ready to speak?”

“I think I am. I’ve prepared. Now I hope God will direct me.”

Daisy smiled. “He will. Are you nervous?”

“Surprisingly, I’m not. I feel very much at peace.”

“Cool! I prayed for you this morning asking that God give you peace, so, there’s that!”

Brody chuckled. “Thanks for thinking to pray for me. So, after church, Daisy, are you intending to have lunch at the Inn with everyone?”

“Yes, our whole family is coming.”

He nodded. “So, shall you and I ride together?”

She frowned. “Oh, well, I didn’t bring my car.”

“That’s okay. I borrowed Miss Jodi’s car so that I could take you with me to check on the dogs and then afterward, we’ll head to the Inn. Does that sound okay?”

“That sounds wonderful,” she said as she reached out her hand and placed it on his hand where it rested on his knee.

He immediately turned his hand over and intertwined his fingers with hers. They turned their heads and smiled at each other as they gazed into each other’s eyes. Daisy blinked up at him, her heart was doing things she didn’t understand.

They both looked away as they heard a murmuring in the crowd. They looked back to see that the Kinos and Gabe and Taylor were making their way down the aisle. They were being stopped every few seconds by people shaking their hands and welcoming them back. Brody watched as Ricky seemed genuinely interested in what the man in front of him was saying. He nodded and smiled and placed his hand on the man’s shoulder. He seemed to be comforting him.

Bree was hugging a woman who came from behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. Other people waited to also say ‘hello’ to the Kinos. Gabe and Taylor had gotten caught up by a whole group of young people who were also hugging them and shaking their hands and talking to them. Brody was interested to know what these people were saying to Gabe and Taylor. Maybe they were telling them how Gabe or Taylor had touched them in some way. He hoped it was that and not just fanning on them.

Brody looked down at Daisy. “How does Gabe feel about all these people constantly wanting to speak to him?”

She nodded in understanding. “At first he was just shy and embarrassed. Now, he sees it as God placing people in his path for a

reason, so, he never just brushes them away. He takes time to make sure there isn't something he needs to do for them, or they need to do for him."

Brody nodded. "That's a beautiful thing, isn't it? Your brother is really a special kid."

"I have to say, he's surprised me. He really does try very hard to do what's right, to know God's will for him and to do it. If you ask him why he does what he does, what makes him strive so hard to do good, he'll tell you it's because he's trying to be as good a man as Dad."

Brody nodded. "What an amazing compliment for your father."

Daisy agreed. "Like I said, I want to create the same kind of family that my mother and father have created. And I strive to be like my mother and I look for a man like my father."

Brody pressed his lips together. "And so far, I'm checking boxes?" he asked, needing the confirmation. "That's what you said."

She gave a soft laugh. "No, I said so far you check *all* the boxes."

He grinned. "Well, good, and you check all my boxes, so I guess we should just get married now."

She laughed. "Let's just see. Once you really get to know me, you might have to start unchecking boxes."

"I very much doubt that."

"Ya never know. I might have a terrible temper. Or smelly feet. Or like to eat some horrible kind of food that grosses you out."

He chuckled. "Heaven forbid."

They stopped talking when the Kinos finally arrived at the front. Brody stood and Ricky shook his hand. "Hello there, Brody."

"Good morning, Mr. Kino. Nice to see you."

"Mind if we sit with you?"

"No, sir, not at all." He started to move over but Ricky stopped him.

"Let Bree and me get past and you sit on the aisle since you'll have to go up to speak. That way you won't have to crawl over people."

Brody nodded. "Good idea."

He and Daisy moved out into the aisle and let the Kinos by. Bree paused to kiss both Brody and Daisy on the cheek as she moved past. Gabe and Taylor also stopped to shake hands with Brody and kiss Daisy, then went on to sit in the front row. Now that the Kinos and Gabe and Taylor were sitting, the rest of the congregation began filing in to find a seat. Brody looked around to see where his family was, but they were nowhere to be seen. Since Grace had been looking for Violet, he had a feeling they were somewhere putting an arrangement together.

Behind them, the Tanners arrived and began filling in the third row. Mr. Tanner on the aisle, Lizzy next to him, Lily, holding one of the babies,

Heather, holding another one, Nolan, Rose and Jericho. Iris went running up to sit with Gabe and he sat her on his lap and whispered to her that he had to go up and speak and when he did, she had to be good for Taylor.

The Appels, John and Jodi, sat on the far side of the second row on the other side of Bree and Ricky.

Finally, Toby Nash, Caro, Grace, Violet, and CJ entered amid more murmurings. They headed to the front row and filled in next to Gabe and Taylor. Lisa and Chaz Stewart, holding babies, came and sat next to the Appels on the second row. Charlie, Matt and Aralyn sat in front of them on the first row. Melaynah scooted in on the far side of the third row, so then Rose traded places with Jericho so she could sit next to Laynahbug.

The music began playing as the rest of the congregation came in, squeezing into the pews. Finally, the music swelled and the musicians began to play beautiful worship and praise songs.

Gabe closed his eyes and smiled. Almost immediately, the church seemed to fill with the Holy Spirit. It was beautiful and he loved it.

Toby, too, smiled and felt the spirit. Music always did that to him. Everyone sang together as the words flashed on two large monitors.

Brody sang too, and looked over at Daisy. She was singing and smiling so prettily, and her eyes were teary and her face was glowing with light, and he suddenly knew: he didn't just like her. He was falling in love with her. Of course, that was his goal. He wanted to find a girl and fall in love with her and marry her and create a family with her. And he'd had his eye on Daisy for almost forever. Could it be because they were meant to be? Could it be that God had been trying to tell him since he was a kid that this girl was meant for him? He sincerely hoped that was what God was telling him, because that is how he was feeling.

The singing came to an end and Pastor Tim approached the pulpit. "Good morning, brothers and sisters in Christ! What a beautiful day! And what a wonderful sermon we have planned today! But before we get started on that, let us pray."

"Time to pray, Iris," Gabe whispered and he made her sit still and bow her head. He then took Taylor's hand and held it during the prayer. When it ended, she looked up at him. "One day, we'll do that in our own home," she whispered.

He smiled. "I hope so, Tay."

"Now, hello everyone and welcome to our congregation to fellowship together and worship together. How blessed are we that we have the opportunity to do that! Are you still in Thanksgiving mode? Amen?"

"Amen," the people said.

"So, many of you had the opportunity this past Thursday, to take part in a wonderful event, an effort to feed five thousand people, most of them in need of help. Homeless, sick, out of work, etcetera. My wife and I and many other people in this congregation were there to serve and we all experienced some amazing things, miracles really, and today I've asked a few people to share their testimony of what they experienced. We want to share because it needs to be shared, and we need to praise God for His faithfulness in healing and blessing so many people.

"Now I know you all know that the Kinos are here today, and we usually grab them up to speak to us when they're here. As a matter of fact, I don't know why they don't pastor their own church, because we love to hear them speak each and every time. However, we decided to give them a break today since they spoke last time they were in town. Today, we are so blessed to have another family in town, also known for their deep love for our Savior, and we have asked Toby Nash and his son, Brody Smith to share their testimony with us today and tell us what they experienced as they served at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand.*

"After they speak, we will be so blessed and honored to have two of the Nash family sing for us, Toby Nash and Gracie Nash, and they will be accompanied by our own Violet Ander..., oh, I mean Violet Tanner. And then both my wife and I will share what God has put on our hearts about what we experienced at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*. But before all of that, I've asked our own Gabriel Tanner to share some of his thoughts, especially since he is the owner of the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*."

"And so, without further ado, Gabe, come on up." He looked out over the congregation. "Y'all don't need to hear from me in between speakers, so, after Gabe, Brody, you're on, then Toby, and then we'll have music."

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Matthew 24:42

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know
on what day your Lord will come."

Chapter Twenty

Gabe stood and whispered to Iris, "Flower, you have to be very quiet and sit still on Taylor's lap because she's live-streaming, okay?"

"I will be quiet," she said loudly, making the congregation laugh. He placed her on Taylor's lap, buttoned his suit jacket and walked to the left, trotted up the three steps and strode quickly to the pulpit. Smiling, he shook the pastor's hand.

The pastor went to sit in one of the chairs off to the side of the pulpit, as Gabe adjusted the microphone, tugged at his tie and smiled at the large congregation. He allowed himself a few seconds to let his eyes roam over the crowd, making eye contact with some of the people. Finally, he chuckled. "Wow, everyone's so quiet."

The congregation laughed.

"And wow, there sure are a lot of people here today. Very cool."

The Tanner family smiled. Gabe was so honest and so real, that with those few simply uttered words he had the entire congregation in the palm of his hand. The fact that he was drop-dead gorgeous and extremely fun to look at didn't hurt either.

"Well, first, I have to correct something. I mean, yes, my name is on the Community Center, but I don't own it. My foundation owns it, but the foundation didn't buy it. It was given as a gift by the Kinos. They saw a vacant building in the middle of town and God placed it on their hearts to do something with it. I want to say that because if they hadn't done that, the miracles that took place this past Thursday wouldn't have happened. So, I thank God for them and that they are in tune enough to listen to His will and then take action."

"That's one of the big lessons I get from their actions, I mean, that I may not have the resources they have, but in my own small way, I should stay in tune with God so that I can listen, understand His will for me, and take action."

"What happened Thursday was an amazing miracle. Our communities, our churches, you people, all came together to make that miracle happen. I mean, how beautiful is that? I have to say that feeding five thousand people was not my idea. My sister, Rose Tanner, had that

idea. At first, she said, wouldn't it be nice to feed some people in need on Thanksgiving. But God spoke to her and she listened. He said, feed five thousand, and Rose said, wait, what?"

The congregation chuckled.

"And God told her to trust Him. And she did. And He sent her the right people to instruct her. People from the college just happened to be teaching a course on how to handle a large charity event and they decided to help Rose and to teach her, free of charge. The mayor of Pine Forest, Mayor Bradbury, boosted Rose, told her he would clear the way to make this happen because he believed it would be a wonderful thing for our town and for our people, and I think he was right.

"And then, there was all of you. The people. Many of you volunteered. Many of you snuck food in, like, trying to be discreet. Many of you simply donated. So many people, I just feel like I need to recognize you and tell you that even if your name wasn't on the program, God saw you, and He heard you too, by the way, because the choir, I mean, they really rocked the house."

He waited for the laughter. "So, now that I have all that straight, let me just say, that this Thanksgiving has been one of the best experiences of my life. Now, I know I haven't lived that long, but still..."

He waited for the laughter to end again.

"What I mean is, my family has had some really great Thanksgivings, and they are all special, but this time, seeing my entire family being in service to all of the people that came, it was like, I mean, it really got to me." He tapped his chest. "I'm just grateful. Grateful for God working in our lives, grateful for this congregation and how hard you worked, grateful that we can look around and see the faces of people who know and understand that God is real. He's not just a figment of our imagination as some people say. He's not just some 'fairy in the sky' as one person I know recently said. He's real and He's made himself known to us and I'm so very grateful for that.

"So, in closing, let me just leave you with a scripture. It's in Galatians 5:13-14. It says, 'You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

He flashed his handsome smile, glanced down at his father and mother, then at Taylor, and drew a deep breath as the Holy Spirit filled him and he got choked up and his eyes filled.

"Well, I was gonna end right there, but, um, my heart is just so full, so let me just say one more thing. God loves you, each and every one of

you, and—so do I. Let go of bitterness or fear or hatred, let go and allow Him into your heart. Trust that He is real and act accordingly, in Jesus' name, Amen." He stepped back and nodded and turned. Pastor Tim rose and shook his hand.

Brody rose, buttoned his suit jacket and headed to the steps. At the top of the steps, he met Gabe as he was coming down. He held out his hand to Gabe. Gabe shook it, then they pulled in for a giant hug. Gabe headed down and Brody shook Pastor Tim's hand and stood behind the pulpit. He smiled at the congregation and shook his head. "How do I follow that?"

Everyone chuckled.

"I'll just say what everyone is thinking, that Gabe Tanner is one special guy. He's so humble, he doesn't even understand how his actions over this past year have affected people. His open heart, his faithfulness to God, his prayer that went viral—well, there were a lot of those, but I mean the first one, the one when he'd been abducted. His honesty, his humility, his earnestness—Gabe is a great example of a truly good, wholesome, all-American guy and I'm proud to have known him his entire life. And though I may be older than him, he is my teacher in many things.

"I won't speak long, but I do want to begin with a scripture, and since Gabe used the one I had memorized..." He pulled out his phone. "I had a few others set aside. This one is John 13:12-14, and it reads, 'When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."'

Brody looked up with a smile. "I'm sure that scripture needs no explanation. That's what we were all doing on Thanksgiving at the Center. We were washing the feet of others. Not literally, but figuratively, and we had some amazing miracles take place. Miracles that show that God is indeed still working like He did back in the Bible times."

He drew a deep breath. "Let me introduce myself since most of you probably don't know me. My name is Brody Smith. And yes, as Pastor Tim said, I am the son of Toby Nash. We don't really have different names. My father's real name is Smith, but when he first started singing, his business manager changed his name to Nash, as in Nashville, and so he and my sister, who also sings, go by Nash. In answer to some who questioned it, he's my real father. I guess that's obvious enough because

we look so much alike, except I'm younger and better-looking." He said the last with a grin and smiled at his dad.

Daisy giggled as she looked up at her new, what, boyfriend? She sighed. He was indeed, very good-looking.

"Like so many of you," Brody went on, "I too was blown away by what occurred on Thanksgiving Day. Miracles did indeed take place. And though what happened there actually began a few months before, it seemed Gabe's powerful prayer that morning, as he blessed the food, was an omen of what was to come. I asked Gabe about his prayer. He told me he hadn't planned on saying what he did, that the words simply came into his mind and tumbled out of his mouth. He told me he was worried after he said what he said, worried that he'd acted like a false prophet, that he'd predicted miracles would take place and maybe he shouldn't have said that. But he was only second-guessing himself, because miracles did take place. So, for those who weren't there, because his prayer was early in the day, you're probably wondering what Gabe prophesied in his prayer. He was blessing the food and suddenly, his voice got much louder and he said that people would be healed this day. He was not being a false prophet. He was speaking God's words.

"Let me tell you a few of the miracles that I saw take place. There was this young girl, maybe about six years old. She was sitting on her mother's lap with her hands over her ears. She was crying and I went to see what I could do to help. The girl told her mother, by signing, that the sound, the people and the music, was too loud. The mother had tears in her eyes and explained to me that this was impossible because her daughter was born deaf. Brothers and sisters, the deaf will hear.

"And there were these two old homeless men. They were arguing with each other. You see, each person was given a paper to fill out, so that we could find them again, locate them and continue to help them in a more meaningful way than a simple meal. But these two men were arguing because the one man, who was quite angry, said there was no way the other man could be filling out his paper. The other man told him to mind his own business because he could fill out the paper very well all by himself. I went to speak with them, because they were at one of the tables I was overseeing, and tried to find out what the problem was, since they were arguing quite loudly. Then the angry man explained to me that his friend was essentially blind. Not all the way, but he could definitely not see well enough to fill out the paper. The man handed me his paper, and his name was written neatly in the correct space. Each line was filled out correctly." Brody paused and nodded his head. "The blind will see."

"Then yesterday I learned about another healing. One of our own, my good friend Eric Kino, has a fiancée whom you may have seen. She was the one sitting at the door giving out gift bags to people as they left. That was her job because she had a severely broken foot and ankle. She was in a cast. That cast was not due to come off for a few more weeks, and even then, it was precarious at best if she would ever be the same. Well, we found out yesterday that her foot is completely healed. Totally and completely restored." He smiled. "The lame will walk."

He stopped and looked around. "Brothers and sisters, miracles occurred here in Pine Forest on Thanksgiving Day. These few I've mentioned were not the only ones. We worked hard to serve God and His children and we were blessed with far more than a few full stomachs." He blew out a breath and shook his head as his heart overflowed. He swallowed hard and glanced at Daisy, because he had indeed been blessed with his own miracle. "God is real," he said through the emotion in his voice. "He's working. Something is happening. There is a revival at hand and it's a good thing because the darkness is trying to creep in at every turn and the time is late. The Lord is coming. Stay strong. Stay in service. Stay in prayer. Trust God. Those are the things I intend for myself. I hope you will too, because I know that it's those things that will bring you eternal happiness. I pray that for you all, in Jesus' name, amen."

Brody shook the pastor's hand and headed off stage. He met his father on the way up. Just as Brody and Gabe had hugged, Toby hugged his son. "Well done," Toby said softly.

"Thanks, Dad."

Brody went to sit with Daisy. She smiled at him as he approached. He unbuttoned his suit coat and sat down. She patted his leg. "You were awesome," she whispered.

He smiled and placed his hand on top of hers. They both looked up as Toby Nash began to speak, his deep voice penetrating the silence.

"Thank you, Pastor Tim, for the opportunity to share my testimony. And thank you, brothers and sisters, for your time." He smiled. "And now *I* have to follow those two amazing young men, but I think I can handle it," he said dryly. The congregation chuckled. He nodded with a smile. "I love God and I'm grateful for my relationship with Him. I'm grateful for what He did on Thanksgiving Day here in Pine Forest. There were some pretty amazing miracles that occurred. It almost seemed like Jesus Himself was walking around the crowd, stopping to heal someone, or speak to someone, or comfort someone. And I believe He actually *was* there. We could all feel His presence. He was working through us.

Through Pastor Tim, and the other pastors and ministers, and reverends and bishops and counselors and even lowly volunteers like myself."

He stopped as he thought about some of the things he saw, and his eyes filled. "I saw a woman who hadn't walked in years stand up out of her wheelchair. I saw an old man, bent over, who stood straight. I saw too many miracles to name. We all knew this was gonna be a very special occasion. We knew from how hard the dark forces of the world tried to impede us. But young Gabriel stood strong and declared in his prayer that miracles would occur this day, that healing would take place. He felt and heard God's words in his head and he was brave enough to speak them. We should all be brave enough to take that step, that small faithful step when we feel God urging us to do something."

He stopped and drew a deep breath. "And, actually, I am feeling that urging right now, and so, I'm gonna veer away from what I'd planned to say, to what I feel God is urging me to speak right now. It's actually about another thing I saw a lot of this past Thursday. Regret. I saw and heard thousands of people living in regret. Living with 'if only I'd done this or hadn't done that.' If only."

He paused. "God doesn't want us living under the burden of regret. He wants us to feel it enough to make a change in our lives, but when we've repented, He wants us to let go of the regret and move forward. He sent His only begotten Son to pay for our sins and our mistakes. If we confess our sins, acknowledge them, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. That purifying, that cleansing, is not for a moment, but for the rest of our lives.

"Of course, we continue to sin, and each time, we repent and try to do better. But God does not want us to live in regret for the rest of our lives. Regret causes depression and anxiety and stress, and those things belong to Satan. They are the enemy's tools. We have to stop giving him the tools he needs and wants to destroy us. We have to let go of past sins. Jesus forgives us much easier than we forgive ourselves. Do you think He died for us so that we can hold on to the remorse and anxiety and sadness? No! He wants us to feel the joy of living in His light, with His salvation. He gives us joy, the true joy that comes with our connection to Him. Joy comes with our relationship with Him. Our regret and depression and anxieties, those separate us from Him.

"Therefore, brothers and sisters, whatever it is you regret, confess it to God. That means admit it, acknowledge it, and then repent, do better, but let it go and rise up. The best way to overcome our mistakes is to move forward in His light and not grovel in the darkness of the enemy. You are free. There's a story I heard about a dog who'd been chained to

a tree for years. The chain was ten feet long. One day, the owner of that dog died, and a man came to rescue the dog. He took off the chains and tried to get the dog to follow him out, but the dog would get ten feet away from the tree and stop. There was nothing holding him to the tree anymore. He'd been delivered. He was free. But the dog kept himself in the chains. Brothers and sisters, Jesus has freed you. Go, and find your family, find your home, and do wondrous things with your life."

He stood silent a moment or two. "I made a lot of mistakes when I was a young man. I pretty much turned my back on God. And then I found my girl, the one who would become my wife. I know some of you older people remember the drama that took place in our lives, in full view of the whole world to see. I'd supposedly been a Christian my whole life. Went to church every Sunday and Wednesday. You know the drill. But I hadn't built a relationship with Jesus.

"Funny thing, when I met my girl, she didn't know anything about God, and yet she was the one who brought me back into the fold. It was her probing questions, asking me what God would think about this or that, what His laws are, that got me back on the path, and my life since then has been so filled with joy. I could live in regret about the years I wasted, or I could move forward and be the husband and father I was meant to be. I chose to move forward. I chose joy. I chose to move forward into the light. Well, with my sweet and very strong and faithful wife, she made it the only logical choice.

"So, anyway, let me encourage you, brothers and sisters in Christ, to learn from the lives of five thousand people who are currently living in regret— let go of that. Confess, repent, move forward. You are washed in the blood of Jesus, and I speak these things in His mighty name. Amen."

"Amen," the congregation said loudly.

Daisy smiled up at Brody, noticing the tears in his eyes. She sighed contentedly. She looked around. There were a lot of tears.

Toby didn't leave the stage. Grace and Violet rose and made their way up onto the stage. Violet took her place at the piano and Toby and Grace stood in front of the microphones. The concert pianist played a beautiful intro to the well-known hymn, *"How Great Thou Art*." It was Toby's buttery deep voice that took the first verse. As soon as he began to sing, a shimmer of light and spirit shot through every single person in the congregation. Grace joined in on the chorus melody as Toby switched to harmony. Their voices blended so beautifully, it was completely mesmerizing. Grace sang the second verse alone, and then they were together again on the chorus.

As they sang, Rose looked up at Jericho, her eyes tearing, her smile trembling. “They are amazing,” she whispered.

Jericho nodded. “I’ve never heard it sung so well,” he whispered back.

In the front row, sitting on the right side all alone, CJ blinked up at his girl as her fingers moved so beautifully over the keys. He was totally in love with her. She was his reason for living. Literally. And after hearing Mr. Nash’s words, he knew what he had to do. It had been as if Toby Nash was speaking directly to him. He could ignore the words, but the consequences of that could mean a complete death, both physical and spiritual. So, CJ would speak to JJ, he would speak to Violet, he would ask Director Tanner for an audience, and he would keep the Monday morning appointment he had with the realtor. He drew a deep breath. So much depended on the outcome of those four conversations.

The song ended with a flourish by Violet on the piano. There were some big-time sniffs in the audience.

Pastor Tim stood and introduced his wife. She wiped at her tears as she came to the pulpit. She spoke of four miracles she personally witnessed and how those miracles would change the lives of everyone involved. She spoke briefly and saved the rest of the time for her husband, who also told of several of the miracle healings he’d witnessed. He then quoted scripture about service and challenged the congregation to make Christmas as wonderful as Thanksgiving had been. He ended with a strong message. “We have no idea when Jesus will come again. But He told us to watch and be ready, just in case. I wouldn’t want Him to come and ask me why I didn’t do all I could to help and to serve and take care of others. The miracles that we, here in rural Georgia, in the tiny but growing town of Pine Forest have been privileged to witness, it’s amazing. And I asked God this morning, ‘why us?’ Why would He bring this amazing thing to us? Maybe it’s because He trusts us to act on what we’re learning.

“I don’t know. I don’t know His plan. But I know we’re a part of it. I know He is trusting us to do His will. And I know He’s telling and showing the world that He really is still working as He did back in Biblical times. He’s showing us that He is real. These miracles cannot be denied. And because Gabe Tanner is livestreaming this service, almost the entire world is listening to and learning about what took place here in Pine Forest. And I invite them and all of you, to go to previous livestreams on Gabe’s website and on Isla August’s teenspotter.com and see the actual miracles that took place on Thanksgiving Day. We are so blessed. God is real, my brothers and sisters. He listens to and answers prayers. It may not

always be the answer you want, but we need to learn to trust Him. Trust Him."

As the congregation nodded and muttered 'amens,' the pastor finished his sermon with a prayer. The music began as people stood and sang *Our God is An Awesome God*, and clapped hands and cried. It was a beautiful meeting, a real fellowship of the saints of God. Finally, the service ended, the congregation was dismissed, and everyone started filing out.

Violet turned to CJ with a sweet smile. "That was an amazing service, wasn't it?"

He smiled and nodded. "It was amazing." He touched her cheek. "Listen, Vi, you know I have to work all week and through next weekend and I have to meet with clients this afternoon. So, the only time I have to see you is gonna be tomorrow evening and then I'll be out of state. Will you go for a drive with me tomorrow? I, uh, I want to talk to you. I want—to tell you what happened."

"You mean between you and Jericho?"

He nodded sadly. "Nothing really happened between us. It was all me and I want to tell you all about it."

She nodded. "Yes, CJ, I'm so happy that you finally want to talk to me about it."

He nodded. "What Mr. Nash said today, it felt like he was talking to me. I need to tell you what happened. What I did. And hope you can still love me."

"I will always love you, CJ. You don't have to worry about that."

He nodded. "Thanks for that, but we'll see." He glanced over at Jericho. "Excuse me a minute."

Violet nodded and watched him go back a few rows to grab Jericho before he exited his pew.

"Uh, JJ," CJ said.

Jericho turned immediately, a warm smile on his face. "Hey, CJ."

CJ nodded. "So, I was wondering if there's a time we can talk. Like, before tomorrow night."

Jericho frowned. "Well, I have to work tomorrow. Does it have to be before tomorrow night? Maybe we can *do* the talk tomorrow night?"

He shook his head. "Can't. Have a hot date."

Jericho smiled with a nod. "Okay, well, how about lunch tomorrow? I could take a long lunch and get Jimmy to cover for me."

CJ shook his head. "I'll be working." He sighed. "I guess it'll have to wait until next week sometime. I'm leaving the state for an assignment."

Jericho frowned. “I don’t feel good about waiting. I’ve waited to have a real conversation with you for ten years. If you’re ready to talk, I don’t wanna wait.”

“I understand what you’re saying, JJ, but I don’t see a time. We’re booked up the rest of the day.”

“How about early tomorrow morning?” Jericho asked.

CJ sighed. “I have a 7:00 AM appointment with a real estate lady.”

“How long do you think that will take?”

“Probably not more than thirty minutes.”

“Why don’t I meet you at 7:30 then?”

CJ shook his head. “The appointment is about ten miles out of town, in Steven’s Bluff. Goin’ to see about a house.”

Jericho nodded. “I’ve been to Steven’s Bluff. They brag about having the best BBQ in the state.”

CJ smiled. “Did they fall short?”

“A mite short,” Jericho said with a drawl. “How about I meet you there? At the house you’re goin’ to see?”

CJ thought. “I might be able to do that. Though I’ll have to leave no later than about 8:20. I have to be way up in North Georgia by 10:00.”

“Okay then. Let’s make this happen.”

“That’s a long way for you to go just so I can talk to you,” CJ said.

Jericho shrugged. “I’d do anything for you, CJ. Especially if it means we’re gonna clear the air. I hate living like this.”

“Me too,” CJ said softly.

Jericho’s heart lightened considerably and he clapped CJ on the shoulder and took out his phone. “What’s your number?”

He told him.

“Text me the address.”

CJ nodded.

“Do it now,” Jericho insisted.

CJ smiled and did as asked, then held out his hand with a serious nod. “See you in the morning.”

“Looking forward to it.”

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Brody stood up from his pew and tried to make his way out, his hand holding Daisy’s. He was stopped immediately by people wanting to shake his hand, congratulate him on a fine talk. Some of the guys asked him about his college baseball. He had to let go of Daisy’s hand to shake hands and talk to people. Daisy leaned close. “I’m gonna go tell Heather that I’m coming back to the Inn with you. Be right back.”

He nodded and watched her chase her sister down. He glanced around to see his parents and sister being crowded around, and Ricky and Bree shaking hands and speaking kindly to everyone who approached them. On the other side of the aisle, Gabe and Taylor stood together, smiling and talking and shaking hands and taking selfies and still livestreaming. It was a strange world. A surreal world, and he had an odd feeling in his gut. But really, all he could think about right then, was getting Daisy alone.

He'd made the decision that he definitely had to kiss her before he left to go back to Knoxville. He wouldn't see her again for several weeks, and he wanted to make sure she had something from him to remember, and a first kiss from someone is usually something to remember. Then again, he'd kissed several girls along the way, and none of them really stood out. Still, he was sure this one would. It would be the first of many kisses with Daisy, he thought with a smile.

Finally, the crowd began to thin out and he started moving up the aisle toward the doors. He made it out into the foyer and spotted Daisy standing in the center of a group of guys, all smiling and laughing. One guy put his arm around her and gave her a small shake. She laughed and pushed him away. The other guys all laughed too. Suddenly, one knelt down in front of her, his hands clasped together as if he were begging her for something. Brody had no idea what was being said. He moved closer, then actually decided to lay claim. He walked straight up beside her and put his arm around her.

She looked up at him with smiling eyes. "There you are, Brody. Let me introduce you to some guys I went to high school with." She pointed and named five guys as Brody shook hands with each. "Jack, Colin, Damian, Marquez, and Jackson."

"Nice to meet you," Jackson said. "I played baseball in high school and I follow college baseball. Your numbers are impressive."

"To say the least," Colin said.

"Thanks," Brody answered.

"You'll hit the big show for sure," Jackson added.

"Well, I don't like to speculate, but thanks."

"Brody, don't we need to get going?" Daisy said sweetly.

"We do." He turned to the others. "Well, nice to meet you all."

"Hey, come back if you're ever in town again. Your talk was great," Damian said quickly.

"Thank you, I definitely will."

He took Daisy's hand in his and pulled her toward the door. "Thank you," he said softly. "For getting us out of there."

Daisy giggled. “You’re welcome. I just didn’t want you to feel like you needed to make a show of male dominance.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I was completely civil.”

“Yeah, but I could see your temper rising a bit.”

He smiled. “You could see that, huh?”

“So, what are you saying? You think I was just imagining it?”

Brody shook his head. “Nope. You got it right,” he said as he opened the door of Jodi’s car and helped her in. He shut the door firmly, ending the conversation. They headed to the Stewart ranch and walked down to the barn hand in hand.

“This is nice,” Daisy said, swinging her hand.

He smiled. “Yeah, it is. I’m a lucky guy.” He sighed. “So, those guys at church, did you date any of them?”

She giggled. “Yes.”

“Which ones?”

“All of them,” she said, grinning.

He looked at her. “Really?”

She raised her brows and nodded. “I went to prom with Marquez my sophomore year, and with Jack my junior year and with Jackson my senior year. And then I went to homecoming with Colin my junior year and Damian my senior year.”

“Well, aren’t you just little miss popularity.”

“I don’t know about that, but I mean, small town, small school, no big deal. And now they say they’re all members of the open-fist club.”

“Open fist? Is that some kind of martial arts club?”

She laughed. “Nope.” They got to the barn, opened the doors and stepped inside out of the cold. She stopped in front of him. “Make a fist.”

He did.

“Now open it,” she commanded.

He did.

“What do you have in it?”

“Nothing,” he said.

She grinned. “And that is exactly what they got from me.”

He chuckled.

She smiled. “So, is your temper down now?”

He nodded. “No more temper.”

They looked up as Georgia came running to meet them.

“Hey, Georgia. Hey, girl,” Brody said as he bent down to greet her. “How’s it goin, girl? How are those babies, huh?”

Daisy knelt down and hugged the momma. “Let’s go see.”

They went to the box and counted all nine puppies. They fed and watered Georgia.

Brody glanced at Daisy. "Aren't you afraid of getting your pretty dress all dirty?"

Daisy looked down at the part of her dress that stuck out below her coat and brushed at some smudges. She shrugged. "It's just dirt. It'll come clean."

Brody smiled. Yep, this girl was the best. "I'm gonna take Georgia out for a short walk, let her go potty and stretch her legs. You wanna come, or stay here where it's warm?"

"I'll come, though it really is extra cold outside."

He shrugged. "This is nothing to me since I live in the mountains of Tennessee."

"Well, it's usually not this cold down here. Mom says they're saying it's gonna be one of the coldest holiday seasons ever in middle Georgia."

He took out his phone and glanced at the weather app. "Right now it's 38˚, but it's windy, so it feels like 27˚. That's pretty cold. You sure you don't wanna stay inside?"

She smiled. "I think I can handle it. Besides, I'm gonna be the one taking care of her while you're gone."

He frowned. "Yeah, I was thinkin' about that, Daisy. Ya know, I could ask Charlie to take care of the dogs for us. He already told me he'd be happy to do it."

Daisy frowned. "But how would Georgia feel if I suddenly stopped coming to see her every morning and every night?"

"Well, she'd feel hungry and thirsty unless you ask Charlie to take care of her."

Daisy laughed. "But how would I feel?"

He smiled. "I don't know. Tell me, how would you feel?"

She shrugged. "I'd feel sad and lonely and I'd miss her. Just like I'm gonna feel when you leave."

He glanced at her face to make sure she was serious and not just teasing him. She looked exactly how she described, sad and lonely and frowning and troubled. He immediately pulled her close and hugged her to his chest. "Ah, Daisy, I'm gonna miss you too. Terribly."

She looked up at him. "What have you done to me? I don't want you to leave."

He nodded. "I like hearing that. And Daisy, I don't want to leave." Her blue eyes blinked up at him. He looked down at her sweet mouth, and brought his hand up and rubbed the pad of his thumb over her lower lip.

She sighed, and before anyone could interrupt them, he lowered his head and kissed her.

At first, he only gently touched his lips to hers, a soft whisper of a kiss. He pulled back and looked at her, his heart in his throat. Her eyes were closed and she gave a soft sigh. So, he kissed her again, a little longer, a little harder and finally pulled away.

She placed her hands on his chest and looked right into his eyes. "Don't stop," she whispered.

The next kiss would be one to remember. When he pulled away they were both breathing hard. He smiled at her. "You are so beautiful, Daisy."

She blinked slowly and smiled. "That was really nice."

"What? The compliment or the kiss?"

"The kiss."

They were interrupted anyway, but not by a person. Georgia began to whine and nudge them with her nose.

Brody laughed. "Okay, girl, I understand. Let's go out."

They pushed open the barn door just enough to walk outside. The wind immediately took Daisy's breath away. He put his arm around her and they walked together as Georgia trotted off to do her business.

Daisy sighed. "So, what time are y'all leaving in the morning?"

"Right after breakfast."

She moaned softly.

"Hey, Daisy, let's go on one more ride before I leave."

"When?"

"Before breakfast tomorrow. We can be down here at dawn, ride east, watch the sunrise. Take some pictures. Then we'll head back to the Inn and have breakfast together."

She smiled. "One more date before you leave."

He nodded. "One more."

"I can do that."

"Will your dad be okay with you leaving the house before light?"

"If he's not, he'll escort me or have Gabe escort me."

"Or I can come get you."

"Okay."

"The sun rises about 7:30. How about 7:00?"

"Sounds good," Daisy said, unable to suppress her excited smile.

Brody grinned. "Ya know, when my father first met my mother, she was twelve and he was fourteen, and the last thing they did before she had to leave Tennessee and go back to Georgia, was he took her for a ride on a big, black horse."

"Really? That sounds sweet."

"Well, it kinda was, except that it was the last time he saw her for fifteen years."

She frowned. "Oh, well then, Brody, don't be pullin' a like father like son kinda thing."

He chuckled. "Oh, I won't. I'll be back in three and a half weeks. Right after Christmas. And I won't have to be back to school until the second week of January."

"Which is really only two weeks you'll have to be here."

He nodded. "We'll figure out ways to see each other. Besides, you have lots to do. Like, that shoot on Wednesday with the city dude."

Daisy giggled. "You know his name is Mike."

"He doesn't deserve to be called by his name, and he'd better keep his hands off you."

"He will. My father will be there."

"Good. Anyway, so, you and Rose have big plans for Christmas at the Center and in Pine Forest at large, right?"

"Oh, yes, we do. And by the way, all the decorating you guys did for us, it was hugely helpful."

"Glad we could help."

She sighed. "Do you think you might have time to call me while you're gone?"

"Oh, Daisy, absolutely. I was gonna ask you if you wouldn't mind me calling you."

"No, I don't mind. I want you to tell me how your practices are going or your classes."

"And you can tell me all the stuff you Tanners are doing, because your family is very interesting."

She giggled. "Okay then."

Brody whistled. "Okay, Georgia, come on, girl. That's too far and it's too cold. Let's go back to see your babies."

Georgia came running back full speed, almost got to them and turned and ran away again and turned and came back again.

Daisy laughed.

"She's got the zoomies," Brody laughed. "She needed to get that energy out before she goes back to being momma."

"I get it, because sometimes I feel like *I* have the zoomies," she said with a giggle as she took off running after Georgia, her arms out wide like she was an airplane.

He laughed out loud at the beautiful sight as his heart took a tumble in his chest. Her long blonde hair blowing back in the icy wind, her dress

billowing out from the bottom of her coat. She wore suede boots with heels, and was obviously not able to run as fast as she probably could. She turned and came back toward him, a big smile on her face, her cheeks pink with the cold. She came right toward him and he put out his arms and scooped her up and swung her around. Setting her down in front of him, he tilted her face up and kissed her again.

She smiled up at him as he pulled away. "Thank you, Brody."

"For what?"

"For letting me be me. For—seeing me."

"I've always seen you, Daisy. Always."

They turned and headed back to the barn to put Georgia away. Daisy loved on her and petted her and her puppies. She smiled up at Brody. "Don't we need to go see about Blackie too?"

"John is taking good care of Blackie. He says they've bonded and the dog already follows him everywhere he goes."

"Oh, that's cool."

Brody took Daisy's hand. "Well, it's time to go eat a giant meal at the Inn, have a giant sing-along, and then have a giant dessert, and a giant fire and tell giant stories and tell everyone goodbye."

Daisy sighed. "But I'll see *you* in the morning."

"Yes, you will." He squeezed her hand.

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Song of Solomon 8:4

"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases."

Chapter Twenty-One

December 2nd, 7:20 AM, Monday Morning
Vacant Home, Steven's Bluff, Georgia

Jericho Jones pulled up the long, steep driveway of the house where he would meet with CJ. The house sat way up on top of a large hill, possibly on the edge of the actual bluff of "Steven's Bluff." It was an older but larger home, split-level, probably built in the '60s. It seemed to have a couple of acres of property around it, as the closest neighbor was not in his line of sight. It definitely needed renovation. It was weathered and tired looking. On the plus side, it was large and sat on beautiful land. There were some huge hardwoods and giant pines on each side of the house, and in his experienced eye, a few of them needed to come down before they fell down on the house. A definite safety hazard.

CJ's car was parked at the top of the drive in front of one of the three garage doors. Another car was parked behind CJ's. Jericho supposed it belonged to the real estate lady. The car was familiar, and Jericho thought it was probably the same woman who handled his rental home.

Jericho pulled up to the top of the drive in front of the second garage door. The garage was situated on the right front side of the house. Jericho checked the time. He was ten minutes early. He started to wait in the car, but then thought if he went on up and knocked on the door, it might hurry the real estate meeting along. He got out of the car, pulled on his coat, grabbed his phone and headed to the front steps. He'd barely started to knock on the front door when it opened.

The woman jumped back, startled. "Oh!"

Jericho smiled. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Marjorie, isn't it?"

She smiled. "Yes. And you're Jericho Jones. I found you the house you're renting."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I just came to see my friend."

She nodded. "Yes, he told me he was expecting a friend. I didn't realize it was you. So, I was just leaving. Mr. Blackmon is out on the deck. I already told him to just lock up when you leave."

"Yes, ma'am. Will do," Jericho said politely.

He closed the door behind her and went up the short flight of stairs to

a large living room area on the left. Behind it was a dining room, and sliding glass doors that led to the deck.

Jericho opened the doors and stuck his head out. "CJ?"

CJ turned with a smile. "Hey, JJ, you're a bit early."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Not at all."

Jericho looked out past CJ and his mouth dropped open. "Wow."

CJ nodded. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's amazing. Wow. What a view." He walked to the far edge of the deck and leaned over the railing. "I mean, it's like living in a tree house."

"Yep, and just think how the view will be in the spring and summer with all the trees in bloom. And in the fall, with all the colors."

Jericho looked straight down. "It's like you're on the side of a mountain. It's a really long way down and nothing but trees and brush."

"It is, and though it's beautiful, it could be a drawback too. But Violet says she's always wanted to live in a house in the woods."

"Well, this is definitely the woods."

"Right. So, I'll clear some of the flatter land off to the left of the house, and make a nice yard where the kids can play."

"Sounds really nice, CJ. And you wouldn't want to take down any of these trees in back because the view is breathtaking."

"I know. The view is what actually sold me on the house, and the fact that it's actually been on the market a long time and so it's goin' cheap."

"So, you *are* gonna buy this place?"

CJ nodded. "I know it doesn't look like much right now. But it's in the right price range and it's large enough to house a large family."

"Family?"

"Yes, if Violet says 'yes.'"

Jericho nodded. "So, you're gonna pop the question?"

"Yes, but first I have to tell her what happened ten years ago, and we'll have to get past that."

Jericho shook his head. "What are you talking about? There's nothing to get past. Bad things happen, CJ. You of all people should know that."

CJ sighed and looked out over the view. He shook his head. "JJ, you don't know what really happened that night."

"I believe I know more than you do about what happened."

CJ shook his head. "What you were told, what the news said about it, even what the police said about it, that isn't the truth."

Jericho turned to look at CJ.

CJ turned slowly and looked into Jericho's eyes. "I need to tell you what really happened. I've been living in anguish for the past ten years.

When Mr. Nash spoke yesterday, telling us to move forward, to stop living in regret, I knew I had to come clean and tell you what really happened."

Jericho started to shake his head, but CJ stopped him.

"Please, JJ, I need to tell you this."

Jericho nodded. "Okay, but it's freezing out here. Let's go inside."

CJ nodded, then stopped. "Wait, I wanted to take some pictures of the view to show Vi."

Jericho pulled out his own phone. "Mind if I take a few pics too? It really is an amazing view. I mean, all you can see is the tops of trees."

They walked to the edge again and snapped off several pics.

"Ya know, CJ, one of the first things you're gonna have to do is replace this deck. This thing is about to go. It might even be the original. If not, I'd say it's almost as old as the house."

CJ nodded.

"I mean, at this point, I wouldn't let anyone else out here. You're one big guy short of a disaster," he said as he jumped a few times.

The next few seconds seemed to last an eternity. The entire deck gave way. Both Jericho and CJ yelled as they went airborne, arms and legs flailing as they fell through the air.

A brief thought went through Jericho's mind. *This is it.* The next thought, as the ground rushed toward him, was that pain was coming. The thought was a complete understatement. He hit the ground with an explosion of pain, but it didn't stop there. As soon as he hit, he tumbled down the very steep hillside. It registered on him that he was about to hit a tree and it would at least stop his fall. It didn't stop him but it slowed him and finally he came to a halt about ten yards farther.

Breathing hard, his eyes closed with excruciating pain, he tried to get his bearings. The first thought was he was actually still alive. That was a miracle, seeing as how he had to have fallen at least forty feet through the air. He was face down on the hill, his legs at a higher elevation than his head. He needed to reverse that. He lifted his head, tried to move his legs down and groaned with the agony. Breathing hard now, he tried again and was able to move his legs a few inches down. One leg moved easier than the other and it dawned on him that one of his legs was broken. Broken badly. Maybe in more than one place. He groaned again because the pain was so bad he couldn't suppress it.

He still wanted to get his legs lower than his head so he forced himself to roll onto his back. The pain was so bad, tears came to his eyes. Breathing in great gasps, he used his hips to pull his legs down in front of him, grunting with the torture. Finally, he was on his back, his legs down,

his head elevated. He looked around, thinking he heard someone calling his name. Then he remembered CJ. He listened. Yes, CJ was calling him. Which meant he was alive, and that was a wonderful thought, because Jericho had written off both their lives as he'd fallen through the air.

"Here," he answered.

"JJ!" he heard again.

He drew a deep breath. "Here," he said louder. "I'm here, CJ." The effort of speaking took all of his breath away and he sat trying to catch his breath so he could call out again. But he heard a rustling through the leaves and underbrush and he looked up to see CJ climbing up the hill slowly toward him.

Jericho looked up at him and tried to smile. "CJ, I'm really happy to see you. I thought you were dead."

CJ sighed. "I thought so too. Actually, I really don't know how we're still alive."

"Me neither." Jericho wanted to say more, about another miracle, but it was too hard to speak.

CJ sat down beside him. "How bad are you, JJ? Where are you hurt?"

"My leg is broken. Badly broken. Maybe in two places and I hate to sound like a baby, but I'm in a whole lotta pain."

CJ nodded. "And your head is bleeding."

"It is?" Jericho reached up to touch the side of his head. His hand came back covered in blood. "How about that. Must've happened when I hit the tree."

"Just the one?" CJ said with a smile.

Jericho chuckled and then moaned. "Ugh, don't make me laugh." He drew a ragged breath. "How about you? How bad?"

"Pretty sure my arm is broken. But I can walk, though I think my ankle is messed up. Maybe a sprain."

Jericho nodded and groaned again with the torment as another wave of intense pain washed over him.

CJ looked closely at him. "You're in bad shape, JJ. I gotta get you outta here."

Jericho nodded. "You wouldn't happen to have held onto your phone when we fell?"

CJ shook his head. "My phone is somewhere on this mountainside."

Jericho sighed. "Mine too."

"Well, that means I'm gonna have to climb up that hill and get us help," CJ said.

"Do you think you can? I mean, it's pretty steep and you only have one arm."

"Well, I gotta try, right?"

Jericho nodded. "Yep. We have to be able to say you tried." He drew a deep breath and grunted as another wave washed over him. "Go slow. Be careful."

"You were always so bossy, ya know that?"

He grunted. "Yep. It's part of my nature. Natural born leader."

"Natural born pain in my butt," CJ returned. It was something they used to say to each other all through high school, and saying the words made CJ choke on the emotions.

Jericho sighed. "Be careful," he said again.

CJ drew a breath and tried digging his toes into the ground as he moved up the hill, using his good arm to grab onto a bush, or a tree or a rock, even a clump of grass. He started to slip several times. He did slip to his knees a few times. Looking up, he saw he still had a long way to go. The ground, which would usually be moist and wet and soft, was hard and frozen and with only one arm to hold on with, it seemed impossible. And with that thought, the very next step, he slipped and tumbled back down the hill, grunting in pain as he went.

Jericho saw him falling and reached out with his hand to try to grab him and actually ended up grabbing his coat briefly. CJ came to a stop a few yards past Jericho. He lay there waiting for the pain to subside and for his breathing to slow. He then turned and climbed back up to Jericho.

"Fun times?" Jericho asked, his breathing ragged.

CJ nodded. "The best."

"I don't think you should try again. You were lucky you only fell about fifty feet this time. I imagine there's probably a cliff just past that line of trees," he said, nodding farther down the hillside. "Who knows how far that drop is."

CJ nodded.

"CJ, does anyone else know that we're here?"

He sighed. "No. Just me, you, and Marjorie." He looked at JJ. "You didn't tell Rose by any chance?"

"No. I didn't want her to question me about our conversation until I knew exactly what we were gonna discuss."

"Okay, well, don't worry. We're gonna be okay."

Jericho nodded. "I mean, when I don't show up for work this morning, my guys will start looking for me."

"Except they won't know where to look. You don't, by any chance, let them follow your location on your phone?"

"Nope, but if we get out of this alive, I will remedy that."

CJ nodded. “Well anyway, I’m an Ameritech agent. We wear GPS trackers.” He touched the chain around his neck. “When I don’t show up for my assignment this morning, they’ll call Dalton, and he’ll track me.”

“What time were you supposed to be there?”

“Ten.”

“Well, then, we just have to hold on for a few hours.”

“Right.” He blew out a breath. “A few hours in the freezing cold, with you in excruciating pain and a head wound.”

Jericho frowned. “We’re alive. When did you get to be such a negative kinda guy?”

CJ shrugged. “I guess when I woke up in the hospital to the news that my family was dead.”

Jericho sighed. “I’m sorry, CJ. I wanted to be there for you. I’d arranged everything. You were gonna come live with my family. We were gonna help you recover and get on with your life. But when I went to see you again, you were gone. I tried to find you. And finally, I figured you simply didn’t want to be found. So, I left you alone. But CJ, I didn’t desert you. Is that what you think? Is that why you wouldn’t talk to me?”

CJ shook his head. “Not even close.”

Jericho sighed deeply and grunted as he tried to move his leg to a more comfortable position. “Well, we have a couple of hours to kill. Let’s have our talk. Tell me what you wanted to say. You said up on the deck that things didn’t go down like I believe they went down.”

CJ sighed and nodded. “That’s right. But before I tell you what really happened, will you please tell me what happened to you that night? I need to know, so that I can piece it all together.”

Jericho nodded. “Okay. Are you sure? Because it’s not pretty.”

“I’m sure.”

Jericho drew a deep breath as he let his mind go back to the fateful night that had begun with something as innocent as spending the night with his best friend. “Well, I woke up. Do you remember that there’d been a big thunderstorm and the power went out?”

CJ nodded.

“So, I woke up and I smelled smoke. I was so dumb. I thought you’d gone downstairs to the kitchen to make yourself something to eat. I was gonna go down and tease you about your cooking. I grabbed the flashlight that you’d given to me earlier when I went to the bathroom and headed downstairs. As soon as I got in the hallway, the flashlight reflected off the smoke. It was everywhere. Thick smoke. I could barely breathe.

“I made it down to the kitchen and you weren’t there. The door leading out to the garage was open and I saw a light so I headed out there.

Well, the light turned out to be a fire. The garage was totally engulfed. Climbing the walls, the ceiling. Your father's car. And then I saw you, lying on the floor. CJ, the fire was all around you. You were totally out. It looked like you'd smacked your head on the concrete floor. The back of your head was all bloody. The garage door was up, and I grabbed you and pulled you out and laid you in the driveway."

He stopped for a moment as the horror of that night came back into his mind. He drew a deep breath and looked into CJ's face. "I knew I had to go get your family out. I went to your parents' room, to wake them, to get your dad to help me get the kids. But when I went in their room..." He stopped and shook his head. He cleared his throat. "They were both unconscious. They were unresponsive. So, I left them," he said as sobs welled up in his chest. "I left them," he repeated softly, as tears welled in his eyes and fell over onto his cheeks. He blew out a breath. He glanced at CJ, who also had tears running down his face.

"I headed to your little sister's room but she wasn't there. I thought, maybe she'd been afraid of the dark and went to your brother's room, so I rushed to his room. I remembered, too late, that your brother's room was right over the garage. The moment I stepped into the room I fell through the floor into the garage. That was the last thing I remember before I woke up in the hospital."

He sat there in silence for a minute. "I learned later that your parents died of smoke inhalation and that your brother and sister probably also died of smoke inhalation before..." He paused and sighed. "Before they were consumed in the fire."

He looked back up, into CJ's eyes. "I'm so sorry, CJ. I did everything wrong. I know that now. I've learned from my mistakes. I try every day to make things right."

CJ shook his head. "You don't have to apologize. You tried. And because you tried, you lost your scholarship to play football and your chance to go pro."

Jericho shook his head. "No, CJ. I'm telling you, that wasn't meant to be. I know that now."

"No. I'm the one who's sorry, JJ. I'm sorry I ruined your career, and I'm sorry because I..." he stopped, drew a deep breath. "I killed my family. It was all my fault. They said the fire was caused by faulty wiring and spilled gasoline. But it wasn't— it was caused by me. I don't know why they would say that. They're supposed to be professionals. They should know it wasn't the wiring. It was me."

Jericho started to disagree, but somehow knew to keep quiet. "Go

on," he said softly.

CJ sniffed and drew a deep breath. "I woke up. The power was still off. I thought I heard someone downstairs and went to see if maybe Dad needed some help with something. I got into the kitchen and no one was there. But I heard some talking in the garage and I opened the door and stepped out."

He breathed. "There were three guys in the garage. They wore masks. They were breaking into Dad's car. One of the guys looked up at me when I came out the door. He said he was gonna do me a favor and let me live. He told me to just turn around and go back inside and all that would happen is the car would be gone and the insurance will replace it."

He stopped and shook his head. "But oh no. Not me. I had all this big man pride. These punks were not gonna come into my house and steal my father's car and me just go hide away while they do it. I was a big strong guy. So, I told them to leave or I was gonna make them leave. They came at me. We fought. I know I hurt a couple of them. One of them threw that old gallon gas can at me and I knocked it away with my arm. That's how the gas got spilled. I think I was winning the fight, but then, one of them pulled out a lighter and threatened to light the gas and me on fire. While he had my attention, another guy hit me in the back of the head with a big pipe wrench. That was the last thing I remember until I woke up in the hospital days later. I suppose the guy decided to light up the spilled gas anyway. The thing is, JJ, if I'd done what the guy said, just gone in the house and turned a blind eye, my family would be alive." His voice choked as he broke down into tears. He sniffed. "My own pride killed them. I just couldn't let it go."

"Of course you couldn't, CJ. I would've done the same thing."

"Think about it, JJ. You would've gone inside, probably gone to wake up your Dad, call the police. But I made a stupid decision to fight, and ended up killing my mom, my dad, my sweet little sister, and my brother who looked up to me." He stopped to get his emotions under control. "She was just a baby, ya know? She'd just had her sixth birthday. And my brother, all he wanted to do was play ball like me." He sniffed again. "My mom thought I hung the stars. And my dad told me almost every day how proud he was of me. And it was all misplaced. All of it."

"Wait now, CJ. That's not true. You were a great guy. You ARE a great guy. You couldn't have known that trying to defend your father's property could lead to what it did. You couldn't have known."

Jericho stopped talking as he tried to get his pain under control so that he could speak the right words to his friend, to the guy who'd been his best friend forever, to the guy he thought of as a brother from another

mother. He shuddered for a moment and then got control, but before he could go on, CJ spoke again.

"I couldn't face you, JJ. I was so ashamed. I killed my family. I destroyed your life. I spent like, two years afterward in an alcoholic daze. I wanted to die. I bought a gun and tried to shoot myself in the head several times, but each time, I chickened out."

"Thank God," JJ muttered.

CJ sighed. "Who would've thought that I would run into you ten years later in the middle of nowhere."

"Yeah, who would've thought," Jericho said sarcastically.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"There is no such thing as a coincidence. God is trying to bring you back into the light. He brought you and me back together, man, so that you can finally heal from all the pain. And CJ, the guy I see now, you've put yourself back together."

CJ shook his head. "No. That was Mr. Tanner. I heard about Ameritech and thought it might be something I could do that would at least give me some focus. I applied and got turned down. So, I applied again and they set up a special interview with Agent Tanner. He took an interest in me. I'd been turned down because of a few DUIs and he did an extensive background check on me, and hired me. He took me under his wing. He's a great man."

"I agree. And he has awesome daughters."

CJ smiled. "I agree."

Jericho started to shiver, but forced his words out. "CJ, you obviously are trying to get your life back together. And if you took Mr. Nash's words seriously, then you know you're supposed to be letting go of the regret, not wallowing in it. So, I'm gonna tell you something. Let's pretend for a minute that what you say is correct. You made a lousy decision and that decision ended up getting your family killed. What was Mr. Nash trying to say? That Jesus has cleansed you with His own blood and He wants you to move forward, right?"

CJ nodded. "Yes, and that's what I'm trying to do. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

Jericho grunted in pain and gave a soft moan. "I get it. So, it's time to let go of your regret and your guilt. Your family didn't die in vain if you move forward and do something with your life. If you don't, then what will you say to them when you see them again? I'm sorry, Mom and Dad, but all I could do was throw my life away? If you live *for* them, CJ, make something of your life, get married, have children, stay close to God, then

you'll be able to look them in the eye when you see them again."

"I want to do that. But I needed to talk to you. I needed you to know the truth. I needed you to know that I wasn't mad at you. I was uncomfortable. I was too ashamed to look you in the eye. I destroyed your career and I need you to forgive me."

"CJ, there's nothing to forgive. I'm happy. I don't think I was really wanting to spend my life playing football. I became a firefighter and a darn good one. And I started my own company teaching firefighter specialists and I am doing good in this world. I'm helping people. I'm happy." He stopped and shuddered and gagged. He turned to the side and dry heaved.

"What's wrong? Are you sick?"

Breathing hard, Jericho grimaced. "Maybe. Hey, CJ, it's really cold, don't ya think?"

"Abnormally cold for here, yes, but not that cold. The hill is blocking us from the wind." CJ frowned. "You're scaring me. What's wrong?"

"How much time do we have left before someone realizes we're missing, do you think?"

CJ shrugged. "Probably at least another hour. What's wrong?"

Jericho drew a ragged breath. "Well, if I were to self-diagnose, I'd say I'm abnormally cold. So cold. I think it's possible that I'm bleeding internally. I'm probably going into shock, and my head is pounding. I probably have a concussion. And I'm nauseated and that makes me think that my blood pressure is dropping." He stopped to shiver and his teeth started chattering.

CJ stood. "I'm gonna try to slide in behind you, JJ, and see if I can get you warm."

Jericho didn't argue. He grunted as CJ moved him a little to get behind him. CJ then wrapped his one good arm around JJ and pressed his chest against JJ's back.

"Hold on there, JJ," CJ said firmly. "You hold on."

Jericho nodded as he tried to do just that.

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December 2nd, 8:45 AM, Monday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe sat the barbell back in its cradle and sat up. Something wasn't right. He wasn't feeling well. Was it him? Or was it someone else? He was nauseated. His breath was coming fast. He wanted to get in the workout before breakfast because he had a whole day scheduled to be with Taylor and his sisters. And he had time scheduled to be with the new babies, hold them and rock them and sing to them while his mom took a

shower and did other things that she felt needed tending to.

So, this little bout of whatever was going on, was not welcome. But it was growing steadily worse and finally, he rose and made his way upstairs. The family was in the kitchen. Rose was at the stove. His mother was sitting at the table nursing Gentian. Iris was in her new booster seat singing a song to Isaiah, who was being held by his father. Heather and Nolan were both at the sink doing more kissing than cleaning. Violet was cutting up fruit at the island. Two sisters were absent. Lily was at the Inn working and Daisy was saying goodbye to Brody.

Gabe came in and placed his hand on the wall to steady himself. "Dad," he said breathlessly.

Keegan looked up quickly at the sound of distress in his son's voice. "What's up, Gabe?"

He drew a breath. "Dad, there's something wrong."

The entire kitchen got quiet.

"Can you give me more information?"

"I don't think it's me. But it's someone we're close to."

"I'll call the girls," Lizzy said immediately.

Keegan nodded then looked back to Gabe. "What else?"

"There's so much pain. And I'm so cold. Dad, I think I'm dying."

"I thought you said it wasn't you."

"It's all a blur. I just recognize the way this feels. This is dying."

"So, someone is dying that's close to us?" Rose asked.

Gabe looked at her closely. "Rose?"

"I'm right here, baby. I'm okay."

He nodded. "Where's JJ?"

Rose's face paled. "Oh, well, I think he's at work, or will be soon."

"Call him," Gabe said as he clutched his stomach.

Hands shaking, Rose pulled out her phone and called him. She waited. Finally, she ended the call. "Well, there's no answer. But if he's working, he would turn his phone to vibrate."

"I, uh, I think Jericho might be with CJ," Violet offered. "I think they were gonna meet up this morning."

"Where?" Rose asked.

"I, I don't know," Violet said.

Gabe sank to the floor. "Please, make it stop."

"I'll call CJ," Violet said as she picked up her phone. Her call ended the same as Rose's call to Jericho.

Keegan nodded. "I can track CJ." He went to his office.

Gabe lay down on the floor, breathing hard. His mother handed off

the baby to Heather and knelt down beside him. She took his hand. “Sweetheart, breathe. Remember, it’s not you. You’re feeling what someone else is feeling. Try to separate yourself.”

“I’m trying.”

At that moment, Gabe’s phone went off. Lizzy pulled it from his pocket and answered it. “Hello, Jeffy. Yes, he’s in bad shape. He’s lying here on the floor. He’s in a lot of pain. Yes, hold on.”

She put the phone on speaker and held it close to Gabe.

“Gabe, the pain is leaving you. Only the knowledge of what’s happening is staying in your brain, but you can let go of the pain now.” She moaned. “Someone is in great pain and he’s very cold.”

“Was it a car accident?” Rose asked, her voice showing the panic she felt. “Do you know?”

Jeffy moaned. “I can’t see clearly enough. I don’t think it’s a car accident. Gabe, take a deep breath and clear your mind and talk to Jesus.”

Gabe nodded and almost immediately he began to calm and the pain began to subside.

Keegan came back in. “CJ is at a house over in Steven’s Bluff. I’ve contacted Dalton and he’s dispatching agents to CJ’s location. I’ve also contacted the Steven’s Bluff Police Department and they’re sending some officers to the address.”

Rose’s phone rang and she didn’t recognize the number, but she answered it and put it on speaker. “Hello?”

“Hi, Rose. This is Jimmy Callaway, JJ’s partner. I’m sorry to bother you, but I can’t reach him and he’s never late. I mean never. I’m hoping he had breakfast with you.”

“No, he didn’t and we think there might be something wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Too much to tell right now,” Keegan answered. “Jimmy, this is Keegan Tanner. I’m sending agents to an address. There might be some kind of trouble or accident. You might want to get your equipment and head over there. I’m sending you the address.”

“Thank you, sir. We’re on it.”

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Jericho shivered. He gave another grunt as the pain shot from his leg up through his entire body. He struggled to draw a deep breath. “CJ,” he whispered weakly.

“Yep, I’m right here, buddy. We’re gonna be outta here soon.”

“No, CJ, you gotta listen to me.”

“I’m listening.”

“If I don’t make it, I need for you...”

"Please don't finish that sentence, JJ."

Jericho drew several breaths. "You gotta listen to me. Just listen. If I don't make it, I need two things from you. First, Rose." He stopped as emotions welled up that he didn't expect. He swallowed. "Rose, I mean, we haven't dated all that long, but I swear, I freakin' love that girl. That woman. And I want you to tell her that for me. Tell her she's the best and that she needs to be strong. She seems tough, CJ, ya know? But really, her heart is vulnerable. Tell her to not go back to her ex. She'll find someone good. God will take care of her and send her someone good."

"JJ, stop this. It's ridiculous."

He moaned. "And the second thing—damn it, CJ, don't let this throw you. You just got clear. God sent a message to you and you immediately acted on it. That's good. So, don't let this send you back to that dark place. You keep moving forward, into the light, brother. You marry Violet. You make a bunch of babies. You live a good life."

"Now it's your turn to listen to me, JJ. You will hold on. You will tough this out. Don't you dare think you can leave me. Dammit, JJ, I just got my act together. You're my brother. You're all I have left and you can't leave me now. You have to fight, JJ. Fight. Do you hear me?"

He waited for an answer. "JJ?"

He pulled JJ's head back so he could see his face. His skin was pale. His eyes were closed. But he was still breathing. "JJ?"

Still no answer.

CJ wrapped both his arms around him, regardless of the pain. He looked upward and prayed. "Dear God, please do not take him too. Please, Father, yes, I'm begging you. I know you're real. I know you answer prayers. Answer mine. Grant me this plea. Please don't take him too. Please. You took my father and mother, my brother and sister, and yeah, I haven't handled that well mostly because I know it was my fault. But don't take JJ. Not JJ. He's too good." He prayed and cried over the only person left from his childhood who knew him and understood him. "Please, God, please, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name," he whispered over and over.

It seemed he prayed for hours when he thought he heard something above. He thought he heard someone yell something. "They're here! I can see them! They're down here!"

In only a few minutes Jimmy Callaway, Max Hooks, Micah, Jalen, Luke, and a few others from Pine County ES were down the steep hill, secured by tethers. They immediately affirmed life and spoke gently to CJ. "Are you injured?" Jimmy asked.

"My arm is broken. Help JJ."

"Can you tell us his injuries?" Max asked.

"He said his leg was broken, probably in more than one place. He said his blood pressure was dropping and that he was probably bleeding internally." He looked up toward the house. "The deck gave way."

They nodded. "We saw that."

"Okay, now, we're gonna pull you away from JJ so that we can take care of him, okay?" Luke said.

CJ nodded and grunted as two of the paramedics lifted him up and away from JJ. He watched as JJ was laid down. They worked so quickly it was hard for CJ to keep up with what they were doing. Starting IVs, checking blood pressure, speaking to doctors on phones. They surrounded him, working together as if they could read each other's minds.

He looked up when he heard a chopper overhead, and watched as a rescue basket descended down through the trees. JJ was loaded quickly, secured and lifted. It all happened so fast, at least in CJ's mind. The basket went up, JJ was taken in, the chopper turned and was gone. He watched it silently and was finally pulled from his trance by one of JJ's men.

"We're gonna help you up the hill. Can you walk?"

He nodded.

"Anything else hurt besides your arm?"

"I think I sprained my ankle."

"Okay. Listen, I'm gonna put this strap around you. You won't fall. Let me carry your weight."

CJ nodded as the man circled his waist with a strap and then helped CJ move up the hill. Whatever they were using to help CJ up the hill, it made it almost effortless on CJ's part. In only a few minutes he was being placed on a gurney at the top of the hill beside the house and was being assessed by JJ's men.

"Agent Blackmon," a fellow Ameritech agent said as he took hold of CJ's hand.

CJ focused on him. "Austin," CJ said. "Good to see you."

Agent Austin nodded. "I bet. So, Director Tanner asked me to let you know that he'll meet you at the hospital."

CJ nodded.

Austin smiled. "It's a miracle, ya know. The two of you fell from that deck, right?"

CJ nodded. "Yeah."

"That's about thirty, maybe forty feet. I don't know how anyone could survive that."

CJ thought about that. It *was* a miracle. Hopefully, that meant God

was gonna save JJ. He looked up. "Do we know JJ's condition?"

"No, not yet."

Jimmy leaned over and secured a strap across CJ's chest. "Let's get you to the hospital and make sure you have no internal injuries and get that arm fixed," he said as they lifted CJ into the back of an ambulance.

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December 2nd, 11:00 AM, Monday Morning

Pine County Hospital, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan quietly stepped inside the small chapel room at the hospital and went to sit next to Violet in the last pew. He put his arm around her.

"Hey, Daddy," she whispered.

"Hey, sweetie. CJ is being released soon and is asking for you."

"I want to go to him, but I don't want to leave Rose."

He nodded. "I'll stay with Rose. How's she doing?" he whispered, his eyes on Rose, who was sitting in the front pew.

"Not good, Dad. I was sitting with her, but she wanted to be alone, so I came back here."

"Okay, I'm gonna go talk to her. You go see your guy."

Violet kissed her father's cheek and quickly left.

Keegan said a quick prayer and headed to the front pew and took a seat next to Rose. "How ya doin', honey?"

"I want to be alone."

He shook his head. "Sorry, but that's not gonna happen. You used to want to go to your room and pout and feel sorry for yourself when you were little. I'm not gonna let you slip back into that routine. You've grown and matured way past that."

"Then why do I feel like a little baby who just wants to curl up in a ball and cry?"

"Because you're grieving, sweetie. You're acting as if he's already passed. He hasn't. He's alive. They're working on him. Don't give up and don't give in, my strong girl. That's not what Jericho needs from you right now. He needs your strength. He needs your prayers. And you need to come back to the waiting room with me. Ricky was able to arrange a private waiting area for us. There is a large group of people there, praying together and wondering why you've chosen to separate yourself."

"I wasn't trying to dis anyone. I just needed time to think and get my act together."

"Rose, baby girl, you don't *have* to have your act together. The man you love is in there fighting for his life. You can fall apart if you feel like it. Just do it where the people who love both you and Jericho can be there

to support you."

She sniffed. "Did I tell you that I'm in love with Jericho?"

Keegan smiled. "Well, honey, you didn't have to. It's obvious. Have you told him?"

"No. It was too soon. And now I may not get the chance."

"Stop talking like that. Come on back to the waiting room with me."

She wiped at her cheeks. "Who's there?"

"So many. His five employees. Our whole family. Bree and Ricky Kino. And Gabe and Taylor are livestreaming a prayer circle in about ten minutes. Jodi and John are here. Lisa, Chaz and Laynah, Rebecca Murphy, Dalton and several of my agents. The Nash/Smiths are here. Jeffy and Cam, the Adams, the elder Kinos, the Davises and the Lees are zooming in for the big prayer circle. Pastor Tim is here. Mayor Bradbury is here. The fire chief is here. Sheriff Ty is here. It seems Jericho has touched many people during his short time in our community."

Rose sniffed and nodded. "He's such a good man, Daddy. Such a good guy in so many ways. And he fits right into our family. He's a lot like you, Dad, and that makes him the right guy for me. Please, God," she suddenly cried aloud. "Please don't take him from me."

Keegan sighed heavily and added his own silent prayer to that plea. "Come on, baby girl, let's go pray with everyone." He stood and pulled her to her feet. They walked up the aisle together and he had a flash. Just a quick flash like a scene in his head, of Rose in a wedding dress walking down an aisle in a church on his arm. He smiled. It was a gift, and it immediately erased his fears.

They got to the large room. It was full but very quiet. People spoke in low tones. A few babies gurgled and cooed. Iris was sitting on Nolan's lap. Daisy, Lily, and Heather immediately came to hug Rose, whispering to her, telling her that Jericho is gonna be okay.

A minute later, Violet and CJ walked into the room. Everyone quieted, because they hadn't yet heard what had actually taken place.

Keegan immediately approached CJ and took his good hand. "What's your diagnosis?"

"I broke my arm. I twisted my ankle, but there are no ligament tears, so it will heal quickly. I have some bumps and scrapes, which is obvious, and I have some big bruises on my back and thigh, but that's about it."

Keegan shook his head. "It's a miracle you fell all that way and came away with only those injuries."

CJ sighed. "Yeah, it is, but JJ didn't fare as well. Have you heard anything yet?"

Keegan nodded. "He's in surgery. He tore his spleen. Broke his leg

in three places. And like you, he has a bunch of contusions and abrasions."

"So he was right," CJ said. "He gave a self-diagnosis and said he was probably bleeding internally. He said his blood pressure was dropping because of that and he was probably not gonna make it."

"But he did make it so far," Max said. "And he didn't die before they got to him, and I'm sure they've given him blood and are repairing his spleen and he's gonna be okay."

Everyone nodded.

"That's correct," they heard a voice say.

Gabe held up a phone. "It's Jeffy, I mean, Dr. Kino, I mean Dr. Wallace on the line. Go ahead, Miss Jeffy."

"They got to him just in time," she said. "Any later and he may have bled out internally. It's called exsanguination. But that didn't happen because God didn't let that happen. He allowed Gabe to be alerted and his employees were also alerted. Because of that, you all acted quickly and found them quickly, before he could bleed out. So, that tells me that God isn't finished with Jericho yet, so everyone give thanks, and praise God for that. Jericho is gonna be okay."

Rose sniffed away her tears. If Jeffy felt that way, then she had confidence that Jericho would be okay.

"It's time for the prayer circle," Gabe said. "I'm goin' live here on Zoom, so don't anyone say anything mean about, well, anyone." He chuckled. "Hmm, that joke doesn't work when there's so many people."

The room gave a soft laugh. Gabe's eyes lit up as he looked at his phone. "Hey, so, Jericho's parents are driving down here, but they just signed onto the call. And Jericho's brother is at the airport catching a flight into Atlanta and also just joined the call. So, hello to Jericho's family. We here all really love Jericho and that means we love his family too and we're about to all pray for him." Gabe looked around the room. "I guess I'll start and go to my right. If you don't feel inclined to pray, it's okay, just motion to the person next to you to go ahead. Let's do this while I have so many prayer warriors on the call. Father in heaven, hey God, it's me again..."

They prayed over Jericho for a good thirty minutes. Gabe's words were, as always, warm and heartfelt. Taylor echoed Gabe. Ricky and Bree Kino prayed eloquently and reminded everyone that no matter what God does, it's His will that they want, but prayed that His will be to heal Jericho. Pastor Tim also prayed eloquently, as did Keegan and Lizzy. Heather and Nolan prayed and all the Tanner girls, even Iris, who proclaimed her love for Jewiko. The Appels prayed. The Stewarts prayed.

Even the mayor prayed. CJ's prayer was cryptic, making many wonder what had transpired between CJ and Jericho. A few of Jericho's men also prayed for him.

The last one to pray was Rose, who, through her tears, thanked God that He gave Gabe a heads up, and that miraculously both men lived through a fall that would have easily killed anyone. She gave thanks for the two men, for their strength, for their goodness and for simply being a part of their lives. She asked for healing and that the pain would ease, and for peace of mind, and for the safe travels of Jericho's family as they make their way to his side. And then she quietly asked God to give her a chance to show Jericho just how much she loved him.

When she uttered those words, many people looked up at her with a smile on their faces.

Once the prayer circle was finished, people divided into different groups. Most, though, wanted to hear from CJ what happened. He filled them in. He told them that he and JJ met to discuss some old times, that they were on the deck looking at the amazing view, that Jericho had just warned him that the deck would need to be replaced, that he jumped a few times to show CJ that it was unsteady, and that the entire thing collapsed.

He told them that he immediately went to find Jericho and when he did, Jericho was in a lot of pain. They'd both dropped their phones. It was too steep to climb up one-handed. They'd decided to wait for help since he was an agent and would eventually be tracked. They had a long, very serious talk about life and death and then, Jericho, obviously suffering, gave his self-diagnosis. They thought they were gonna have to wait another hour or so before help came, and he was glad they didn't, because maybe JJ would have been dead by then. Just as he finished his telling of things from his point of view, the doctor came into the room.

He looked around. "Family of Mr. Jones?"

Keegan stepped forward. "For now, yes. His family is en route and won't be here for a few hours."

The doctor nodded. "Okay, well, Mr. Jones is in recovery. We've repaired his spleen. He's received a large amount of blood. His leg has been set and cast and, with some physical therapy, should be back to normal eventually. The laceration on his head has received twelve stitches and he does have a concussion. His prognosis is for a full recovery. He should be awake within the next hour and will be in ICU for the next few days. If he does well, he'll be moved to a regular room."

"Can I see him?" Rose asked.

The doctor looked at her. "You are?"

"I'm his girlfriend."

He nodded. “When he wakes up, we’ll make sure it’s okay with him and we’ll let some visitors in. But we don’t want to tire him.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

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Romans 8:28

“And we know that in all things God works
for the good of those who love him,
who have been called according to his purpose.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rose walked into the ICU room where Jericho had been brought about fifteen minutes earlier. She stopped at the doorway and looked at him. Her big strong man had been torn down, but he survived. The enemy tried to take out his light, but he withstood the trial. God had intervened. It was a miracle he hadn't died in the fall. And God allowed Gabe to feel Jericho's pain, so that help could arrive in time. She closed her eyes. "Thank you, Father, in Jesus' name."

"You can go in," a soft voice came from behind her.

Rose turned to see a nurse, young and pretty. She smiled and moved aside. "Sorry, am I in the way?"

"I just need to check a few things," she said softly as she passed Rose and went to the bedside. She adjusted the blood pressure cuff that was already wrapped around his upper arm. The tube had been kinked. She checked his IV, lovingly patted his shoulder, and turned to smile at Rose. "We weren't getting good readings. Just a kink in the tube."

Rose nodded. "Thank you. I mean, for taking good care of him."

"Is he your husband?"

"No, I mean, not yet. He's my boyfriend."

"Lucky you."

Rose nodded in agreement.

The nurse left and Rose approached the bed. He had a bandage around his head, but it couldn't disguise his handsome face, his chiseled jawline, his perfect nose and mouth. His beautiful brown eyes were currently closed. His face, though tan, was paler than usual. His right leg was in a cast from his foot to his upper thigh, and suspended with a sling above the bed. The sheet covered him only from the waist and down the thigh of the uninjured leg.

There was a large piece of gauze on the left side of his upper abdomen, and a tube came out from under it. An oxygen tube that ran under his nose was taped to his cheeks. An IV was attached to his right hand, so she gently lifted his left hand. It was large, like him, and calloused. She wrapped both her hands around his one hand and pressed firmly. Looking down at his capable hand, her eyes filled and spilled over.

She sniffed. He opened his eyes.

"Rose Rose," he whispered.

She looked up immediately, her eyes meeting his. She sniffed. "Jericho," she said softly.

"Don't cry, baby. I'm okay."

She blinked away her tears and nodded her head. "You're okay," she repeated. "Thank you, Jesus," she said softly.

"Indeed," he mumbled.

"Are, are you in pain?"

"Not really. I think they're giving me something for the pain."

"Good. Gabe said you were in excruciating pain."

"Hmm, that's interesting. And yeah, I was. So, you'll have to fill me in about that."

"I will. Maybe later." She squeezed his hand again and sniffed. "Oh, Jericho, I thought I'd lost you."

"To be honest," he whispered, "I thought the same thing. I told God I understood if He wanted to take me. But I asked Him, if He was willing, could I please stay with you. I explained to Him that I'd just found the perfect girl. I told Him I was totally in love with you and I wanted to marry you and have a dozen or so children with you and love you and teach our children to love Him."

Her mouth opened, but no words came forth.

He sighed and closed his eyes again.

"Jericho?" Rose said, wondering if he'd merely been talking in his sedated sleep.

He opened his eyes again. "Sorry. That was a long speech and it took all my energy to get it out."

Rose blinked. "Then you know what you just said and you meant it?"

He smiled. "I know exactly what I said. And I meant every word. But don't feel pressured just because you feel sorry for me right now. I just had to get those words out. That was not a formal proposal."

"I don't feel sorry for you, Jericho."

He took several breaths, as if he'd been running and needed to catch his breath. "What do you feel then?"

"Grateful."

He nodded with a smile. "Perfect."

She bent down and kissed the hand that she was still holding.

He squeezed her hand in return. "I'm really sorry that you have to see me like this."

"I'm sorry you have to go through this."

"I promise I'll heal quickly."

"We'll see."

"Who's running the Center?"

"It's closed due to emergency."

"Where's Rebecca?"

"She's here, silly. So many people are here, praying for you. Wanting to see you."

He thought about that for a minute. "My guys are pretty worried?"

"Actually, they didn't seem too worried. They were the ones who got to you and stabilized you and got you off that hillside."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"Max said they got to you in time, the docs were gonna give you blood and fix your spleen and you were gonna be just fine."

Jericho closed his eyes. "Max would know." He sighed. "CJ is okay?"

"He seems to be. They already released him. But he's still here with Violet. He seems— different."

Jericho smiled. "We had a long talk. I'll tell you all about it later."

"We have a lot to talk about later. For now, there are some people desperate to see you and pray over you."

"Sounds good," he said with a sigh.

"If you get too tired, let someone know."

"Never too tired to pray."

"Okay. So anyway, your parents are on their way. They're still about thirty minutes out."

"Oh, who called them?"

"I think it was Jimmy."

He nodded.

"And your brother just arrived at the airport and will be here in about an hour."

"You're kidding?"

"No. Why are you so surprised?"

"I mean, this is no big deal."

"Well, it *was* a very big deal when we thought you were dead," she said sharply.

Her sharp tone made him smile. "Oh. Well, okay, then."

She suddenly leaned close and ran her hand over his cheek. "Thank you, Father, for letting Jericho stay with me. I love him and promise to take good care of him. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," Jericho whispered since he was too emotional to speak.

Rose smiled. "I'll stop being selfish and go get the next person in line to see you."

He nodded and closed his eyes. “Don’t stay away too long.”

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Some people who had been in the waiting room had to leave after they’d been able to see him. The Stewarts had children coming home from school. The Appels had to get back to the Inn as they had guests arriving the next day. Rebecca went to the Center because children would be arriving who were looking forward to the scheduled Christmas activities. The mayor and Pastor Tim and the fire chief, all took their leave. The only ones left when Jericho’s parents arrived were the Tanners, the Kinos, CJ, and Jericho’s employees.

The Joneses texted Jimmy to let him know that they’d arrived and he went to the front of the hospital to escort them to the private waiting room.

They came in and were greeted by a room full of strangers. Jimmy made the introductions.

“Everyone, these are JJ’s parents, Dean and Diane Jones.”

Keegan stepped forward. “Dean, I’m Keegan Tanner. So nice to meet you.” He shook his hand. He smiled at Diane and offered his hand. “Mrs. Jones, nice to meet you.”

“Keegan,” Dean said. “Jericho has mentioned your family to us.”

“He’s more than mentioned you,” Diane said. “He can’t stop talking about you.”

Keegan smiled. “The doctors are checking him over again, but when they finish, they’ll send someone to let us know so that you can go in to see your son.”

“Thank you,” Dean said.

“In the meantime, let me introduce you to everyone here. There was a much bigger crowd an hour ago, but they all got to go in and see Jericho and then had to attend to things.” He nodded at Lizzy who stood with one of the babies in her arms. “This is my wife, Lizzy.”

Lizzy smiled and offered her hand.

“My goodness, how old is that tiny baby?” Diane asked.

She smiled. “They are one week old today.”

“They?” She looked around. “Oh my goodness, twins! How amazing. Oh, they are precious.”

“Thank you,” Lizzy said.

“And these are my daughters,” Keegan went on. “Heather, Lily, Daisy, Violet, Rose and little Iris.”

“Hello,” the girls all said, and the Joneses nodded.

“Such beautiful girls,” Diane said softly with a smile.

“And I’m Nolan,” he said as he stepped forward. “I’m engaged to

Heather."

Jimmy spoke up. "And these guys are all of JJ's employees. Of course, you know Max."

Each one stepped forward and said their name and shook hands with Jericho's parents.

"And I'm another Tanner," Gabe said. "I'm Gabe and this is Taylor Kino and it's very nice to meet you."

"Oh yes," Diane said. "Gabe and Taylor, Jericho has talked to us about you two many times."

Ricky stepped forward. "Hello, Dean and Diane. I'm Ricky Kino, and this is my wife, Bree."

They shook hands with them both.

"Ricky," Dean said. "I can't believe I'm meeting you in person."

Ricky shook his head. "And I'm honored to meet the parents of one of the finest young men we've ever known."

"Absolutely," Bree said brightly as she offered her hand.

Diane smiled. "Oh my goodness, Breanna Adams, you are more beautiful than I imagined."

She brushed it away. "Diane, I know this is a strenuous time for you right now."

"Yes," Ricky said. "And we stayed because we wanted to let you know, whatever you might need for Jericho to have a full and complete recovery, please contact us. We're happy to help in any way we can."

"We really love Jericho," Bree continued. "He's a wonderful man of God and I know you must be proud of him."

They nodded. "We are," Dean said.

"So, please," Bree added. "Whatever Jericho needs, we're absolutely happy to help."

"Thank you so much," Dean said. "We'll keep you informed."

Nudged by Violet, CJ finally stepped forward. "Uh, hello, Mr. and Mrs. Jones," he said as he stepped in front of them.

Both parents looked at him, their brows wrinkling, then their eyes opened wide. "CJ?" Dean said first.

"CJ?" Diane repeated. She put her hands on either side of his face to hold him still while she looked at him. "Oh, CJ, it is you." She burst into tears and pulled him into a big hug. "CJ, oh my goodness, I've missed you and worried about you so much."

Violet watched with pleasure as both of Jericho's parents embraced CJ. His face had reddened, but he was smiling.

"And what happened to you? Your face is all scratched up and your arm is in a cast. Were you in an accident?"

"I guess you don't actually know what happened," CJ said. "JJ and I were on a deck together. We were talking over old times, or getting ready to, when the deck collapsed."

"Oh, we had no idea. We'd just been told that he was injured when a deck collapsed. We didn't even know that you and he had found each other. He hasn't mentioned it to us."

CJ nodded. "Probably because we needed to talk about things before he spoke to you about things."

"Well, how are you, CJ? What are you doing?" Dean asked.

"I'm fine. Actually, now that I know JJ is gonna be okay, I'm doing great. I work for Ameritech. Mr. Tanner is one of my bosses. And I live in an apartment complex right here in Pine Forest."

"And you were on the deck with Jericho?"

"Yes, but somehow, I fared a lot better than he did."

Mrs. Jones sighed. "Well, you know, we're gonna have to talk."

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

At that moment a nurse walked in. "Miss Rose Tanner?"

"Yes," Rose said as she stepped forward.

"The doctors have finished and Mr. Jones is asking for you."

"Oh, okay." She turned to Jericho's parents. "He doesn't know that you're here yet. I'll go let him know and then come back to get you."

They nodded with confused looks on their faces and watched as Rose left the room.

"I'm guessing Jericho also hasn't told you about Rose," CJ said.

"No, he hasn't," Dean replied.

"Well, he will. I may be speaking out of turn, but he will because he told *me* that, well, that, she's the one," CJ said.

The Tanners all smiled.

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Rose stood by Jericho's bedside, again, looking him over. She was in love with him, and it hurt her to see him in this condition, all banged up, probably in pain, like a warrior fallen on the field of battle. She hated to see him suffer. Gently, she took his one hand in both of hers, and he opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Rose Rose. There you are. A sight for sore eyes."

She smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. "So, the doc checked you over again and you're good?"

"Yes. I'm good. Blood pressure is normal. In a little pain. Headache. No other symptoms."

She nodded. "Good. Well, Jericho, your parents are here and would

like to see you."

"Oh. Okay. I'm sure they're worried."

"Yes, and I told them I'd go see you and let you know and then bring them to you."

"Okay. Then, you've met them."

"Yes. And they are very sweet."

"Dean and Diane Jones, right?"

She laughed. "Yes. Why? Are they not usually sweet?"

"Uh, no. My dad is usually loud and aggressive and my mom can match him word for word."

"Oh! Well, I guess they're on good behavior."

"I guess so."

"So, if your dad is usually loud and aggressive, who do you take after? Because you always seem so quiet and calm and in control."

"Well, you've never seen me on the football field," he joked. "No, but really, I take after, well, me. Or, Jesus. I'm not really the aggressive type. That's why I guess, I wasn't so terribly crushed when I lost my scholarship to play football."

Rose nodded. "You were on the wrong path and the horrible circumstances made you have to recalculate."

"They did that for sure."

She squeezed his hand. "Well, I don't want to keep aggressive people waiting too long, so I'll go get them."

He smiled at her. "But you'll come back afterward, right?"

"Yes. I'm not leaving you."

He frowned. "Rose, I know what I said earlier, and that wasn't really the cool, romantic way I was gonna tell you how I feel about you."

"You were telling me what you prayed to God. That was a beautiful way to tell me how you truly feel."

"Still, I'm gonna make it up to you."

"Do that by getting well." She stopped and looked into his eyes. "And just in case you didn't get the message, I let you know how I feel in *my* little prayer."

"Oh, I got it."

She smiled. "Then, this is lovely, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "It is. I love you, Rose Rose."

"And I love you, Jericho. Now, let me go get your parents."

She squeezed his hand and turned and left the room. He watched her go, her small, athletic body looking so adorable. He sighed. He hoped he would heal quickly, though he'd been told his leg would take some time to heal and then be rehabilitated and he might have a limp. But he'd been

told before that he might not heal completely, and he'd proven them wrong. He would do it again, because he had to be the best he could be in order to be a good, strong husband for a strong woman like Rose.

A few minutes later he looked through the glass wall of his room and saw her outside his room in the corridor, smiling and nodding to his parents and directing them toward his room.

He plastered a smile on his face. They came in and he watched their mouths drop in shock. He must look pretty bad.

"Oh, Jericho," his mom said as she came forward.

He smiled at her. "Hey, Mom."

"Oh, honey, you look terrible. Are you in pain?"

"Maybe a little, but I'm okay. Really."

"Jericho," his father said. He leaned over him, placed his hand softly on his head, and looked into his eyes. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yes, sir. I'm good. I'm alive, and I didn't think I'd make it, so, I'm really good."

He nodded. "Are you tired? Do you feel like talking at all?"

"I'm a little tired, but I can certainly talk to you."

"Oh, sweetheart, what in the world were you doing on that deck at a vacant house? Were you inspecting it?"

He smiled. "No. I met CJ there. It's a house he was gonna buy. He wanted to talk to me, finally tell me why he disappeared, what he was thinking, what had happened to him over the past ten years. You see, I ran into him here in Pine Forest and he acted as if he was angry with me. He would barely speak to me. But finally, we were gonna talk it out."

"And where has he been all this time?" Dean asked.

Jericho sighed. "It's actually a long story and I'm too tired to tell it all. But I promise I will."

"Okay, dear, that's fine," his mother said. She patted his hand. "Do you feel too tired to talk about Rose?"

He smiled. "Never too tired to talk about her."

"CJ says you and her are an item."

Jericho nodded. "I'm gonna ask her to marry me."

"Oh! Well, that is wonderful," his mother said. "How long have you known her?"

He sighed. "About a month."

"Oh!"

"You jumping the gun a little?" his father asked.

He drew a deep breath. "It would seem that way, I'm sure, but I guess, when you know, ya just know. And I know. There is no one out there like

Rose. Except her sister," he added with a smile.

"What?"

"Don't get all excited, Mom. They're twins, and I said that only in jest, because even though they're identical twins, they are very different."

"It didn't even register on me when we were introduced to the Tanner girls that Rose is a twin. Which one is her twin, because actually, they all look alike."

He nodded. "Rose's twin is Violet. She looks just like Rose except her hair is long and wavy, where Rose's hair is straight and she wears it a little shorter. But the others may look alike to you because Daisy and Lily are also twins."

His mother smiled excitedly. "Two sets of twins! Oh, how wonderful, but how difficult," Diane said.

Jericho nodded. "Well, Lizzy Tanner is a remarkable lady, and she actually just gave birth to another set of twins, though these new babies are not identical."

"Oh my, that's right. They told us the babies were twins. Isn't it amazing. And here you are, a twin yourself. Maybe Rose's twin would be interested in your brother," she said, halfway in jest, but only halfway.

Jericho chuckled. "Violet is interested in my brother from another mother. Violet and CJ are together, only they've known each other for several months. As a matter of fact, CJ was looking into that house to buy it, because he's gonna ask Violet to marry him."

"Now that's interesting," his father said. "So, he intends to settle down here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure that to him, Pine Forest is the center of his universe. And actually, I'm thinking I might feel that same way."

"You're gonna settle here in Pine Forest?" Dean Jones asked, his tone not quite so pleased.

Jericho sighed. "Yes, Dad. You know, I've told you I was gonna open an office and hire on guys and I'll be stationary."

"Yes, I know, but I thought that would be down the road. You're too young to be sitting behind a desk, don't ya think?"

"Well, I'm not too young to run my own company. And if you're worried that I won't be physically active, I promise you, I will."

"Well, I'm not trying to give you a hard time, but you're too gifted athletically to be sitting behind a desk, getting fat, and drinking beer on Friday night with the good ol' boys."

"Dad, I'm not sure what you think of me, because that description is kind of insulting. I wouldn't do that. I try to live the best life I can live. However, I do want to stop traveling all over the country and run my own

business, and I want to settle down here in the little town of Pine Forest for several reasons, and the main one is because I intend to ask Rose to marry me."

"Though you hardly know her."

Jericho sighed deeply. "Dad, I know my own mind and my own heart. Surely you know that about me by now."

"I do know, but son, sometimes, us old folks know a little more."

"I give you that. But it seems you don't know me. I'm not some young kid, going on hormones and some idyllic vision of life. I've worked hard over the past ten years. I've accomplished things not many have. I've learned about people and how to know them, how to work with them. And mostly, I've grown so much closer to God, and I've learned *that* is the most important thing I could do. God led me here. God led me to Rose. I know it. And I'm gonna marry her."

"How do you know it?"

"He speaks to me, Dad. In small ways sometimes, and other times in a very loud voice. When I was dying, just a few hours ago, and I WAS dying by the way, I spoke with Him, like, in my mind. And I know that what I want to do is the right path for me. Can you just trust me that I'm not making a rash decision? And can you just be happy for me that I finally found a girl who is absolutely perfect for me? She's strong. She's level-headed. She's sweet. She's kind. She's not materialistic. She comes from a good family. Her heart is filled with love."

"She's the one who ran the whole *Feeding of the Five Thousand* thing, right?" his mother asked.

"Right. It was her idea and she worked her butt off making it happen."

"Well, I think that's just lovely," Diane said.

His father nodded. "That *was* quite an accomplishment. Did she graduate from college?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I'm just making sure she's smart enough to handle you."

He sighed. "Dad, I know you mean well. I know you love me and just want to make sure I'm happy. You don't want me to get hooked up with some ignorant girl who can't hold her own, or be smart enough to mother my children. Well, take a little time to get to know her. Rose is brilliant. Her own mother is brilliant. Her whole family is brilliant. They may live in the sticks, but they are educated and intelligent, and by the way, yes, she graduated from college. Rose is extraordinary. She was hired to run the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* by a foundation that is very picky about whom they hire."

"It's the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*, right? And she is Gabe Tanner's sister, right?" his father pointed out.

Jericho closed his eyes and blew out a breath. "Yes. But they wouldn't hire her just because she was Gabe Tanner's sister. They would hire the most qualified for the job, because they are all about integrity. And for that matter, so are Rose and her whole family. They are all about integrity and honor and morality and strength."

As the conversation went on, draining Jericho's energy and spirit, Rose blinked back the tears and went straight back out to the waiting room. She'd been sent to let Jericho and his parents know that Joshua Jones was here, waiting to see his twin brother. She came back to the room and forced a smile at the man who looked so much like the man she was in love with.

"Uh, well, they were in the middle of a deep discussion," she said quickly. "I couldn't bring myself to interrupt them. Let me just lead you back there and you can interrupt if you'd like."

Joshua smiled at her. "I'd follow you anywhere." He looked up at the Tanners and the Kinos. "In case you leave before I come back, it was really nice to meet you all."

"Nice to meet you too," Gabe said first.

Ricky Kino nodded. "You too, Joshua. Do you or your parents have a place to stay yet?"

"Actually no. I figure we'll find a hotel in a little bit."

"Well, there are no hotels in the area. You'd have to go to Macon or up toward Atlanta. There are some motels, up on the highway, heading toward Steven's Bluff or Upton, and soon there will be a hotel in Pine Forest, or a hotel/motel hybrid, but it won't be finished until the spring."

"Isn't there an Inn? Jericho has talked about an Inn."

"Yes, but it's booked solid from now until after New Year's. So, Bree and I were talking and we'd like to invite you and your parents to stay at our home. We have a large place on the outskirts of Pine Forest."

"Wow, that is very nice of you. You sure you don't mind?"

"We'd love to take care of Jericho's family," Bree said.

"Well that's a 'yes' from me. I'll ask my parents in a minute."

Ricky nodded and took out his phone. They exchanged numbers and he sent Joshua the address.

"Okay, now that that is settled, follow me," Rose said with a smile.

Joshua followed Rose through the corridors of the hospital.

"So, Rose, how old are you?"

"I'm about to be twenty-four on Christmas Day."

"Oh, wow, Christmas Day? I've heard most people hate that."

She smiled. “It’s never bothered me. I guess I’m honored.”

Josh nodded. “That’s a good way to think about it.” He thought a moment. “So, since your entire family is here at the hospital, I’m guessing my brother is very close to your family?”

“We think of him as our own.”

“Very nice. My brother has always had a way about endearing himself to the people around him.”

They got to the hallway outside of Jericho’s room. She pointed. “He’s right in there.”

Joshua nodded. “So, after I see my brother, would you consider having a cup of coffee with me?”

She smiled. “Oh, I’m sorry, but you’ll find I don’t have a heart.”

He frowned. “Hmm, don’t have a heart? So, is this like, a Tin Man kind of thing?”

She gave a short laugh. “No. I was given one by my creator.”

“Then what do you mean by that?”

“I mean, I’ve already given my heart away.” She paused. “To the man—in that room.”

“Oh! You and my brother. Okay, that’s cool. I gotta say, he does have good taste.”

She smiled. “Thank you. Well, I’ll let you get to him.”

“Thanks.”

She watched him as he made his way to Jericho’s bedside. There were smiles. They clasped hands. Joshua leaned down and hugged his brother. She heard the first sentence. “So, Jericho, are Dad and Mom giving you a hard time?”

“As usual,” Jericho answered. “Thank goodness you came. It’s really good to see you, brother.”

“You too, brother.”

Rose turned and headed back to join the others in the waiting room.

“So, how’s he doing?” Max asked.

She smiled. “He looks tired, but he seemed very happy and relieved to see his brother.”

Jimmy nodded. “I’m sure. JJ’s parents can be a little— overbearing. But they mean well. They probably are talking his head off.”

Rose nodded, but didn’t smile.

Violet hugged her sister and whispered in her ear. “You okay?”

Rose sighed. “I guess. I’ll tell ya what I overheard later on when we get home tonight.”

“Well, Rosie,” Lizzy began. “I’m gonna get these babies home and

feed Iris. Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yes. I'll be fine."

Keegan spoke up. "Daisy, Lily, you go home with your mom and help her take care of what's needed, please. Make sure your mom also eats a good meal. I'm gonna stick around a bit with Rose. And Gabe, go home and take care of everyone."

"Yes, sir," they all said immediately.

"Can Taylor come with me?" Gabe asked.

"Yes, of course," Lizzy said.

"Mom?" Taylor asked.

Bree smiled. "Yes of course."

"I mean, we only have four more days together."

"I understand."

"I'll also be there, until you get home, Mr. Tanner," Nolan said.

Keegan nodded. "Thanks. I'm not used to having another male in my family to call upon. Didn't mean to leave you out."

"No problem. Just thought I'd remind you that I'm here. At least for now. Of course, we have to leave day after tomorrow, but then we'll be back in a week."

"Alright," Heather began. "Let's get a move on."

In a flurry of activity, the Tanner family gathered everyone, said goodbye to the Kinos and Jericho's employees and took their leave.

CJ and Violet stayed because CJ wanted to speak to JJ one more time.

Ricky and Bree decided they too would head home, but just as they were saying their 'goodbyes,' Dean and Diane Jones came back to the waiting room.

Diane smiled. "Well, we got thrown out by a mean nurse. She said only two people at a time, and Joshy hasn't seen his brother in a long time and he insisted he had to stay."

"So," Bree began. "Did Joshua tell you that we've offered a place for you to stay?"

"Yes, he did," Dean said. "Thank you so much, but we don't want to be any trouble."

"It will be no trouble at all," Ricky said.

"Well, then, we'd love to accept your invitation," Diane said.

Ricky nodded. "We were just getting ready to take off. You can follow us there if you'd like."

"That would be splendid," Diane said. She looked around. "Oh, I see that the Tanners have left."

"Well, not all of them," Keegan said. "My wife needed to rest. After all, the babies are only a week old. So the family went home to have

dinner and get the little ones to bed. But Rose, Violet and I will stay here a little longer."

Rose frowned because she intended to stay with Jericho all night, but she didn't want to argue with her father in front of the Joneses.

"Oh, yes, so, Jericho told us, Rose, that you and Violet are twins."

Rose nodded with a smile.

"Well, that's just lovely," Diane said.

Dean nodded. "Yes, and we heard that Rose was responsible for pulling off the big Thanksgiving event at the Center. Well done."

Rose smiled. "Thank you, sir. It was a giant undertaking, but I couldn't have done it without the help of hundreds of volunteers."

"Well, someone had to organize those volunteers, Rose," her father said quickly. "Don't play it off like you didn't do anything. We all saw the amount of work you put in, leaving the house at 5:30 in the morning and not getting home at night until almost midnight."

She shrugged. "I wanted to make sure everything got done."

"I hope Jericho was one of those volunteers," Dean said.

"Oh, he was. He was one of the main players," Rose said with a dreamy smile.

The Kinos then began saying goodbye to everyone and in a few minutes they and the Joneses were gone.

"Well," Max began. "I'm just gonna go speak with Jericho about things I need to take care of in his absence and we'll also be off."

One by one, Jericho's men each made their way back to him and then took their leave, explaining that they had to keep things going and the training of the Pine Forest and Pine County emergency services would continue in the morning.

Finally, CJ made his way in to speak with Jericho again. The first time had been very brief. He wasn't quite sure what to say with JJ's brother Joshua present. He had a feeling that Josh somehow blamed CJ for Jericho losing his football scholarship, and CJ knew that if that's what Josh thought, he would be correct.

"Hey, CJ," Jericho said as CJ came into the room.

"JJ," he said and then nodded at Joshua. "Josh."

"Hi, CJ. I'm really glad to see you."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course. Look, I know I may have been a little resentful of your relationship with my brother way back when, but that was just a jealousy kind of thing."

"Really?" Jericho asked. "You were jealous of CJ?"

"Of how close you two were. After all, you were MY twin."

"I had no idea you felt that way," Jericho said. "I'm sorry, Josh, if I made you feel slighted in any way. You're my brother and I love you and I'm proud of you."

Josh smiled. "I know that. It was just a maturity thing. I got over it. And I love you too, brother. And I'm proud of you too. What you're doing, the lives you're saving, you are a hero. I mean, I just play a game for a living. You do something important and I'm really proud of you."

"Hmm, maybe you should tell that to Dad."

Josh laughed. "Maybe I will. But look, don't let what he says get to you. He was gonna have two sons playing pro football, and he hasn't been able to get over it. He'll come around."

"It's been ten years. I don't think he'll ever see me as a competent man. He's even second-guessing my decision to ask Rose to marry me."

"Well, don't let that discourage you. She's a keeper. I tried to get her to go for coffee with me and she turned me down."

"You did? You work fast."

Josh laughed. "Don't hold it against me. I didn't know that you and she were a thing at the time. I mean, who wouldn't make a move on a girl that beautiful?"

"Right?" CJ added.

Josh nodded. "She's only got eyes for you, Jericho. I say go for it."

"I will. As soon as I get back on my feet." He looked at CJ. "So, what happens with your job? You'll get paid leave, right?"

CJ nodded. "Yes. I have medical leave. If I'd been hurt in the line of duty I'd also get a payout. But hopefully, I won't be out too long. And I can work behind a desk for a while."

"Line of duty? Are you like, a police officer?" Josh asked.

"I'm like one, except different. I'm an Ameritech agent."

"Oh, wow. I think our QB uses Ameritech. They say Ameritech is top-of-the-line, the best you can get."

"We are."

"They also say they're expensive."

"We are, but we're worth it."

"You're nationwide, right?"

"Worldwide. There are over forty thousand employees. It's a very big and very sought-after organization."

"And Rose's dad is a bigwig, right?"

"Keegan Tanner is a Division Chief Director. Right now he runs the entire Eastern Division."

"Sounds like big money."

"He makes like, triple what the director of the FBI makes. But he doesn't need the money. He says he works at it because they help people, they right wrongs, and they play the part of equalizer many times. They are consulted and hired by city, county, state and even federal governments around the world. They operate only with integrity and honor and will not accept jobs from precarious sources."

"Sounds too good to be true," Josh said.

"Mr. Tanner is a very interesting man. A very good man," Jericho said. "He sets a good example of the kind of husband and father I would like to be."

"He seemed very quiet and stern when I met him."

Jericho nodded. "He can be. Don't ever cross him. But he's a great man and he's not always stern. Today, he was just worried about me, and I'm sure, his daughter, who was also worried about me."

"So, how are you feeling, bro? You seem fine. You've been talking for a long time now. Seeing visitors. You don't seem to be in pain."

"I may be in a little bit of pain, but I'm okay. I am tired though. Once you guys all leave I'm gonna sleep."

"Have you eaten anything?" Josh asked.

"No. Not yet. Not really hungry yet. May even be a little nauseated."

"Hmm, have you told that cute nurse that keeps coming in that you're nauseated?"

"Not yet. I will if she asks."

"Well, Jericho, I think I'm gonna head out and let you get some rest," Josh said.

Jericho nodded. "I'm really grateful that you actually left practice and came to see me."

"Well, they told me they weren't sure if you would live."

"They were right. It's actually a miracle that I'm lying here talking to you. I almost bled out internally. I tore my spleen. If they didn't find us when they did, I would be dead."

Joshua sighed. "Thank goodness they found you."

"Thank God," Jericho said.

Josh nodded. He leaned over the bed and hugged his brother. "Get some rest. I'll be here in the morning."

"Thanks, Josh. See you then."

Josh shook CJ's hand and took his leave.

CJ smiled. "You've missed him, haven't you?"

Jericho nodded. "I've missed him. I've missed you and right now I feel really blessed to have you both nearby."

"Well, I guess I'm gonna take off too. I don't know how you're still awake, but I feel like I could just lay down on the floor and go to sleep."

Jericho nodded. "Then go. And CJ, what we talked about this morning, I'm really freakin' happy that you didn't shoot yourself. And just in case you need to hear it again, it's time to put aside your regrets and move forward. Whether you truly believe it was your fault, or not. Time to move forward."

CJ nodded. "I'm gonna try to do just that. I still need to talk to Violet and tell her what happened. How she handles it will be a big deal as to what I do next."

"I get it. If she's anything like Rose, then she'll handle it just fine."

They clasped hands and CJ left the room. The nurse came in to replace an IV bag and spoke to him briefly, asking what his pain level was. He said maybe a two or three and then told her he was a little nauseated. She explained that a lot of times the anesthesia used during surgery can make one nauseated for twenty-four to forty-eight hours. She said it had only been about four hours and they didn't want him to try to eat or drink anything for another two or more hours. He let her know that he wasn't interested in eating or drinking anything anyway. A few minutes later Rose and Keegan came in.

He smiled at Rose. Every time she showed up, she was like a warm, comforting light and he felt so happy to see her. He glanced at Mr. Tanner. "Hello, you two," Jericho said.

"I'm guessing you're feeling a little tired or drained," Keegan said.

Jericho nodded. "Yes, sir. It's been a long hard day." He looked back to Rose. "I'm sure for you too."

Rose smiled. "I can handle it."

"I don't doubt that."

Keegan smiled. "So, your parents and brother will be staying at the Kinos' while they're here."

"Oh, well, that's very kind of the Kinos."

"Yes, well, I think you've probably begun to realize that they just operate that way."

"Yes, sir. They are very much like you, or you're very much like them. You all operate on another level than everyone else."

"Well, thank you for the compliment. I can only hope to one day be like the Kinos."

Jericho smiled. "My brother thinks you're very stern."

Keegan smiled. "Oops, sorry. I guess I had on my game face. He should understand that. I hope you don't see me that way."

"No, sir. I see you as one of the best men I've ever known."

Rose smiled. “Both of you are the best men I’ve ever known.”

Jericho smiled at her.

“So, how are you feeling, Jericho?” Rose asked.

“I’m okay. I’m tired. I’ve been trying to stay awake while everyone was here visiting me, but I’m pretty worn out now.”

Keegan glanced at the time. “It’s already after five. You need to get some rest.”

“I will. Is everyone else gone?”

“Yes. Is there anything you can think of that you might need?”

Jericho shook his head. “Nothing I can think of. Except maybe my phone. Did they find my phone?”

“Yes,” Rose said. “And I have it. Luke found it and gave it to me, but the glass is shattered. I’ll get it fixed and bring it to you tomorrow.”

“That would be great. Thanks, Rose.”

“Well, Rose,” Keegan began. “Let’s get out of here and let him rest.”

“I’m not going home, Daddy. I’m gonna stay here with him tonight.”

“No.”

“No.”

Rose blinked at the negative answer that came from both men. “Excuse me?”

“Rose,” Jericho said softly. “I’m okay. And if you stay to watch me while I sleep, then I won’t be able to sleep. I love you, Rose. See, I said that right here in front of your father. But I’ll worry about you if you stay here all night. Please, go home. Eat some dinner and get some sleep. Don’t you have things to do at the Center tomorrow?”

She frowned. “Yes, but...”

“Then take care of it. If I were on the brink of death, I would understand you wanting to stay nearby. But I’m not. I’m fine, sweetheart. And I’ll rest so much better if I know you’re at home, safe and sound in your own bed.”

Keegan nodded in approval. “Well said.”

Jericho smiled. “Rose, I know that just today, you and I, we declared our love for one another. I realize we need some alone time to talk and share our feelings. And let’s do that really soon. But for now, I need to rest. For now, just know that I love you.”

“And you just know that I love you too.”

“Noted,” he said with a smile.

Keegan put his arm around his daughter. “Sweetie, I’m so proud of you, and since you two are declaring your love publicly, I’ll just say that I don’t think you could have chosen a better man to fall in love with. Just

now, he showed that he will take care of you and wants only what's best for you. You get that, right?"

She sighed. "Yes, I get that. And I get that you're trying to see if I'll obey him. And I see the wisdom in what he says and I will go home and eat some dinner and get some sleep."

Both Jericho and Keegan smiled.

"Did it hurt to say that?" Keegan asked.

"That I'll—oh, oh—obey him?" she joked as she acted like she couldn't get the word out of her mouth. "Maybe a little." She smiled at Jericho. "But what about *your* dinner?"

He sighed. "I'm not allowed to eat anything for another few hours and then we'll just see. I'm a little nauseated right now. The nurse said it was probably due to the anesthesia."

Rose sighed. "Are you sure you're gonna be okay?"

"They're gonna take good care of me."

Keegan leaned over the bed, placed his hand on Jericho's head and gave him a quick prayer and blessing. Jericho's eyes moistened. "Thank you, sir."

Keegan nodded. "I'll check in with you tomorrow. Rose, I'll be out in the hall. Don't be too long."

Rose nodded and turned to Jericho. She leaned over him and brushed her hand over his cheek. "I do so love you, Jericho."

"That makes me very happy, Rose Rose."

"When I thought I'd lost you, I prayed so hard, and I begged God to let you live."

Jericho nodded. "I did too, just so that I could be with you. But I think it wasn't my path to die today. Too many miracles happened. We were meant to be together, my sweet Rose."

She sighed. "You get well. Sleep. Heal. Get better."

"I will. I promise. I really want to see this Pine Forest Christmas you have planned."

"Well, it's gonna be hard to outdo the Thanksgiving thing."

"I have faith in you."

She leaned over and kissed his lips softly.

He closed his eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He opened his eyes. "I was thanking God."

She giggled. "Oh, sorry."

"Now go home, babe, and sleep."

"Okay. And I'll get your phone to you tomorrow."

He nodded and smiled.

She kissed his forehead. “Good night, Jericho.”
“Good night, Rose Rose.”

✞✞✞

Psalm 23:1-3

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

December 2nd, Monday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Hey, Dad, hey, Rose," Lily said as they came into the kitchen through the garage door.

"Hello," Keegan answered. "Where's my car?"

"Gabe, Taylor and Daisy took it to go take care of the dogs."

Keegan nodded. "Has everyone eaten?"

"Yes, sir. And I was just wrapping up these two plates with your dinner. Are you ready to eat? I'll warm them up."

"Yes, thank you," he said as Rose went to get silverware and drinks for herself and her father. "Where's your mom?"

"She's upstairs. She was very tired and Gentian was fussy. And Iris decided to have a breakdown," Lily said.

Keegan sighed. "What did she break down over?"

Lily sighed. "Over wanting Mom to read to her and no one else."

Keegan nodded. "She's probably feeling a little displaced. So, where is Iris now?"

"Gabe asked her if she wanted to go with him and Taylor to see the puppies and she cheered right up."

He smiled. "Of course she did. Well, as soon as I finish eating, and the others get back, let's have family prayer and bunk down. I have a lot to do tomorrow."

"Anything I can help with? I have the day off from the Inn."

"What were you gonna do, if I didn't need you?"

She shrugged. "Some laundry and get more of the Christmas totes out for Mom and let her order me around where she wants everything."

He nodded. "You do that. If I need help, I'll get your brother or Nolan. Most of what I have to do tomorrow has to do with work."

"Oh. Well, sorry I'm not of any use there."

"None of you are useful there because it's *my* job, not yours. Just like I wouldn't be useful to you in the kitchen."

She smiled. "Sure you would, Daddy. You could be my taster."

He smiled and nodded. "That would be an awesome job."

Lily placed the plates in front of her father and Rose. “Hey, big sis, you doin’ okay?”

She smiled and nodded. “Hey, Lily, yes, and thanks for asking. I’m okay. Jericho is okay. I’m just tired.”

“Stress will do that to you,” Lily said.

Keegan quickly blessed the food and he and Rose sat quietly eating. It’d been a hard and stressful day.

“Rose, are you still planning on doing the shoot on Wednesday?” Keegan asked.

She sighed. “Well, I sure don’t want to do it, but *Twin Wave* is depending on that holiday campaign for their biggest sales yet, and I don’t feel right leaving them in a lurch.”

“I agree with you. I’m just asking because I have to arrange security. Both Jericho and CJ were gonna be there to handle your protection, but both are out of commission, and I don’t want Mike Moreland to put one hand, not even one finger on Daisy.”

“He doesn’t even know which one of them is Daisy,” Rose said.

“Well, I don’t want him mistaking me for Daisy,” Lily put in.

Keegan nodded. “I will arrange some security. Also, I mentioned the shoot to Ricky and both he and Bree are interested in seeing how Mike handles this kind of thing and how he handles himself, given what I’ve told Ricky about Mike.”

“So, they wanna come watch the shoot?”

“Yes. But discreetly.”

Rose smiled. “Well, it’s kind of hard for two very well-known movie stars to go anywhere discreetly.”

“Let’s see how they do it,” Keegan said with a smile.

Rose gave a soft laugh. “This should be interesting.”

They finished their meal just as Gabe, Taylor, Iris and Daisy came back from feeding the dogs.

“Daddy,” Iris yelled as she ran to her father, her arms outstretched.

He scooped her up and sat her on his lap.

“Hey, my little flower,” he said softly and kissed her cheek. “Did you see the puppies?”

“Yes, and dey is bearwy cute. Almost as cute as me. Gabe said so.”

Keegan chuckled.

“Daisy said we can have a puppy when dey get ode enuff, but ownwy if it’s okay wif you and Mommy. Can we, Daddy?”

He sighed. “Well, if you have a puppy, it has to be taken care of. You have to play with it and feed it and take it out for a walk and wash it and

train it. Can you do all of those things?"

She frowned. "Maybe not all of it. Can you hep me?"

"We'll all help," he said. "How about I take care of you and you take care of the puppy?"

She frowned. "Okay."

He hugged her tight. "Baby girl, you know I love you so, so, so, so much, right?"

"Yes."

"You know you're very important to me, right?"

"Yes, Daddy, and you are portent to me too."

He smiled. "Thank you. Do you also know that Mommy and I love both you AND the new babies?"

She scrunched up her face. "*I* wove the new babies too."

"I'm glad you do, because you're their big sister."

"I know."

"Okay. So, you know how all of your big sisters help you and take care of you and teach you things?"

"Yes."

"That's what you have to do with your new baby brother and sister."

She nodded. "I will. I sunged *Twinkle Twinkle Wittle Star* to dem."

"That's good, baby girl. That's exactly what I'm talking about. But right now, they don't even know how to talk. But they will learn how to talk and then you really can teach them how to sing songs."

"How will dey wearn how to talk?"

"They learn a little bit every time you talk to them. It might seem like they don't understand what you're saying, but the more you talk to them, the more they start to understand how to talk."

"I will talk to dem a wot."

"Wonderful. But I just want you to remember that we all love YOU so much. You are very special to us."

She smiled. "I wove you too, Daddy."

Rose smiled. "I love you too, Daddy."

"Me too," Daisy said.

"Me too," Lily said.

"I'm in," Gabe said.

Taylor smiled. "Well, I love all of you."

Keegan smiled then looked at Rose. "Text Vi and ask her when she'll be home, please. I'm tired and want to get some rest, and that won't happen while she's out."

Rose nodded and pulled out her phone.

"And where are Heather and Nolan?"

"They're back in the den having a serious discussion."

Keegan nodded.

Rose looked up. "Vi says she's on the way home."

"Good. I'm gonna go check on your mom. When Violet gets home, we'll have a prayer and hit the sack. Next question, who wants to help Iris get ready for bed?"

"I'll do it," Taylor volunteered.

Iris cheered and jumped off her father's lap and grabbed Taylor's hand. They headed upstairs and Gabe tagged along behind.

Keegan headed upstairs too and went to his room. He stood in the doorway gazing at his wife as she sang softly to Isaiah, slowly rocking back and forth. She finally gently laid him in his bassinet. She looked up at her husband and smiled. "Hey, hon," she whispered.

He smiled. "Hello, Elizabeth," he said softly. "Everything okay?"

She came to him. "Whenever you finally get home, everything is absolutely wonderful."

He took her in his arms and sighed. "I love you, Liz. I'm so grateful for you."

"I'm grateful for you, Keegan." She frowned. "But you look tired."

"I am. We're gonna have family prayer and get to bed. Do you feel like joining us?"

"Of course."

"Are you tired?"

"Yes. I mean, it's only been a week since I gave birth. But I'm not too tired to pray. I just need a little more time to be back to normal."

"Honey, you can have all the time you need. How's your back?"

"It's strange, but it doesn't hurt at all. Hey, maybe on Thanksgiving, I got healed too!"

He smiled. "Maybe! Sounds like another thing we need to make sure we thank God for."

She put her arms up around his neck. "We are so blessed."

"We are. Thank goodness you didn't give up on me all those years ago." He bent his head and kissed her.

Lizzy sighed. "I was so in love with you, I couldn't give up. I also knew you were my one chance for having a mate who could actually love me and my children."

"And now look at you. Look at us. We have nine beautiful, amazing, talented, God-loving children."

"Nine," she said softly. "I've given birth to nine children."

"And yet you're as beautiful as the day I met you. How do you do it?"

"Hmph," she said. "Not hardly." She drew a deep breath. "But I do want to get back to training. If I can find the time. I want to stay fit."

"I'll help you find the time. Out of nine children, we only have three that need tending to. We can do this."

She nodded. He took her hand and led her downstairs to the den.

They were the first ones there. A minute later Gabe came down with some bed linens and a pillow.

"What's that for?" Lizzy asked.

"I'm gonna sleep on the couch," Gabe said. "Unless you're okay with me sleeping with Taylor up in my bed."

Keegan rolled his eyes. Lizzy giggled. "Sure, honey. Go ahead."

Gabe's eyes opened wide.

"She's kidding," Keegan said quickly. "Elizabeth, I guess we need to go ahead and order that furniture for the two rooms downstairs that we've talked about turning into guest rooms."

"I'll do it tomorrow. This will be fun."

"Which two rooms?" Gabe asked.

"First, the big one that's just storage. We need to get rid of most of that stuff and then Dad says he's gonna put two new storage sheds in the backyard. One for all those boxes and totes stuff, and a new one for the yard tools and maintenance stuff. And then the other room to make into a guest room is the game room that no one ever uses," Lizzy explained.

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, why go down there when we can play games around the kitchen table which is closer to the food anyway. And the pool table is up here in the big game room anyway."

"Right?" Lily said as she came into the room.

Taylor and Iris came in next, followed immediately by all the others, including Violet.

"When did you get home?" Keegan asked.

She smiled. "While you were smooching with Mom."

"How's CJ?"

"He's in pain. I fed him. I helped him get ready for bed. I gave him his pain medication and made sure he had what he needed. But, Dad, he's gonna have a hard time for a while. I might end up staying there with him, just to take care of him."

Keegan sighed. "We'll talk about it."

"He's incapacitated, Dad. It's not like we can do anything."

Keegan rolled his eyes and Gabe and Nolan both chuckled, because they all knew that wasn't exactly true.

"We'll talk about it," Keegan repeated. "Shall we kneel?"

They all knelt together and held hands.

"Nolan? Would you like to pray?" Keegan asked.

"Thank you," Nolan said. "I'd be honored."

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December 3rd, 2:15 AM, Tuesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Taylor knew she was being bad, but she couldn't seem to help herself. It'd been nice, sleeping in Gabe's room. The bed smelled like him. It was nice to experience his bed, knowing this is what he felt when he was here and she was in Cali and they would talk in the middle of the night. Still, the temptation of knowing that he was downstairs, so close by, she needed to go down and talk to him in person. Until they came to Georgia for Thanksgiving, he'd been staying at her house off and on and they'd snuck into each other's room several times, though they were not trying to do anything other than be close to one another. It was such a comfort to be close to him. It was comforting knowing she could do that.

They understood that once they came to Georgia they would not be able to do it. She would be at the Inn or their new home, and he would be at his home. But here they were finally, in the same house and it was too tempting. She padded barefoot softly down the stairs in the red flannel pajamas that Daisy lent to her, which were warm and cozy.

She carefully passed Mr. Tanner's office, just in case he'd been awakened to have to work in the middle of the night. She knew that happened quite often, but the door was closed and no light was on. Moving past quickly, she came to the den. It was a giant room. A large screen TV was on the wall over top of the fireplace. Opposite that wall was a very large blue L-shaped sectional sofa. If you were facing the fireplace, to the left of the sofa was Mrs. Tanner's new rocking chair and then a small table and then an overstuffed wingback chair. If one were to walk behind the sofa, you would go to the far right side of the room which was almost like another entire room. The back wall held two French doors that led out to a large back patio. One side wall to the right was lined with bookshelves and in front of those shelves there was a smaller sofa with tables and lamps on either side. The other side wall had a pretty little window seat with a coffee table in front of it, and then another large chair.

Gabe was asleep on the large, blue sectional. Taylor crept up close and knelt down on the floor next to him and gently placed her hand on his shoulder. He sighed, and reached up and placed his hand over hers.

She smiled and he opened his eyes.

"Hey, Tay," he said softly.

She sighed. "Oh, Gabe, I needed to hear you say that."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just feeling lonely."

He scooted back against the back of the large sofa and lifted his blanket. "Come on up."

The relief washed over her. Oh, how she needed to be near him. She immediately climbed up on the sofa and lay down beside him, facing him. Smiling into her eyes, he ran his hand over her face, leaned forward and kissed her.

She sniffed.

He frowned. "What's wrong, Tay?"

"Nothing. I just suddenly felt like crying. I guess because it's such a relief to be near you. I can't stand being away from you. What am I gonna do when we leave on Saturday?"

He sighed. "Well, you know what to do. We've talked about it enough, haven't we?"

She sighed. "Yes. Focus on the present moment. Give the present moment all my energy. It'll make the time go by faster."

"Right. But still, I understand how you feel, babe, because I feel the same way. I love it when we're together, like this. I hate being away from you. Sometimes I think, we're too young to feel this way. I think, I just want to marry you and be with you every day, every night, but I know we're too young."

"Are we?"

He sighed. "I think we are. You're still in high school. I haven't even begun my training yet. We have a lot to do. Let's try really hard to do things right."

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long do we have to try?"

He chuckled. "Forever. We have to try to do things right forever. But we don't have to be apart forever. You finish high school. You decide what you want to do with your life and..."

"I already know what I wanna do."

"Okay, what?"

"I want to be your wife and have your children."

He drew a deep breath, because whenever she mentioned having his children, it always made him want to do what it takes to make that happen. He kissed her again. "I love that you want that. But you are young, and you might not want that once you've had some time to think about it, so I just want to give you that time. But let's say for a minute that you won't change your mind, that you know what you want to do: marry me and have

my children. How would you do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"What does a wife do? What does a mother do?" Gabe asked.

"Well, a wife is a companion to her husband. She takes care of the home and..."

"How does she do that?" Gabe interrupted.

"She makes it homey, keeps it clean, cooks delicious meals."

"Do you know how to cook?"

"Some things, but I want to learn more about that."

"How?"

"Oh, well, maybe taking cooking lessons," Taylor suggested.

He nodded. "Good. That sounds like a good idea. And how do you make a home, uh, what did you call it? Homey?"

She shrugged. "You know, like, decorate it, make it look nice, make it functional but pretty."

"Do you know how to do that?"

"Well, I have good taste, I think. But I'd like to learn more about design and efficiency stuff."

"Good. That sounds like a good idea. And how do you take care of the children?"

"Well, you just do."

"What if they get sick? Or go back to when you're pregnant; how do you stay healthy? Do you know all about nutrition? Do you know how to take care of a kid with an ear infection? Do you know how to take care of a child who is feeling sad? Or one that is struggling in school?"

She stayed quiet.

He ran his hand over her shoulder, down her back and pulled her in close. "I'm not trying to be mean, and some of those things we learn together as we go, because I don't know them either. But, Taylor, there are things you can do to prepare to be a wife and mother, if that's what you truly want to do. So, we're not ready yet. We have things we need to do. Things we need to learn. And what about dance? Do you want to pursue that at all? It'd be a shame to let that talent go to waste. And on top of all of that, I have to be able to support you and learn how to do that in a way you're accustomed to, which is a very steep hill to climb."

"I don't care about money."

"I don't either. I mean, being rich is not my priority. But you'll care when we don't have enough. I have to be man enough to at least work hard and support my family. I have to buy you a home, transportation, keep the power on, buy good nutritious foods for you and our children.

While you have the opportunity to focus on a career, or being a wife and mother, or a hobby or anything really, I don't. There are things I absolutely have to do. I HAVE to support my family to offer you and our kids the opportunities you need, and God has given me abilities and I have to use them to take care of my family."

"Which abilities are you talking about?"

"I'm strong, I'm athletic, I'm a good martial artist, I'm good with guns, and I'm a fast thinker. I have a strong, logical mind. I have a strong faith. God is with me. I have to work hard and not settle."

"I want to support you in all of that, Gabe, whatever you do. I get that it's a lot of pressure to take care of and be responsible for a family."

"I love that you want to support me in whatever I do, and it makes me happy. And it makes me try harder and work harder. And I love you, Taylor Kino. You understand me. You get me. And I feel so close to you, and I trust you. I really do."

"That's exactly how I feel about you."

"Then somehow, we'll get through the next little while and we'll follow the path God has for us, and we'll be so good together. Nothing will be able to stop us. Certainly not a little separation."

She sighed. "No, a little separation won't stop us, but I still crave being near you. You are like an addiction. I can't get enough."

He pulled her even closer and covered her with his body and kissed her deeply. He raised his head and smiled. "I feel the same way. I do. But being with you like this is very hard on me. You are just too tempting."

"Are you saying you want me to go back upstairs to bed?"

"Yes. No. Oooh, man." He sighed. "No. Stay here a few more minutes."

She smiled. "Okay. Just a few more."

He nodded. "Good talk."

She giggled.

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December 3rd, 6:00 AM, Tuesday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Gabriel Tanner."

Gabe's eyes blinked open. The voice was soft and stern and masculine. It was his father's voice. He tried to sit up, but Taylor had herself wrapped around him, her head nestled under his chin, her leg thrown up on his hip. He gently moved her leg down and eased himself up over the back of the couch and stood to face his father. He blinked up at him in the dim light of dawn.

His father pointed toward the doorway, turned and headed out. Gabe

quickly pulled on his jeans and followed him to his office.

Once inside, Keegan closed the door and took a seat behind his desk. "Sit down."

Gabe sat and drew a deep breath. "Sorry, Dad. She came down a few hours ago. She was feeling..." He trailed off. "Sometimes, she gets like, desperately lonely. Almost like, panicked."

Keegan nodded. "Ya know, those are the feelings of a child."

"I get that and I talked her down." He smiled. "She would be very unhappy to hear you call her that."

"Again, childish feelings, Gabe, and I don't mean that in a derogatory way. I'm only saying that she's young. One of the things she has to learn how to handle is the separation. If she learns to be clingy and feels like she can't function unless you're near her, then how will she ever mature and grow and take care of your children while you're off working?"

Gabe nodded. "I understand what you're saying. We need to be mature and take care of our responsibilities. I mean, I understand both sides, that we have to learn to take care of business when we're not with each other, but I also understand how she feels, because I'm desperate to be with her too. I guess because, like, our love is new. And what was I supposed to do? Tell her to go back to bed? Not comfort her? I mean, Dad, you love being with Mom."

"Yes, but we go through our day taking care of business."

"But you sleep together every night. That, like, carries you through. It sort of, fuels you for the next day."

Keegan sat there smiling. "Well said."

Gabe smiled. "Anyway, our intention was just for her to stay with me a few minutes. But I guess we fell asleep, and I'm sorry. But Dad, don't worry. I am not gonna compromise her. I swear. We haven't spent that much time together since we got to Georgia. We've actually been taking care of business. And last night, she said she couldn't resist coming down to see me when she knew I was in the same house."

"You had to know that's how she would feel when you asked if she could stay the night."

Gabe nodded and looked his father right in the eye. "I absolutely *did* know. She knew too. We *wanted* the chance to be together. And when she came down and woke me up, I was all too happy to invite her onto the couch with me."

Keegan smiled. "Well, okay then. Anyway, I'm glad you're being honest."

"Always."

Keegan sighed. “Really, son, I understand how you feel. When you love someone as much as I love your mother, you want and need to be together. I just don’t want you to be tempted beyond what you can resist before you get married, because I don’t want you to feel guilty. There are things you can’t take back.”

Gabe nodded. He blinked up at his father. “So, you don’t want me to make the same mistake that you made with me?”

Keegan looked into his son’s eyes.

Gabe shrugged. “I mean, I can do the math. Your anniversary is in January. I was born in June.”

Keegan sighed. He’d known this talk was coming eventually. “First, let me be very clear about this, son: you were not a mistake. You were an absolute blessing. You were meant to be. That is obvious. You are a favored son of God. Still, the circumstances surrounding your conception were different than circumstances between you and Taylor. At the time, I was not a Christian.”

“But Mom was, right?”

“Yes. Your mom was sweet and pure and holy and faithful, but you can’t blame her for giving in to me. It was a hard situation. You’ve heard bits and pieces of it. We fell in love when she was taking care of me as I recovered from the accident. She was so alone. Her husband was dead. She had five babies to take care of. She was struggling financially. Oh, but she was proud. She worked so hard and wouldn’t accept help from me. I fully intended to finish my assignment and marry her. If I had just done that, we probably would have waited to consummate our relationship.”

“What do you mean? What did you do?”

“One day I told her we were gonna be together soon and be happy, and the next day I made a stupid decision. I decided I wasn’t good enough for her. I decided that my line of work made me a monster. I’d done so many horrible things, in the military and in the line of duty in the FBI, and when I say horrible things, I mean horrible things.”

“You mean, like killing bad guys?”

“Yeah, like that. You know some of the circumstances. It was the ones that were hand-to-hand combat that were the worst. I didn’t want her to know the things I’d done. I didn’t want her to see my hand on her and know that same hand had slit some guy’s throat.”

Gabe nodded.

“So, I left her. At the time, she was in protective custody and I left her and let her know that I wouldn’t be back, even after I finished my assignment. During that time your Aunt Jodi had befriended your mom and she told me later that I completely broke your mom’s heart and her

spirit. But oh, Gabe, your mom was so strong. She was not gonna just go away and lick her wounds. She decided she was gonna get me back. She came to Savannah and confronted me when I was in the hospital after I'd been shot the night I rescued Jeff. It was her intention to seduce me. She was a strong Christian, and knew that she wasn't supposed to have sex outside of marriage, but she felt like it had to be done in order to wake me up, and, well, I was in the middle of the post trauma sex drive thing and it worked much too easily, and that, son, is when you were conceived.

"We talked through the night and she laid out a perfect argument and she convinced me that she and I were supposed to be together, that we were good together. That was October. Only a short time later, she told me she was pregnant. We married New Year's Day. You were born on that fateful day in June and we have been living in bliss the rest of the time. You have been a treasure for us. Special. A light, Gabe. Such a bright light. And as you know, Ricky Kino was moved by the Spirit to speak to me about God and it was really because of him and his faithfulness in doing the things God moves him to do, that I was brought into the fold."

Gabe nodded. "And because you were, you've taught all of us, and given us the best life ever. Because I don't know how I could be happy if I didn't have God in my life. My relationship with Him, He fills me with so much joy."

Keegan smiled. "Right. And now, because Ricky spoke to *me*, and your mom and I taught *you*, that means Ricky's daughter is gonna have the very best man possible to marry her and take care of her and give her babies and teach them. The intricate and amazing plans God has for us, it's beautiful the way it all fits together."

Gabe sniffed and nodded as his heart filled with the Spirit and his eyes filled with tears.

Keegan smiled. "And I'm so grateful that I hit that deer nineteen years ago. It hurt so bad, but coming through that made everything wonderful. It changed my life in ways I never dreamed and I wouldn't change anything. Especially having you."

Gabe gave a watery smile and sniffed again.

Keegan rose. "It's been a good talk, but I have to get a move on. There are things that need attention at work and I need a cup of coffee, and your mom needs breakfast if she's gonna keep up her strength to feed those babies all day. It takes a lot of calories to produce milk."

Gabe thought about that. "Interesting. Those are things I guess I'm gonna need to learn about. For now, you make coffee and I'll start on Mom's breakfast."

Keegan nodded. “Thanks. But put on a shirt first. Don’t want any chest hairs in the scrambled eggs.”

Gabe chuckled.

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December 3rd, 8:30 AM, Tuesday Morning

CJ’s Apartment, Pine Forest, Georgia

CJ struggled to get his pants buttoned. He’d been able to get the zipper up, but the button wasn’t gonna happen. He sighed. He looked up at the soft knock on his bedroom door. “Come in,” he said.

Violet poked her head in. “Hey, just seeing if you need any help with anything.”

He frowned as he tried once more to button his jeans. She came forward. “Let me get that for you.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said as she quickly buttoned his jeans and smiled. “What else? Are you gonna wear a shirt?”

“I’m not sure how to get a shirt on over this cast.”

She pulled a T-shirt from his drawer and approached. Carefully, she worked the sleeve over the cast and then helped get the shirt over his head and he pushed his other arm through. “There,” she said with a smile. “Sit down and I’ll help you get some shoes on.”

Sighing, he did as ordered.

“I think I can actually do this part by myself.”

“Well, I’m here, so I can do it much faster,” she said.

He watched her as she knelt in front of him. She’d braided her long, blond hair into a single braid that ended at her waist. She wore a soft, flowy, casual moss green skirt that came to mid-calf, with suede boots that looked like hiking boots and an oversized, cream-colored sweater. So feminine. So soft. No glitz. Her simplicity and femininity stirred him.

She finished tying his shoes and looked up at him with her big, blue eyes. “Ready for some breakfast?” she asked.

He frowned. “Violet, you know, you don’t have to do all this. I can take care of myself.”

“You couldn’t even button your pants.”

He shrugged. “So, I was gonna just leave them unbuttoned.”

“That’s good for today, since you’re not going to work, but what will you do when you go back to work?”

He sighed. “That won’t be for about a week. Maybe by then I’ll be able to use my fingers a little bit.”

“Okay, fine. Maybe. We’ll see. But for now, can we just agree that you need my help?”

He sighed. “For now.” He smiled at the pout on her face.

She looked up at him. “So, what is it? Are you thinking me helping you takes away from your manhood or something like that?”

He shrugged. “Maybe a little.”

“CJ, don’t be silly. You are my big strong man. You are not less in my eyes because you got hurt. You wanna be manly? You *are* manly. Now, let me be *girly* and give in to my need to take care of you.”

He smiled. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Well, Lily made up some biscuits this morning, so we have a few of those, and I’m making up some scrambled eggs and some grits and sausage. It’s almost ready, so come in and sit at the table. Would you like some coffee or juice?”

“Yes and yes.” He sat at the table and watched the beautiful girl as she finished preparing breakfast. She was so soft. So, gentle. So sweet. His mind went to the college professor who’d so casually thought he’d take her virginity. Thank goodness her sister and father acted so quickly. She came forward and placed a plate in front of him and put the silverware on his right side to make it easier for him to pick up. She was so thoughtful.

She took her seat. “Who’s gonna bless the food?”

“I will,” he said as he bowed his head and gave thanks for the food and for the young woman who’d prepared it and for their lives. And he prayed for Jericho and gave thanks for his life too.

Violet asked if he wanted jelly or honey on his biscuit and prepared it for him.

He took a bite and sighed in pleasure. “This is so fluffy and perfect.”

Violet nodded. “Lily is just the best. I’m so proud of her.”

Violet took a bite of her eggs and smiled at CJ. “This is nice.”

He nodded. “It’s always nice when you’re with me.”

She sighed. “So, I don’t mean to pressure you, but before things happened yesterday, you and I were gonna get together and talk. You know, you were gonna tell me about Jericho, and what happened between the two of you.”

CJ nodded. “Yes, I was.”

“And now you’re not?”

He chuckled. “I still am.”

“When?”

“Now, babe. Give me a second.”

“Oh.” She smiled sweetly. “Okay. Well, while you’re thinking about what you have to say and how you’re gonna say it, tell me this: why were you and Jericho at that old house yesterday?”

He nodded. “Okay, we’ll start there.” He looked around. “I need my phone. I guess I left it in the bedroom.”

“I’ll get it,” she said quickly. She rushed into the bedroom, grabbed it off the bedside table, came back to him and set it down next to him.

He lifted it and opened the case. Jericho’s phone had been shattered in the fall. CJ’s phone was in an Ameritech military-type case and didn’t even have a scratch. He opened his photos and handed the phone to Violet.

“Scroll through those pics.”

She oohed and ahhed over the beautiful scene. Trees, with a morning mist coming up through them. It was as if they were up in the sky, looking down on a forest on a hill. It was beautiful and she told him so.

He smiled. “That was the view from the deck we were standing on. I wanted to talk to Jericho, settle things with him, tell him things I thought he needed to know. It was the only time I could meet with him and he drove out to Steven’s Bluff to accommodate me for that meeting.”

“Why Steven’s Bluff?”

“Because I had to meet with a real estate lady.”

“With Miss Marjorie?”

“Yes. She showed me that home. It was the second time I’ve looked at it. I was gonna surprise you. Take you on a tour, show you all the potential it had.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“That’s because I’m doing this all wrong. All out of order.” He sighed. “Yesterday I was gonna put a contract on that house, talk to Jericho, then talk to your father and finally, talk to you. I was gonna tell you about Jericho, about my family, about everything, and then officially ask you to marry me.”

She smiled. They’d already spoken of their plans to marry many times, but she didn’t know they were even close to a proposal. “Well, that sounds wonderful.”

He smiled. “Good. Because when it happens, I’m hoping you’ll still feel that way.”

“I will. But I can’t believe you bought a house without me.”

“Well, I never got around to actually telling Marjorie, so if you don’t want it, fine. But I thought you would love it, the way it’s in the woods, the way the trees make you feel like you’re in a tree house. I thought it would be an awesome surprise, but now, I’m thinking, women don’t like that kind of surprise, do they?”

“Hmm, well, it’s a sweet gesture, but yeah, I think a woman would want to be in on a decision to buy a home.”

“Okay. Well, then, it’s good that things happened the way they did.”

"Yeah, except for Jericho being hurt."

"Yes, of course." He shook his head. "I'd like to go see him today."

She nodded. "Let's make that happen. But first, CJ, talk to me."

He nodded. "Okay. Let me begin by telling you that I never had a problem with Jericho. He was my best friend since middle school. We were inseparable."

"And this was up in Rome?"

"Yes." He drew a breath. "My family...died in a house fire shortly after I graduated from high school. My father, my mother, my little brother and my little sister." He stopped as the usual emotion clogged his throat.

Violet's mouth fell open.

He looked at her expression. "Did you have no clue?"

She shook her head. "I was gonna do some research, and like, look into your family and why you didn't have any contact with them, but Dad said if you wanted me to know, you would tell me and so I decided to honor you in that way."

He smiled. "You are such a good, sweet girl."

She took his hand. "Please go on. But first, let me ask you: my father knew what happened?"

CJ shook his head. "He knows the official story, but the official story is not the truth. I needed to tell Jericho and your dad, and then you the real story. Because, Violet, I killed my family."

"What?"

"Not on purpose. But my actions killed them."

She shook her head. "No. My father told me that whatever happened in your past, that you didn't do anything wrong."

"He said that because he doesn't know the truth. If your dad didn't tell you what happened, I'm just curious, what did you think all this time?"

"I thought, maybe you were falsely accused of something and your family disowned you. I never dreamed that they died, especially not so tragically, and especially never dreamed that you would think that you were the cause."

"Well, I was. Let me try to explain." He blew out a breath. "First, I'll tell you the official story. Then I'll tell you what Jericho told me yesterday. And then I'll tell you what really happened."

She nodded and braced herself. All she knew was, no way was she gonna believe that Carson Josiah Blackmon killed his family.

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December 3rd, 9:30 AM, Tuesday Morning
Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Daisy Tanner glanced at her buzzing phone, stopped working on the computer and answered. “Hey, Brody!”

“Hello, Daisy,” he said softly. “It’s really good to hear your voice.”

“You just heard it last night.”

“And that’s not enough,” he said. “Quite a day, yesterday, huh?”

“Yes. But thank God Jericho is gonna be okay.”

“I did. Just a few hours ago. So, how’s Georgia?”

“She’s doing great. Charlie and Matt and Aralyn are totally in love with her and her puppies and even though I still want to see to them myself, they keep beating me to it.”

Brody laughed. “Are their eyes all open now?”

“Yes, and they’re growing and getting so big already.”

“Well, their mom and dad are big. Have you picked out which puppy you want?”

“Yes, and it’s a male and he’s black with a few golden patches and that’s what I want to call him.”

“Patches?”

“Yes, Patches. He’s so sweet and when he looks up at me, it’s with so much longing in those big, brown eyes, it’s like he’s thinking, ‘pick me, pick me’ and I just can’t resist.”

“I look at you that same way,” Brody said.

She giggled. “I can’t resist you either, though your eyes are blue. I wish I could bring you home to live with me.”

He sighed. “So, anyway, I’m on my way to class where I’m about to give my big speech, so I thought I’d call you to get you to help me calm my nerves a little.”

“Nerves? You didn’t seem a bit nervous on Sunday when you spoke.”

“Well, that was in front of people who believe the same things I believe, AND, that wasn’t for a grade.”

“Wasn’t it?” Daisy said quickly.

Brody laughed. “Thank you. That helped.”

“Let’s pray,” Daisy said. “I’ll do it,” she volunteered quickly. “Father, Brody is about to give a speech in class and we don’t really care about a good grade but what we really care about is how what he says affects the teacher and the students. We pray, Father, that You will fill Brody with Your Holy Spirit so that what he says touches the hearts and souls of all those who listen to him. Help him to help all the people in that class today in one way or another. And I said we don’t really care about a good grade, but actually, he needs a good grade, so first we pray that he will help the people and second, that he’ll get a good grade. Help him to not be nervous, and help him to get grounded, and help him to know exactly what

to do and say. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen."

"Amen," Brody whispered. "Daisy, you never cease to amaze me."

"I hope it helps."

"I already feel better. Thank you for your strength."

"Thank you for yours. Call me and let me know how it goes."

"You can depend on it."

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Psalm 19:14

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

Chapter Twenty-Four

December 3rd, 10:00 AM, Tuesday Morning
CJ's Apartment, Pine Forest, Georgia

They'd started the discussion with Violet sitting across from CJ at the small dining table as they ate breakfast. Sometime during the talk, though, Violet had moved to the chair right next to CJ, facing him, and currently, CJ had tears in his eyes and Violet had tears running down her cheeks.

She grabbed up another paper napkin and wiped her face and sniffed. "CJ, Carson, I am so sorry. So sorry for what you've been through. So sorry for the loss of your parents and the loss of your brother and sister, the loss of a happy life."

He sighed. "Thank you." He shook his head. "Yes, Vi, those things are sad, and yeah, I still get emotional when I think about it, but still, I didn't lose my life, did I? Somehow, I made it through. Well, not somehow. JJ got me out of the house. He says it was God's plan that I live. And like I said, when Mr. Nash said what he said at church Sunday, it got to me. It felt like he was talking straight to me."

Violet nodded. "Maybe he was. Maybe God was trying to get through to you. I mean, Mr. Nash said, for some reason, God was telling him to talk about regret instead of what he was gonna talk about. Why do you think God impressed it on his mind?"

CJ shook his head. "Certainly not just for me."

"Well, first, why not just for you? You're important. But you might be right. Maybe there were others there at church Sunday who also needed to hear that very message. But I'll tell you this, God doesn't make mistakes, and He had Mr. Nash change his talk to something he'd noticed at the event. Regret. Maybe Mr. Nash noticed that at the event because the Holy Spirit touched his heart and mind and made sure he noticed. Maybe God knew that Mr. Nash would be asked to speak instead of Mr. Kino. I mean, not maybe. Of course God knew. I'm just saying that Mr. Nash speaking right to you was not just a fluke. He was speaking right to you."

CJ nodded. "It seems he was. And for once, I really listened. For once everything seemed to make sense and I knew I had to act on what I heard. He said, more than once during that talk, to confess and move on, and I

knew I had to come clean and tell you and JJ and soon, your father, what really happened. I knew JJ thought I was mad at him, and I had to set him straight. I wasn't mad. I just couldn't look him in the eye because I felt like I destroyed his life."

"And you just told me that he said you didn't. He said he was happy, maybe even more fulfilled because of what he's doing, because he's helping to save lives."

"Right." CJ drew a deep breath.

"But, CJ, Carson," she said softly, "I'm so..."

"Why are you suddenly calling me by my name?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. This discussion seems too important to call you by your initials. It just came to me, that the person who is Carson, the little baby named Carson Josiah who grew into such a fine man, it seemed like I should call you by your name. Do you not like your name?"

"It's a good name. It's just that no one calls me that, not even my parents. I think I do like how it sounds coming out of your mouth, though it seems a bit too formal."

Violet smiled. "Hmm, what does Carson mean?"

He shook his head. "Nothing special really. Son of Carr... I think it's Scottish. But my middle name, Josiah, is the name of a king, one of the youngest kings in the Bible, he became king at eight years old, and he was one of the few good kings and he loved the Lord."

She nodded. "Cool. I wonder what Josiah means, like in Hebrew. Do you know?"

"Hmm, no, I don't."

She pulled up her phone and quickly looked it up and her eyes opened wide. "Oh, wow," she whispered.

He smiled. "What is it? Does it say large and handsome man who loves purple flowers?"

She slowly shook her head. "It says, Josiah means several things. Jehovah heals is one."

He nodded. "That's good?"

She nodded and drew a deep breath. "It also means— fire of the Lord or the Lord burns."

He was silent a minute.

"Well," Violet said softly. "I'm not sure how you feel about that, but it certainly is like, prophetic I guess."

He nodded. "I guess it is. I suppose I could say that God really does have a purpose and design for me."

Her eyes opened wide. "Maybe that's what He wants you to know.

Maybe that's why I suddenly felt like calling you by your name. He wanted you to know that nothing is random."

He sighed, smiled and held his good hand out to her.

She placed her hand in his.

CJ cleared his throat. "So, I'm sorry, I interrupted you earlier. You were about to say something."

She reached over and took his hand in both of her hands and squeezed. "Carson Josiah Blackmon, I was gonna say that I'm so glad that you didn't kill yourself and I'm so sorry that you even got to the point where you even thought about it. I hurt so much for you, but I'm also proud of you. Proud that somehow, you pulled yourself out of it."

He shook his head. "Well, actually, that was your father. He saved me. He pulled me from the fire."

"My father?"

"I somehow came to the decision that if I didn't have the nerve to end my miserable life, then I had to do something to earn money and support myself. I'd had a huge amount of insurance money, but I was plowing through it pretty fast. I needed a job and I heard about Ameritech and for some reason, it seemed like that was what I needed to do. And I reasoned, that at the very least I'd learn how to handle a gun and later, if I still wanted to do it, I could take my own life. So, I applied to Ameritech, but I was turned down. It was the background check. My DUIs. The turn down was par for the course for me. I was deep into victimhood. Woe is me. Poor little me.

"But something told me to try again, and when I applied, give a statement about the DUIs, an explanation, right up front, and maybe they would consider my application. So, I did. I explained about losing my family, and that I was floundering and that I was now trying to make something of myself. Next thing I knew, your father wanted to interview me personally. He was very kind, but very firm. I felt a lot of respect for the man. I even felt myself wanting to please him. I told him about the fire and losing my family. The official version. He investigated and then said he was gonna give me a chance.

"My life improved quickly. I began to remember that my parents raised me as a Christian. I started to pray again. When I shared this information with your father, he began to pray with me whenever we met together. One day, as I was driving to an assignment, back when I was twenty-five, a song came on the radio, and I was suddenly so filled with the Spirit. That day, I gave myself to Jesus, I committed myself right then and there as I was driving."

"What song was it?"

"It was 'Here's My Heart, Lord,' by Casting Crowns. Have you heard it? It's an older one, but it got to me."

"Yes, I've heard it. We sing it in praise sometimes."

"After that day, I was truly a changed man. But still, I wasn't all the way healed. I still suffered, but I pushed it down. At least I was functioning again. For the next few years, I tried really hard to please and impress your father, and I guess I did, because when he needed some bodyguards for his own family this past summer, I was one of the chosen ones, and I thank God for that, because that brought me to you."

Violet smiled and the radiance of that almost took his breath away.

He squeezed her hands and lovingly rubbed his thumb back and forth over the back of her hand. "You, Violet, stole my heart. I knew the rules, but the pull to you was so strong, I was willing to break the rules. And knowing how much I wanted to please your father and move up in the company, you gotta know, the pull was stronger than anything I've ever experienced. I was so in love with you. And that first time you said those three little words to me, I thought I'd rise off the ground. I swear. You totally blew me away. But I couldn't stand the dishonesty, and that's why I finally confessed to your father."

She smiled. "That was quite a day."

"It was the right thing to do. And I was willing to take the punishment, if he'd just let me be with you. And then I thought, I'd get through that and eventually he'd consent to our marriage and that would be that. But then JJ showed up in Pine Forest and I felt myself spiraling down. And I realize now that's because I hadn't dealt with my past."

"And then Mr. Nash spoke," Violet said. "And now you have. But one thing I don't understand. Why would you think that I wouldn't love you anymore once you told me what happened?"

"Because, I *did* kill my family. And then I kept it hidden. I didn't tell the police. Of course, at first, I couldn't tell them."

"Why not?"

"Because I had amnesia from the head wound. It was pretty severe. Blunt force trauma from a large, heavy-duty pipe wrench. It was actually months before I could remember what actually happened."

"Did you remember Jericho coming to see you in the hospital?"

"Yes. I just didn't remember how the fire started. Not until months after I was released from the hospital, and once I did remember, I didn't bother to correct the fire marshal's report."

"But now you understand that you can't blame yourself for what happened to your family, right?"

"Well, JJ said, whether it's true or not, whether I was responsible or not, the message from God was to confess and let go of the regret and move forward. Jesus has me covered and He and my own family would want me to do good things with my life. Worthwhile things. And I want to. I really do. So, Violet, I need to know, I need to hear you say it, after all you've learned about me today, can you still love me?"

She sighed. "To me, it seems like such a silly question, but I'm understanding that to you it feels legit. I love you now more than ever. And I admire you. The way you fought your way back, the strength it took to overcome the depression, that is no small thing, and even more, the learning curve at Ameritech, it's not easy. And the way you came back to Jesus, the prodigal son, that's joyous. And your humility and strength and putting yourself out there though it makes you vulnerable. Carson Josiah, I am so in love with you."

He closed his eyes briefly, sighed and smiled. "You don't know the weight that was just lifted off my shoulders."

She shook her head. "How you could even think that I could stop loving you is actually a little insulting, but I won't take offense when no offense is intended. Have some confidence in me. I am not shallow or easily deterred. Just a little naive sometimes," she said as she shook her head in disgust.

He sighed. "Are you talking about New York?"

She nodded.

"Violet, he knew what he was doing. He'd obviously done it many times, taking advantage of young, innocent girls and it makes me furious to think about what he even thought he was gonna do to you."

"Well, it's over. He didn't get to do what he had planned, and I'm grateful. And now, I have you, CJ, and I'll never be in that kind of situation ever again."

"Well, never say never, so, we'll stay vigilant and be smart."

She rose and circled around behind him and put her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "CJ, thank you so much for finally telling me about your family, about your past. I love you so much."

He rubbed his good hand over her arms. "Thank you, babe, for listening, and for loving me, because I love you, Violet. You are the sweetest, most beautiful, most angelic girl I've ever known."

She sighed and pulled back. "Hmm, so, CJ, that makes me wonder, have you known many girls?"

He grimaced. "Oh, um, well, yes, a few."

She stood up straight but kept her hands on his shoulders. "Oh, so, well, I'm just wondering, like, are you still a virgin?"

He frowned and sighed. “I guess we need to talk about this part too.” He drew a deep breath. “Okay, so, Violet, I, uh, so, like I said, I went through a bad time, when I wasn’t being a very good guy. I was depressed. I was truly lost. I’d forgotten all about God. I guess you could say that I chose the dark side for a while.”

“So, I guess that means ‘no’ you are not still a virgin?”

“Is that a deal-breaker?”

“No, of course not. If Dad and Rose hadn’t arrived in New York on time, I guess I wouldn’t be a virgin either.”

“Even if you weren’t, that wasn’t willful. What I did was willful sinning. I knew better and I did it anyway.”

“How many were there?”

He shrugged. “Well, to make it worse, I’m not really sure. I was in a fog of alcohol and, well, some drugs. It could be a few, but to be honest, it could be more than that and probably is.”

She frowned. “So, you know what it’s like to have sex.”

He nodded. “Violet, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. It’s another one of my very deep regrets.”

She nodded. “I understand and I forgive you and I’m sure God forgives you. It’s just that, I hate that some woman who doesn’t really love you or care about you, knows you, I mean, in that physical way. She knows—I guess *they* know you better than I do.”

He shook his head. “They don’t know me at all. I was just a number to them. They don’t remember me any more than I remember them. And Vi, I do know what it’s like to have sex, but I don’t know what it’s like to make love. And one day, Violet, I’m gonna make love to you, the right time and the right way.”

“That sounds like a proposal.”

“Well, to be honest, you have to know that’s coming. I just want to speak to your father first.”

She walked away, wringing her hands. “Do you know when you’re gonna do that?”

“Soon.”

“Okay.” She came back to the table and began clearing the dishes. She then quickly did up the dishes and cleaned the tiny kitchen.

He came to the kitchen door and leaned against the jamb. “Violet?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you upset?”

“I don’t think so.”

He frowned, because that meant ‘yes.’ “Is it about the sex thing?”

"I don't think so. I don't think I'm upset." She went past him to his bedroom and began making up the bed. She looked up as he followed her into the bedroom. "CJ, did you take your pain meds this morning?"

He shook his head. "It said only 'as needed.' I'm okay right now."

She nodded and rounded the bed to reach the spread on the other side. He came up behind her and circled her waist with his good arm. "Vi," he said softly. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure."

He sighed. "Turn around and look at me."

She did. She really looked at him. He was a big guy. Like Jericho, he was big and strong and played football in high school. He had a cute, boyishly handsome face. Dark eyes, thick brown hair cut short on the sides and back, but allowed to grow on top a little. A nice, straight nose, a strong jaw, pretty lips, she thought, as she glanced down at them. "I'm looking," she finally said.

"I'm in love with you, Violet. You. Only you. And I want to spend the rest of my life proving it to you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I love you too, CJ."

"Do you trust me? Or have my confessions to you caused you to lose your trust in me?"

"No, I haven't lost trust in you. I do trust you."

"Good," he murmured as he leaned forward and kissed her softly on the lips, keeping his good arm around her waist to hold her tight.

She sighed and lifted both her arms up around his neck. "Kiss me again," she said.

He did, and next thing he knew, they were sitting on the bed, and then lying on the bed and he covered her. He kissed her one more time and tried to get up off of her, but she held him there.

"What are you doing, Vi?" he said with a chuckle.

"I'm trying to figure out what I'm feeling."

He sighed. "So, does this have to do with the 'not a virgin' thing?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. I mean, I guess. It feels weird that those women know you in a way that I don't."

He frowned and thought for a moment. "Okay." He sighed. "Let's play that game, but before I do, I just want to say that the point I'm about to make doesn't mean that I condone what I've done in the past. I don't. I sinned. I've repented. I have regrets. But I'm trying to move forward."

"Okay."

"Okay. So, have you ever kissed another guy?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"The professor that tried to rape you, did you kiss him?"

She sighed. “Yes.”

“Did it mean anything to you?”

“At the time I thought it did, but no, not really.”

“That guy, that criminal, he knows what it feels like to kiss you. He knows how you taste, how your mouth feels. Though it’s only a kiss, he knows things that I wish only I knew, as the man who loves you and wants you as the mother of his children.”

She nodded as she thought about what he was saying.

“Is he the only one you ever kissed?”

“No. I’ve had a few boyfriends over the years.”

“How many?”

“I’d say about six.”

“Wow. Did you kiss any of them?”

She shrugged. “Probably all of them except maybe one, and he was only six years old.”

“So, all those guys know what it’s like to kiss my wife.”

She frowned. “But those guys didn’t mean anything to me. It was just the process of growing up and waking up and discovering myself and learning and maturing.”

He nodded and raised his eyebrows. “Well, the same can be said for the girls I’ve been with. The exact same thing. They didn’t mean anything to me. I was learning and growing and going through a dark time that I would eventually evolve from. Right?”

She sighed. “Yes, I get it. Good point.”

“I’m sorry, Vi, that I’ve made so many mistakes. And that was what I was questioning when I thought maybe you couldn’t love me after I told you what I’d done. I hope you can forgive me, and trust me that I am going to strive very hard to be a godly man of Christ. To be like your father, who sets such a good example. Can you forgive me?”

“Yes, CJ, I can forgive you and I do trust you.”

He lowered his head and kissed her. Again and again. It turned very passionate, very quickly. Violet moaned and whispered words that shocked him. He raised up and looked at her. “Did you just say what I think you said?”

She nodded. “Yes, you heard me. Show me how to make love. I trust you that much, CJ.”

He drew a deep breath. “Violet, thank you for your trust and I’m gonna do just that—when it’s right. I can’t come this far and then willfully go against God again.” He kissed her nose and rose up off the bed, adjusting his sling as he did.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm showing you that your trust in me is not misplaced."

He held out his good arm. "Come on, babe. Let's go visit JJ and see how he's doing. I need to have a talk with his parents, and don't you have some kids to teach at the Center?"

She nodded as she allowed him to pull her up. "Yes, I do."

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When CJ and Violet got to the hospital they'd had to wait their turn. Jericho's parents were in visiting him. Joshua, Jericho's twin brother, sat in the waiting room talking on the phone. He smiled and nodded at CJ and Violet as they walked in. He was busy assuring one of his coaches that he would be on a plane and would join them in Miami by Wednesday morning. "Yes, I'll tell him. Thank you, sir. Got it. Yep."

He ended the call and smiled at CJ and came to him immediately to shake his hand. "CJ, how are you feeling?"

He nodded. "I seem to be okay. I don't know why I didn't get hurt worse than I did. I do think I landed on some deep brush that maybe broke my fall a bit."

"Well, I'm glad you're okay." He smiled at Violet. "How are you doing this morning, Violet, right?"

She nodded. "Right. Very good."

"I have a head for remembering people."

CJ chuckled. "Jericho does that too. It's a thing they have," he explained to Violet.

"So?" Joshua asked. "How are you doing? And how is your sister?"

Violet smiled. "Rose is doing okay. She's worried about Jericho."

"Where is she?"

"Jericho made her go take care of some business at the Center. And she's having his phone repaired. It was smashed in the fall. Why? Are you upset that she's not here?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I was hoping to get to see her before I have to leave, which I'm gonna do this evening." He glanced at CJ. "You know, I have a million questions to ask you."

CJ nodded. "I bet. Maybe after we get in to see JJ, we can find a place to have a conversation."

"That would be great. I'd like to drive out to see where he fell. Would that be possible?"

"Sure. Violet has to go teach music to some kids at the Center, so you can drive me there."

Violet smiled. "I want to see that place too," she said and then turned to Joshua. "So, did the Kinos take good care of you last night?"

Joshua nodded. “Now, those are some pretty awesome people. Very genuine. Very real. Of course, that’s what everyone says about them, but it doesn’t sink in until you’re sitting in their kitchen watching them stand side by side doing dishes together. They’re just regular people.”

“And yet they’re not,” CJ put in. “They are very special people. They truly live their religion and they help a lot of people, most of them, you’ll never know about.”

Joshua nodded. “I can see that. And they are special. They actually have, this power emanating from them. They’re very friendly. And man, that place they have. It’s spectacular.”

“It is,” Violet said. “And the designer was just a local girl and they are doing so much for her. They’ve recommended her and she’s beginning to get big-name clients all over the nation. It’s really wonderful. Rose and I went to school with her.”

“That’s cool,” Joshua said. “I guess the power the Kinos have, it’s like, the power to change someone’s life with the snap of their fingers.”

“They pray every morning for God to put someone in their path that He wants them to serve and then they put their whole selves into it.”

“It seems your family does the same thing,” Joshua said to Violet.

“They do,” CJ said. “Her father changed my life and pulled me out of my funk. If not for him, I’d probably be dead.”

Joshua nodded thoughtfully. “Sounds like a story.”

“It is. If we have time, I’ll tell you today.”

Violet smiled. He was airing out all of his dirty laundry and cleansing his heart and soul and it was a beautiful thing. “Joshua, you know, you’re a pretty big celebrity yourself,” she said.

He shook his head. “I’m just good at playing a game. No big deal. But seeing how the Kinos operate, it makes me want to do more with the blessings I’ve been given.” He smiled. “And so, there ya have it. They’ve influenced me too, to do something bigger for others. They really are powerful people.”

At that moment, Joshua’s parents came into the room. They smiled and nodded at CJ and Violet.

“How’s he doing?” Joshua asked.

His father nodded. “He seems to be okay. The danger has passed. Don’t you need to get back to practice?”

Joshua sighed. “Yes. I’m flying out tonight. I’m gonna go see my brother. Are you guys gonna stick around?”

“We’ll be here,” his mother said.

Joshua left the room and Mrs. Jones came to take CJ’s hands

immediately. “I have so many questions. Like where have you been and how have you been and what are you doing with your life?”

He smiled at her. “Let’s sit down and I’ll tell you everything.”

Violet smiled. He was gonna share the story again. This was definitely gonna be good for the cleansing of his soul. They all sat down and Violet listened as CJ poured out his heart. She was a little surprised at how Mr. Jones seemed slightly perturbed. She knew CJ picked up on it, because he apologized and begged for forgiveness.

“I understand that my stupid decision to fight those guys was what caused JJ to lose his football scholarship. I understand that he would probably have gone pro, just like Josh. I understand that I almost caused his death too. I understand all of the consequences of my actions, which is why I came so close to offing myself. But I wasn’t able to do it.”

“Thank goodness,” Mrs. Jones said quickly. “What good would that have done? Just one more death. No, you were meant to stick around.”

He nodded as he glanced at Mr. Jones. “That’s what JJ says too. He says I have unfinished work to do and that God wants me to ‘go forth’ and do something good.”

“Jericho is right,” she said. “My son has always been very spiritual. He truly knows God.”

CJ nodded. “He is a special guy.”

“So,” Mr. Jones said abruptly. “What ARE you gonna do?”

“Well, I have a good job. I have a very special girl at my side. I intend to get as close to God as possible, like the Kinos and the Tanners and Jericho. And I intend to make a family, teach them that God is real, and accomplish some good works in honor of my deceased family.”

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December 3rd, Tuesday Evening

Ingles Grocery, Pine Forest, Georgia

“Oh, this is a sweet little grocery store,” Taylor exclaimed as they drove into the large parking lot.

“Little?” Gabe said. “I mean, it’s not a giant supercenter, but it’s as large as the average grocery store.”

“Really?”

Gabe looked over at her as he took off his seatbelt. “Have you ever even been grocery shopping?”

She frowned. “Yes, I have. Mom and I shop for groceries all the time. What are you trying to say?”

He laughed. “I’m not trying to fight with you or say anything. It just popped into my mind that you guys might have your groceries delivered or something, ya know, just because of the celeb thing.”

"Well, in that case, do *you* go grocery shopping?"

"I'm not a celebrity."

"You are, you just don't realize it. But you get recognized every time I'm out with you."

"Well, maybe, but at least here in my hometown, they don't make a big deal about it." He got out of the car and rushed to open her door for her. "Anyway, I'm glad you're with me to do this."

"I'm glad too. I'm glad your mom told me I could pick it out."

Gabe grinned. "She trusts your taste."

Taylor nodded. "I told you I have good taste."

They walked into the large, well-lit grocery store and headed straight to the bakery. The woman smiled at them as they walked up to the counter. "Well, hello there, Gabriel Tanner," the older woman said.

Taylor giggled. Gabe smiled. "Hey, Mrs. Hutchinson. I didn't know you worked here."

"Well, the kids are all gone off to college and I decided to work at the bakery since I love to decorate cakes."

He nodded. "That's cool. Uh, Mrs. Hutchinson, let me introduce you to my girlfriend. This is Taylor Kino. Taylor, Mrs. Hutchinson is the mom of a couple of guys I played football with at Pine Forest."

"Oh my, yes, I know who you are," the older woman gushed. "And you're just as pretty in person as you are on TV."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hutchinson."

"So, what can I do for you?"

Taylor spoke up. "Well, we would like to order a large birthday cake for little Iris."

"Oh my, how old is she gettin' to be?"

"She'll be three in one week," Gabe supplied.

"Do you know what you have in mind?"

"Not really, but Taylor is gonna pick one out. It just has to be big."

"Got it. Come over, Taylor, and you can look through a book and pick out what you like, and if you don't see what you like, I can do a custom order for you."

Taylor nodded and followed her over to a little table with a giant book on it that held pictures of cakes.

Gabe watched as she slowly flipped the pages. He pointed to a few. "That one's cool," he said as he pointed to a cake that looked like a football field, goal and all.

Taylor rolled her eyes at him. "Okay, let's get that one."

"Really?"

"Uh, no."

"So, ya gonna get a princess-type thing?" Gabe asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing Disney."

Gabe nodded. "Right. Well, is it okay if I go round up the rest of the list while you decide?"

"That sounds like a good idea," she said with a smile.

He kissed her cheek. "Okay. Be back soon."

She smiled as she watched him walk away. He was really such a hunk and she simply enjoyed looking at him. He was dressed casually, in jeans, athletic shoes and a gray UGA sweatshirt. So cute. Sighing, she turned back to the book and kept browsing.

It wasn't much longer before she made a decision and finished placing the order with Mrs. Hutchinson. Taylor smiled as the woman scurried away to enter the order into the computer.

"Hey there."

Taylor thanked Mrs. Hutchinson and turned to see who was speaking to her. It was a couple of young guys. Thinking they may be friends of Gabe, she smiled kindly at them. "Hello!"

"So, aren't you that Taylor Kino?"

She nodded. "I am. Are you Gabe's friends?"

They snickered.

"I wouldn't exactly call him a friend," the other guy said.

Taylor immediately got nervous and looked around to see if she could see Gabe. "Well then," she said, "nice to meet you, but I have to be off."

"Why? Don't you wanna stick around and be friendly?"

"I really have to go."

The first one to speak reached his hand out and tugged on a lock of her hair. "I swear, that Gabe is one lucky guy. You are totally hot."

"Yeah, well, you take care," she said quickly and tried to head out.

One of them grabbed her by the wrist. "What? You think you're too good for us?"

Taylor couldn't believe this was happening. "Of course that's not what I think. But you are being very rude."

He reached up and put his hand on her shoulder.

"You need to stop touching me," she warned as she pulled away.

They laughed. "Why? You gonna kung fu us?"

"I don't wanna have to, but I will. But I probably won't have to, because Gabe is here in the store."

"Yeah, right. He's here and he left you alone?"

"That's because I can take care of myself. Now, if you'll excuse me," she said as she started to walk away. She whirled around though, when he

put his hand on her backside. She didn't mean to hurt him. It was pure instinct. She whirled and her foot caught him in the face. It was just a glancing blow, but it made him back off. Thank goodness.

The guy had his hand on his cheek and his eyes glared into hers. "You think you're something, don't ya?"

"I believe I gave you fair warning."

"Come on," his friend said. "Let's get out of here."

They took off. Taylor watched to make sure they left the store and then started searching for Gabe. He was on the other side of the store having meat sliced in the deli. She ran to him.

He smiled at her. "All done?"

She nodded. Her heart was still beating hard. She suddenly didn't want to tell him what happened like she was some baby who went crying the moment she felt scared. She drew a deep breath.

"So, what did ya end up getting?"

"I got a custom design. It had a lake on it and a field and bunches of flowers of all different kinds."

"Sounds perfect."

Taylor nodded. "What else do you need to get?"

"I'm almost done. Just this last order of lunch meat."

The man behind the counter handed him the package. "Here ya go, Gabe. Tell your dad I said hello."

"Yes, sir, I will. Thanks." He threw the lunch meat in the basket and smiled at Taylor. "Let's go check out."

She nodded.

"You okay? You seem upset."

She breathed a sigh. "I'm okay. I just wanna get home."

His brow furrowed. "Why? What's wrong?"

She glanced around quickly and shrugged. "Nothing really. I mean, it was probably nothing."

"What is 'it'?" he asked as they found an open register and began putting the groceries on the conveyor.

"Well, it's just that, a couple of guys called my name and came up to talk to me."

Gabe nodded. "Okay. Normal."

She nodded. "Right, so I asked them if they were friends of yours and they said they wouldn't call it that."

Gabe frowned.

"And they started flirting with me, and touching me."

"Touching you?"

"Yeah, like, my hair and my shoulder. And then I said I had to go and tried to walk away but one of them grabbed my wrist to stop me."

Gabe forced himself to be calm.

"But I pulled my hand away from him but then he put his hand, right here." She turned and showed him.

"Where did they go?" Gabe said immediately.

"Well, the thing is, I sort of kicked him. It was instinct. I kicked him in the face."

Gabe smiled. "Cool. Did you hurt him?" he asked as he tapped the debit card.

"Not really. It was a glancing blow."

"We'll have to work on that."

She smiled. "Anyway, I told them you were in the store and they left in a hurry."

"You saw them actually leave the store?"

She nodded.

"Good."

"I admit, they scared me for a minute."

He sighed. "Sorry, Taylor. I guess I shouldn't have left you. I've been told that because of the good stuff we're trying to do, we're always gonna be a target. I need to take that seriously." He pushed the cart filled with bagged items toward the door.

She stopped at the door and looked around nervously. "Do you think they've gone?"

"Probably."

They headed across the parking lot toward his father's SUV. They were almost there when there was a flurry of movement and suddenly the two guys were coming at them from the far side of the parking lot.

"Oh no," Taylor cried, her fear evident. "That's them."

"Get in the car and lock the doors," Gabe ordered immediately.

"But..."

"Do it," he growled.

She obeyed and immediately pulled out her phone.

Gabe eased toward the area in front of the car so that the streetlight allowed him to see better. He started talking to the guys, feeling them out. Figuring out who they were and what their problem was with him.

Taylor called her father.

"Daddy," she said, unable to control the panic in her voice.

"What's wrong, Taylor?" He put the phone on speaker so that Bree and Keegan and Lizzy could hear. They'd been invited to the Tanners for dinner and had just arrived.

"Daddy, some guys are, well, I think they're gonna pick a fight with Gabe and there's two of them and only one of Gabe."

"Are you still at the grocery store?" Ricky asked as he and Keegan grabbed keys and headed out the door.

"Yes, sir."

"Where is Gabe? Can you see him?" Ricky asked as Keegan made a call on his phone.

Taylor was breathing hard. "Yes, sir. He's right in front of me, in the parking lot. Oh, no, one guy just pushed him."

"He's okay. Where are you?"

"I'm in the car. Gabe told me to get in the car and lock the doors."

"Good girl."

"Oh no, Daddy, two more guys just came up. Oh, Daddy, Gabe's in trouble. Four against one. I have to go help him."

"Do not get out of that car."

She gasped. "He has a knife. One of the guys has a knife, Daddy."

"Are they fighting yet?"

She shrieked. "Yes, the guy with the knife just tried to cut Gabe. I have to go help him."

"Taylor, you can't help him. Do not get out of that car. I mean it. We're on the way and Keegan just called the cops. One of us will be there in just a minute."

"Oh, no! He's down."

"Gabe?"

"Yes. Oh, wait. He's back up. One of the guys is down. He's screaming. He's holding his leg. I think Gabe broke his knee. Oh, the guy with the knife is swinging it at him. Gabe just grabbed his arm, but the guy behind him, no, Gabe kicked the guy coming from behind in the face. He's down."

"Who's down?"

"The guy that came from behind." She was silent a moment. "They've got Gabe on the ground. I have to go help. I'm getting out."

"Taylor," Keegan said sternly. "If you want to help him, then don't get out of the car. That will distract him. Trust him."

"But they have him down!"

"Do they have him down or is he using momentum to take them down?" Ricky asked.

She sniffed. "I don't know. I can't let them hurt him, Daddy."

"We are about one minute out. Stay put."

"Oh, Daddy! The police are here. Oh, thank goodness."

Taylor watched as two police cars pulled up and the officers jumped out, their guns drawn. The fight stopped immediately. Gabe dropped to the ground on his knees, his hands in the air. She gasped at the sight of him. He had blood running down his face. One of the guys took off running and one of the cops took off after him. Taylor smiled. The guy was running straight toward the car. She waited for the perfect moment and slammed open her car door.

He smashed into the door and crumpled. In a few seconds, the cop was on him and had him cuffed.

Taylor smiled as her father and Mr. Tanner screeched up beside her.

Keegan immediately went to see about Gabe, who was still on his knees in the parking lot and pointing to the guy who'd had the knife as he spoke to one of the officers.

Keegan nodded at the officer. "I'm Keegan Tanner."

The officer nodded. "Yes, sir. I was just getting the story from Gabe."

"Mind if I see to his injuries first?"

"No, sir. Go ahead. I called EMS."

Keegan knelt next to Gabe. "Hey, you okay?"

Gabe nodded as he caught his breath. "Yes, sir."

"That's a lot of blood on your face."

Gabe nodded. "Knife caught me on the forehead."

"Is that the only injury?"

"Yes, sir, I mean, it's the only one on me. The other guys, they didn't fare so well."

Keegan smiled. A second later the paramedics arrived in three different vehicles since multiple injuries were reported.

They headed to the unconscious guy first and two of the medics worked on him. They went to another one who was laid out groaning. His kneecap *was* broken, just as Taylor suspected. The knife guy was holding his wrist, which Gabe knew was broken. The guy who Taylor bashed with the car door had a bloody nose. Finally, one of the medics knelt in front of Gabe with a smile. "Well, hello there, Tanner."

Gabe smiled at the guy who'd graduated high school with his oldest sister. "Hey, Cody."

"You did quite a bit of damage tonight."

Gabe nodded. "It was them or me."

He examined Gabe's head. "Looks like you're gonna need stitches."

"Ya can't just butterfly it?"

"Not this time. Unless you want a big ugly scar across your forehead, and I don't think your mom or your girlfriend would want you to mess up your pretty little face."

Gabe chuckled. "Okay."

He checked Gabe's blood pressure. "Pressure is normal. Actually, it's great. You got ice water in your veins?"

Gabe smiled. "Healthy living."

Taylor approached and knelt beside him. He reached out and took her hand. "I'm okay."

"I was so worried," Taylor said.

"I was worried about you too. I'm really proud of you that you did what I said and stayed in the car."

She frowned. "Well, to be honest, I almost didn't." She handed him her phone. "Um, someone wants to talk to you. You're on speaker."

Gabe took the phone. "Hello?"

"Get the stitches and make sure they clean the area really well, because I see another infection, but you can avoid it. They'll give you antibiotics in the hospital, and I'm gonna have some of my new meds overnighted to you."

Gabe smiled. "Thank you, Miss Jeffy."

"You're welcome."

"Sorry to be so much trouble."

"You are never any trouble. The bad guys are gonna keep coming for you. We're gonna fight them together."

"Ya know, I really don't get it. I'm not the only one who is trying to spread a little light in the world."

It was Grandmaster Kino's soft voice that answered the question. "No, you're not the only one, and the bad guys are after all of them to one extent or another. However, Gabe, it's not just a 'little' light you're spreading. With your daily messages and your challenges combined with your upright living and being in constant service, you have planted millions of seeds and changed hundreds of thousands of lives. I'm proud of you. Keep up the good work."

Gabe nodded. "Thank you, sir. I will do my best."

"Mr. Tanner?" the paramedic started. "Let us go ahead and transport him. If *we* bring him in, they'll get to him much faster."

Keegan nodded. "Gabe? Okay with you?"

"I guess, if it gets me home faster."

"I need to get his statement before you transport," the officer said.

"Yes, sir," Gabe responded.

"And I need to give a statement too," Taylor said. "Because two of them accosted me in the store before we came out."

The officer nodded. "Well, that's good to know."

Keegan pointed to the cameras in the parking lot. “And you can pull footage from the cameras both outside and inside the store.”

The officer nodded again. “We’ll take care of it.”

Gabe gave his statement and the paramedics took over.

Taylor then gave her statement as Ricky and Keegan listened in, both of their faces turning dark as they visualized what she described.

Gabe was strapped onto the gurney for the ride and lifted in. Gabe gave a thumbs up.

Ricky put his arm around his daughter. “We’ll gather up the groceries you guys just bought and head back to your house. Hopefully, it won’t be too long.”

“Thanks, Rick,” Keegan said. “Make sure Lizzy is okay and let her know that Gabe is okay.”

“Will do.”

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1 Peter 3:5-7

For this is the way the holy women of the past who
put their hope in God used to adorn themselves.
They submitted themselves to their own husbands,
like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord.
You are her daughters if you do what is right
and do not give way to fear.
Husbands, in the same way be considerate
as you live with your wives, and treat them
with respect as the weaker partner and as
heirs with you of the gracious gift of life,
so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Chapter Twenty-Five

December 4th, Wednesday Morning
Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia

The morning dawned bright and cold. The night before had started rough, but had ended nicely.

The doctor at the hospital was very neat and precise in stitching up Gabe's forehead to cause as little scarring as possible. Before Keegan and Gabe headed home they stopped to see Jericho in the ICU. Jericho joked with Gabe that he just wanted to have a fancy white headdress too, and now they matched. They were happy to hear that Jericho was doing well and they were gonna move him to a "step-down" unit in the morning. Rose was there and was commanded by Jericho to go home and have dinner with the family.

Back at the Tanner home, dinner was later than they'd planned, but Lily and Daisy had whipped up some hors d'oeuvres to hold people over. The dinner was delicious, the company was delightful, interesting stories were told and Taylor was allowed to stay the night one more time because she was concerned about Gabe.

Gabe's eyes met his father's during the discussion. He wanted to see if his father understood Gabe's and Taylor's need to be together after the early morning talk they'd had. It seemed he understood, but he still pulled Gabe aside later and reminded him to be strong. He reminded him that many times, good intentions were not enough, and if they had to be together, allow her to come to him on the sofa, and for him to *not* go up to the bedroom. Gabe had assured his father he would follow that advice.

Sure enough, Taylor did come down the stairs to find Gabe. He had a headache, and she made him some of Jeffy's special tea for pain and gave him a massage on his temples, brow and neck. He complimented her on how much the massage helped, and she told him it was a massage her father had taught her when she'd been sick when she was younger. Once she finished easing his pain, they'd prayed together and snuggled up together, sleeping in each other's arms until dawn.

The morning was a rush of activity to have morning prayer, eat breakfast and get the girls to *the Main Street Market* by eight with the

makeup and clothing they'd been asked to bring along. Heather stayed with Lizzy to help with the twins and Iris. Nolan accompanied Keegan and Gabe to the shoot to help watch over the girls.

CJ also arrived at the shoot to help watch over the girls. With Ricky and Bree also there to help, Keegan only assigned two agents to help take care of security.

Mike Moreland stood in front of the market and stared south down Main Street. He smiled. These people knew how to go all Hallmark on their Christmas decorations. He'd been told the town would take care of things nicely, and boy had they. Green pine garland and big red bows everywhere. Lampposts were turned into candy canes. Beautiful wreaths hung in every store window. Christmas trees and lights everywhere. Little families of lighted deer spotted the edges of the sidewalks. Small potted Christmas trees were on either side of each storefront doorway. The dogwood trees and pear trees that would be in bloom in the spring were currently wrapped in tiny white lights. Strings of those same tiny lights on a wire frame, arched over the street, making a tunnel of lights, and right in the center of each string of lights, over the street, was a large, beautiful golden bell tied with a large red bow.

Also in sight of the camera lens, to the north of where he stood, was the town gazebo, located in the little city park across from the post office. The gazebo was beautifully draped in Christmas garb. On the other side of the park was the Pine Forest Community Church which had a nativity scene set up in the lawn surrounded by Christmas trees and lights. He would try to keep the religious stuff out of the shots. The *Main Street Market* was beside the city park, south of it, in what the locals called the old Bank building which had been owned by the Rutledge family, a fact Mike had been told several times now, because these dumb hicks think he cares at all about their town's history.

The building had been split into several storefronts. The *Main Street Market*, *Bev's Books*, *Cindy's Bridal*, and *Pine Forest Floral*. Next to the "old bank building," was a new large modern bank that took up the large corner lot. Across the side street from the bank was *Sunshine Daycare*, and *Pine Forest First Baptist Church.* Everything was dripping in every kind of Christmas decoration one could imagine.

Mike smiled and nodded. It was perfect for the shoot, and he hadn't had to pay out anything. The mayor had been all too happy to know that his town would be part of a national ad campaign, even if the campaign was being run by a young company. Mike pasted a businesslike scowl on his face as he spotted the Tanner family headed up the sidewalk, carrying suit bags and such.

Rose raised her chin as she approached. “Mike, good morning.”

He smiled warmly. “Rose, you look amazing as always.” He nodded past her. “Violet, right?”

Lily smiled. “Good guess. But no.”

A woman stepped from behind Mike. “Hello, everyone. I’m Dusty. I’m Mr. Moreland’s assistant. Please come into the store. Mrs. Burton has allotted a room in the back as a dressing room.”

Rose’s eyebrows shot up. “Mike has an assistant now?” She turned and smiled at him. “Must be moving up in the world.”

“You’ll never know,” he quipped.

Rose rolled her eyes and headed inside, her sisters right behind her.

Dusty smiled sweetly at the girls. “The first shoot will be just outside this store. He wants you in the white outfits, but no hats yet. If you need anything, please let me know. Make sure you use the loose powder to take away the shine.” She suddenly gasped as she glanced at Daisy. “Oh no, what happened to your head?”

Daisy smiled. “A bad guy broke in where I work and bashed me in the head,” she answered.

Dusty frowned. “Oh my goodness, I’m not sure if this is gonna work. I’d better go talk to Mike.”

Rose grinned. “You do that.”

She left and Daisy giggled. “Well now, I’d say she’s a little high-strung, don’t ya think?”

A minute later, Bree and Taylor Kino were ushered into the room by a flustered Mrs. Burton. “If I can get you anything, please let me know. Anything at all.” She smiled and closed the door.

Bree wrinkled her nose as she looked around. “Okay, I guess we’ll have to make do.”

Rose smiled. “I guess this is not what you’re used to.”

“Yeah, not quite,” Bree said with a smile. “But we can make this work. Let’s get ready.”

They started to undress when Mike came storming into the room. The girls squealed as they covered themselves.

Bree’s eyebrows rose.

“Oh, sorry, ladies. Uh, I came because Dusty said one of you is injured.”

“It’s me,” Daisy said. “It’s almost healed.”

He studied her head, then shook his. “This is terrible. It won’t work. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Daisy shrugged. “You didn’t ask. And I thought it’d be healed well enough by now.”

“This is a breach of contract.”

Bree stepped forward. “What are you gonna do? Fire her? Nonsense. That can be covered with makeup and you can make the camera shots from the good side of her face. Do you want to make this shoot a success or not? Are you looking for an out?”

“No, of course not, Mrs. Adams, and no disrespect to you at all, but she should have let me know.”

“What would you have done?” Bree countered. “You need this campaign and you need it now. Make it happen.”

“Again, no disrespect, but...”

“Say that like you mean it,” she quipped and then went on. “I’m acting as these girls’ handler currently, and I have vast experience and I’m telling you that if you and your one cameraman aren’t professional enough to shoot around a small blemish on a girl’s forehead, then you’d better rethink your profession.”

“I assure you our cameraman is very good at what he does.”

“Oh, then it must be you who doubts that you can direct it properly?”

“Uh, no, of course not.”

She smiled. “Well, then, it’s settled. You may leave. And you will only have your female assistant come into this room from here on out. You barge in here again like that, I will not let it pass. Are we at an understanding?”

His eyes narrowed in anger. “Yes, we are.”

Rose knew that look, and it didn’t bode well. She hoped Mike didn’t end up making a ridiculous scene.

Mike sighed and checked his expensive watch. “You now only have forty-five minutes.”

Bree nodded. “We won’t need that long. Bye-bye.”

She closed the door and turned to smile at the girls. She pointed at her daughter. “Tay, did you get that?”

She held up her phone. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Shoot that out to your father. I want him to see what we’re dealing with today.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Taylor said.

The Tanner twins giggled.

“Mrs. Kino, that was impressive,” Rose said.

“I’ve never seen that side of you,” Lily said softly. “You always seem so quiet and sweet.”

Taylor snorted, but stopped when her mother glanced at her.

"I speak when I feel I need to speak, and I felt I needed to just now."

"My dad says that's the reason he fell in love with her. She was strong enough to stand beside him," Taylor offered.

"Oh, I love that," Violet said. "Mrs. Kino, I think I just fell in love with you too."

Everyone giggled.

"Okay, ladies, get a move on. Don't make a liar out of me. And Daisy, when you're dressed, let me work on you."

Daisy nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

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Hours later, Bree stood next to Ricky smiling as they watched four beautiful young ladies walk up the sidewalk. Lily was dressed in white knit slacks, a turtleneck sweater, a white beret on her head, and a white long wool coat. Daisy wore a straight white skirt, white boots, a white cashmere sweater and a white cape, with a white cable-knit hat on her head that perfectly covered the mark on her forehead. Rose wore white slacks, a white blouse, white suit jacket, and a white scarf around her neck and soft, faux fur small-brimmed hat, and Violet wore a long, white cotton skirt with a lace overlay, with a long-sleeve knit shirt paired with a cropped white jacket, white boots and a lovely white felt bowler with a white flower on the front.

They laughed and walked up the sidewalk and leaned into each other. One pointed at the shop window and they smiled prettily and turned slightly to look at the display then back to look at each other. A cameraman and photographer were busy catching every second, every nuance, every aspect of a beautiful girl with a beautiful complexion.

Ricky nodded in appreciation. Bree smiled at him. "These girls, they could sell anything."

"I agree. First, their fresh, almost angelic beauty is breathtaking. Their complexions are flawless. They are naturals," Ricky said.

Gabe nodded. "I'm so used to seeing my sisters that I think I've taken how pretty they are for granted, but watching this has given me new appreciation for them. They *are* breathtaking, just like you say."

"And Mike is doing a good job in the direction, though I hate to say that," Bree added.

Ricky and Gabe chuckled.

Bree smiled. "I think my favorite shots are the ones when all four girls are together. Especially the one where they were misting the perfume in the store. The way their eyes sparkled, the way the camera will catch the

water particles in the air, the way they laughed and interacted with each other. It made me want to buy a bottle right then and there."

Taylor looked up at her parents. "They are awesome. I wish Heather and Mrs. Tanner could be here to see this."

Bree looked at her daughter. "Taylor, when you say things like that out of the blue, it makes me get all teary-eyed."

"Why? What did I say?"

Ricky nodded. "Your mom means that when you show how you constantly think about others it touches her heart and makes her remember just how special you are. You have a good heart, baby girl. We're proud of you."

Taylor shrugged. "Just saying what popped into my head. I was also thinking about something else, Mom, that I want to talk to you about."

"What's that?"

"When we were in there, helping everyone get dressed, it made me think about a movie premiere, and then I thought about Eric's coming up."

"Oh, and you want a new dress?" Bree said.

"No, it's not that. I was thinking that Jordan is gonna be on Eric's arm, right? She's gonna need a dress, right?"

"Aww, honey, there you go again," Bree said with a sniff.

Again, Ricky and Gabe chuckled.

"Well? What are we gonna do?" Taylor asked.

"I already set Jordan up with Maria. She's gonna take care of her."

Taylor smiled. "Oh, I like Maria. Of all the stylists you've worked with, I like her the best."

"Me too. And she's not pushy but she has a good eye."

"When are she and Jordan gonna get together?" Taylor asked.

"Jordan had an appointment to get her cast off today. She met with Maria yesterday after class at her salon."

Taylor smiled up at her mother. "Mom, looks like you were the one thinking about others."

Bree shrugged. "She's about to be my daughter-in-law. We take care of our own."

"She's about to be my sister-in-law, and I'm so excited. I'm glad that Eric chose someone that I truly love."

Ricky smiled.

Bree shivered. "Well, I think this shoot is about over, and I'm freezing. Let's go have a hot meal somewhere."

Ricky put his arm around his wife and pulled her close. "I can warm you up back at the house."

"Dad, I'm standing right here," Taylor quipped.

Bree snuggled up against him. “You are so warm. Why are men always so warm?”

“It’s science, babe. Men have more muscle mass, which generates heat. Ya know, higher metabolism,” Ricky answered.

“Okay,” Mike said, clapping his hands together. “It’s a wrap.”

The crowd standing around in the blocked off street applauded. Some came forward to ask Ricky and Bree for autographs or selfies. They allowed it for a few minutes.

The mayor stepped forward and spoke to Mike, and then got his officers to clear the street so they could open up the road again. In only a few minutes, Main Street was back to normal.

Keegan called the group together. “The Appels said to invite you all to the Inn for a warm lunch.”

“I’m in,” Bree said quickly.

Ricky frowned.

She laughed and took his arm. “Oh, sweetie, we can go home after that and snuggle.”

He smiled. “Snuggle? Okay. Sounds good. Let’s go eat.”

“How are you feeling, Gabe?” Taylor asked.

“I’m good. It’s just a little cut. No big deal.”

“I guess after what you’ve been through this year, a cut is no big deal to you. But it *could* get infected.”

“Jeffy sent some meds for that.”

Taylor blinked up at him. “Gabe,” she muttered as she put her cold hand on his face. “I love you.”

He smiled. “I love you too. What’s up?”

She shrugged. “The way this year has gone, doesn’t it make you a little afraid of what else is coming at you?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I mean, I really do trust Jesus. He’s got me. I just gotta stay in tune.” He stood back suddenly, his face going pale. He started breathing hard.

“What is it, Gabe? What’s happening?” She turned to get her father’s attention. “Dad.”

He turned immediately at the urgency in her voice. She pointed at Gabe and Ricky came to him immediately.

“Hey, son, what’s going on?”

Gabe tried to catch his breath. Finally did. He nodded at Ricky. “Mr. Kino, uh,” he stopped and glanced at Taylor. “Uh, can I talk to you privately after lunch?”

Ricky nodded. “Yes, we’ll talk. You okay for now?”

Gabe drew a deep breath. “Yes, sir. For now.”

Meanwhile, inside the Main Street Market, Lily was the last to gather her clothing and makeup bags. She took time to straighten up the room, throwing away some water bottles, pushing in the chairs around the dressing table. She looked up at the male voice.

“Well, hello there, Daisy.”

Lily frowned. “Mike,” she said, not bothering to correct him.

“You were really beautiful out there today.”

“Thanks.”

“I was thinking, even though you’re a twin, you stand out above the others. There’s just something about you.”

“Really?” she said with a soft laugh.

“I’m not kidding around. You’re special.”

Lily sighed. “What makes me special?”

He moved closer and she backed up, wondering if she was gonna have to put some of the things she’d learned in her martial arts classes into practice today. She readied to do just that when he moved closer again and reached out and touched her hair.

“Everything about you, Daisy. Your hair is longer and so much prettier than your twin, much healthier looking. Your face is slimmer.” He touched a finger to her cheek.

“Stop,” she said quietly.

“Why? You draw me like a magnet.”

She snorted. “Now that was a really cheesy line.”

He shrugged and smiled and reached out to take hold of her upper arm. “Come here.”

“You have no idea who you’re messing with,” she said.

“Messing with? I’m not messing around. I’m serious.”

“No, I mean, literally, you have no idea who you’re messing with.”

He pulled on her arm and she tried to pull away, but he held her fast.

“Michael Moreland, do not make me have to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” He shook his head and laughed. “You Tanners are always threatening violence.” He jerked her arm and pulled her close to him.

“Listen, either you let go of my arm, or I’ll make it so you can’t do anything for a long time.”

He chuckled. “Just let me show you how good I can be to you.”

“Let go or I’ll show you how good I can be.”

He let go of her arm, but quickly put one arm around her waist and the other on her backside. She immediately brought her knee up, and as he bent over in pain, she circled around and put him in a headlock. Squeezing hard, she allowed him to lift his head to see another twin standing there.

"Hi, Daisy," Lily said.

"You have a little problem there, Lily?" Daisy asked.

"No problem at all," Lily said.

Mike tried to pull Lily's arm away, so she squeezed harder. Finally, though, he succeeded in pulling her arm away. He choked. "You're Lily?"

She smiled. "Yes. I'm so special, you didn't even know who I was. And guess what? You're lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yes," came a male voice from behind Daisy. "Because if I'd been the one to pull your hands off my daughter, you'd be unconscious right now and on the way to a hospital. Mike, I've tried to tell you to stop all of this. I've tried to tell you that you're gonna cross a line and ruin the business you've been building. Well, no more warnings. You're done." He smiled at his daughter. "Well done, Lily. I'm thinking you and Daisy and Rose and Vi should do an interview about ethics in business, and mention what occurred in your dealings with Mr. Moreland's agency."

"Oh, Daddy, that would ruin him."

"Yes, it would, but you might be saving another young lady from having to deal with his advances. The next girl might be younger, more innocent and less able to take care of herself."

Lily nodded. "You're right, Dad. Too bad Mike didn't learn his lesson when you told him to stop."

Mike cleared his throat as he nodded his head. "Okay, okay, you win. Sorry, Dais, I mean, Lily."

"I think it's too late for that," Daisy said. "You're done, Mike. Done."

"It's a shame," Keegan went on. "Because you're a talented young man. You could have done a lot of good to help small companies get going. Brilliant concept. But you got seduced by the dark side. Sex, money and power don't mean anything. They are nothing but a lure and can't be your priority or focus."

"Can you give me another chance?"

Keegan looked at his daughters. Shook his head. "You've had several chances. I think the problem is you've never had to face any consequences. You have to pay in some way. I can't let you go scot-free. You have to learn that you must take responsibility for your actions."

"I didn't do anything that bad."

"You put your hands on my daughter. On my daugh*ters*," he said, emphasizing the plural. "Women are not objects for you to handle. They are not here on the earth for your pleasure or your amusement. They are human beings. Partners in life. The human race cannot live without them

and they should be treated with respect and care. They should be protected. Going back to the example I once used with you, how would you feel if a man put his hands on your mother? How would you feel if your mother asked a man to let go of her and he treated her the way you just treated Lily? Imagine it for a moment. Envision it."

Mike stood silently actually thinking about how it would make him feel. He nodded. "I'd want to kill him."

Keegan smiled. "See? That's why Lily said you were lucky, because you're not dead." Keegan sighed. "I think you've been a little averse to trying to understand what we've tried to teach you because your ego is bruised. You're used to being in charge. You were in charge of your mother as you were growing up. Then you came into our world, the Tanner world, which is very different from the world you grew up in and your ego is hurt. You discovered, you're not the strongest. You're not the smartest. You're not the biggest or the best looking or the richest. You came here and quickly discovered those things.

"Here, in rural Georgia, we hold people much more accountable for their actions. We have moral laws that we are proud to keep. We are strong. We have ethics. I allowed you into our lives because we thought you too, had ethics. You've shown that you don't understand the meaning of that word. So, you have to learn. For your own good and for the good of those around you."

"What are you saying?" Mike asked.

"I'm saying there will be consequences for your actions. We could make this a criminal matter, but I think we'll go civil. A lawsuit maybe. Our goal is not to destroy you completely, but make you responsible and accountable for your actions and I think money is important to you, so, we'll hurt you there. You'll have less of it for a while. And you might lose some business but if you work hard and make amends, you'll recover. Eventually."

"This is ridiculous," he said, glancing at the two girls in the room.

Keegan shook his head. "You're embarrassed. You should be. The only way to fix things is to humble yourself, admit your mistakes, and vow to change your ways. That's really the only way you can come out of this setback. Until then, I guess we'll see you in court."

"I have a good lawyer," Mike retorted.

"So do I. Ranked best in the nation. Good luck."

Mike Moreland turned and stormed from the room. Lily sighed. Daisy shook her head.

"Do you think he'll ever change?"

Keegan frowned. “It’s hard to say. But we need to pray for him. Pray that God will touch his heart and help him to see the light.”

“It’s gonna be hard to pray for him,” Daisy said.

Keegan nodded and pulled out his phone. “Let’s look at the scripture real quick. It’s one of my favorites.”

He found what he was looking for and smiled as he read: “‘He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’” He scrolled back up. “And here’s the beginning of that lesson. ‘You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.’”

Keegan looked up at his two daughters. They both were smiling.

“I love you, Daddy,” Lily said.

“Me too,” Daisy said.

Keegan smiled. “And I love you. Let’s go eat some lunch and then I have to go to work.”

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December 4th, Wednesday Afternoon

Pine Forest Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Everyone sat around the table complaining about the lunch. Everyone meaning the Tanners, the Appels, the Stewarts, the Kinos and two guests of the Inn. Complaining meaning, the food was too good, too filling and they’d all eaten too much.

The guests were immensely pleased that they’d decided on an early Christmas vacation at the Inn. They had no idea at the booking that two of the biggest movie stars in the nation would be sitting at a table eating lunch with them. They tried not to stare, but were immensely relieved when Bree struck up a conversation with them and they could look into her beautiful face as they spoke.

She asked the normal questions like; where are they from, any children, any other family, about their jobs, about how they usually celebrate Christmas and what brings them to Pine Forest.

Ricky listened in, doing what his father would do, silently praying to ask how he and his wife can be in service to these people. What did God need him to do? His amazing wife was already doing what she needed to do, get information.

He discovered as he listened that the couple was in their forties. They were childless. They were wealthy. They live in Boston. One of them, the husband, grew up in Colorado and the wife grew up in South Carolina in a small town on the border of Georgia. They'd heard about the Inn and decided to come for Christmas. They didn't have anything else to do and the woman wanted to remember Christmas how she'd celebrated as a kid.

Ricky got a nudging to ask a question. "So, you mentioned that you have no children?"

The woman shook her head. "Sadly, no."

"So, that wasn't a choice?" Bree asked, then quickly added. "Oh, that might be too personal of a question. I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay," the woman said. "We tried. But I had a lot of health problems and ended up having to have a hysterectomy."

They watched as her husband reached over and patted her hand.

The woman smiled and shrugged. "And now, we're in our forties and it's really too late."

Ricky shook his head. "It's never too late. I mean, you could adopt."

The man shook his head. "I'm forty-three. My wife is forty-one."

Bree smiled and looked over at Lisa Stewart who'd been listening. "Lisa over there recently gave birth to twins and she's..."

"I'm forty-six and my husband is forty-nine."

"You're kidding? You look so young," the woman said.

"Thanks," Lisa replied. "It's the good, clean country air, lots of hard work and living Jeffy's protocols. We have lots of energy and stamina."

"What is Jeffy's protocols?" the man asked.

"Jeffy is my sister," Ricky put in. "Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace."

"Oh! Well, yeah, of course we've heard of her. We've been meaning to look into her books or go to one of her clinics, but we just never seem to have time."

"Her books are very easy to read and very helpful," Bree said.

"I would make time, if I were you," Ricky said. "To either read the books or go to one of her clinics for an evaluation."

The man laughed. "Drumming up business for your sister, huh?"

Ricky smiled but then became serious. "Well, she has no need for us to drum up business for her. She's not interested in making money. She was willing to risk her life to bring her protocols to light and end disease in this world, and came close to death several times. It's her calling."

"Oh, I mean, I was just joking around."

Ricky nodded. "I know. Just had to make sure there was no misunderstanding. We are only here to help. So, let us know if you need

any information." He frowned. "If you were to adopt a child, would you want a baby, or would you be interested in adopting an older child?"

"Well, to be honest, a toddler and up would probably be best for us," the woman said.

Ricky nodded. "That's great! A friend of ours has a few agencies that handle adoptions and I know they have a whole lot of children who need homes. Their agencies are nationwide. Would you like the number?"

"Yes! I would," the woman said.

Ricky nodded at Bree. "Do you have one of Angel's cards?"

Bree smiled. "I do." She pulled her purse off the back of her chair, dug out the card and handed it to the woman. "Just tell them you met us in Pine Forest, you're interested in adoption and they'll take it from there."

"Will do," the man said as his wife handed him the card and he looked it over.

The woman smiled. "So, will you be here for Christmas?"

"No," Ricky said. "We're headed back to Cali on Saturday morning."

"Aw, that's a shame."

Bree smiled sweetly. "The Appels and Stewarts who run the Inn here, they are very good friends of our family and they'll take very good care of you. We love coming here. Feels like home. But we probably won't stay here at the Inn any longer because we just bought a home in the area."

"Oh, how nice!"

Ricky nodded. "We love Pine Forest and all the people here. They are family to us. I have a feeling you'll feel the same way." He looked up as someone laid a hand on his shoulder. "Hello there, Gabe."

"Grandmaster Kino, do you have a moment to talk?"

Ricky nodded and smiled at Gabe's use of a formal greeting. He was showing respect in front of strangers. "Yes." He stood. "I'm sorry to have to leave, but I promised this fine young man that I would have a conversation with him."

Gabe nodded at the people and introduced himself and mentioned that his family lived right next door to the Inn and that his sister was one of the chefs that worked at the Inn. After handshakes and pleasantries, Ricky kissed his wife's cheek, bid farewell to the newest acquaintances, and went to John's office to speak with Gabe.

Ricky took a seat in the chair behind the desk and Gabe sat down

in front of the desk, sighing heavily as he did.

Ricky smiled. "Would your father like to join us?"

"He had to go back to work."

"Okay then." Ricky looked Gabe over. "I take it that you don't particularly want to have this conversation?"

"It's not that I don't want to talk to you, Mr. Kino. It's just what I have to say isn't fun." He drew a deep breath. "Look, I know I'm not special like Jeffy. I know that. But for some reason this year, I've started having these visions, and they've actually been pretty accurate. I had that first one in the stable where I saw and felt myself in pain, on an old dirty wooden floor, and shortly after that, that's exactly where I was. Then I saw Taylor hurt on the beach and sure enough, someone tried to take her. I had a dream about Grandmaster Kino, that something was wrong with his heart, and shortly after that he was shot in the chest, and—well—he died I guess. But I mean, it was his heart."

Ricky nodded, urging him to go on.

"I've had several others, some a hint that something is wrong, and others that haven't happened yet. I'm telling you all this to remind you that I've been fairly accurate. I don't know why God is giving me these visions. It's not like I'm a prophet. Today, Taylor and I were talking about all the things that have happened to me," he said as he touched the cut on his forehead. "She asked me if I'm afraid of what might happen next."

Ricky nodded again. "And are you?"

"No, sir. I told Taylor I wasn't afraid because I trust Jesus and I know He's got me. But the very moment I said that, I had a strong thought and a vision come into my head. The thought was that because I was protected, then the dark forces will try to hurt those I love in order to get to me."

Ricky sighed and nodded. "Hmm."

Gabe went on. "And the vision..." he trailed off. "I don't know if I can even bring myself to say it."

"Must've been pretty bad," Ricky said, trying to get it out of him.

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. It was about Taylor." He shook his head.

"It'll be easier if you just get it out. Rip off the Band-Aid."

"I saw a fist. A large fist. A man's fist. I saw it punch her in the face. Then the scene flashed to her lying on the street. Very still. Her eyes open. Her hair all fanned out around her head. She wasn't breathing. She wasn't moving. It looked like she was d..." He shook his head and looked down. "I can't say it." Looking back up, his eyes met Ricky's. "Mr. Kino, you know I love Taylor. I love her more than my own life. One day, after she graduates from high school, I was gonna ask you for her hand in marriage. I was gonna make a family with her. We would've been so good together. I was gonna work very hard to provide her with a good life."

"You say all that like it's in the past."

"Because maybe it is."

"You mean because of the vision?"

"The vision really shook me up. If Taylor is in danger because she's associated with me, then maybe I should end it with her."

"You mean, like break up with her in order to protect her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. Well, Gabe, your thinking is a little skewed. Do you mind if I set you straight on a few things?"

"No, of course not. That's why I wanted to speak with you."

"Good. And let me just say, that after I tell you my opinion, I want you to do two things. I want you to discuss what we've talked about here with your dad, and then I want you to pray about it and get clarity."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. I will."

Ricky nodded and smiled. "First, Gabe, let me just say that my father thinks you are a special young man and a fine young man and I totally agree with him. So much so, that if the time is right when you come to me and ask for Taylor in marriage, I will happily bless that union."

Gabe sighed.

"Gabe, Jeffy and my father both have visions. They have discovered that sometimes those visions are for road signs, meaning, just signs to let you know you're on the right path. Sometimes those visions are to prepare you for something big that's coming. And sometimes they are so that you can actually prevent what's coming. You have to learn to discern what it is God is asking of you. Pray, talk to Him, fast, and pray some more. Do that until you have an answer. For now, I can tell you, Gabe, that I take your visions very seriously. I don't scoff. I will take steps to make sure Taylor is protected."

Ricky smiled to comfort Gabe who was looking very troubled. "Gabe, you are a bright light, yes, but so is Taylor."

Gabe nodded. "Absolutely. That's why I love her so much."

"So, that means, even if you weren't in her life, she's still gonna be a target. Maybe the forces of evil are gearing up here in these last days and will be coming hard at her, and at you. But you can't bow to them. You know that. I know you know that. You do not let them dictate who you can be with or not be with. You are the powerful ones, not them. And Gabe, each day you get stronger. If God has brought these two powerful lights together, do we refuse that because we're afraid?"

Gabe shook his head. "I'm just trying to protect her."

"Well, go about it a different way. Be strong together. Pray for protection daily. Read the Word. Put on the armor of God. He will lead you and protect you both. Trust Him. He brought you and Taylor together.

Don't throw that away. And I just have to say, if you broke up with Taylor, if you put her away from you, you would crush her. She trusts you. You have to trust her too. You have to trust that she will stand by your side through it all, that she wants to stand by your side through any and all trials. She's strong, Gabe, and she's getting stronger. She's had some battles with fear, but she's overcoming that."

He nodded. "But I don't want her to die."

"Well, I don't either. And we're gonna do everything we can to prevent that. But what we're not gonna do is kowtow to the darkness. That's probably exactly what they're trying to do; make you afraid so that you two won't come together and be the brightest light of all. Don't give them what they want. Let me ask you this: do you believe that God brought you two together?"

Gabe smiled. "I believe *you* brought us together the day you asked me to teach her to shoot."

Ricky chuckled. "Fair enough. But I did that because God put it in my mind to nudge her toward you. As soon as you began to speak to her, as soon as I saw her reaction to you, I knew it was meant to be. Did you not think so? Did you not feel it?"

Gabe nodded. "Teaching her that day, it was like, we suddenly became aware of each other. Well, I mean, I've always been aware of her. She was Ricky Kino's very h...beautiful daughter, but she was waaay out of my league and off limits."

Ricky smiled. "She is beautiful and pure and special, and you are worthy of her and in the same league. It's been very easy to see that God has brought two very special young people together. So, we don't throw that away because we're afraid. You told Taylor you're not afraid for yourself. You trust God. Well, trust her too, because she's not afraid either. Not anymore. And together, we'll protect her with God's help."

Gabe sighed and nodded. "Okay. We'll protect her together." He shrugged. "I guess I feel a lot better now than I did fifteen minutes ago."

Ricky smiled. "Good. Bree and I are in this together. Your dad and mom are in this together. You and Taylor are in this together, at least so far you are. I don't want to assume."

Gabe smiled. "You can assume. Unless she finds someone else, I intend to marry her."

"Take it a day at a time," Ricky urged. "Let's head back out. You only have until Friday night before you have to say 'goodbye' for a while."

Gabe frowned. "Yes, and it's always a hard thing to do, saying goodbye to Taylor."

Ricky chuckled. "I'm sure."

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December 4th, 7:30 PM, Wednesday Evening
Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Bree stood, swaying back and forth, cooing at little Lachlyn Stewart, the youngest member of the Stewart family who was now one month and three days old. She had a head full of dark hair, and everyone was joking about that because Lisa and her other two daughters, Laynah and Aralyn, all had red hair, and Chaz and his two sons had darkish blond hair.

"Well," Lisa said. "I've seen pictures of my grandfather Lawrence, when he was young, and his hair was dark."

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, it was."

Everyone stopped and stared. Gabe's face reddened and he quickly looked down. "I'm uh, sorry."

"That's okay, Gabe," Lisa said quickly. "It just took us a minute to remember that you encountered Grams and my grandfather in your little trip to the other side. I think it's very cool."

He nodded. "Thanks," he mumbled.

"And anyway*, my* mother also had dark hair," Joe said quickly.

"Well, then, little Lachyloo," Bree purred at the baby, using the nickname her father Chaz called her. "I guess that makes you legit and very special." The baby yawned.

Ricky smiled as he bounced Lachlyn's twin brother, Jonathon, in his arms and spoke to him using his nickname too. "Okay, Jonnyfun, you're special too, big guy, because you're the only male redhead in the family."

Joe cleared his throat.

"Well, I mean, in the immediate family," Ricky corrected.

"Well, are we gonna play with babies all night, or are we gonna get these trees decorated?" fourteen-year-old Charlie Stewart asked.

Gabe laughed. "You just wanna hurry up and finish so we can get to the dessert."

Charlie shrugged. "Yeah, and I know you know that because you're thinking the same thing."

Gabe nodded and grinned.

Chaz nodded at Charlie. "Well, you boys help me get this last tree in the house and into the stand and us guys can get the lights on."

"Yes, sir," Charlie and Matt said.

Ricky passed the baby he was holding off to Taylor. "Here, honey, take this big guy and I'll help the men get the trees prepped."

Taylor gently took the baby and began cooing at him. She looked up across the room at Gabe and he smiled at her. She knew that he knew she

was thinking about one day having her own baby in her arms. Keegan placed his arm around Gabe's shoulders. "Beautiful sight, huh?"

Gabe nodded. "It's pretty cool."

"Maybe one day she'll be holding your own child."

Gabe sighed. "Hopefully."

"Is there even a question?"

Gabe looked up at his father. "Well, sure. She still has to graduate from high school. She might want to go to college. She might meet someone else. I mean, I'm really her first real boyfriend."

"Okay, well, I guess that's you trying to think responsibly, and I get that. But don't be so noble that you lose her."

Gabe blew out a breath. "Losing her, is my biggest fear."

Keegan's brow furrowed.

"Dad, can we have a talk a little later tonight?"

"I think that might be a good idea."

Chaz Stewart came in holding the trunk of a large pine tree, already in its stand, while Charlie held the top. They placed the tree in the middle of the large den. A minute later, Ricky and Matt came in with a second tree, and behind them came John Appel carrying the third tree.

John set the tree down, circled it, nodded. "Okay. My part is done. I have to head back to the Inn because our manager's daughter is singing at the high school Christmas concert and I have to cover for her. But Jodi gets to stay here and represent."

Jodi put her arm around Melaynah. "You mean Laynah and I get to stay here and represent."

John smiled. "Well, if you mean to represent the Appels, that's correct, but I meant to represent the Inn."

Melaynah didn't smile. She'd been hard to cheer up lately. She hadn't heard from Jake and she was worried sick. She'd been trying to be present in the moment, and put her heart into helping her family and friends. She'd focused so hard on the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, but now that it was over, and Christmas was coming in three weeks, she really needed to hear from Jake. Even if it was only a word from his commanding officer saying that he was okay and just very busy. Her father had told her that "no news is good news." She clung to that now, drew a deep breath and helped the women sort out all of the decorations for the trees.

Meanwhile, the guys all quickly put the lights on the three Christmas trees. One tree had all white lights. One tree had all blue lights and one tree had multi-colored lights. The tree with white lights would grace the Stewarts' den. The tree with the blue lights would be in the formal front living room, where they would leave the table lamps turned off, because

when Charlie had been three years old, they'd had blue lights on their only tree and he'd said it looked like starlight at night when baby Jesus was born. Since then every Christmas, they'd kept a second tree with blue lights in the living room.

The third tree would stand in the middle of the side yard where they had a large fire pit and where they had guests from the Inn come over for s'mores and hot chocolate and Christmas carols and entertainment provided by what they called, the church kids. The "church kids" were a group of teenagers who loved to sing together and always at least one or more of them could play the guitar and accompany everyone. The Stewart, Tanner, and Appel children had been part of the "church kids." Violet had been one of the guitar players. And traditionally, Lizzy and her girls had always gifted the guests with "O Holy Night."

Lily and Daisy came in from the kitchen with two giant bowls filled with popcorn and the decorating of trees commenced.

Christmas music floated softly over the large group of people as they concentrated on making the trees perfectly decorated in a very imperfect sort of way. There was usually some banter between Rose and her sisters, or Rose and Laynah, but Rose was notably absent. Right after the delicious lunch at the Inn, she'd packed up some food and headed out to the hospital to be with Jericho. It was Gabe who finally spoke what everyone was thinking.

"Wow, without Rose, everyone is so quiet," Gabe said.

"I am not quiet," Iris demanded. "I am finking."

"Oh, you're fffinking, are you?" Gabe teased, making everyone laugh.

"Yes, and Awawyn is hepping me."

Seven-year-old Aralyn smiled at Iris. "Which do you want to put there, the gold candy cane or the clear icicle?"

"Umm, I fink I want de icicle!"

Aralyn held it out to her to put on the tree and helped her get it hooked onto the branch.

Violet nodded at Gabe. "You're right though, Gabe. Rose definitely adds spice to any undertaking."

Ricky and Bree smiled at each other. In the Kino home, at their parents' house, it was Bree and Ricky who'd argued and teased and made things interesting.

"Well, Gabe, as long as I can remember," Daisy began, "you were the one who really got everyone going."

"And I'm about to do it again, because this song is fun to dance to."

He grabbed Taylor's hand and began swing dancing to *a high-tempo remix of Jingle Bell Rock*. Everyone watched as the dance, which started out silly, became a really good version of a swing dance with lifts and spins. Taylor squealed as Gabe lifted her high in the air and she tried to point her toes and look graceful, which she accomplished to perfection.

Everyone laughed and applauded.

"I wanna dance," Aralyn announced.

Gabe immediately left Taylor and went to dance with Aralyn. So Taylor, immediately went to Charlie and held out her hands. "Come on, Charlie. Dance with me."

"I, uh, don't dance too well."

Taylor laughed. "Well, you will by the time I get finished with you."

Red-faced, Charlie Stewart followed Taylor's instructions as she showed him where to put his hands and then counted one-two-three to show him the rhythm of the swing step. The music ended and she asked them to replay the song. After a few times through, Charlie and Taylor were doing a fine job of dancing the swing. They all applauded. Then twelve-year-old Matt Stewart was brought out to dance with Aralyn so that Gabe could switch partners and dance with little Iris who was demanding to be danced with. Daisy and Lily smiled at each other. Once again, their brother had made things interesting.

The doorbell rang and Charlie rushed to open it. "Hey, Lucas! Hey, Mrs. Murphy. Hey, Dalton. Y'all come in. Everyone's back in the den."

They all went to the den and Rebecca immediately apologized. "Hello, Lisa. I'm so sorry we're late. I had some last-minute things to take care of at the Center."

"It's okay. We're just getting started."

Chaz stepped forward and shook Dalton's hand. "Glad you could make it. Come on in. There's popcorn and cider for now. Big desserts coming later."

Dalton nodded. "Looking forward to it." He turned and went to shake his boss's hand. "Director Tanner, good to see you."

Keegan smiled. "We're off the clock, Dalton. Just call me Keegan. I've told you that a thousand times."

"I know, sir, but I find it difficult to do that, so please just allow me to show my respect."

Keegan chuckled. "Whatever makes you feel comfortable."

Gabe smiled at the conversation. He was glad other people had so much respect for his dad. It made him feel proud. He looked around. The entire very large room was filled with trees and decorations and people that he loved. His heart felt so full.

Someone's phone started ringing. It was Melaynah who pulled her phone from her hip pocket. She looked at it and let out a shriek. Everyone quieted as she answered the video call.

"Jake?"

"Yes, baby. It's me," came a soft reply.

Melaynah looked up with a huge smile. "It's Jake, everyone. It's Jake," she said again, literally jumping up and down like a little girl. She spoke into the phone. "Jake, everyone is here decorating our trees." She held her phone at each person in the room and they all waved at and yelled greetings to the young man who was on the other side of the world.

Finally she got to Jodi. "Hello, my boy," his mother said happily.

"Hey, Mom. You okay?"

"I am now. I love you, sweetheart, and I'm so happy to see your face."

"I love you too, Mom. Is Dad there?"

"No, he had to watch things at the Inn."

"Okay. I'll try to call him later."

Jodi nodded, her brow furrowing. Something wasn't quite right.

Melaynah finally put her own face back in front of the phone. "Oh, Jake, I miss you so much."

"I miss you too, Bugs. So much," he said softly. "Laynah, can you go upstairs so we can talk privately?"

"Yes. Hold on." She turned to the crowd. "I'm gonna go upstairs for a private conversation." She dashed out of the room and up the stairs to her bedroom.

Once up there she transferred the call over to her tablet so she could see him better.

"Oh, Jake, it's so good to see your face."

He nodded. "And seeing your face is a sight for sore eyes for sure."

Melaynah looked closer at the screen. "Where are you? I mean, I know I'm not supposed to ask, but usually I see a yellow wall behind you and that wall looks white."

Jake looked behind him. "Usually, you see a wooden wall, and this wall is not white. It's light green."

"Oh, okay. So, where are you?"

Jake sighed. "I'm in Germany."

"What? Why? When? When did you go to Germany?" Her voice became more agitated with each question.

He sighed. "Okay. So, stay calm, okay?"

"Okay." She drew a deep breath.

"I'm in a hospital in Germany. LRMC, which is the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center."

Melaynah's eyes filled with tears immediately. She sniffed. "Why? What happened? How badly are you hurt?"

"Not too badly. I still have both arms and legs. Laynah, on a mission outside of Jalalabad I was," he stopped to draw a breath. "I was, taken."

She gasped. "Oh no. Jake."

"I'm okay, baby. Me and another guy, Nick, we were both taken. Our unit was helping get a family of five out of the country. Everything went sideways. We got them on a chopper but couldn't get on ourselves. The bird had to lift and hightail it and we were overtaken by some very bad guys. And they were really mad at us because we probably took out about twenty of their guys before we ran out of ammo. Once they were able to subdue us, we were taken back to their hideout."

"How long? How long were you there? Because you just called me Sunday night!"

"We left for the mission after I called you Sunday night. We spent the next few days locating the family and arranging their evacuation, and I can't go into detail. They took Nick and me on Thanksgiving. We were held almost five days. Five really horrible days. Our guys found us and we were flown to Germany after we were stabilized. We arrived here yesterday."

Melaynah sniffed back her tears. "Jake, I'm so sorry. How bad are your injuries?"

He nodded. "I have some internal injuries from being beaten and stomped on. Broke a finger and injured two others."

She gasped. "Dear Jesus, please," she murmured.

"He was right there with me," Jake assured her.

"He was with you but He didn't help you?"

"He did help me, Bugs. Don't lose faith, babe. I'm alive. They were gonna behead us, on video for all the world to see. I was in so much pain, I almost welcomed it. The only thing that made me not give up was the thought of getting back to you. I prayed hard, and Jesus filled me with peace and with comfort and I felt strongly that we were gonna be found. And we were. Miraculously. See, one of the women where we were being held is secretly a Christian. She told me that Jesus spoke to her several months ago in a dream, and she knows He's real. She told me she heard me praying. She told me she was gonna get word to our guys and she did, Laynah. That's the only reason I'm not dead. It was Jesus. He helped me. So don't lose the faith, baby."

Melaynah nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to doubt, but it’s so hard to see you suffer.”

Jake smiled. “I’m not suffering anymore. I feel really good compared to how I felt forty-eight hours ago.”

“Does this mean you’re coming home?” Laynah asked hopefully.

Jake frowned. “I’m not hurt badly enough to come home. I’ll be here another week or so and then I’m being shipped back to my unit.”

She wiped at the tears pouring down her face. “I’m looking at your face, Jake, it doesn’t look bad. I mean, I see a few scratches. Nothing big.”

He sighed. “Yeah, they were more interested in other parts of my body. Like my back. It’ll never look the same again. Not until the resurrection,” he said with a chuckle.

“Why are you laughing?” she said through her tears. “It’s not funny.”

He shrugged. “Because, I’m actually happy. I’m alive and I’m talking to my wife. Two days ago, I thought I’d never see you again. It’s simply a matter of perspective.”

She sniffed. “I just want to put my arms around you and hold you.”

“Ditto,” he said softly. He smiled at his beautiful, very young wife. “You know what you can do for me that will bring me great comfort?”

“No, what? Tell me. I’ll do anything for you.”

“You can talk to me about all the stuff goin’ on there at home. I wanna know it all. Like, what are your plans for Christmas? Anything different than the usual?”

She nodded. “Oh, yes, because there didn’t use to be a *Gabe Tanner Community Center*, but now there is and there is so much going on. It’s really like having a multi-denominational Christian church to run and Rose is doing such a good job. Let me tell you all about what took place on Thanksgiving, and then I’ll tell you all about what’s planned for Christmas in Pine Forest.”

Jake nodded with a grin. “Tell me everything.”

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Proverbs 31:11

“The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

December 4th, 2:30 PM, Wednesday Afternoon
UCLA, Los Angeles, California

Jordan made her way out of the Athletic Complex and headed toward the parking lot with a shoe on both feet and no crutches. Her meeting with the coach had gone well as had her first physical therapy session. It was almost as if she hadn't been injured. She was a little weak, but she felt good. Great, really, and she was very much looking forward to getting in some pitching tomorrow morning.

Yesterday, Jordan had an appointment with a woman named Maria, who helped Jordan find a dress to wear to Three's movie premiere. It too had gone well. Both Maria and Jordan felt something simple, modest and elegant would be the best fit for her. They'd settled on a shimmery red high-low dress. It was sleeveless, showed only a hint of cleavage, hugged her trim, athletic body and flowed around her as she walked. The bare arms showed off her muscle definition, or so Maria kept exclaiming. The color accentuated her blond hair. Earrings and a necklace were chosen for accents. The whole thing made Jordan nervous, but she allowed it because she didn't want to embarrass Three on the red carpet. She wanted him to be proud of her.

Three. Young Eric. She sighed. He was her fiancé! The thought made her heart race every time it crossed her mind. She smiled. Sometime this next year, she and Eric Kino III would be husband and wife. Her name would be Jordan Kino. And she wouldn't have to sleep in separate rooms, or go home to her apartment she shared with her roommates. He would be her roommate. Oh, how she loved him. Oh, how she looked forward to living with him and sharing her life totally with him. Oh, how she looked forward to praying with him every morning and night, to learning from him, and sharing her thoughts with him.

They hadn't discussed too much yet, like, where they'd live. Would they even stay in California? They talked about driving across the country, seeing it up close and going back to Pine Forest in the spring or summer. She wouldn't want to live there. She wanted to be close to her mother and brother and sister and celebrate their milestones in life. She needed to tell

that to Three. Jordan gasped as a hand reached out and grabbed her arm as she walked.

"You must be deep in thought," Agent Wyatt said. "You almost walked right past me."

Jordan smiled at the man. "I'm so sorry. Yes, I was thinking about Three, I guess."

Agent Wyatt smiled. "Oh, well, that explains it."

"Well, in my defense, you're not wearing the usual suit."

Wyatt nodded. "Jason wanted us to try to blend in more, so jeans and a sweatshirt it is."

"Why?"

"Actually, I'm not real sure, but I think it's so we don't scare away your friends."

"Well, I don't have many friends so there's no danger there."

"You have people stopping to talk to you all the time."

"That's just because they've heard that Eric Kino and I are seeing each other."

They walked toward the car. "So, a little instant popularity?"

"I suppose."

He shook his head. "Don't let it get to ya. People are shallow. So, are we still heading to English class?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. Though I have to say, I'd really like to just play hooky."

He frowned. "You wanna keep your scholarship?"

She sighed. "Yes, I do. I wanna show Three what I can do on the field. I want him to be proud of me."

Wyatt nodded. "Then I guess it's off to English class." He opened the car door for her and helped her into the car, then went around to the driver's side and got in. "How's the foot? Any pain?"

She shook her head. "None whatsoever."

"I heard all about the healings that took place at the event. Pretty impressive."

Jordan nodded. "Yes and I'm so grateful."

"So, why do you think God healed you and not JoJo Adams?"

She sighed. "Good question. I asked Three what he thought and he said that JoJo said it wasn't his path. He had things to learn and burdens to carry that would make him stronger."

"Hmm, so I guess that means you must already be strong."

"I don't know about all that, but for whatever reason, I'm just really grateful to be walking again."

Agent Wyatt motioned at Jordan. “Put on your seat belt, please.”

She obeyed. He started the car and drove away. They didn’t notice the eyes that followed them, that stared at them with so much disdain.

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December 4th, 4:45 PM, Wednesday Evening

UCLA, Los Angeles, California

When Jordan got out of English class she looked up to see both Three and Melody waiting for her, instead of Agent Wyatt.

She smiled brightly. “Well, hello there, you two!”

Melody smiled. “Hey, Jordan! Eric stopped by to see the kiddos and his grandparents and since he was coming to get you and go see Logan’s performance this evening, and I was getting ready to head over here too, he suggested he follow me and we go see Logan together.”

“I think that was a great suggestion,” Jordan said as she hugged Melody and then reached out to hug Eric.

He touched her face. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too. How did your interviews go?”

He shrugged. “It’s like they ask the same questions every time. How does Dad feel about me going into the movie business, do I have any leftover trauma from my kidnapping experience, am I still in touch with the homeless man I’d been trying to help, is the rumor true that I’m engaged to be married, do I think I might be too young to be married, do I know that there are a whole lot of disappointed girls to find out that I’m taken, how does my mother feel about me getting married, how does my family feel about my fiancée.” He shook his head.

Jordan frowned. “I guess a lot of people could really hate me right about now.”

“They’re just jealous,” Melody said. “Don’t you worry about it.”

“It’s true, I am very, very lucky to have Three in my life. I still have to pinch myself that we’re engaged to be married.”

“It’s me who’s lucky,” Eric said quickly. “But it’s not luck anyway. It’s a blessing and it was meant to be and they can all just be mad or jealous, because I AM so blessed to have you, Jordan. Don’t let all the publicity get to you.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Okay, well, let’s go watch my brother melt the hearts of all his classmates and we can let everyone be mad at Melody for a while.”

Jordan laughed. “Okay, deal!” She linked her arm in Melody’s as she spoke to young Eric. “Did you send Agent Wyatt home?”

"Well, I'm not his boss, so no. But he called in and let Uncle Joey know that I was here to get you and he was relieved of duty for the night. But he'll be here to get you first thing in the morning, so don't worry."

Jordan nodded. "Okay, I won't worry. Sorry I'm such a chicken."

Young Eric didn't answer. He just shook his head and put his arm around her. "I guess you want to go change clothes?"

Jordan nodded. "It won't take me but a few minutes."

They headed to her apartment. Melody and young Eric conversed with Jordan's roommate Colton while they waited for Jordan to change. She was true to her word, only taking a few minutes. She wore the same black dress she'd worn the first night he'd met her, this time with a soft knit cape over it that she borrowed from Colton.

"You look amazing," Eric complimented when she came out.

"So pretty," Melody agreed.

Jordan shrugged. "I don't have much to choose from. I hope it's good enough for a little Christmas concert."

Eric frowned. "It's perfect," he assured her. But he was kicking himself mentally. He hadn't thought about the fact that she still had very few clothes and he needed to be a little more conscientious about that and make sure he took her shopping for anything she'll need for the holiday season. Or maybe get his mom to do that.

They headed to grab a bite to eat together and then to Royce Hall and then backstage. Logan immediately met them with a smile on his face as they came through the security door. Melody looked around at all the people rushing here and there, some holding long gowns on hangers, some carrying instrument cases. Most of the guys were in black tuxedos, most of the girls were in red velvet gowns.

Logan took both of Melody's hands in his and squeezed. "Hey, Mel, it's so good to see you."

She laughed. "You just saw me last night."

"Was it? It seems like it's been forever."

Young Eric and Jordan both smiled. They understood how that felt.

"You look beautiful. Love that dress," Logan said.

Melody smiled and looked down at the red dress she'd worn last year to church on the Sunday before Christmas. It was a simple A-line dress with short sleeves and a white satin ribbon around the hem. "Thanks," she said softly.

"So, guys, I just wanted to introduce Mel to a few of my friends real quick. They're all badgering me, saying I just made her up."

"What is it with the UCLA people?" Eric said. "Do they pretend to have a boyfriend or girlfriend a lot and that makes them think that everyone else just makes up a partner?"

Logan grinned. "It does seem to be a problem, doesn't it, Jordan?"

She nodded. "It actually does. Kinda creepy."

Logan tugged on Melody's hand. "Come on."

They went around to several musicians and were introduced. Melody smiled sweetly as she offered her hand to each person. Jokes were made about Logan not being in the same league as Melody. Young Eric and Jordan smiled at the banter.

Finally, Logan pulled Melody close and softly kissed her. "Hope you enjoy the show, and hope I haven't messed up you getting good seats."

"You didn't," Eric said. "Your dad is saving seats for everyone."

Logan smiled and nodded. "Ya know, it's very cool to have a dad," he said reverently.

Young Eric nodded. "It's very cool that you still appreciate it so much even after all these years."

"I'll never take having a mother and father for granted again."

"What's this all about?" Melody asked.

Logan frowned. "It's a long story. I was gonna eventually tell you all about it, but I was waiting until..."

She waited for him to go on and when it looked like he wouldn't she urged him on. "Until what?"

"Uh, well, I guess until I was sure it wouldn't make you run away."

"Oh! Is it that bad?"

Logan glanced at young Eric for help.

"It's a heartbreaking story," Eric said quickly. "And it should make you want to stand by his side, but it is waaay too long to tell right now. It has to do with his biological father. Bottom line, Logan very much appreciates having Uncle Mark as his father."

Melody nodded with a smile. "He seems like an awesome father." She looked up at Logan. "I can wait to hear the story, but just know, there's not much you can say that would make me run away."

Logan sighed. "I'll keep that in mind. Well, you guys go get to your seats. I have some things to take care of."

"See ya, bro," Eric said as he escorted Jordan and Melody back to the auditorium.

It was easy to find their seats. The Kinos, Adams, Brooks, Lees, Keiths and Davises took up seats in the fourth, fifth and sixth rows of the center aisle. Jordan smiled at her mother, sister and brother who had new Christmas outfits on they'd bought special to attend the big holiday

concert. They were sitting right behind her. She leaned over. "You guys look so nice!"

"Thanks, Jordan," Josie said softly. Jordan could tell that her ten-year-old sister liked the pretty new clothes. Jordan and Melody waved at the senior Kinos and their five little ones who also were dressed up in pretty Christmas attire. Also on that row was Jason and Justin Lee and their wives and Cam and Jeffy with their baby.

Young Eric, Jordan and Melody sat down next to JoJo. On the other side of JoJo, were his little sister Em and his mom and dad and then Melody's parents and her two brothers. Melody waved at them.

On the row in front of them were Joey, Breez, and their three and Jeff and Mickey Davis and their two boys. Thirty-seven people all together.

Finally the lights dimmed and the program began.

They started with the orchestra playing the first part of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker,* then immediately on to part of Handel's *Messiah,* and finally ended with *Sleigh Ride*.

The curtain then opened to a beautiful winter wonderland and a chorus of eighty voices, including Logan's. They sang some holiday songs from around the world and then finally, Logan came down to play the piano and a percussionist joined him as he played and sang a lighter selection of popular Christmas songs. When Logan played the intro to a familiar song, and then opened his mouth to sing *White Christmas*, there was an audible gasp from the audience. They couldn't believe the smooth, deep quality of his voice. It was so perfect, it almost sounded unreal. He went on to sing a few more and then he went back to the choral group and joined in as they sang more songs, some very classical, some more modern. Several soloists stepped forward to perform.

The entire program was well-done. At the end of the evening though, when Logan stepped back down and took the microphone in his hand, the place erupted before they even knew what he was gonna sing. He and the pianist, and guitarist waited for the applause to end. Finally, the piano and guitar began playing the familiar notes of the last song, *O Holy Night*.

Logan began singing, pouring his soul into every single word, hoping the audience would feel the amazing thing that took place on that long ago night. God's Son was born into the world, come to fulfill, God's perfect lamb, here to overcome death for us all. The chorus joined him at different parts of the song. It was a beautiful finale and the standing ovation at the end went on and on and on.

Logan took his bows as did the others on stage. It was obvious that his emotions were overflowing. Melody smiled up at him through her tears as

she applauded. In her mind, he was the most amazing guy she'd ever known. Multifaceted. Multitalented. An ultra-masculine guy who could cry over a Christmas song. Strong. Handsome. Humble. Kind. Thoughtful. Hard-working. Beautiful. If she hadn't been in love with him already, she definitely was now.

JoJo glanced over at his brother's girl and smiled. Her reaction to what just took place was perfect. She was a keeper.

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December 4th, 10:30 PM, Wednesday Night

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Daisy rolled to her back and stretched one hand above her head. The other hand held the phone. "Yeah, and it's a good thing we got it done, because tomorrow, they have to go over to Chaz' parents' home and help them decorate for Christmas. They're getting up there in age, like in their late seventies and they need help up in that big house. But we knocked out those three trees really fast tonight. There were so many people there, we got all three trees done in record time, even though we were minus Laynah, since she was upstairs talking to Jake and Miss Jodi left to go be with her husband so they could be together when Jake called them."

Brody sighed. "It's hard to think about Jake getting hurt like that, but I'm really grateful that he's gonna be okay."

"We all prayed after Laynah came down and told us about it. We gave thanks that he survived, and for that woman who helped him, and we asked for a blessing of healing both physically and like, emotionally too, for both guys."

"Good. And I'll definitely be including them in my prayers tonight."

"Good. Ya know, Brody, it seemed the ones who took the news the worst, other than Laynah of course, were my dad and Gabe. They had a little talk after we got home."

"I guess Gabe and Jake are pretty close," Brody said.

"Yeah, they think of each other as brothers."

"So, anyway," Brody went on, trying to brighten the mood. "What did you do after that? Just came on home?"

"No. We had dessert and then Charlie and Matt and Gabe and Taylor and I went down to see Georgia and her puppies. Oh, Brody, they are getting so cute. They try to stand and walk around and they're just so darn adorable. I wish you could see them."

"Well, I can if you'll video call me the next time you're down there."

"Okay, I'll do that tomorrow! But what if you're in class?"

"Hmm, can you do it tomorrow around 8:30 in the morning?"

"Yes, I can."

"Good. I can't wait to see you."

"You mean the puppies."

"Do I?"

She giggled.

"As a matter of fact, why don't we switch over to video right now?"

Daisy frowned. "Oh no, I'm not dressed and my hair's a mess."

"I'm sure you're as beautiful as ever. What are you wearing?"

"I'm in bed in my brother's old pajama bottoms and an old faded high school drama club T-shirt."

He chuckled. "Why are you wearing your brother's PJs?"

"Well, back when Gabe started growing, like when he was thirteen or fourteen, he was growing so fast, he had to have new clothes every few months and us girls started claiming his old clothing because, like, it wasn't very old at all and it was so comfortable to lounge around in. I've had these pajama bottoms for years, and they're still my favorite thing to wear to bed in the winter time."

"What color are they?"

"They're like, black and gray plaid flannel. So cozy."

"Come on, Daisy. It's making me crazy. I've gotta see."

She sighed. "Okay. But don't look at my hair."

He laughed. She waited while he switched over to video. She smiled into the camera. "Hey."

"Hey," he murmured as he realized she was still in the bed, lying flat on her back, with her phone held above her face. Her hair was fanned out around her head on the pillow and he swallowed hard. He sighed. "Lord, Daisy, you are so beautiful. I'm really missing you right now."

"I miss you too, Brody," she said as she eyed his handsome face.

He cleared his throat. "Okay, let me see the pajamas."

She lifted the phone higher and he got a full-body scan that made his pulse jump. She was wearing a light blue t-shirt with a picture of drama masks on it and the flannel pajama bottoms that looked a little too big on her, and she was about as sexy as a girl could be. He forced himself to smile casually. "Very cute."

She giggled. "Yeah right."

Daisy looked up as Lily came into the room. "Hey, sis," Daisy said.

"Hey. Is that Brody?"

"Yes, and you're on video."

Lily smiled at the phone and waved. "Hey, Brody. How's it goin'?"

"Hello, Lily. It's goin' great. Whatcha been up to?"

She sighed. “I stopped by the Inn to do a little prep work for tomorrow’s breakfast. The Inn is almost full and it’s about to get crazy up in here.”

“Did you see the Appels when you were there?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Just wondering how they’re doing, I mean like, with the news about Jake being taken.”

“They’re good. They’re grateful. When I got there they were still on the call with him. Then they came to speak to me for a bit and they said they were extremely grateful. There were a few guests having a late snack and they heard what we were talking about and they were very impressed at how well Uncle John and Aunt Jodi were handling it. That got them into a discussion about trusting God, and that led to a teaching moment and it was actually a beautiful thing. Seeds being planted every day.”

“Love it,” Brody said softly.

“Well, guys, I’ll be in the bathroom for about ten minutes and then I have to get some sleep. I have to be at the Inn by 6:00.”

“In other words,” Daisy said, “we need to finish up our call. We get the hint.”

“You can finish or you can take it somewhere else, but I do need to sleep. Right after breakfast at the Inn I have to go to class, then come home and help mom with the babies, and then work on dinner at the Inn.”

“I feel ya,” Brody said. “Good night, Lily.”

She smiled and waved at the camera as she closed the bathroom door.

“Your sister is so sweet.”

Daisy smiled. “She’s the best. And she works so hard.”

“So, what do *you* have to do tomorrow?”

“Well, first, I have to do my workout, and then, it’s my turn to make breakfast here at the house in the morning, and then I’ll go take care of the dogs and then I have to work at the Center for a while. Then I promised Mom I would do the grocery shopping for her, and then I was gonna spend some time with Gabe and Taylor by taking a martial arts class with them because after tomorrow the Kinos only have one more day with us, and then after martial arts, we’ll have dinner and then, we’ll clean up and have family prayer and hit the sack.”

“Wow. That’s a lot.”

“It’s normal. What’s on your schedule?”

Brody sighed. “Well, first there’s Bible reading and family prayer via video call at six. Breakfast at seven. Team meeting at 7:45. Video call with you and the puppies at 8:30. Class starts at 8:50. Lunch at 11:00. Practice 12:00 to 3:00. Conditioning 3:30 to 4:00. Weights 4:00 to 5:00.

Dinner at 5:30. Shower after dinner. Study hall at 7:00. Call my girl at 10:00. Pass out until 5:30 the next morning."

"Wow. Brody. That sounds really hard."

He chuckled. "Hard—builds—character."

She smiled. This guy. He was something. "I'm amazed by you."

"Ditto," he said softly.

"Well, I guess I'd better say goodnight."

Brody smiled. "Goodnight, Daisy. See you in the morning."

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December 5th, 1:20 AM, Wee Hours Thursday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe pulled himself from a deep sleep and grabbed up his phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, Gabe," Taylor said softly.

He sat up. "Taylor, what's wrong?"

She sniffed. "I really need to see you."

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Bad dream?"

"No. I just can't sleep. I need you. Will you come here?"

He tried not to sigh. "Tonight?"

"Yes," she said timorously. "I have a bad feeling."

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Do you know what the bad feeling is about?"

"No. I mean, it just feels bad, or scary, or something."

Gabe thought about his vision.

"Will you come? I mean, after Friday, you won't be able to come to me for a long time."

He nodded. "Yes, Tay, I'm coming."

"When you come up the drive, turn your lights off, and come around back and I'll sneak you in."

Gabe sat silently, thinking a moment.

"Gabe?"

"Yep, I'm here. But I'm not gonna sneak in like some high school kid. I'll tell your father that you needed me and I came to see you."

She sighed. "Okay."

"Taylor, go down in the den and wait for me. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Okay," she said softly.

Gabe quickly dressed. He grimaced as he realized he needed to borrow his father's car. Hmm, should he knock on the bedroom door or text? The knock might wake his mom or the babies. He picked up his phone.

~~ Dad, sorry to wake you. Taylor's having a problem and I need to go see her. Mind if I borrow your car?

His dad responded with a simple thumbs up.

Gabe headed out. As he got to the Kino plantation, he pulled up to the gate, pressed the code and it swung open. He parked at the front steps right behind their rental car, pulled out his phone and texted.

~~ Mr. Kino, sorry to wake you. Taylor is having a bit of a problem and needs to see me. I'm at the front door. May I come in?

~ Be right there

A minute later, Ricky opened the front door and invited Gabe in.

Gabe immediately apologized. "I'm sorry, sir."

"What's wrong with Taylor?" Ricky asked.

"Not sure. She said she felt bad and she didn't know why and she was desperate to see me. I'm sorry, but I had to come. She, uh, wanted me to sneak in, but I told her I needed to act like a man and not like a high school kid, so I woke you. I'm sorry about that."

"Don't apologize for being responsible. So, let me ask you this," Ricky began. "Do you intend to come running every time Taylor says she needs you?"

Gabe sighed and thought a moment. Finally he looked up with a smile. "Actually— yes. I mean, when it's possible." He shrugged. "If Mrs. Kino calls you and tells you she needs you, do you come running?"

Ricky nodded. "I do, if I can."

Gabe gave a slight shrug. "My father too. So, yes, I will too. I trust her that she's not just being silly. And, of course, the vision I had popped into my head immediately."

Ricky smiled. "I guess I'll go up and get her."

"I, uh, I told her to go down into the den because I didn't think you'd want me to go up to her bedroom."

"You thought right. Not that I don't trust you. Obviously, I can trust you with my daughter. It's just better to not put yourselves into a tempting situation." Ricky swept his arm toward the den located in the back right part of the large home. "I guess I'll leave you to it. I will ask you later though, if she has a problem that I need to address, because, she's not your wife yet."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. I understand, sir." He bowed slightly.

Ricky chuckled and headed back up the steps.

Gabe made his way into the den. Taylor was sitting with a blanket around her shoulders and her knees drawn up to her chin. She looked up at him as he came in. “Hi,” she said softly.

He sat down next to her. “Hey, Tay.”

She immediately threw herself against his chest. He pulled her close and locked his arms around her. “I got you, babe,” he murmured.

She sighed.

“Can you tell me what you were feeling? What you were thinking?” Gabe asked.

“I can’t explain it. I felt like I was suffocating. Like I couldn’t breathe. I thought about going to my parents’ bedroom and talking to them, but all I knew was, you were just down the road and you were the only one who could understand.”

He sighed and ran his hand over her hair. “And yet, I don’t understand.”

“All I know is, now that you’re here, I feel better. I feel like I can breathe. It’s like, immediate relief.”

“Taylor, do you think maybe you were just missing me? I mean like, I know it’s hard to be apart and you know, you guys are about to leave to go back to California, and maybe you just panicked a bit. I know the feeling I get, when I’m missing you. It’s sort of like an ache. And the only time it goes away is when you’re just like this.”

She lifted her head. “Like what?”

“Like, close to me.”

“See, I knew you’d understand.”

“Yeah, I understand, but I also know that I need to learn to live with that feeling for a while.”

“How? How can I live like that? How can I sleep?”

“I get it. I really do. But Tay, learning to live with it, it’s part of growing up, part of being mature. We can’t have everything we want all the time. We’re not like children who cry because we want something and we can’t have it. Taylor, God wants us to grow and mature and be in control of our emotions. He wants us to learn to lean on Him. You won’t be lonely when you know that He is always there. So close. He is with you. I know you believe that. You’ve shown before that you believe that. When I’m really alone, like I was when those people took me and put me in that barn, I could feel Jesus, right there, letting me know that even though I had to go through this thing, He was gonna go through it with me. He was gonna be right there beside me. So, I know that even though

your heart aches when we aren't together, He is with you. Right beside you. Reach out to Him. This isn't a new thing for you. I know that."

Taylor sniffed. "No, it's not new, but I think I forgot. Or I panicked. I know Jesus is real and I've seen Him interact with our lives so many times now that I can't deny it. I'm sorry, Gabe. I'm sorry I let you down."

"You didn't let me down. We all stumble. I hope when I stumble you'll help me up and help me to remember who I am and that God is right there with me too."

Just outside the den Ricky Kino smiled. He'd come back down to tell them they were welcome to raid that refrigerator and that there was ice cream that needed to be eaten before they left town. He'd stopped because he'd heard Gabe's words that God wants them to mature and be in control. The rest of his words were pretty darn wise.

If his daughter and this young man actually did end up getting married, Ricky knew Taylor would be in the best hands. This Gabriel Tanner was more than just attracted to Taylor. He loved her unselfishly, which made him completely worthy of her. He decided to forgo the message he'd come to impart and not interrupt.

In the den, Gabe lifted Taylor's chin and lowered his head to kiss her. She sighed as he did. He understood, because it was always such a relief to kiss this sweet girl. He did so now, several times, until their breathing became labored. He couldn't resist the temptation to push her down onto the sofa and lie next to her. They lay side by side, face to face. He reached up and stroked her beautiful cheek with his fingertips. There were times when she was all businesslike. Very mature. Very logical. Very seasoned. Like when she was in the public eye. But then there were times when she was like this. Young. Naive. Innocent. Unsure of herself.

She'd panicked at the thought of their pending separation. She'd reached out to him in the middle of the night and he'd answered her by rushing to her side. It might be a year or longer before he actually popped the question. Then who knows how long before they were married. He shook his head. He was thinking about their wedding and she might not even be his at all depending on what goes down between now and then. At the rate things were going, he might not even still be alive. Though, what his vision suggested was not his impending doom, but hers. No. He would not let that happen. God showed him and now he had to do whatever it took to keep that from happening.

"What are you thinking about?" Taylor asked.

He smiled. "About how much I love you."

She smiled, and reached up and touched her fingers to his lips. "I love you too."

He ran his hand down her side to her waist and pulled her in tight. "Do you feel better?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess I need to go home."

"Not yet. Wait a little while, okay?"

"Okay. I know, let's pray together for a while," Gabe suggested.

"For a while?"

He chuckled. "Yes. What's the longest do you think you ever prayed?"

"I don't know. I guess, when you were dying, I prayed for hours."

"Oh yeah. That. Well, let's pray together awhile."

"Okay. You start," she said.

"Okay. And when I'm out of words, you take over."

She smiled. "Sounds like a good plan."

He kissed her softly. "Close your eyes. Our Father who art in heaven..."

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Still December 5th, Thursday Morning

Kino Plantation Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

They both woke at the sound of a man clearing his throat. Gabe couldn't sit up because Taylor was lying across his body. She scrambled up when she realized that her father was in the room. Once she was off of Gabe, he sat up, and then stood up. "Uh, sorry, sir. I fell asleep."

Ricky smirked. "Stating the obvious, Gabe."

Gabe nodded, reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone. His eyes opened wide. It was 5:00 AM.

"Gabe, may I ask what your plans are for the day?"

"Yes, sir. I'm gonna go run a few miles, then head home and have breakfast with my family. Then I was gonna come get Taylor. I promised my mom I would help her finish decorating the house and more importantly, the front of the house for Christmas. She likes to do it all up. Then Taylor and I were gonna attend a martial arts class at Appel Studio with Daisy and then we were gonna do some Christmas shopping. I'm not sure what after that."

Ricky nodded. "Sounds like a good day. I'll be at the class. I've been asked to be guest instructor today."

"Oh, well, that's cool!" Gabe said. "That means I'd better come prepared to work my butt off."

Ricky smiled. "So, did you and Taylor work things out last night?"

Gabe glanced down at his girl. “Yes, sir. She’s just a little upset about us saying ‘goodbye’ on Saturday morning.”

Ricky nodded at his daughter. “You’re okay, sweetheart?”

She shrugged. “No, I’m not okay with leaving. But yes, I’m okay.”

“Don’t think about it today while you’re spending time with Gabe. Just be grateful for the time you have.”

Taylor nodded. “Yes, sir. I’m trying, Daddy.”

“Well, I’d better be off,” Gabe said. He hugged Taylor. Shook Ricky’s hand and took his leave.

It only took him a few minutes to get home, hydrate, don some sweats and take off running down the dirt road. He turned right out of the Tanner gate and headed toward the Stewart ranch. As he ran past the Inn he smiled at the delicious aromas drifting out. The smell of breakfast cooking was always a warm fuzzy for him. It brought him such good memories, the cold wind as he ran, the smells, the anticipation of the season that celebrated the birth of the Son of God. He’d just passed the front gate of the Inn when he heard a car coming up from behind him.

He thought it was probably a member of his family heading out for the day and he braced for them to blow their horn or flash their lights at him to try to scare him. They were driving pretty fast though, and he glanced around. It wasn’t his family, but the car was coming right at him. He dove out of the way, the side of the car grazing him. He smashed against the iron fencing of the Inn. The car swerved over almost hitting the fence and came to a stop.

Gabe grunted as he rolled over to see what was happening. He wasn’t really hurt. Nothing worse than what he faced on the football field. He sat up and watched as both the driver’s side and passenger side doors swung open and two people emerged from the car. Gabe struggled to his feet, getting ready to defend himself. He squinted at the two guys as they approached. They were laughing. The one that got out of the passenger side fell down, and the driver helped him up.

Gabe’s eyes opened wide. “Carlos? Lucas?” he said loudly.

“Gabe!” Carlos said, as he stumbled toward him.

Gabe braced his hand against the fence and glared at his former high school classmate and former pitcher on the high school baseball team. “Carlos, what are you doing?”

“Gabe! Hey, man! How’s it goin’?”

“It’d be goin’ a lot better if you didn’t just hit me with your car.”

“Gabe!” Lucas yelled. “Oh, hold on—uh oh...”

Gabe shook his head as he watched his former first baseman turn and throw up on the side of the road.

Carlos made his way to Gabe and gave him a big hug. “What are you doin’ here, man?”

Gabe shook his head. “I live here, you idiot. Carlos, you guys are totally wasted.”

“I know, right?” he answered loudly as he grinned.

Gabe quickly moved past him, went straight to Carlos’ car and took the keys from the ignition.

“Whatcha doin’, Gabe?” Carlos asked. “You wanna borrow my car?”

“Yeah,” Gabe said. “I’m gonna borrow it to take you home.”

Carlos shook his head. “I’m not goin’ home. We’re goin’ to Lucas’ house. He’s in big trouble and his dad is gonna kick his butt, so we can’t stay and talk. We gotta get goin’.”

Gabe rolled his eyes at his friends. “Yeah, we’ll get goin’ and I’m drivin’, so y’all get back in the car.”

“You’re coming with us? So cool! Lucas’ dad really likes you.”

“Yeah, get in the car.”

“I get front,” Lucas yelled.

“It’s my car, man,” Carlos argued as he tried to run to get in the car first. They both got to the front passenger side door at the same time, and there was a quick shoving match, but Carlos won and Lucas grumpily slid into the backseat.

Gabe started the car. “Buckle up, guys,” he ordered sternly.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Lucas muttered with a laugh.

Carlos laughed. “Aww, Gabe, you’re such a boy scout. Gosh, I really miss you, man.”

“Yep, I miss you too. But I’m not kidding. Buckle up.”

Gabe waited for his friends to accomplish the simple task. “It reeks in here, guys. Where in the world have you been?”

“We were at a party,” Lucas answered with a laugh.

“All night?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“You do know it’s morning, right?”

“What? Well, no wonder Lucas’ dad is mad,” Carlos slurred.

Lucas started to outright cry. “Oh, man, my dad is gonna kill me.”

“Yeah, and you deserve it,” Gabe said. “How in the heck did you guys end up over here on my road?”

“I dunno. Lucas was giving me like, shortcut directions to his house.”

Gabe shook his head. “Where was the party?”

“Over at Kappa somethin’ house at Middle Georgia.”

"Geez, guys, that's over an hour away." Sighing, Gabe headed into Pine Forest. Lucas lived over on the opposite side of town just a few miles past the high school. Gabe drove into town and had just passed the Community Center on Hill Street and Main when the cop pulled up behind them and turned on his blue lights.

"Great," Gabe muttered. He carefully pulled the car over onto the shoulder of the road and let the window down and raised up a little so he could pull his wallet out of the pocket of his sweats.

He watched the Pine Forest policeman in the side-view mirror as he approached.

Unfortunately, Gabe didn't know this guy. He figured he must be one of the new officers they'd recently hired to keep up with the growth of the town. Also, unfortunately, the cop approached the car carefully and unbuckled his sidearm as if he expected trouble.

Gabe sighed. He had no intention of causing any trouble.

The officer leaned toward the window and immediately backed up. "Step out of the car."

Gabe's brow furrowed. "You want me to get out?" he asked, making sure he'd heard correctly.

"Get out of the car," the officer yelled.

"Okay, okay, I'm getting out," Gabe said. He opened the door and stood up out of the vehicle.

"Step back here and put your hands on the trunk of the car."

"Why?"

"Do as you're told."

Gabe did as he was told, and saw another cop standing behind the car, his hand on his sidearm. "May I call my father?"

"Put your hands behind your back."

"Am I being arrested?"

"You're being detained."

Gabe allowed him to cuff him. "Why am I being detained?"

"Suspicion of driving under the influence and hit-and-run."

Gabe drew a sharp breath. "There's no way. I just started driving a few minutes ago. And there's no way you can suspect me because I know I'm not acting impaired at all."

"And just how do you know that?"

"Because I'm *not* impaired at all."

"That remains to be seen, but the smell of alcohol coming out of that car is strong." The officer searched Gabe, pulled out his phone and placed it on the trunk of the car.

"Sir," Gabe said, trying to be respectful. "Officer, sir, will you please let me call my father?"

"Be quiet and have a seat on the curb," the officer ordered.

Gabe obeyed and watched as the two officers then worked together to get Carlos and Lucas out of the car and place them in cuffs.

Once that was finished the officer came back to Gabe. "Do you not have any ID with you?"

"It's in my wallet, which I laid on the dashboard, when you made me get out of the car. Sir, I'd like to call my father. This is a big misunderstanding."

"Yeah, kid, that's what they all say."

"Listen, I get that, but everyone in this town knows me. They know I wouldn't drink and drive. I'm underage. They know me. Call your chief. Or the Pine County Sheriff. They know me."

"And I guess the mayor knows you too?"

"Yes! I mean, really, he does."

The officer pulled Gabe's wallet out of the car and looked at his ID. He looked up. "Gabriel Tanner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you related to Keegan Tanner?"

"He's my father."

"Well, he's gonna be pretty disappointed in you."

Gabe shook his head. "No, sir, he's not, but he might be disappointed in you. Do you know him?"

"He gave a class to the incoming officers."

"Good, then, may I call him?"

"First, tell me where you were headed this morning."

"I was taking my friends home. They live a few miles in that direction," he said, motioning with his shoulder.

"And what were you doing last night?"

Gabe blew out a breath. "I spent the night over at the Kinos' home over on Taylor Mill Drive."

"Right," the officer said sarcastically.

"I swear I did. They're good friends of our family. I left there about 5:15 this morning and drove back to my home over on Country Inn Drive and then I went for a run. These guys came down the road and uh, pulled over. They're friends from high school. I saw that they were in no shape to drive, so I told them to give me the keys and I was gonna drive them home. That was just a few minutes ago. I'm not lying, sir. I never lie."

"Sit still a minute," the cop said as he went to talk to the other officer.

He came back a few minutes later. “I’m gonna allow you to call your father. Tell him he needs to come and get you.”

Gabe sighed in relief because he didn’t want an arrest, even a brief one, on his record. He glanced over at his two friends as they were being questioned. He wished he’d been able to help them in some way, but it was absolutely obvious that they were pretty much drunk out of their minds. Hopefully, they would learn from this and it wouldn’t mess up the rest of their lives. He wondered who they hit. He wondered if they’d hit a pedestrian or another car. His stomach churned with the thought that maybe they’d hurt someone pretty bad. It was definitely possible. If he hadn’t been able to jump out of the way, they would’ve hurt him.

“Are you gonna undo the cuffs?” Gabe asked.

The officer shook his head. “Not until your father gets here.”

“Well, how am I supposed to call him?”

The cop went over to the car and grabbed up the phone he’d pulled from his pocket earlier. “What’s the number?”

Gabe told him the number and the officer put it on speaker. It rang until it went to message. “I don’t know why he’s not answering,” Gabe said, the frustration evident in his voice. “He might be in the shower. Can I call Mr. Kino? I mean, he’ll vouch for me.”

The officer nodded. “What’s the number?”

“Um, I don’t remember, but it’s in my phone.”

The officer looked through the contacts and sure enough, there was a Grandmaster Ricky Kino listed. He hit the call button.

“Hey, Gabe. Long time no see,” Ricky quipped.

The officer’s brows rose and Gabe frowned at him. “He’s kidding.” He blew out a breath. “Mr. Kino, you’re on speaker. I’m in trouble. I’m standing here on the side of the road in handcuffs. I can’t reach my father. Will you come up here and vouch for me that I was at your house?”

“On my way.”

“And will you try my father again?”

“Will do.”

“I’m just down from the Center on...”

“I have you on my GPS.”

“Oh yeah. Okay, thank you, sir.”

“Gabe, did they say why you were pulled over?”

“DUI and hit and run.”

“Whoa. Okay. Don’t stress, Gabe. We both know you were at my house and I have video of you leaving.”

“I’m not stressed. I understand what’s happening.”

Ricky smiled. “Be right there.”

Gabe glanced over at his friends. Lucas was blowing into a tube. Carlos was being placed in the backseat of the second cruiser.

"Okay, Tanner. I'd like you to take a preliminary roadside breath test. Since you say you haven't been drinking, it should be no problem to clear this up."

Gabe shook his head. "No, sir, I can't do that."

"Are you refusing to take the test?"

"Yes, sir. You have no reason to suspect me of drinking."

"You were behind the wheel of a car that has been reported to be involved in a hit and run accident."

"Yes, sir. And I just told you how I got behind the wheel of that car. And when Mr. Kino gets here he will let you know that I left his house around 5:15 this morning. And he can show you video evidence of that. And when I get hold of my father, he can show you video of me arriving at our house and then going out to run. And we can also get video from in front of the Inn because that's when my friends drove up and pulled over and I decided to take them home."

The officer sighed and nodded. "Okay. I believe you. Turn around and I'll take the cuffs off."

Gabe did so quickly.

It took Mr. Kino about fifteen minutes to arrive and when he did, Gabe's father pulled up right behind him. The two men approached slowly. Keegan nodded at the officer. The two men introduced themselves, and showed the officer their identification.

Keegan nodded at his son. "Gabe. You okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me what happened."

Gabe went over the events of the morning quickly. Keegan and Ricky both nodded as he spoke. When he finished telling the short story, Keegan turned to the officers. "You say there was a hit and run?"

"Yes, sir," one officer replied. "A gold Nissan Maxima ran off the road just a few miles from here and plowed down a fence. The owner of the home was standing on the porch of his home letting his dog out and saw the whole thing. And here's the gold Maxima, and there's a broken headlight on the passenger side."

"So, the hit and run was property damage only?" Keegan asked.

"Right."

"Oh thank goodness," Gabe muttered.

Ricky nodded. "Officer, I have video of Gabe leaving my home this morning. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, sir. Not that I don't believe you. It would be good to add that to my report."

Both Ricky and Keegan showed video on their phones from their home security. They assured him they could also get video of when Gabe was in front of the Inn when he decided to drive his friends home.

Once that was done, Gabe nodded. "So, am I free to leave?"

The officers nodded. Keegan and Ricky shook their hands.

Gabe glanced at his friends in the back of the cruiser. "Dad, can we arrange some legal counsel for Carlos and Lucas?"

Keegan smiled. "Yes. I'll speak to their parents and take care of it."

"Thanks, Dad." He looked at the officers. "May I talk to my friends a minute?"

The officer nodded and Gabe headed there and opened the door. They both seemed a lot more sober than they were thirty minutes ago. "Hey, guys," Gabe said. "Don't worry too much. We're gonna get hold of your parents and get you out."

"Thanks, man," Carlos said. "They said it was hit and run. Did I like, kill someone?"

"You killed someone's fence," Gabe said.

"A fence? I hit a fence?"

"Yep. Thank God that's all it was. But you guys, y'all know better than this. Don't do stupid things that could ruin your lives. Okay?"

"I hear ya," Lucas grumbled. "You always were such a Boy Scout."

Gabe shrugged. "Look, I know everyone makes fun of me for trying to do the right thing all the time. Today, doin' that almost got *me* arrested. But Carlos, you could've killed someone. Heck, you almost hit me. And that would send you to jail for a long time. Make fun of me all you want, man, but come on, you gotta make better choices. I'm not tellin' you this to sound like, I think I'm all better than you. I'm tellin' you this because you guys are my friends and believe it or not, I actually care about what happens to you." He sighed.

The guys were quiet a moment as they digested the sentiment.

It was Carlos who finally spoke. "Got it, Tanner, and thanks, man. So, like, my mom is gonna have to post bail or something?"

Gabe nodded. "Well, Carlos, I'm not exactly sure how it will work but yeah, I think so."

Carlos shook his head. "We ain't got no money."

Gabe nodded again. "I'll get her some help. We'll talk to both your parents and see what they need and we'll take care of it. This is exactly what my foundation is for. To help you get your life together when you

mess up and don't have a way to fix it. But you gotta do the work too. You gotta want to fix things."

Lucas sniffed. "Thanks, Gabe," Lucas muttered, his emotions running rampant due to the alcohol.

Gabe nodded. "I'll be in touch." He stepped back and closed the door. The defeated look on their faces really tore at Gabe's heart. He opened the door again. "Hey. Listen to me. It's gonna be okay. Ya know, God is real. So say a prayer. Ask Him to show you that He's real." He didn't wait for a response from his friends. He shut the door again and made his way back to his father's side.

While Gabe had been talking to his friends, Keegan and Ricky had been reminding the officers that Pine Forest is a special place and how they go about doing their job is important. Keegan went on to tell the officers that he was not disappointed in his son at all, but instead, proud of him for trying to do the right thing. He advised the officers to get to know the people of the town as soon as possible. He told them that the Tanner family and the Kino family don't expect special treatment, but they do expect to be treated with respect and that they should also treat the other people who live in Pine Forest with respect.

Finally, they shook the officers' hands. Keegan put his arm around his son's shoulders and walked back to the car. Gabe thanked Mr. Kino for coming to help so readily. Ricky smiled. "I had no choice. Taylor would be devastated if you ended up in jail and she couldn't have this day with you. Anyway, glad to help. I've been arrested before and so has my son. It's no fun. Not one little bit."

Gabe nodded. "I know about young Eric, but what did you get arrested for?"

Ricky sighed. "Felony assault. A man shot and killed an Ameritech agent, and almost killed another agent *and* my stepmother *and* Jeffy when she was just a kid. He took Jeffy and when I caught up to him, I almost beat him to death with my bare hands and he pressed charges against me."

"I remember that," Keegan said. "It was in the news and it was before I met your mom, Gabe. I was actually preparing to go undercover on the case that brought your mom and me together."

"Yep, it was also before Bree and I were married," Ricky added.

"How old was Jeffy?" Gabe asked.

"She was seven." Ricky sighed. "So much has happened since then. And here I am talking to Keegan's grown son."

"It's kinda weird how much can happen, like in a short amount of time," Gabe said.

"Yep," Keegan agreed. "And in the blink of an eye, you'll be telling your own son about the time you almost got arrested," Keegan said.

Gabe smiled at the thought of having a son. Hopefully, he would be his and Taylor's son. How cool will that be?

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Proverbs 23:29-35

"Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife?
Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause?
Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine;
those who go to try mixed wine.
Do not look at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly.
In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.
Your eyes will see strange things,
and your heart utter perverse things.
You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea,
like one who lies on the top of a mast.
"They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt;
they beat me, but I did not feel it.
When shall I awake? I must have another drink.""

Chapter Twenty-Seven

December 5th, 9:00 AM, Thursday Morning
Pine County Hospital, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose Tanner stopped to smooth her hair before she opened the door of Jericho's room.

Jericho smiled as she came in. He held up a finger. "Yes, Max, that sounds good. Arrange for the interviews starting Thursday of next week. Then we can start with an entire class by the end of January.... Well, I want to have a good hour for each interview, so, let's reach for eight per day... I want to fill the class up, but I also want to screen heavily. And if you do the screening first, and I will take the cream off the top, we'll have some great options to work with... Yep, by the summer of this next year, we should be in full swing... Okay, gotcha...Yep. I feel that way too, man. God is working. He is so good... Okay... Gotta go now. A beautiful woman just walked into my room and it looks like she's got food... I will... Yep. Later."

He ended the call and set the phone down with a smile on his face.

By the time he ended the call, Rose already had the food taken out of the bags and placed neatly on his bedside table. She turned to him once he set his phone down and smiled.

He reached out his hand and she came to him quickly, bent down and kissed him. "Good morning, Jericho."

He sighed. "So good now that you're here." He frowned. "This has to be gettin' old for you, I mean, having to come up here every day."

"Don't be ridiculous," Rose snapped. "What's the alternative? That I abandon you and go about my day as if you didn't exist?"

He chuckled. "Good girl. Let me have it for making stupid remarks."

"Keep it up and I will definitely make some threats."

"Oh, wow, that's scary."

"You're feelin' pretty feisty today, aren't you?" Rose said as she pushed the rolling table up to his bed.

He smiled. "I am."

"Does it have anything to do with the call I just heard?"

"It does."

She opened up the container that held some steaming pancakes, then picked up the small glass jar and covered the pancakes in hot, homemade syrup. He sighed with pleasure. She then lined up some of Dr. June Flower Kino's prescribed supplements for anti-inflammation, and for quick healing and handed him a bottle of coconut water. "Use this to take the pills and then here's some ice cold raw milk to go with the pancakes."

"I'm in heaven," he said as he obeyed her orders. He gathered all of the supplements in one hand and threw them in his mouth and chased them with the coconut water.

Rose nodded. "You're being a very good patient."

"I am. And I guess that's why they're already talking about letting me go home next week. As long as I can prove I have someone to take care of my, like, personal needs."

"You have me."

He shook his head. "Nope. There are certain things I cannot have you do, and also I'm too heavy for you. I'm gonna get a strong, male nurse to help me plus, I'll have Jimmy and Max to help too."

"Why don't you want me to help you?"

"You think about it and talk to your father about it. He'll help you to understand."

"But..."

"Please, Rose. I'm in love with you. Our relationship is very new. I appreciate your need to take care of me. But I also need certain things. Like, privacy. I don't really want to have this discussion right now. Just trust me. Talk to your parents. Your father and I had a long talk a few days ago and he knows exactly what I'm talking about."

Rose sighed. "Okay."

"Don't be hurt."

"I'm not hurt."

"Good. If you say you're not hurt, I believe you." He took another bite of his breakfast as he eyed her. She wore a red long-sleeved sweater dress with black tights and tall black boots. "So, RoseRose, you're looking very festive today."

Rose smoothed her hand over her dress. "We have a 'Caroling on the Courthouse Steps' event this evening and I won't have time to go home and change. And, I'm sorry to say, I have to leave here in an hour and head to the center. We have a group of women who are coming to make plans for the families in our area who may be struggling. I mean, some we know are struggling, and some, we know they may be too embarrassed to let us know, but we're trying to figure it out. We've been in touch with schools, teachers and administrators and churches. We want to see what we can do

and not let anyone fall through the cracks. The women are also gonna be making decorations for the families as we meet."

"This sounds like a great undertaking."

"I just pray God will help us to not overlook anyone. And we have like, four tree-lighting activities in our town coming up. The first one tonight at the courthouse steps. So, we have to have enough goodies for any and all children that come and we'll have a wish bucket for kids and parents alike to write down what they want, what they need, what they wish, what they pray. The little form has a place for address and phone number, so that will help us to identify and find those who need help."

"Rose, I'm so proud of you. I wish I was available to help you."

"You helped me so much at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*. I think you earned a rest." She smiled brightly. "Anyway, what was with the conversation I overheard?"

He grinned. "It's happening, Rose. We're interviewing guys, firefighters and paramedics, who want to join our team of special ops firefighters, who want to help us teach and train special operation firefighters. My company is expanding. And Rose, listen to this, we have an office space."

"What?"

"Yep. It's on College Street, right here in Pine Forest. I'm gonna run the operation. Max will be my right-hand man. The other guys will be out in the field in charge of different teams. They will travel the country. But there will eventually be a big training ground right here, somewhere in Pine County. We're actually looking at the property where I understand your brother was held hostage."

"Really? The old poultry farm?"

"Yes. And here's the big one... I'm so stoked I can barely get the words out. Your father spoke to Jason Lee and they're thinking that they might want to partner with us. As you know, right now, Ameritech is pretty much a military operation, but, they've been thinking about some humanitarian type operations. Like, when the National Guard goes in to help hurricane victims. And they're thinking that special operations firefighters and medics, the best of the best, they'd fit into their company perfectly. So, we're not quite sure the direction to take with that just yet. But, it's a big deal, babe. A big deal. Ameritech Security Special Firefighters Operations run by Jericho Jones. How does that sound?"

Rose grinned. "Oh, Jericho. It sounds wonderful."

"And there would be a lot of cross-training taking place. Trained and skilled agents who want to add to their skills. Trained special ops

firefighters and paramedics who want to add security training to their arsenal. The soldiers we'd be creating, I mean, the warriors, who can do it all, it's like, a huge dream."

"The possibilities are really endless," Rose said softly as her brain started working. "Oh, wow, Jericho. It would almost be like a group of superheroes."

"Right? And if Ameritech actually does put my little company under their umbrella, coming up with the money to start this venture will be a snap. I'll be in business. And think of all the people we could help."

"Jericho. It's amazing, really. You were slated to play professional football, but God had different plans for you. And now, after your hard work and the hard work of the five guys you handpicked to represent your company, you're all going to reach astounding heights."

He nodded, pushed away his empty tray, grabbed her hand and pulled her forward. She fell onto him and he gave a soft grunt at the slight pain in his incision area. "And all this," he said softly, "means I'm not leaving, except for maybe short business trips. I'm gonna heal, I'm gonna establish my home right here in Pine Forest, I'm gonna be able to provide well for my family and I'm gonna find me a beautiful, ultrasmart, hardworking, sexy companion to spend the rest of my life with, and have a dozen or so children and teach them about the purpose of life."

Rose's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, baby, did I make you cry?"

"Yes." She sniffed. "Are you saying that I'm a part of this big elaborate plan?"

"I hope you are, my beautiful Rose. I need someone by me who is as strong as I am. Though you're as beautiful as the flower you're named after, you're not delicate. You're tough. You're dependable. You're so strong in mind and body and more importantly, in spirit. You are a warrior daughter of God and though I don't deserve someone as wonderful as you, I hope you'll stay by my side.

"But I don't want to propose to you, Rose, while I'm lying here in a hospital bed unable to stand tall like a man. I just want you to know that THAT is exactly what's on my mind. Having you by my side. Making love to you every night. Taking care of you. Protecting you. You're the only one I've ever met that I could trust to raise and teach my children. Our children. We'll make a family of warriors just like your parents have made. But I'm getting way ahead of myself. First things first, Rosey. I gotta get out of here and heal."

She wiped at her eyes. "Just a few months ago, like, the first week of September, I was feeling very inadequate and very doubtful that I would

ever find the right guy for me. Someone smart, and strong and whose faith in God is as strong as mine. A good man, like my father. And my dad told me that the right guy is out there. He told me to trust God. He told me that God had big plans for me. That I wasn't who I was so that I could be used and mistreated. That I was special."

"He was sure right about that."

She sniffed. "Thank you, Jericho. Thank you for being that good man my father spoke about. Thank you for following God's prompts to take the job that brought you here to Pine Forest, that brought you to me. And thank God that He didn't let you die."

Jericho nodded. "The bad guys tried to take me out. They tried to keep us apart, because they know we're gonna bring so much light to this world. You and me, Rose, we were meant to be."

He pulled her down and kissed her thoroughly.

She licked her lips. "You taste like maple syrup."

He smiled and glanced up at the clock. "Oh, darn, it's almost time for you to leave."

"I wish I didn't have to leave."

"I know. Me too. Just remember, we'll be together soon. Give me time to heal. Time to get back on my feet."

"I'll give you time. But don't take too long."

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December 5th, 6:00 AM, Thursday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Hello there, my little man," Cam uttered softly as he bounced his three-and-a-half-week-old son in his arms. "Dear Lord, you are so beautiful. My little Eli, I'm so grateful for you. You are a special little guy. I can feel your little spirit so strongly."

He stopped talking for a minute as Eli whimpered and thrust his fist to his mouth, making loud sucking sounds.

Cam chuckled. "Your mom is in the bathroom, son, but she'll come feed you in just a minute, I promise. We both love you so much. We're so grateful that God sent you to us. I promise, Elijah Cameron Kino Wallace, that I will love you forever and I will never leave you. I mean, I have to go to work, but, I promise to be here for you to support you in all the things you want to do or try. I'll protect you and teach you and pray over you and with you. I'll make sure you get to know all of your very large family. Your grandmother and grandfather, your uncles and aunts and cousins."

He leaned forward and kissed him gently on his cheek. "You have another set of grandparents, but I don't know where they are right now. I

suppose I should try to reach out to them and let them know that they have a grandson. Who knows, maybe your strong spirit can reach them and turn their hearts to what is really important in this world. And that, son, is God, and family. They don't understand that. But maybe if they meet you, they'd begin to understand. I gotta talk to your mom first, and make sure she has no problem with me reaching out to them."

"I have no problem," Jeffy said softly as she came out of the bathroom.

Cameron smiled at her as she got back in bed and got comfortable sitting up against the headboard so she could nurse the baby. He gently handed his son to her, kissed his head one more time and watched as she put the baby to her breast. The first time he'd ever seen his child nurse at his mother's breast, it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen and it brought tears to his eyes. Watching her again now, he realized it would never get old.

Jeffy smiled up at him. "Cam, are you feeling like it's time to try to reach out to your parents?"

He nodded. "I haven't really been thinking about it, but just now, the thought came on me strong a minute ago. So, like, maybe our little guy's spirit, being so fresh from God, maybe his spirit can touch my parents' hearts when I couldn't."

She sighed, because she couldn't imagine the hurt and pain Cam had endured over the years, knowing that his parents weren't a bit interested in him or in his life. He'd been a hero way back when he was just seventeen years old. He'd rescued her from certain death. His parents did seem interested in that, albeit briefly. Once the furor died down after that, so did their interest. He played football at Oregon and they never attended one game. Not one. How selfish could they be?

Jeffy didn't understand, though her father tried to help her to understand the psychology of what has been termed uninvolved parenting. He said the liberal world calls it a parenting style. That's because Satan likes to make his influence seem okay. Her dad simply called it child neglect. His assessment after speaking to them was not that they suffered from depression. They were simply narcissistic. They just were not interested. They provided for his physical needs. But her father said it's possible and even probable that they themselves had little to no input from their parents and simply didn't think to try to connect with their son.

Instead, Cameron Wallace had ended up being raised by a few outsiders. One of them was one of his high school teachers and a coach, who'd taken an interest in the talented and very smart athlete. Another one to help him was his best friend's housekeeper, Dora Suarez, the

housekeeper for Senator Talmond Daley. His best friend was the Senator's daughter, Marissa Daley. It was through Marissa that Jeffy met Cam, though it was a horrific episode in their lives that they were grateful to have emerged from unscathed.

Jeffy stroked her son's cheek as he nursed. "Cam, if you feel a nudging, then reach out. They have no idea that you've accomplished so much and that you're married and have a son. I'm actually interested to see if our little Elijah can touch their cold hearts."

Cam frowned. "Don't get caught up in a scientific experiment. Our son is not a guinea pig."

"I'm totally insulted by that remark," Jeffy said with a smile, knowing he had a perfectly sound reason to suspect that was what she was doing. "No, Cam, it's not a scientific experiment. It's more like a spiritual one. Follow God's nudging and let's see where this leads us."

Cam nodded. "Okay, then, I'll reach out. Who knows, maybe they'll actually answer the phone. Or, maybe I'll send a text first."

"Maybe do that," Jeffy agreed.

He sighed. "Well, I have to get in my workout, shower and get to work. I have a new client Jason wants me to meet."

Jeffy frowned. "Tell me you're not being sent over to Turkmenistan or Russia, or something like that."

"I actually don't know yet. But as soon as I do, I'll let you know."

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December 5th, 6:00 PM, Thursday Evening

Pine Forest Courthouse, Pine Forest, Georgia

The courthouse steps were being used as risers for the choirs that were performing. Currently, it was the *Pine Forest Community Church* who occupied the steps. Violet's really nice electric keyboard was currently being played by the Community Church organist. Joining her were two men on electric guitars.

This wasn't the first time the town had sponsored caroling on the courthouse steps, but it was the most elaborate time, mostly because the mayor had asked Rose and Violet Tanner to organize the event this time. The mayor was becoming more and more excited about the town's growth and doing things in a big way.

The Kinos moving into their town was a huge boost to their economy and to their budget. The town and countryside were growing by leaps and bounds. Today, the mayor and the city council were very excited about the names and addresses being collected. They would be able to sort out the

people who were indeed struggling in the community and then actually be able to help the ones who needed it.

The Kinos had donated a tremendous amount of money toward the cause. The money would be used to provide people with the things they wished for and needed for the Christmas season and beyond. They would do real things that didn't just help with the holiday, but things that would get these people on their feet.

The front of the old courthouse was beautifully decorated with green pine boughs and big red ribbons and lots of tiny white lights. In the large yard to the left of the courthouse steps was a huge tree that would soon be lit up by an eight-year-old member of their community, Emily Sanchez, who suffered a spinal cord injury when a tornado came through two years ago. She was now in a wheelchair, but despite that, she was always so cheerful and so happy and loved helping others. Tonight she'd been invited to throw the switch.

Emily and her family were sitting and listening to the beautiful music. They also sang whenever the people conducting would turn to the audience and get them to sing with the choirs. Many of the people had brought their own chairs to sit around the courthouse steps and out into the grass. Some people stood while watching, listening and singing and milling around visiting with each other. Currently, that was what Taylor and Gabe were doing. Ricky and Bree stood out to the back of the crowd enjoying the beautiful spirit and speaking to each other about how they wished young Eric and Jordan and her family were here to enjoy this.

The Tanner family too was in the back with the Kinos, though Lizzy was sitting off to one side near the refreshment tables. She wasn't currently holding her new babies because every teenage girl in town argued over who got to hold one next. The same thing was happening with the Stewart twins, though Lisa was not sitting down. Instead, she was keeping careful watch over her babies.

Off to one side was a string of refreshment tables holding all kinds of goodies, cookies, cakes, slices of pie, hot chocolate, hot apple cider, and hot coffee. The refreshments were free, but donations were accepted.

Daisy was walking around on a video call with Brody, showing him everything that was taking place. Laynah was also on a video call with her husband, walking around and letting Jake speak to everyone. Heather and Nolan were not in attendance. They were back in Tennessee working on their big move back to Georgia.

Taylor and Gabe grabbed some refreshments and went to stand with their parents.

"Umm, this hot chocolate feels good on my hands," Taylor said.

Gabe looked down at her. “Are you cold?”

She nodded. “Maybe I am just a little, but the hot chocolate makes me feel a lot warmer.”

“I can do that too,” Gabe said, but looked up at Mr. Kino when he cleared his throat. Gabe smiled. “I just mean that maybe I can put my arm around her.”

“Right,” Gabe’s dad quipped.

Gabe looked Taylor over. She wore a white knit hat that had a little white ball at the tip. She also wore a white coat and a white scarf. Her red dress was short and just barely stuck out below her coat and she had on black tights and black knee-length boots. Her cheeks, nose and lips were pink with the cold. Her eyes sparkled. He felt a rush of warmth and love flood his system.

Rose stepped forward on the courthouse steps and took the mic. “How in the world can we be so lucky to have so many awesome singers in our little town? Thank you, *Pine Forest Community Church*. Okay, everyone, our next choir is actually the *Pine Forest High School Chorale*. We are so grateful to have these fine young people come and sing for us. But be ready, at the end they’re gonna get you all to sing *‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’,* and I have a bet with my sister that the left side over here can sing louder than the right side over there. So, be ready! Everyone give a hand to the award-winning *Pine Forest High School Chorale*.”

Taylor was trying to listen but she got distracted by a young girl that caught her eye. The girl looked to be maybe twelve years old. She was thin, and wearing only a blue sweater over a t-shirt and blue jeans. Her blond hair was long, but really messy. Her shoulders were hunched. She was acting strange, Taylor thought. The girl looked back over her shoulder and gave a sharp gasp, which made Taylor look too, wondering what frightened the girl. Taylor looked over trying to figure out what was scary. There were a lot of people standing around, but one stood out. A man. He was a heavyset man, wearing a black knit cap and a large brown coat that came to his knees. He stood out because he was frowning. Scowling really. And he appeared to be looking for someone.

Taylor looked back toward the girl. She moved quickly to almost wedge herself between a man and woman. They moved aside and the girl stepped in front of them and stayed very close to them. Taylor took a few steps to her right so that she could see what the girl was doing. She kept glancing over her shoulder. Taylor suddenly knew that the girl was in some sort of trouble. Maybe the man was her father and she’d

misbehaved. Maybe it was a much worse scenario. Taylor didn't want to wait to find out.

Moving quickly, Taylor went around the man and woman and approached the girl. The girl looked up at her, the fear evident in her eyes. Taylor put her finger to her lips, to tell her to stay quiet and she quickly took the white hat off her own head and placed it on the girl's head. Then she took off her coat and helped the girl put it on. Next she took off her white scarf and wrapped it around the girl's neck and brought part of it up to cover her face from the nose down. She smiled at her. "There," Taylor whispered. "No one can tell who you are."

The girl's eyes opened wide.

"I know you don't know me, but I had a feeling you needed help. Will you come stand with me and my parents? Whatever the problem is, we can help you."

The girl blinked.

"Come with me," Taylor said firmly. "Those are my parents right there," she said, pointing at her father and mother.

The girl looked where Taylor pointed.

Taylor smiled at her. "Okay, well, if you don't need my help, that's cool. I just thought that man over there was scaring you."

Taylor started to leave but the girl grabbed her arm. "How, I mean, how did you know that?"

"I'm very observant." Taylor sighed. "Is he your dad?"

The girl looked down and then shook her head. "He tells everyone he is, but he's not my real dad."

Taylor nodded. "Okay. Come with me. You're safe now."

Taylor took her hand and led her back to her parents. Bree immediately smiled at her. "What have we here?"

"Mom, I think this girl is in trouble."

Ricky immediately looked for Keegan, but he was no longer near them so he pulled his phone and called him. Bree knelt down in front of the girl. "Hello."

Meanwhile, Taylor was looking around to see if the man recognized the girl. Gabe followed her line of vision. "The man right there in the brown coat, Tay?"

Taylor nodded. "She says he tells everyone that he's her dad but he's not her real dad. That's all I know so far except she was hiding from him and she's really scared of him."

Gabe immediately took his own coat off and placed it around Taylor's shoulders. "Put your arms through. You're freezing."

Taylor did as instructed. Gabe watched the man as he moved down toward the courthouse steps, obviously looking for the girl. “Mr. Kino, I’m gonna tail the guy so we don’t lose him,” Gabe said.

Ricky nodded. “Okay, but do not engage.”

“Yes, sir.” Gabe took off.

Bree smiled at the young girl and took her hand. “So, what’s your name, sweetie?”

“Hannah.”

“So, do you live with that man?”

The girl nodded her head as tears came to her eyes.

“Did you always live with that man?”

She shook her head. “I used to live with my mom and my real dad. But my mom got mad at my dad and took me and left him. We went to my grandma’s house down in Columbus. She couldn’t find a job and grandma said she couldn’t afford us, so we had to leave and we were homeless. Then my mom met Carl.”

Bree frowned. “That man that’s looking for you, is that Carl?”

She nodded.

“What’s his last name?” Bree asked.

“Deetz,” she said softly.

“And then what happened after your mom met Carl?”

“We moved in with him. But he was always mean to my mom and they had these big fights all the time.”

“So, where is your mom now?”

Hannah looked down. “He said that my mom moved out. He said she packed her bags and left me. But that’s not what happened.”

“What happened, Hannah?”

“He killed her.”

“How do you know that?”

She sighed. “Because I saw him do it.”

Bree hugged the girl. “Oh, sweetie. I’m so sorry. Do you know how long ago that happened?”

Hannah nodded. “It was about two years.”

“Two years? Oh, sweetie. How old are you?”

“I’m thirteen.”

“Oh! Sweet girl. You look much younger than that.”

Ricky got off the phone and looked at Bree. “Sheriff Ty is in touch with Pine Forest police and is gonna have them pick up this guy. Did I hear her say he murdered her mother?”

Bree nodded.

Ricky called Ty back immediately and let him know he was a suspect in a murder and could be armed and dangerous.

Hannah looked up at the man. “I have to go hide somewhere. He won’t stop looking for me. He won’t let me get away.”

Ricky smiled kindly. “You’re safe with us. Trust me.”

“Dad, does Mr. Tanner know that Gabe is tailing that guy?” Taylor asked, the worry in her voice evident.

“Yes. They’re using his GPS to zero in on him.”

Meanwhile, Keegan and John Appel were walking the perimeter of the area trying to spot Gabe when Keegan’s phone rang. It was Gabe.

“Dad, Mr. Kino told me not to engage, but he’s heading out toward the parking lot. I think he’s giving up and is about to hightail it.”

“Do not engage, Gabe. I’m almost there.”

“But Dad, maybe I can stall him. How far away are the police?”

“They should be right on you any second and so should I.”

“Dad, he’s getting in a black Dodge Dakota. Hey! Hey, buddy! Can you give me a ride?” Gabe yelled at the man.

“I’m gonna kill that boy,” Keegan muttered.

The man got back out of the truck and looked Gabe over. “Why? You wanna ride?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where to?”

Gabe shrugged. “Which way are you headin’? I’m not picky.”

“You some kind of drifter, huh?”

“Maybe,” Gabe said with a shrug.

“How ya gonna pay me for the gas?”

“Oh, well, I can do odd jobs, I guess.”

“What else can you do?” the man asked.

Gabe’s stomach turned over. “Anything you want,” he replied.

The man nodded and unlocked the passenger side door. “Go ahead and hop in.”

“Thanks,” Gabe said as he walked slowly toward the passenger side, his eyes sweeping the parking lot. He didn’t want to have to fight this guy because he looked big, strong and mean. Gabe got into the truck but left his door open. If only he was old enough to carry. He was dreading what he was about to have to do, namely, fight for his life. But then, he breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the police cars swing into the lot and at the same time his father and his Uncle John come running across the pavement.

The man jumped into the truck and tried to put the keys into the ignition, but Gabe immediately snatched them out of his hand and jumped

out, running about ten yards before he stopped. Within a few seconds, the man was subdued and cuffed.

Gabe came trotting back and turned the keys over to his father. “Man, Dad, that dude was bad. Pure evil.”

Keegan nodded. “The darkness is everywhere.” He sighed. “Gabe?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You were told to not engage.”

“I, uh, I didn’t. I mean, not really.”

“Really? So, what is your definition of engagement?”

Gabe gave a slight smile. “Um, to get ready to marry?”

John snorted.

Keegan tried to hold it in but couldn’t stop the chuckle. “You’re quite the comedian.”

Gabe shrugged. “I’m sorry, Dad. I didn’t want to disobey you. I was trying hard to not have to fight that dude. But I didn’t want it to turn into a car chase. Someone could get hurt, or he could get away, and if he got away, he would try to prey on someone else, because he didn’t think twice about trying to prey on me.”

“Yes, I heard, and you’re right. He’s a predator.”

“So, Dad, I mean, do I look like easy prey? It’s not like I’m some little kid. I’m almost 6'1" and 180 pounds. That’s not little.”

Keegan smiled. “You look young, Gabe. And he may have thought because of your good acting job, that you were emotionally vulnerable.”

Gabe grinned.

Keegan ruffled his son’s hair. “Come on, let’s head back to your mom and Taylor.”

Gabe nodded. They headed back toward the courthouse and found the Kinos, the Stewarts, the rest of the Tanner family, Jodi Appel and the young girl all together. They’d all moved to the back of the crowd for privacy as Sheriff Stewart questioned the young girl. Taylor stood with her arm around her as the Sheriff spoke to her. Ricky and Bree stood just behind. They looked up as Keegan, John and Gabe approached.

“Good job, Gabe,” Tyson said.

Gabe nodded. “Glad I could help.”

“You caught him?” Hannah asked softly.

“Well, I helped to catch him. He won’t be able to hurt you anymore,” Gabe said, looking deeply into her eyes, hoping he could offer some comfort. She looked so small, so fragile and Gabe thought he probably didn’t want to know what the poor kid had been through.

Taylor reached out and touched Gabe’s arm. “Thanks, Gabe.”

He smiled.

"Uh, Gabe and Taylor, will you walk Hannah over to the refreshment table and get her some hot chocolate and some goodies to eat? I'm sure she's hungry. We need to talk a minute," Bree said.

"Sure," Taylor said. She smiled kindly. "Hannah? You wanna go get something to eat?"

She looked around fearfully.

"He's on his way to jail," Gabe said. "You're safe. Or," he stopped. "I mean, is he the only one? Did he have any friends or family that know about you?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He said he didn't need anyone else. Just me."

"Okay," Gabe said. "Then we're good. Let's go pig out."

Hannah smiled and left with Taylor holding one of her hands and Gabe holding the other.

Bree watched them go then turned back to Tyson. "So, what's gonna happen now?" Bree asked. "I mean, she needs a place to stay."

Tyson nodded. "I hate to do it, but we'll probably need to turn her over to CPS."

Bree quickly looked up at Ricky, a pleading look on her face.

He spoke up. "Well, probably they won't have a place for her this late and she'll end up in a facility, right? We'd like to step in and take care of her tonight, at the very least."

"And after that," Jodi Appel suddenly said, "we can foster her. We're already approved with CPS."

"If that's so, then why don't you just go ahead and take her tonight?" Tyson asked.

"We don't have a room for her tonight. But we have two people leaving tomorrow who we had in the small room on the main floor. That would be perfect for Hannah and would be close to us since we live on the main floor now. We have two whole families in the attic apartments and all rooms occupied on the second floor and all cottages occupied."

Tyson thought for a moment and then nodded. "Let me make a few calls and make sure I'm not pushin' anyone's buttons. But yeah, Ricky, I imagine she could stay with you tonight. The poor kid seems to trust Taylor. The police want to question her some more, but we decided it was enough for tonight. But they'll probably come to your house early tomorrow to speak with her, or get you to bring her to the station."

Ricky nodded. "No problem. I'm sure there's a lot more to the story."

"Well, it's enough that she saw the man murder her mother. On top of that what he did to that poor child. Beating her. Starving her. Keeping

her chained up," Tyson said with a sigh. "And we didn't press her yet, but you know there's probably more than that."

Ricky sighed. "She's gonna need some deep therapy."

John nodded. "Well, we'll help her with that. We'll get her all the help she needs."

"Well, don't forget, John, that her mother took her from the father. She might have a good man searching for her," Tyson said.

"Hopefully he is a good man," John said. "But if she left him like she did, there might be a reason for that."

"Yeah, but the reason could be the mother's problem," Jodi put in.

Tyson sighed. "No need for speculation. We'll find out more the next time we speak to her. They're gonna want her to go to the hospital, do an examination, body scan, the works. It's gonna be hard on her."

"I'll stay with her," Bree said. "And if she needs Taylor, she'll stay with her too."

Tyson nodded. "And we'll also locate her father and investigate him. If he reported her missing, it shouldn't be that hard to find him. All in all, it's gonna be a process," Tyson said. He shook his head. "I come across some pretty dark stuff in my job, but when it involves a child it makes me go a little crazy."

"So, where was the guy holding Hannah?" John asked.

"Not sure yet. She didn't know the address. He didn't let her go outside. Didn't let her go to school. What she describes is pretty rural. She said there was no mailbox, no neighbors, just an old yellow house in the middle of nowhere. I mean, that could be anywhere, but it doesn't sound like it's anywhere in this area. I've been over every inch of this county over the course of my job, especially when Gabe was taken."

"Then what were they doing here at this event if they don't even live in this county?"

"She said Deetz said they were gonna put their names in and get some free stuff for Christmas. She says when she saw all the people she knew she could probably give him the slip and hide somewhere. If he found her he'd beat her but she had to try."

"Do we know if the guy had a job?"

"Yes. He's a forklift operator at a trucking company over in Upton County. Hannah couldn't remember the name of the place, but she's been there before. She described it and I think she's talking about Beckett Trucking. She said he's actually introduced her to some of his co-workers. The Pine Forest police will be heading out there first thing in the morning

to question them. After that it should be easy enough to find the house where they lived and hopefully find her mother's remains."

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December 5th, 10:00 PM, Thursday Night
Kino Plantation House, Pine Forest, Georgia

Ricky Kino sat at his desk in his study gazing at his large computer monitor. He'd been doing a security check before he went up to bed, getting a quick check of each camera. Outside the home, everything was quiet. Inside the home, it was also quiet, but there was a storm brewing. Currently he watched his beautiful wife walking slowly around the giant entrance foyer of the home that was as wide as three living rooms from their Cali home, and extended all the way to the back of the house with giant windows overlooking the back of the property.

Bree seemed to be in a trance, or simply deep in thought. She moved all the way to the double front doors, turned slowly to the left, as if she would head upstairs, but turned again and headed back across the foyer toward the back of the house. Every once in a while she shook her head. A few times she raised her hands and wiped something from her cheeks. Ricky assumed that would be tears. This was her third trip back and forth and suddenly she stopped. She looked heavenward, held her hands out in a pleading gesture and simply sank down onto her knees. Ricky rose from his desk and quickly made his way to the foyer.

He came up behind her, got down on his knees and wrapped his arms around her. She didn't say anything but did lean her head back against his chest. He kissed her cheek. "I got you, Bree. I got you."

She sniffed. Tried to hold it in, but the flood came. She turned into his arms and sobbed. "Ricky, oh Ricky, I can't stand it. I can't stand the evil in this world. It hurts so much. It's like I can feel this thick darkness seeping in through every corner, through every crack. That child, that sweet child, what she's been through, what she's seen. The beatings she's taken. When I helped her change, Ricky, there were bruises all over her back and her backside and her legs. And she's obviously malnourished. She's so tiny. So thin. Nothing more than skin and bones really.

"And she had strips of material wrapped around her chest. I thought it was her attempt at making a bra, but Ricky..." She stopped as her throat clogged with emotion again. "She told us that she did it to hide her breasts from that horrible man who told her he was gonna have her once she was old enough to have breasts."

Ricky sighed and shook his head. "Okay, that's terrible, yes, but then that also means he hasn't taken her yet, and I was sure that he probably had, so, actually, that's a relief."

Bree nodded. “I hope that’s what that means. We’ll know tomorrow.” She drew a deep breath. “But Ricky, I know they said not to let her bathe yet, but we washed her hair in the sink. She couldn’t even remember when it had been washed last. It was tangled and matted and it took us forever to get it untangled and clean and combed out. I tried to be so gentle, but she cried. And that is what really got to me. She’d been so stoic up to that point, answering all of the questions from the police and answering all of our questions so calmly with no emotion, and then she cries over her hair being combed.”

Ricky gently ran his hand over his wife’s head and cheek, stroking and comforting. “It’s a hard thing, Bree, and you are absolutely right, there is a whole lot of evil in this world. That’s what we fight on a daily basis, baby. And we won’t stop and we won’t give in and we can’t let it get to us. We can’t let it stop us or destroy us.”

She sniffed and wiped her cheek. “I’m trying. Oh, but Ricky, it broke my heart to see this sweet child so abused. It really hurts. And I was worried about Taylor, about how she was taking this, what she was thinking and feeling, but she seems to be so much stronger than me. I’m really proud of her.”

Ricky nodded. “You know, your mom used to say the same thing about you, that you were so much stronger than her.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Bree murmured.

“And yet, I understood what she meant. And I understand what you mean. Our girl *is* a strong girl, but she’s strong *like* her mother.” He sighed. “Thank goodness she noticed Hannah. I think she was supposed to see her. I think God had her look in that direction. I think Taylor was very much in tune, and I’m proud of her too, because she acted so quickly. Almost instinctively. And actually, so did Gabe.”

Bree nodded as she wiped away the last of her tears. “Those two were meant to be together.”

Sighing, Ricky nodded. “I have to agree.”

Bree whimpered. “I need this ache in my heart to go away.”

“I know, sweetheart. I know. You’re feeling exactly what Satan wants you to feel. Hopeless. Hurting. Sad. He and his followers get off on the pain, on the desperation. What you feel right now is why a lot of people turn their backs on God. The pain makes them withdraw. It makes them angry, and who better to be angry with than God? Slowly, they stop believing He exists at all. But this is where we, you and I and the rest of our warrior family, this is where we come in. We stand strong in the faith. We help people to understand the plan. These trials either make us or

break us, and I won't let them break us. We'll use them to make us stronger. We'll use them to help more people. We'll freakin' occupy this world until Jesus comes." He hugged her tighter and nodded his head.

"And Bree, after all our family has been through, especially this year, He's shown us without a shadow of a doubt that He's real. We just have to stand strong, keep the faith, trust Jesus. Even more, we have to help others to do that. God allows us, all of us, to have free will. He allows these things to happen. But remember, He's with us through these trials. Hannah will heal and grow to be stronger than ever. Stronger than us maybe. And God sent Taylor to rescue her, so, He finally put an end to Hannah's trial. I think God plans to use Hannah in a big way. We don't know the whole plan for Hannah, but we know she's important to God and we need to be strong for her."

Bree nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry, Rick, for falling apart."

"We all fall apart at times. You're always so strong. I'm glad I had the opportunity to let you cry on my shoulder. That hasn't happened in a long time. I'm glad you needed me."

She blinked up at him. "Oh, honey, I need you more than you'll ever know. I depend on you for everything, Ricky. And you never disappoint me. Not ever." She sighed. "I guess it was just hard to see such a young girl go through such a hard trial."

"You know, this reminds me of your favorite scripture."

Bree smiled. "Which one? I have a lot of favorite scriptures."

"James 1:2-4."

She nodded with a smile and quoted, "'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.'" She looked up into his handsome face. "Thank you, Ricky."

"You're welcome."

"Will you pray with me?"

"Absolutely."

He kept his arms around her, kept her held against his chest as he closed his eyes and prayed, his lips close to her ear. He prayed for peace of heart and mind, he prayed for strength, he prayed for Hannah's healing in body, mind and spirit, he gave thanks for his daughter and Gabe acting so quickly and for their strength. He went on to pray for everyone in their family, for their friends, for the people of the town, the state, the country and the world. He prayed for quite some time and as he did, Bree relaxed

and felt the pain in her heart ease, and the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach dissolve and her spirit fill with the love of God.

They didn't know that they had an audience. The small girl who'd begged for so long for God to help her sat on the steps to the left of the front door and listened. Her heart, too, eased as the kind man prayed with his wife. She knew what they said was the truth. Hannah knew evil, but she also remembered God. A long time ago, before her mother left her real father, she had a friend who used to tell her about God. Her own parents never talked about God, but Hannah remembered the words her friend had said to her. *'If you pray to God He will help you. He loves us all but you have to talk to Him. Sometimes it takes a while before He answers you, but He always does.'*

Hannah had been so desperate, so alone, so afraid, so hungry. Out of the blue one night, those words her friend said came back to her. So she started praying, begging God to help her. She prayed every night and every morning for months. She'd been about to give up. She'd begun to hope that she would just die, like of starvation. She got scared, because Carl had said that soon he wasn't gonna just have her watch him. He was gonna do things to her as soon as she grew breasts. He said, "He wasn't no pervert. He didn't want no kid." That's why she'd begun to tie pieces of an old sheet around her chest. So that he wouldn't know.

Then Carl brought her to this town hoping to be able to get a big handout, and when Hannah saw all the people, she knew it was a miracle. She was supposed to go down and sign some papers and put them in the big bucket at the side of the courthouse steps. He made her memorize his new phone number so she could write it on the paper. And the moment he told her to go ahead and do it, she slipped into the crowd and hid. She'd lost him almost immediately. She thought about running away, like out behind the back of the courtyard, but she'd been afraid to be alone. She didn't want to leave the people. Actually, she felt almost as if someone spoke to her and told her to stay where there were lots of people. Maybe that was God talking.

And then, and then the beautiful girl in white, Taylor Kino, appeared in front of her like she was an angel. Hannah actually still believed that she was. An angel all in white with the prettiest smile in the whole world. She was so nice. And so was her boyfriend. And so were these people, Mr. and Mrs. Kino. Hannah smiled. She'd prayed and God finally did answer her. She guessed He had to wait for just the right time. Sitting on the stairs, she closed her eyes and whispered, "Thank You, God."

She startled briefly at the small creak as Taylor came down the stairs. Hannah smiled up at the angel as she came down to sit next to her on the stairs. She wore white again, only this time it was soft, flannel pajamas. Taylor sat next to Hannah and put her arm around her.

"Hey! Are you okay?" Taylor whispered.

Hannah nodded and put her finger to her lips and then pointed toward Taylor's parents. Taylor peered through the white rails of the stairway to see her father sitting on the blue rug in the middle section of the foyer with her mom curled up in his lap as they prayed together. She smiled as her eyes filled with tears. Her parents were totally awesome.

✞✞✞

1 John 3:17

"But if anyone has the world's goods
and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart
against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

Epilogue

December 5th, 7:00 PM, Thursday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"What is dis?"

Grandmaster Eric Kino shifted his eyes from the paper he was coloring to the one right next to his, then to the beautiful brown eyes of his tiny two-and-a-half-year-old daughter who was currently sitting on his lap. She was tapping a brown crayon against her mouth as she waited for him to answer her question. He smiled at her and looked back to her picture. "That is either hay or straw."

Her tiny brow wrinkled. "Hay or stwaw?"

"Very good. That's correct."

She made a face. "Which one?"

He chuckled. "Well, I'm not quite sure. This happened a long time ago. Two thousand years ago. Some say it was probably hay, because hay is what they fed the animals and this place is a place where the animals were staying. But others say it was straw, which is not food, but is used as bedding for the animals." He smiled at her look of confusion. "But I think it might be a little of both. Maybe some straw on the bottom and then some hay on top of that, because the hay is probably a little softer and cleaner for the baby."

She nodded her head in acceptance. "What cowor is it?"

"Hmm, well, it's a very light yellowish color."

She pushed the box of crayons toward her father. "Pick one for me."

He smiled. "Well, it won't be just one. You can use this yellow," he said as he drew it from the sixteen-pack of crayons. "And press really softly when you color so it's a very light yellow." He demonstrated on the side margin of his own paper. "Like that." He placed the crayon down on his desk. "And then add a little brown over top, like this," he said as he took the brown crayon from her hand and showed her how to blend the two colors. "And that probably looks a lot like the hay looked."

She studied it, then nodded in acceptance, smiled and picked up the yellow crayon.

"But, Angelina," Eric went on, "you don't have to use those colors. If you want, you can make it any color you want. You can use your imagination and make it anything."

She frowned. "Noah used his 'magination when he coword a horse de utta day. He made a pupple horse wif gween spots. But I tode him it was gween 'cause he couldn't bemember his cowors."

"Well, my little Angel, I'm very happy to hear that you helped him remember," he said as he gave her a soft squeeze.

She smiled.

"So, do you want to use your imagination and make the hay a different color?"

She shook her head with a frown. "No. I want dis to be twufe. I don't wanna be 'magination. Dis is 'bout baby Jesus and it has to be twufe."

Eric nodded in understanding and had to clear his throat from the emotion that threatened to choke him. "That is a very good thought. Jesus was all about being truthful."

Angelina nodded her head as she continued coloring with the yellow crayon. She stopped for a minute and glanced at her father's picture. "You have to finish, Daddy."

He nodded, picked up a crayon and went back to coloring his picture of a cow and donkey chewing on hay.

They were silent for a few minutes as Angelina concentrated on coloring the hay. When she finished, she looked up. "Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"What happens at Cwissmas?"

"It's a birthday party to celebrate the birth of Jesus."

She nodded. "I know dat. And Jesus is the Ward (Lord). He is the Son of God. He's vewwy good. He never tells a wie. He always tells the twufe. But, Daddy, what *happens* at Cwissmas?"

Eric frowned. "I'm not sure what you mean, sweetie."

"Daaaddy," she whined. "Wike at Fanksgiving. All duh people wike to have a big dinner wif dare famwy."

"Oh, you want to know what people do to celebrate Christmas."

She nodded as her big eyes blinked up at her father.

"Well, we still like to be together with our families if we can. We try very hard to be together. And we talk about when Jesus was born and how important that was and what it really means. And lots of times some of the churches put on a little play to act out the time when Jesus was born and we like to go see the plays. And there is a lot of beautiful Christmas music that is fun to sing."

She nodded. “Mommy turned on Cwissmas music and she was teaching us some of da songs.”

Eric nodded. “And do you like the songs?”

She smiled. “Yes and we are gonna sing some songs for you.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear them.”

“What else?”

“You mean, what else will we do at Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“Our family will get together and have a big party with lots of good food and we’ll sing songs and talk about Jesus and play games. We’re gonna decorate the house and when we go out shopping, you’ll see all the pretty Christmas decorations in the stores and on the streets. We’ll have a big Christmas dinner, our whole family all together.”

“What else?”

He smiled. “Well, when Jesus was born the wise men came and brought Him gifts, so now everyone has a tradition of buying or making gifts for their family and their friends, especially for their children. So, on Christmas morning, when the children wake up, there will be gifts under the Christmas tree.”

Her eyes opened wide. “I saw pictures of Cwissmas twees. Mommy told us we’re gonna go get twees and decowate dem. She says we have to have decowations that tell the stowy of Jesus.”

He nodded. “Yes. And we’ll have a party and invite the whole family over when we decorate the trees. It’s so much fun to make decorations and buy some too. And when we turn the lights on, it’s beautiful and sparkly, like the stars have come down out of the sky and landed on the trees. But, my sweet girl, we have to be very careful to remember about Christmas trees that we don’t worship the tree. We only worship Jesus. The trees are just a pretty decoration to put the gifts under. Trees are beautiful because God made them.”

She nodded. “What else?”

He chuckled. “We will go see some choirs sing songs about Jesus, and we’ll have some goodies to eat, like Christmas cookies and hot chocolate, but mostly, we’ll go help people.”

“What will we hep dem do?”

“Well, remember I said Christmas is a time to be with family and we get gifts for the children and we have a big Christmas dinner?”

“Yes.”

“Well, just like at Thanksgiving when there were so many people who didn’t have a family or a place to have a nice meal, there are people like

that at Christmastime too, who need a nice dinner and there are people who would like to get gifts for their children, but they have no money to buy gifts. So, we find those people and we help them. We give them a nice dinner, and we get gifts for their children. And we visit children who are in the hospital and we pray for healing and we give them gifts and we help their parents too. And we visit grownups who are also in the hospital and we sing for them and try to bring them smiles and we pray over them."

He glanced down at his small daughter. She was smiling the most angelic smile and his heart leapt. She looked at him excitedly.

"Can we do it again?"

"Do what?"

"Can we feed five fousand?"

"We won't be able to do it like we did in Georgia, but yes, we will feed and give gifts to as many people as we can find."

"Oh, Daddy, I'm so happy," she gushed.

He swallowed hard. "Does helping people make you feel happy?"

She nodded. "Yes. I wove hepping people. I so happy we gonna hep people. Let's do somefing wight now."

He glanced at the time. "It's almost bedtime. But in the morning, we'll all talk together after breakfast and we'll start a list of things we need to do and people we need to help. How's that?"

She clapped her hands together.

He smiled. "Do you want to finish your picture or are we done?"

She picked up her crayon. "I wanna finish."

He drew a deep breath. He was so blessed and even though the Kino foundations were helping people on a daily basis, changing lives, teaching men to fish, he needed to teach his newest children how to not only be charitable, but to be warriors against the darkness in the world. He needed to be very careful how he taught them. He needed to make them strong. He needed to make sure they didn't feel entitled to anything. They had to work very hard to earn their place in the Kino world, and his daughter, this tiny new spirit, was so willing to jump right in and do her part.

All those years ago, in that cave, he'd told the angel that he wanted to teach the world. He'd had no idea how to do that. The angel said, "You teach what you know." At the time, all Eric knew was the martial arts and the young boy didn't understand back then how teaching the martial arts to a few people could help the world. But God led him and Eric learned that teaching anything, doing anything, with God first and foremost in one's mind, teaches much more than the business at hand. God showed Eric how to teach through example. How to live in integrity and never let

the love of money or power take over. He learned to stay humble and to work hard, no matter how tired, no matter how difficult.

His martial arts studios took off in a miraculous way. God led Eric down a path he'd had no idea would lead to where he is today. And like Eric's own father told him a long time ago, he could indeed clone himself. His family, and friends, and the people he taught, would use his same formula to create more God warriors. Like Jason with Ameritech. Like Justin with his law firm, which was slower to develop but was becoming a national and international firm with high-quality, high-integrity attorneys. Like the young Gabe Tanner, whose father had been touched by God through Ricky and now, along with Eric's granddaughter, was becoming an international example for the youth of the world. The Kino formula was growing exponentially, including his own new children and his grandchildren. The elder grandchildren were starting to find their niches, to find their partners in life, and to add to what Eric started in their own way.

The younger children were just learning. Eric had met with all of the parents of both his west coast family and his east coast family after he'd had a dream that cautioned him about the children. He met with Ricky and Bree, Mark and Bella, Joey and Breez, Jeffy and Cam, Jason and Angel, Justin and Lori, Jeff and Mickey, Toby and Caroline, Keegan and Lizzy, Chaz and Lisa, and John and Jodi. He cautioned them to be extremely diligent in teaching their children. He'd been shown in a dream why the kings of the Old Testament had lost their children for generations at a time. One king would be righteous in the eyes of the Lord, and then his own children would turn around and do evil in the eyes of the Lord. That evil would last for several generations until finally, another righteous man would come. It saddened Eric that they would lose their children to evil.

Eric knew the dream had been given to him to keep that from happening to their own children. He'd been told to always make time to speak to them. To pray over them and with them daily. Twice a day. Several times a day. He'd been told to lay hands on them to bless them. He'd been told to keep to the basics. To make sure they understand how the enemy works to destroy. Through low self-esteem. Through the love of money and power, which is idol worship. To make sure they serve the Lord and others and keep their priorities straight. To never listen to the popular word or trends of the day. That is Satan. To stay morally clean. To try to live holy and nobly. It was all a difficult task. But with God's help, with prayer, wisdom would come to help in any situation. It seemed

overwhelming. But with God, all things are possible. These things would protect their children.

As he moved into this first Christmas season with these new little lives, Eric realized it would be a great teaching time and he and his wife would diligently pray over their children during this time. Satan and the world have captured the celebration of the Savior's birth. Besides distorting the actual timing, the enemy was trying—and often succeeding—to turn the celebration of Jesus' birth toward idolatry, commercialism, materialism, and the pursuit of worldly gain. But the light of God is stronger than any darkness. God will prevail. He sent His Son into the world so that the world, through Him, might be saved. It was the most beautiful and righteous sacrifice.

And no matter how tired Eric was, he would give his all to teach his giant family, so that not one soul will be lost.

He closed his eyes. "Help me, Father," he whispered with his daughter right there on his lap. "Help me to be equal to this task. I will do all that You ask of me. Help me to be strong. Help me to have wisdom. Thank You for allowing me this second chance to be with and teach my family, these children. I love them. I love my wife. I love You, Father. I rededicate myself to You. In Jesus' name."

"Amen," his little daughter whispered. "I didn't know we was pwaying. You didn't tell me, Daddy," she reprimanded.

He laughed. "Sorry, baby girl. I didn't realize I was gonna pray until I just did."

"Daddy, will you help me wite my name on my pitchure?"

"Of course."

When they finished the task, Eric looked over her picture. "I think this is a fine job," he said softly. "I love it. Can I have it?"

She nodded. "Mommy says we gonna decowate yo whole office wif our pitchures."

"Oh, really? That's interesting. Come on, munchkin, let's go find the others, have a snack and get to bed. We have lots to do tomorrow."

"And tomowow, after dinner, it's Manny's turn to cowor wif you, wight, Daddy?"

"That's right."

✝✝✝

Luke 2:7

"And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.
She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger..."

Get Ready! Book #13 picks up right where this one leaves off.

✞✞✞

"Perhaps you were born for such a time as this."
Esther 4:14

✞✞✞

The messages just keep on coming. I thought I was gonna write one more book, #9, and now I'm moving on to #13. What?! God literally gave me scenes to write and sometimes before I could finish one scene, He gave me two more. I could barely keep up. They were given in visions and dreams. The words poured out of me, through me really, and the whole process has been quite an amazing and spiritual adventure. I will never forget this time in my life and I'm so grateful to God for being with me and for all of the synchronicities and supernatural confirmations He gave me throughout this process.

People, God IS real!! My heart is full and every day my love for each of you grows. Love Love Love!

✞✞✞

Dear Father in heaven,

As I finish another anointed book, my heart is filled with gratitude. These stories, these scenarios, these scenes and these life lessons, they are so beautiful and I'm always so surprised at the things you are teaching me as you give me these words to write. I'm so grateful, Father, for this time You have spent with me, speaking to me daily, telling me what to write, showing me what to write, and then giving me confirmations that I was indeed hearing from You. I am so grateful.

Father, there are times when I start stressing, how will I get these books out to people, how do I market these books? And then I remember to leave it all at your feet. You are my business manager, my agent, my webmaster and publicist. You know Father that I don't care at all about making money on this task that You have set me to do. You have shown me a few days ago, what to do and I'm trying to do it as quickly as You asked me. Be with me I pray and help me to be strong in this endeavor.

My love for You and for Your Son, Jesus Christ, has grown to such an overflowing that I cannot express it. My gratitude is the same, too much to properly express it. I know I am unworthy, and yet You have seen fit to use me, and I am so very grateful.

Therefore, I pray, Father, for Your blessings on all who read this book. I pray you will fill them with Your Holy Spirit like you did me as I was writing, or even more, like you did the characters in the book as Grandmaster Kino was praying, or as millions prayed for and with Gabe Tanner. I plead the blood of Jesus over all who read these words, bringing them healing in *every* aspect of their lives.

I pray Father, that I can continue to do Your work and Your will and that I will fulfill my contract in honor. And I do this in the mighty name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

✞✞✞

A Note from McCartney Green...

I will go where God leads me, I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

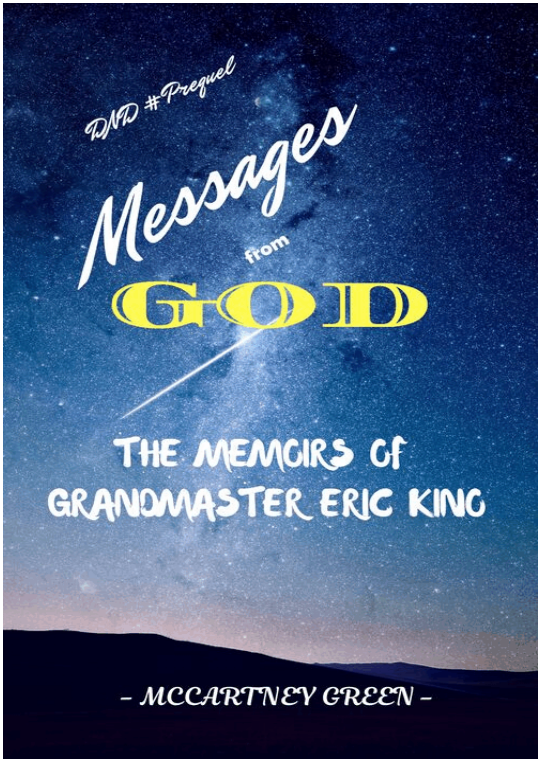
Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...

Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.



Continue the Journey

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series

by McCartney Green

#1 A Healing—In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home—In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels—In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors—In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower—In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name Part Two
#11 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name Part Three
#12 Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name
#14 Such A Time As This—In Jesus' Name

Prequel- Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

All Books Free Download at: mccartneygreen.org

About the Books

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series currently includes fourteen novels and one prequel memoir. Each story brings its own message of faith, courage, love, healing, and hope while following the ever-growing circle of family and friends surrounding the Kinos.

Although each book contains a complete story and may be read on its own, the characters' lives continue from one novel to the next. Readers will experience the fullest journey by beginning with Book One and reading the series in order.

#1—A Healing—In Jesus' Name

When Shelley Adams crosses paths with Grandmaster Eric Kino, she is still carrying wounds from a trauma that changed the course of her life. Eric sees far beyond the frightened, uncertain woman she believes herself to be—and recognizes the strength, beauty, and purpose within her.

A Healing introduces the Kino and Adams families, the Lee brothers, and the dangerous Crane brothers in a story of love, courage, spiritual healing, and freedom from the victim identity. It is the beginning of the family—and the journey—that will grow throughout the entire series.

#2—Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name

Fourteen-year-old Toby Nash is an ordinary boy with an extraordinary heart. He loves baseball, dreams of helping and healing animals, and thinks becoming a singer might be pretty cool someday. Then he meets twelve-year-old Caroline and recognizes the carefully hidden signs that something is terribly wrong in her life.

As Toby and those around him struggle to protect a wounded child, Suffer the Children confronts the devastating realities of abuse while showing the difference one observant, courageous person can make. It is a story of rescue, patient love, faith, and the long road toward learning to feel safe.

#3—Finding Home—In Jesus' Name

Lisa Lewis has spent years building a successful life while distancing herself from the painful family secrets she left behind. When circumstances

bring her to Pine Forest, Georgia, she encounters Chaz Stewart, his remarkable family, and the grandmother who never stopped loving her.

Finding Home introduces Chaz, Lisa, Maddie, Jodi, John, and the Pine Forest family whose lives will soon become closely entwined with the Kinos. Through romance, danger, buried truth, teen pregnancy, incest, and post-traumatic stress, this story asks what it truly means to come home.

#4—Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name

The entire Kino family returns in a story centered on movie star and martial arts champion Ricky Kino and the fiercely independent Breanna Adams. Their love has never been simple, and the choices they make will affect not only their own future but the lives of the young people watching them.

As danger takes root close to home, Weeds Grow explores family relationships, fatherhood, personal identity, sexuality, fear, hatred, and the courage required to confront what has been allowed to grow in darkness. Some weeds can be pulled. Others fight to survive.

#5—Angels—In Jesus' Name

Widowed mother Lizzy Anderson is raising five little girls while working nights as a nurse and doing everything she can to hold her family together. Special Agent Keegan Tanner is dark, dangerous, driven—and carrying evidence that could expose a horrifying criminal operation.

When their lives collide, Lizzy and Keegan are drawn into a battle involving corruption, assault, child trafficking, and powerful people willing to destroy anyone who stands in their way. With help from the Kinos, the Pine Forest family, and Ameritech, they must discover whether wounded people can still trust love—and whether ordinary human beings can sometimes become angels for one another.

#6—The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name

Jeff Davis returns in a story that introduces Mickey, a fierce young woman who has spent much of her life believing she is expendable. When she is taken by people who place no value on human life, Jeff and the growing Ameritech family will risk everything to bring her home.

The Worth of Souls is a story of kidnapping, sacrifice, courage, first love, and the immeasurable value of every human soul. It also offers an unforgettable glimpse of teenage Jeffy Kino and Cameron Wallace—two young people whose connection will help shape the future of the series.

#7—Warriors—In Jesus' Name

Shelley's youngest sons, Mark and Joey Adams, are grown men now, each carrying the teachings, strength, and example of the family that raised them. But even the strongest warriors may find themselves facing enemies they cannot defeat with physical skill alone.

Warriors confronts domestic violence in its most recognizable and insidious form—the gradual isolation, control, fear, and destruction of a person's spirit. It is a story about recognizing abuse, finding the courage to escape it, and learning that true strength is not found in domination, but in love, protection, truth, and freedom.

#8—June Flower—In Jesus' Name

June Flower Kino—Jeffy to those who love her—has grown from the miraculous child introduced in Book One into a gifted physician whose discoveries may change the future of medicine. But there are powerful people who will do anything to prevent that future from arriving.

Her journey takes her across the world, into danger, loss, breathtaking beauty, and the lives of two unforgettable Ugandan children. As Cameron Wallace returns to protect the girl he never stopped loving, the entire cast of the series gathers for a sweeping story of courage, family, sacrifice, healing, reunion, and one final twist that reveals the story may be far from over.

#9—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name

The next generation steps forward as the series moves between Hollywood and Pine Forest, Georgia. Young Eric Kino begins questioning the path laid before him, while Marine Raider Jacob Appel returns home and discovers that the girl he has known all his life may no longer be merely the little sister figure he left behind.

Meanwhile, seventeen-year-old Gabe Tanner—the charismatic only son in a family of beautiful sisters—is beginning a journey that will alter the lives

of both the Tanner and Kino families. Love grows, danger gathers, and a shocking ending given to the author in a dream changes everything.

#10—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Two

The story continues as Gabe Tanner and those who love him struggle with the consequences of what came before. Families draw closer, young relationships deepen, and faith is tested as darkness attempts to reshape the lives of the next generation.

At the same time, Eric Kino III begins to see his own path more clearly when he encounters a young woman stranded beside a highway. One act of compassion opens the door to a story larger than either of them expects, proving once again that a seemingly ordinary moment may be part of God's extraordinary plan.

#11—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Three

As Young Eric recovers and the younger generation rises to meet challenges of its own, old roles begin to shift. Children become leaders. Parents learn to step back. New heroes emerge, new relationships take root, and Gabe and Taylor's growing influence creates waves far beyond their families.

The expanding circle of Kinos, Tanners, Appels, Stewarts, and friends is eventually drawn toward Pine Forest, Georgia, where new spirits are arriving, long-awaited purposes are becoming clear, and an enormous undertaking will require every willing hand and faithful heart.

#12—Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name

The warriors gather in Pine Forest with a mission: to serve God's children, meet practical needs, restore hope, and allow miracles to unfold. What begins as a tremendous act of faith and generosity grows into something far greater than anyone imagined.

But darkness does not stand by quietly while people are fed, healed, reunited, and awakened. As opposition mounts, this extraordinary family refuses to be deterred. Secrets are revealed, wounds are healed, lives are transformed, and the command to "feed My sheep" becomes far more than a simple call to provide food.

#13—For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

For the first time, celebrate the Christmas season with the Kinos, Tanners, and the enormous family of friends God has gathered around them. As they prepare to honor the birth of Jesus Christ, they discover new opportunities to serve, forgive, welcome, and love.

Old friends return. Former enemies reappear. Strangers arrive carrying needs that may not be immediately visible. Through celebration, surprises, conflict, and acts of compassion, For Unto Us asks what might happen if people celebrated the Savior's birth not only with words and traditions, but by becoming His hands and heart in the world.

#14—Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

A mysterious stranger arrives in Pine Forest searching for answers about his family's past—and carrying the weight of a darkness that has plagued generations. His arrival may also hold an unexpected answer for twenty-three-year-old Lily 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.”

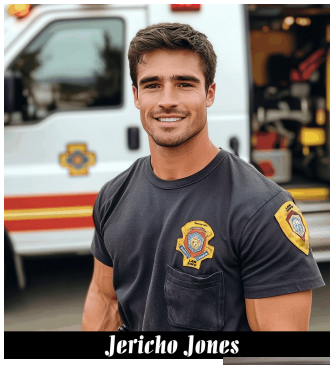
“I have read the first three books and I love them all. They are addicting! The problem is, I don't get enough sleep when I read them because I can't put them down! I am now having withdrawals because I don't have the 4th book. McCartney- you are great.”

“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!”

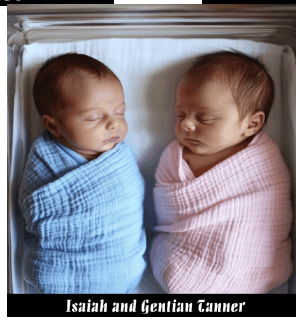




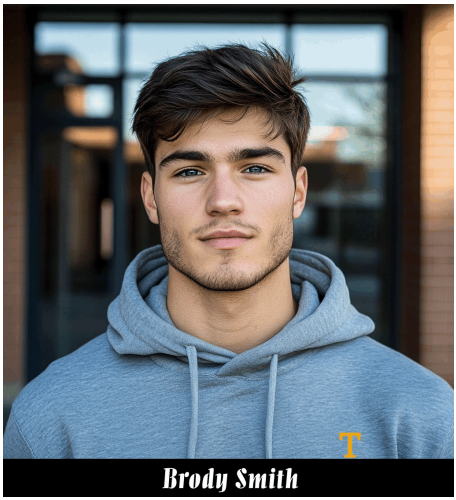
Jericho Jones

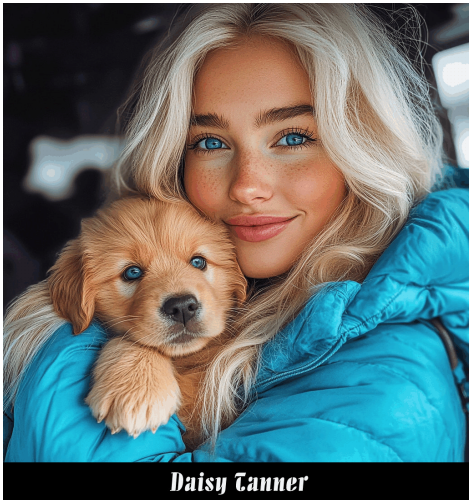


Rose Tanner

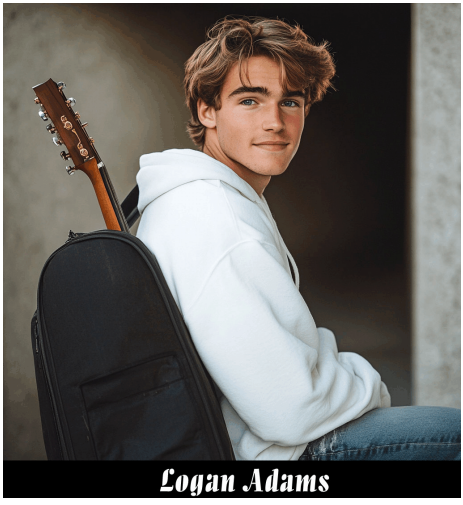


Isaiah and Gentian Tanner


Brody Smith


Daisy Tanner


Melody Keith


Logan Adams





See more photos here...

Continue with DND #13 For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

Sneak Preview...

"He who has not Christmas in his heart
will never find it under a tree."
~Roy L. Smith~

December 5th 10:17 PM Thursday Night
Kino Plantation Manor, Pine Forest, Georgia

It had been a crazy night. What started out as something as wholesome as caroling on the courthouse steps, had turned into a rescue mission for a young girl who had known nothing but misery for several years. Taylor sighed as she sat just behind that young girl on the staircase of the Kinos' new home, and together they watched Taylor's father comfort her mother. Their love for each other and strength in hard times gave Taylor herself much comfort.

Abused and broken, little thirteen-year-old Hannah Brown sat on the giant staircase in the old, but beautifully renovated plantation manor. She felt comforted by the presence of her rescuer, Taylor Kino, who sat right behind her. Hannah had not been able to sleep and had started to roam the house, but stopped when she saw Taylor's parents and heard their conversation. Mrs. Kino was sad, crying over Hannah and what had happened to her. Mr. Kino was so kind and was trying to make her feel better. He hugged her and began to pray with her. It was cool.

Hannah closed her eyes and listened to the end of their prayer. When they finished, they both looked up toward the steps where the two girls sat.

Ricky stood and pulled Bree up. They smiled at the girls and then motioned for them to come down.

Taylor took Hannah's hand and they headed down the steps.

"You two couldn't sleep?" Ricky asked.

"Well, I woke up and Hannah wasn't in bed so I came to check on her," Taylor said.

Hannah looked down. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to sleeping at night."

"Why not?" Taylor asked.

Hannah frowned as she thought how to answer the question. "Well, I was afraid of Carl at night. So I stayed awake at night and when he went to work in the morning, I went to bed and slept. Then I woke up and I would clean the house and make his dinner before he gets home."

Bree sighed. "Then what did you do after dinner?"

"I cleaned up the kitchen and then I had to do my school work."

"I thought he didn't let you go to school," Taylor said.

"Yeah, but he said he didn't want no stupid girl to teach his kids so I had to do online school."

"He has kids?" Taylor asked.

She shook her head. "Not yet, but, well, he said he could wait until I was old enough."

Taylor's mouth opened wide and Bree's eyes filled again.

Ricky cleared his throat. "So, you had internet at the house where you stayed?"

"I guess so. He called it a hotspot. I don't really know a lot about computers and stuff but I know that sometimes he'd get real mad when the internet wasn't working cuz he couldn't see his movies. But he disconnected the internet while he was gone during the day. That's why I had to do the school work at night. He watched me so that I wouldn't try to get anyone to help me."

"Did you ever try to run away while he was gone?" Taylor asked.

"I couldn't run away." She glanced down at her bruised ankles. "He kept me chained up."

"Then how did you go to the bathroom?"

She shrugged. "The chain was pretty long."

"Okay, hon," Bree said. "I think that's enough questions for tonight. You girls have to be up early in the morning so, whaddya say we get you some tea so you can relax and sleep."

"Why do I have to be up early?" Hannah asked.

"Well, sweetie, the police are gonna be here early to question you, remember?"

She nodded. "Oh, yeah."

"And then we have to go to the hospital and see a doctor who just wants to check you out and make sure you're well."

She nodded sadly. "Can Taylor come with me?"

Bree grimaced. "Well, sweetie, I found out that they'll only allow one person to go with you and that person can't be a minor, so, I'll go with you. I promise I'll stay right by your side the entire time."

Taylor suddenly hugged Hannah. "It's gonna be okay. Come on, let's drink some of Dad's special tea and then we can go to bed and I'll talk to you until we fall asleep."

Hannah nodded and followed her into the kitchen. They sat at the island and Ricky set two cups of tea in front of them.

Hannah sipped it obediently. Taylor frowned. "Dad, it needs more honey."

"Why does everything have to be so sweet for you?" he asked, teasingly.

She smiled. "Because I'm sweet, and it takes a lot of sweetness to keep me this sweet."

Ricky grabbed his daughter's hand and kissed it. "I can't argue with that." He squeezed some more honey into her cup. He looked at Hannah. "More honey?"

She nodded. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," he said kindly.

The girls finished their tea and headed back up to bed. Once they were in the room Taylor smiled at Hannah as she patted the bed. “Come on, Hannah. You’ll feel sleepy soon.”

Hannah climbed into Taylor’s bed.

They lay side by side.

“This must be what it feels like to have a younger sister,” Taylor said.

Hannah turned on her side to look at her. “This must be what it feels like to have an older sister.”

Taylor turned on her side so they were face to face. She reached out and touched Hannah’s cheek. “Hannah, I’m sorry for what happened to you.”

Hannah only nodded.

“Things will get better.”

Hannah smiled.

✞✞✞

Continue the story in DND #13
For Unto Us-In Jesus’ Name

mccartneygreen.org

;) Pi anyone?

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745028410270193852110555964462294895493038196442881097566593344612847564823378678316527120190914564856692346034861045432664821339360726024914127372458700660631558817488152092096282925409171536436789259036001133

God used pi to teach me that His universe is not random.

To the human eye, the decimal sequence of pi looks like total randomness—endless, chaotic digits spilling out into infinity without an obvious repeating cycle. People look at their own lives and trials the exact same way: "Why this tragedy? Why this random pain? It's all chaos!" But just like pi, God's universe is mathematically, divinely ordered to the infinite degree. Every single digit, every step, every trial is ***already known*** by the Creator. Placing pi at the end of the books isn't just a quirky signature—it's an eternal stamp declaring: "There is no chaos. God has done the math."