
For Unto Us
In Jesus' Name
DND #13
McCartney Green
" For unto you is born this day
in the city of David
a Saviour,
which is Christ the Lord."
\Luke 2:11

DND #13

FOR UNTO US

IN JESUS' NAME

McCartney Green

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Website Edition

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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 #13

Same year as Books #9,10, 11 & 12, ...#13 picks up one minute after #12 ends
This "Keeping Tabs" is as of December 5th, Thursday Night, 10:17 PM EST

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 (will turn 3 on May 2)
Noah is 2½ (will turn 3 on May 7)
Angelina is 2½ (will turn 3 on May 10)
Abraham (Abe) is 2½ (will turn 3 May 11)
Nathaniel (Nate) is 2½ (will turn 3 May 27)

[Rebecca was stillborn May 8th
Rachel was stillborn May 12th
Luke (Down syndrome) was born May 13th and murdered May 30
Simon (congenital heart disease) was born May 15th and murdered July 9
Maria was born May 22nd and murdered two years later]

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

Mark Adams Family
Mark Adams turned 40 on October 29
Bella Adams is 39 and pregnant
Joseph (JoJo) turned 21
on June 30
Logan turned 20 on July 17
Emily (Em) will turn 4 on December 11

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

Wallace Family
June Flower (Jeffy) Kino Wallace turned 28 on March 15
Cameron Wallace turned 30 in June
Elijah 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 will turn 27 in February
Jason Jensen (Jay) was born Nov 26

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

Brooks Family
Jewell (Perez) Brooks is 42
Jordan turned 19 on July 18
Josie will turn 11 in February
Jamie will turn 9 in April

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 was born 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

Lisa Lewis Stewart turned 46 May 15
Charles (Charlie) will turn 15 February 11
Matthew (Matt) will turn 13 on January 20
Aralyn will turn 8 on 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 turn 22 February 28
Melaynah Stewart Appel turned 21 Nov 22

Tanner Family
Keegan will turn 50 on February 8
Lizzy turned 42 on April 10
Heather will turn 25 on January 10
Rose and Violet will turn 24 December 25
Daisy and Lily will turn 23 on December 19
Gabe turned 18 on June 14
Iris will turn 3 December 10
Isaiah and Gentian were born November 25

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 will turn 15 on January 9

Atlanta AAIC Andrew Dalton will turn 39 Jan 5

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"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."
John 3:16

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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, Rose's ex-boyfriend, an advertising entrepreneur, turned 25 in September

Texas SAC Hart Akins turned 31 on November 12. (Formerly Jeffy's bodyguard in Africa, where he was wounded and missing in action.)

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 Bar and Grill.
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

Reverend Ronald Clark's Family
Ronny Clark is 92
Connie Clark—deceased
Ronald Clark Jr—deceased
Linda Clark—whereabouts unknown

Ronny's older brother
Dr. Marcel Clark—5 yrs older than Ronny; deceased; never married; no children

Ronny's younger sisters
Donna would be 84—deceased
Margaret would be 82—deceased

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"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
Isaiah 9:6

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"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."
Luke 2:11

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"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel."
Isaiah 7:14

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"Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together."
John 4:35-36

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Ameritech Security Hierarchy

Chief Director
Jason Lee
Deputy Chief
Joseph Adams

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

Area SACs—Senior Agent in Charge
New York—SAC Christopher (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
Senior Agent Brayden Turner
Senior Agent Tristan Callahan
Senior Agent Kaleb White

Training Facility Commanders
Chief Commander—Senior Agent William Bradshaw
Unit Commander—Senior Agent Samuel Edwards (Red Unit)
Unit Commander—Senior Agent Graham Warner (Black Unit)
Unit Commander—Senior Agent Desmond Badger (Blue Unit)
Unit Commander—Senior Agent Sonya Brown (Female Unit)

Note to Reader:

I've never focused an entire book on the Christmas season. So much has been written about Christmas that staging a scene can almost feel like a cheesy Hallmark movie. In some of the promptings and whisperings I received from the Holy Spirit as I wrote this book, I was urged to mention all the holiday warm fuzzies, but to dwell more deeply on what Jesus taught us.

Though He didn't teach us specifically how to celebrate His birth, He did teach us how to celebrate. The most important things He taught us were to love God, love one another, and one more very important thing—to serve. He knelt down and washed the feet of His disciples. He taught us to love and serve unceasingly. He taught us to forgive. He taught us to stop being so critical. Yet He also taught us to "Go and sin no more." And so, I was given scenes in the book that focus more on these things.

God has no problem with our celebrations. The Bible is filled with festivals and celebrations, with music and dancing. The trick is to teach our children the true meaning without getting caught up in greed and the wanting and hungering after "things." We need to keep our eyes always on God and make sure our priorities don't get all out of whack.

As I write this book, I look forward to everything the Lord has to teach me. Through this process and these books, God has shown me that He is mindful of little old me. That has been a most amazing discovery and one of the biggest blessings of my life.

Thank you, Jesus.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten
of the Father, full of grace and truth."
John 1:14

"He who has not Christmas in his heart
will never find it under a tree."
~Roy L. Smith~

A Note About the Music:
I felt led by the Lord to include links to some of the music mentioned in this book. These links are live in the website download editions and lead to YouTube. You may prefer to use your own music source, such as Apple Music. Either way, listen to the music while reading the corresponding sections to feel the Spirit of each moment even more! — **You'll also find renditions of the characters and the homes in the Photo Album on my website. They're really fun!**

mccartneygreen.org

Chapter One

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.

"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 got home."

Bree sighed. "Then what did you do after dinner?"

"I cleaned up the kitchen and then I had to do my schoolwork."

"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 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 schoolwork 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 gently touched Hannah's cheek. "Hannah, I'm sorry for what happened to you."

Hannah only nodded.

"Things will get better."

Hannah smiled.

"Do you remember your real dad?"

She nodded. "I think so."

"Was he nice?"

"I'm not sure. I can't really remember. But like, he didn't hit me. But my mom and dad did fight. They yelled and screamed at each other. I mean, they fought a *lot*. My mom was always mad as long as I can remember. She got into fights with everyone."

"Whaddya mean, everyone? Like your dad and Carl?"

"Yeah, and the neighbors, and she actually hit my grandma a few times. And she got in a fight with the lady at the grocery store and she had to go to jail because she got in a fight with a cop."

"Hmm, why do you think she was so mad all the time?"

"She got mad mostly when she couldn't get her pills."

"Oh. Okay, I understand."

They lay quietly for several minutes. It was Hannah who finally spoke. "Taylor?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for helping me."

"You're welcome. I'm so glad I noticed you."

"Me too." She yawned. "Taylor?"

"Yeah?"

"The lady who wants to be my foster mom, do you know her?"

"Yes. Her name is Jodi Appel. She is just the best lady ever. You'll really like her. She's just like my mom."

"Does she have any kids?"

"She has one, but he's all grown and is in the military. She and her husband are really good friends of my mom and dad. They live at the Inn."

"The Inn?"

"Yeah, the *Pine Forest Country Inn*. They run it. It's like an old-fashioned hotel. It's right next door to my boyfriend's house."

"Oh, that's cool."

"Yeah," Taylor sighed.

"How long have you had a boyfriend?"

"About eight months."

"Is he as nice as he seems or do you fight?"

"We never fight. He's the best guy in the whole world and he's waiting for me to graduate from high school so we can get married."

"Oh, wow. How nice. Do you go to *Pine Forest High School*?"

"No. Our family actually lives in California. We're leaving on Saturday morning to go home."

"Oh."

"But don't worry. Miss Jodi will get you a phone and we'll FaceTime every day if you want to."

"She'll get me a phone?"

"Well, I think she will. And Gabe will be here until after Christmas so you can talk to him too. And he has five older sisters and a little baby sister who's about to turn three and a new little baby brother and sister who were just born. They're so tiny and cute. You're just gonna love the whole Tanner family and they're gonna love you."

Hannah yawned. "That sounds nice." She sighed and yawned again. "Taylor?"

"Yeah."

"I'm a little bit scared. Does that seem stupid?"

"No," Taylor said softly. "I think that seems pretty normal after what you've been through. But don't worry, Hannah. It's all gonna work out. And Miss Jodi and Mr. John are so nice and they're gonna take such good care of you, and maybe Sheriff Stewart will find your real dad, or maybe not, but even if he doesn't, we're your family now and you're gonna be okay because we always take care of everyone. So try not to worry, okay?"

When she didn't answer, Taylor raised her head to peer at her. She was asleep. Smiling, Taylor turned off the light, closed her eyes, said a prayer for Hannah and finally drifted off.

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December 5th 8:00 PM Thursday Evening

The Winston House Restaurant, West Hollywood, California

Young Eric watched as Jordan and the wife of the man they were

having dinner with headed to the ladies' room. He turned back to see that Mr. Raymond Turner was no longer smiling. He'd been quite friendly and jovial most of the dinner. But young Eric's father had warned him that these people were snakes and to be very cautious. Mr. Turner was an ultra-rich movie investor. He'd fronted a lot of the money to the entertainment house that was producing Eric's movie.

"So," Mr. Turner began. "I have to ask, do you really think marrying this girl is the thing to do?"

Eric blinked at the quick change of subject and demeanor and mentally put on his armor. "If I didn't, then I wouldn't have asked her."

"Eric, let me be blunt."

"It appears you don't need my permission."

"The facts are, this girl is a nobody. She's pretty enough, or she *can* be if we get some experts to doll her up, but I understand she comes from a very low-class family. Her mother works at a dental office. Her father tried to rape her."

"Well, you have your facts wrong. Her mother is about to open her own restaurant. Her father died of cancer when she was a kid."

"Okay, her stepfather tried to rape her. Same thing."

"Yes, and as a kid, she stepped up and had him put in prison. Because she has strength of character."

"Yes, yes, I know the story. And I know you ended up killing the man, and that publicity was actually good for you. However, what I'm trying to get at is, your fan base is gonna want you single and available."

"Excuse me, Mr. Turner, but I'm not single, and I'm not available, and I don't really care if that displeases my 'fan base,'" he said using air quotes. "I cannot and will not allow the movie industry to dictate my personal life. My real fans know that and I believe will respect that. That girl, as you put it, that beautiful woman of God, as I put it, is the most important thing to me, other than the dear Lord Himself, and I am going to marry her."

The man sighed heavily. "Well, maybe you could put off the marriage for a few years. Let the fans have the hope that you're available."

"I proposed to Jordan live on social media. Millions of people saw me do it, and millions of people have congratulated me and wished us well. I will not mislead anyone."

"Eric, let me give you a little insight on how to get along in this world. Sometimes, you have to be a little dishonest in order to navigate the waters."

"In Satan's world, yes, but I am not of his world. And in my world, you never lie. Or at least you try not to lie. I'm not perfect. But I at least try."

Mr. Turner went in another direction. "Okay, so, don't you think

you're too young to marry? I'm surprised your father supports you in this life decision. Or does he?"

"Of course he does. My father and I are very close. We understand each other. And he's the one who let me know that there is nothing wrong with marrying young. When you know it's right, then it's right."

"Listen, son, don't take offense. I'm only trying to help you."

"To help me what? What exactly is it you're trying to accomplish?"

"I've been approached to help finance several more movies for you and a few others at the studio. It's a big investment. I want a big return."

Young Eric nodded. "That's what you do, right? You invest, you take risks, you make money. That's your thing, and it seems you do it well and you understand that there's a risk. I am not responsible for your risk. I contracted to do a movie and I fulfilled my obligation. I am fulfilling my obligations to promote the movie. All I owe anyone here is my best professionally. Not personally. You see, Mr. Turner, it's not always just about the money. Surely, you know that."

"What if I told you that unless you do as I ask, you will find it difficult to get another movie contract?"

Young Eric gave a soft laugh. "I realize you think you're threatening me with the power you have with your contacts and money. First, even if you held all the cards, you wouldn't be able to sway me. I don't care about money. I certainly don't care about *your* money. It holds no power over me. You want to measure your power and money against my family's power? Good luck. Because our power doesn't come from our money. It comes from God. We don't need you in order for us to continue to make movies. If I want to do another movie, I'll do another movie. I don't need you. I would think you would understand who it is you're talking to, who you're dealing with."

The man nodded solemnly and smiled. "I'm sorry, Eric, I didn't mean to insult you or get you all riled up."

Eric smiled. "You think this is riled? I'm not riled. You haven't seen me riled. And you don't want to," he added, mimicking a line from the movie.

"Touché."

"Speaking in terms that you understand, Mr. Turner, the return you're about to get from *The Resurrection of Elijah Beck* is gonna be satisfactory. It might even be your biggest return yet. Why then, would you alienate the person, or the people, because my father's fight choreography is a big part of what you're about to make, why alienate the people who are about to make you so much money?"

Raymond Turner sighed. "You'll have to forgive me, Eric. I wanted to see if you'd cave, if you'd allow me to push you around and dictate your life. You're young and I wanted to see what you're made of. Your beautiful fiancée is a lovely girl and I wish you all the best. And I think

you're right. We're about to make a fortune. You, young man, are totally bankable."

Eric's mouth pressed together. He didn't know whether he could believe him or not, or if he simply saw he couldn't win and conceded. Still, it was a good lesson. Don't trust the world. Trust his own family, his proven friends, and mostly, Jesus. He looked up as the ladies came back. He smiled at the tall, beautiful blonde wearing the red dress and the timid smile. He rose to pull out her chair, and then did the same for Mrs. Turner.

"My, what a gentleman," Mrs. Turner said. "No wonder all the girls in the world are simply gaga over you."

Young Eric shook his head in denial, then leaned down and kissed Jordan's cheek before he sat back down.

The rest of dinner went by without a hitch. In the car on the way home, young Eric was abnormally quiet.

Jordan glanced up at him. "Are you okay, Three?"

He glanced down at her, smiled and took her hand. "I'm good, babe."

"You're awfully quiet," she said.

He sighed. "Sorry. I was just thinking over some of the things that were discussed tonight."

"Which things?"

He shook his head. "While you were in the bathroom Turner brought up some things. I really don't want to talk about it, but it made me feel, I don't know. I guess I feel suddenly tired."

Jordan sighed. "And you don't feel like you can talk about it with me?"

He shook his head. "I am talking to you about it. But I don't want to rehash exactly what he said right now."

"Okay." She smiled and squeezed his hand. "So, one more day and your family will be coming home."

He nodded.

"Do you miss them?"

"Sure."

She eyed him. "Three, are you hungry?"

He looked over at her, surprised by her question. "Are you?"

She shrugged. "I'm not complaining. The food was really tasty, but that wasn't a whole lot of food. I could really go for a giant bowl of ice cream."

He grinned. "Me too."

"We've been so good the entire week. If I promise to not seduce you, can we go back to your house, pig out on ice cream, and cuddle together?"

He sighed and then smiled at her. "How could I turn that down?"

She giggled. "I know, right?"

A while later they pulled up the long drive and stopped in front of the house. Eric helped her out of the car. She stopped and smiled up at the home.

"What?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I think I've missed being here. Funny, but it feels like home to me, more than my apartment, and even more than my mom's home."

"We've spent a lot of time here together," he said. "Some good times and some hard times."

She nodded. "Every minute I've spent with you is a good time."

He smiled. "How about the night you arrived here after you were attacked?"

"Well, it started out bad, but you made it all better."

"Okay, but how about when you were here and I was being held in Mexico?"

"I was here surrounded by your family, and they were so strong, they helped me so much. Being here, it's really comforting."

He put his arm around her. "Come on."

They went inside and went straight upstairs to get into something more comfortable. He gathered her a T-shirt and some sweatpants and took them across the hall to her room, then drew a deep breath when she asked him to unzip her dress. He did as requested, and then placed his hands on her shoulders.

"I thought you said you wouldn't seduce me," he murmured.

"Oh, well, sorry. My arms are sore from the team workouts and throwing so much. I'm out of shape."

He rubbed her shoulders for a minute. When she tried to lean back against him, he gave her a playful shove. "No way. Get dressed. I'm not feeling real strong right now."

She giggled. He left the room. Five minutes later they were in the kitchen digging some very hard ice cream into bowls. They then covered the ice cream with chocolate syrup and whipped cream and took the heaping bowls into the den and curled up on the sofa together.

Jordan put a spoonful in her mouth and moaned in pleasure. "Oh, wow, this is just what I needed."

He watched her eat and had to smile. How could he be so much in love with her so quickly? He couldn't remember life without her. He certainly couldn't imagine life in the future without her. He waited patiently for her to finish her bowl of ice cream and it took some patience because the bowl was very full. Finally, he took her bowl from her and placed it on the end table, took her in his arms and kissed her. When he pulled away, he licked his lips and grinned. "Oh, wow, this is just what I needed."

She giggled. He wrestled her down, then kissed her with all the love

he felt. It would take a long time to get it all out, but he was willing to work at it.

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December 5th 10 PM Thursday Evening
Regent Theater, Newport, California

Logan took Melody's hand as they walked out into the cool December evening. She shivered and he stopped to take her coat off her arm and put it on her.

"Better?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "It'll do."

"What would you rather?"

"Actually, I'd rather us go back to your grandparents' music room and make use of that love seat. For some reason, I'm always warm when I'm there."

He chuckled. "You used to be kinda shy, Mel, but you're becoming more and more daring."

"Does that bother you?"

"Uh uh. Not at all. It makes me happy."

She shrugged. "I like the way you make me feel. When I'm with you, I feel safe and secure and warm and, well, not pressured."

"That all sounds like good things." He helped her into the car and went around and got behind the wheel.

"Are you taking me home now?"

"You have to work in the morning and I have a class."

"And then we have the big Hollywood party," she said excitedly.

He smiled. "Are you excited about that?"

"Aren't you?"

He shrugged. "It could be fun. With you, it will be fun."

"I finally found something to wear, but I had to get Miss Shelley to help me."

"I can't wait to see."

"Do I just seem so silly and childish to be excited to go to a fancy party?"

"No. You seem innocent."

"Oh."

"Melody, some of these people are not the warm fuzzy people you might be used to. Actually, most of them are not. And there will be a lot of drinking, and probably drugs."

"Why did you accept the invitation then?"

"Because young Eric has to go and he felt like he needed some reinforcements, since his parents won't be here until Saturday morning."

"Is JoJo coming?"

"Yes, he's been invited. He's famous, so the hosts want him there."

"And who's hosting?"

"It's actually the parents of Eric's co-star."

"Who's his co-star?"

"Lucie Bardot."

"Oh! For some reason I thought it was a guy. But Lucie Bardot! Wow. I think she's so cute. I loved her in that movie where she plays the blind girl."

Logan nodded. "Yeah, she was good in that."

"You don't sound so enthusiastic."

He sighed. "Young Eric says Lucie is all about Lucie. Which isn't that strange in Hollywood, I guess. Like most in the industry, Lucie believes the world revolves around her. She's very caught up in her own image and she acts as if everyone worships her."

"Well, maybe everyone does," Melody offered. "The way the people in the world worship celebrities, I mean, they become obsessed."

"Right. Exactly."

"And, to be honest, people feel that way about the Kinos, and like, about Gabe and Taylor," Melody added.

"Yes, you're right," he said softly.

"And they're starting to feel that way about you."

He nodded. "Fair enough. The difference is, getting people to be obsessed with us, or worship us is not our goal. It's not what we're after. Our *only* goal is to serve God, to bring more people into the kingdom, or to heal His children, or, like we just did, to feed His sheep. So, like, I want people to like my music and to buy my album because I want them to be touched and changed by the music and the words I write. I don't care about being famous. But young Eric says Lucie and most other big celebs have giant egos. They are narcissists. They want to be worshiped. That and make lots of money. Their goal is being rich and powerful and leading opulent lives, with the fanciest houses and the most expensive cars, and ridiculously extravagant jewelry and name brand overpriced clothing. *That* is their goal."

"So, when your album comes out are you gonna give it away for free?"

He chuckled. "You're suggesting that I'm being hypocritical?"

She smiled. "Just playing, uh, what is that called again?"

"Devil's advocate?"

"Yes. You're so smart."

He laughed again.

"So, answer the question," she prodded.

"No, I won't be able to give my music away for free, though one day I'd like to be in a position to do that. No, the album will be worth a decent price because I've put a lot of time and work into it, and because the people who produce the album have to be paid. And I have to be able to make a living too, off of what I'm doing or I won't be able to continue to

touch people's lives. I'd have to go, 'get a real job,'" he said, putting the last part in air quotes. "Because I need to be able to support myself and one day, my wife and children. As a man, that's part of the role I need to fulfill." He smiled at her.

She blushed. It was too early in their relationship to be thinking along those lines, though, she had to admit, it was a very nice fantasy. She nodded at him and went back to the original subject. "So, Lucie Bardot is like what you describe? A money-loving, power-grabbing narcissist?"

"Yes, only she's worse."

"How could she be worse than that?"

"She's also a predator. She uses her status and money and position to take advantage of people. And in young Eric's case, to take advantage of him personally."

"How? How does she do that?"

"When I say personally, I mean really personal. She's always putting her hands on him. She makes him very uncomfortable. And I mean, really *on* him. Like, she's grabbed him," Logan said, cupping his hand over his crotch. "More than once. It's Eric's first movie, and I guess she thinks he'll put up with it. She's been acting since she was like, six. She's a pro. She knows better. Uncle Ricky says there's no excuse for that behavior, but that it's not uncommon. It's one of the things he doesn't like about Hollywood. He says having women always throwing themselves at you and invading your personal space is scary."

Melody sighed. "So, the women complain if a man touches them, even if it's just to put a hand on her back to escort her through a door, and the men are having to deal with that?"

Logan smiled. "Well, it's not the same thing. Most men have no problem with women putting their hands on them, so there's that. That's just because of the loose morals of our fallen world. People figure a man should be strong enough to put a stop to it, so, like, he's not supposed to make a fuss about it. That doesn't make it okay. And there's a fine line male celebs have to walk. They have to gently rebuke any advances. If they hurt the female's pride, she could retaliate and make false accusations or other kinds of trouble."

"And how often does *that* happen?"

"It happens a lot, according to Uncle Ricky and Toby Nash and Uncle Joey, and now, young Eric."

"So, I guess that's what Mr. Kino means when he says Hollywood is not as fun and glamorous as people think."

"That's right. And so, babe, when we go to this party, I will not be letting you out of my sight and we will stay close to Eric and Jordan and be vigilant in keeping them safe too."

"Hmm, you keep them safe, and I'll be vigilant in keeping you safe from the clutches of adoring fans."

He smiled. “You do that,” he said as they pulled into her driveway. He walked her to the door, took her in his arms and kissed her soundly. When he pulled away he breathed a sigh. “I could do this all night, every night.”

“Me too,” she murmured. “I don’t ever want you to stop.”

He sighed deeply and cupped her face in both of his hands. “And that is why I need to. I haven’t thought very much about young Eric and Jordan and Gabe and Taylor and how difficult it is to wait to be intimate and do things right. They’ve been battling this feeling a long time. I’m not sure I’m as strong as them.”

“Me neither,” Melody said softly. “I mean, with Cade, I never felt, I mean, I never even considered being intimate with him. Not even once. I let him kiss me goodnight. It was almost like a chore.”

“Don’t talk about him right now,” he said gruffly.

She giggled. “Oh, sorry.”

“So, what you just said, Mel, you’re thinking about being intimate with me?”

She sighed. “I guess that’s what I’m saying. I mean, I think about it, and sometimes I pretend that...” Her eyes opened wide as she realized what she was about to confess.

“Go on.”

“Nope.”

He chuckled, bent down and covered her mouth with his. When he pulled away he smiled. “No matter how much we might fantasize, I do want to do things right. I want God’s blessing on our relationship, so I’m gonna have to learn how to handle the strong urges I’m having. If you could have heard how Jake talked about his wedding night, how special it was, how God knows just what He’s doing when He asks us to wait. How it makes the trust between husband and wife, and the special moments, so amplified, that it makes the union unbreakable. That’s what I want for me, and it’s also what I want for you.”

“Logan, that almost sounds like a proposal.”

“Well, let’s be honest for a moment, Mel. I don’t know if that’s where we’ll end up, but I do know that’s where I want to go in my life. I date because I’m looking for the girl I’m gonna share my life with. We’ll see. So far, I’m super stoked that we’re dating.”

“Me too,” she said shyly.

He looked her over. “You’re so beautiful, Melody. You’re so sweet. You’re so strong. I love the way you take care of my little uncles and aunt and the way you help my grandmother. I love the way you decided to hand out backpacks to the homeless people. I love the way you are with your family. And with my family. I like everything about you.” He kissed her again, slowly, for a long time. When he pulled away he smiled at her. “Good night, Melody. See you tomorrow.”

He opened her front door and shoved her inside.

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December 6th 12:30 PM Friday Afternoon

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"And then, when I come back, little buddy," Gabe said as he nuzzled his tiny baby brother. "You and me and little Jonathon Stewart over there," Gabe said, motioning with his head at the baby being held by his father, "we're gonna have a giant wrestling match."

"Um, how long do you intend to be gone?" Lizzy asked. "Cuz, these guys are gonna be too little to wrestle with for quite a while."

Gabe grinned. "Aw, come on, Dad says he wrestled with me when I was only six months old."

Lizzy frowned at her husband.

"Oh man, you're in trouble now," Chaz Stewart said with a laugh.

Keegan frowned. "Son, there are some things that are meant to only be information between us guys."

"Oops, sorry, Dad." He bounced little Isaiah and then looked back at his mother. "Mom, how do you think I got to be so strong and good at everything? Dad had to start me early. And that's what I'm gonna do for my brother and for little Jonny over there too."

Taylor looked up from kissing on tiny little Gentian with a laugh. "And he's so humble too."

Gabe chuckled. "I'm not prideful. Just confident."

Taylor smiled as she rocked the baby in her arms. "Oh, Mom, I just love these babies so much."

"Let me hold Gentian for a minute and you go get Lachlyn from her mom," Bree said to her daughter.

Taylor handed the tiny bundle over to her mother and hurried over to Miss Lisa to get little Lachlyn to hold. Bree smiled. "Oh my goodness, how can they all be so super gorgeous!"

Ricky smiled and looked around at the current group in the Tanner home. They were having lunch at the Tanners' and then would have dinner at the Inn as a goodbye before they left to fly back to Cali in the morning. Right now, Keegan and Lizzy Tanner, their newest additions, Isaiah and Gentian, little Iris, Gabe and Taylor, Daisy and Violet, Lisa and Chaz Stewart, their new additions, Jonathon and Lachlyn, were all sitting together around the large kitchen table. Charlie, Matthew and Aralyn Stewart were camped out at the kitchen island. Rose was on her way home from the hospital. Lily Tanner and Melaynah Appel were over at the Inn helping out, because Jodi Appel had taken young Hannah Brown shopping for some clothes.

Ricky loved this group of people as if they were his own. His father had always felt very close to what he called, "the east coast family." In Ricky's mind, a finer group of people could not be found. And of course,

he could add the Appels and Toby Nash's family to the list over here on the east coast. He sighed.

"You okay, Rick?" Keegan asked.

He smiled and nodded. "Yep. Just trying to take it all in. The next time I see these little ones, they won't be newborns anymore. The next time I see Charlie, or Matt or Aralyn, they'll look like they've grown into adults."

"Please don't say that about my little Aralyn," Lisa protested.

"Really," Lizzy said. "How long do you plan to be gone?"

Chaz chuckled. "It happens fast."

Ricky smiled. "It really does. My little boy and little baby girl, where are they? It's like they're gone."

Taylor made a face and looked at her father. "Oh, come on now, Daddy, I'll always be your baby girl."

Gabe smiled, but thought hard about what they were saying. The little girl that was Ricky Kino's baby, is a high school senior who is ultra beautiful, ultra sexy, and contemplating being Gabe's wife and mother of his own children. Gabe looked over at his baby sisters, both Iris and the tiny Gentian. Maybe their lives will go by in the blink of an eye like everyone keeps saying. Gabe himself was thinking about how fast he'd gone through high school and now it was simply over. He frowned. The circle of life was strange and fleeting. At least life as humans here on this earth. Life was precious. These babies are precious and they all knew and understood how precious they are.

He thought about the young girl they found yesterday, Hannah Brown, and wondered if her parents thought she was precious when she'd been born. He wondered where everything went wrong for Hannah. They would know soon because Sheriff Ty was on his way over to talk to them about what they'd found concerning Hannah.

Gabe looked down as Isaiah began to fuss. He smiled at the sweet cry of a new baby and then looked up at his mother. "I think he's hungry."

Lizzy smiled. "Yes, I think it's about that time." She rose. "Bring him into the den so I can sit in my chair and get comfy."

"I think I'll go in with you," Lisa said.

Gabe followed them in and gently handed his brother to his mom. "Can I get you ladies anything?" he asked.

Lizzy smiled. Lisa laughed softly. "Gabe Tanner, I see why all the girls are in love with you."

Gabe laughed and shrugged. "I just know that Dad always gets Mom some water when she's nursing."

"Gabe is very observant," Lizzy explained. "But no, sweetie, I don't need anything. Lisa?"

"Nope. I'm good. Thanks, Gabe."

"You're welcome." He turned to leave the room.

Sheriff Tyson knocked on the front door just as the new moms were getting comfortable in the den.

Gabe opened the door for him. “Hey, Sheriff Stewart.”

“Gabe,” he said glumly.

“Come on in, the men are in the kitchen.”

Ty came into the kitchen and nodded at everyone. He glanced around. “You men wanna go in the living room?”

“That bad, huh?” Keegan asked.

Ty only frowned.

“Kids,” Chaz said. “Come with me.”

“Dad, can I stay and hear what has to be said?” Charlie asked.

Chaz looked over his oldest boy and nodded. He then led Matt and Aralyn into the den where their mom and Aunt Lizzy were nursing babies discreetly. “Ladies, Ty’s here and I think what he has to say isn’t rated ‘G,’ so do you mind if the kids come in here and quietly watch a movie or something?”

“No, we don’t mind at all,” Lizzy said. “Where’s Iris?”

“She’s right here,” Gabe said as he carried her in on his shoulders and swung her down to sit on the sofa with Matt and Aralyn. “Hey Matthew, do you mind sort of watching these two girls for a bit? I’ll make it up to you.”

“I don’t mind,” Matt said. “And you don’t have to make it up to me.”

Gabe smiled. Matt too was growing up quickly.

Sheriff Ty, Chaz, Keegan, Ricky, Bree, Taylor, Gabe, Violet, Daisy and Charlie made their way into the living room for privacy.

They all sat quietly. Gabe and Charlie ended up sitting on the floor, and Sheriff Ty stood.

“Okay, Ty, we’re all ears,” Chaz said softly to his younger brother.

Ty nodded. “We went out to Beckett Trucking, and yes, that is where Carl Deetz works, or worked, because he won’t be there anymore. He’s actually been there for five years. Never called in sick. Worked hard. Model employee. Went out for drinks with the guys most weekends. Several of his co-workers knew he had what they thought was a wife and kid. They also knew his wife left him with the kid. None of them had ever been out to his house. We got the address of a PO Box from the employer, and after talking to the postmaster, found the location of the house.” He stopped and shook his head.

“It was like Hannah said, a yellow, dilapidated house in the middle of nowhere over in Barnes County. Took us all morning to process the scene. The chain and shackles that Hannah described were bolted to a floor in a closet with a small mattress in it. The chain stretched out from the closet we guess was her bedroom, to the front room, where we guess he unlocked the shackle to leave with her yesterday. DNA has been taken from every surface. Once that comes back, we will have more of a story,

but I'm pretty sure we will find that he left evidence of his intentions on her mattress."

Gabe frowned and glanced at Taylor to see if she understood what he was actually saying. It appeared she did. "Taylor," Gabe suddenly said. "Do you want to go in the other room?"

She blinked up at him and rose. "Yeah, I think I will."

They waited for her to leave. Ricky nodded at Gabe. "Good call."

Gabe shrugged. "I know how I'm feeling, and she's so sweet and innocent. I don't want this to affect her. Not without a cushion anyway."

"I agree," Bree said. "As a matter of fact, I think I'll go join the ladies too. Ricky, you can fill me in later, with that cushion."

Ricky nodded solemnly.

Tyson went on. "She told the doctor he hadn't penetrated her, but he'd committed lewd acts and made her watch. The examination found no injuries requiring immediate treatment."

He sighed. "We also got more information from Hannah through a psychiatrist that Grandmaster Kino recommended and was gracious enough to meet us at the hospital. We got a description of her mother's murder. Alicia Brown was her name. Hannah said it was night and her mother was screaming at Carl and telling him that she was gonna take Hannah and leave him. They were outside on the front walk. Hannah was watching out the window. He hauled back and punched her square in the face. According to Hannah, she fell straight back, stiff as a board, like a tree falling and smacked her head on the pavement. She lay flat on her back, her eyes open, staring straight up, as blood ran out from under her head. She never moved again.

"Hannah then saw Deetz kneel over her mother. He picked her up and carried her around the side of the house. She's not sure what he did with her after that. She says there are only woods around the whole house. She ran back to her bed, curled up and cried. She was terrified and didn't know what to do. She says she guesses she cried herself to sleep and the next morning he woke her up and told her that her mother left her in the middle of the night. She was too scared to confront him with the truth, which was actually good. Though, life from then on for the poor girl got a little worse every day."

"Sheriff Stewart?" Gabe said quickly. "Do you know what Hannah's mom looked like? Do you have any pictures of her?"

"Actually yes. Why? Do you think you've seen her?"

"No, sir, I mean, well, I can't explain it right now. But can you describe her or show me a picture?"

Ty pulled out his phone and scrolled a moment. "These are pics of a few of the pictures of her that were in the house in the closet where Hannah slept." He handed his phone to Gabe.

As Gabe stared at the pictures, Keegan asked another question. "Did

you find her real father?"

"Yes. And that's just another heartache for this poor kid."

"Go on," Chaz said softly.

"He lives in Louisville, Kentucky. When Hannah was taken by her mom they lived in West Virginia. Her mom was in a car accident and was in constant pain. She started on pain pills and couldn't get off them. Then she added alcohol to the mix. She became pregnant and ended up losing the baby because of her addiction. She took Hannah and left one night after a huge fight with her husband. Hannah's father, Walter Brown, reported the abduction when it happened. We were able to trace him to Louisville. He's thirty-five years old, remarried and has two children, a boy and girl, ages three and one.

"We contacted him. Apparently the man has a new life, and doesn't want anything to do with the old one, including his daughter. He doesn't want her and he wants to sign away his rights to her. According to him, she's now damaged goods and probably unstable and he simply cannot allow her to come into his new life and mess it up. He's sorry for Alicia but says she brought it on herself. He's sorry for Hannah, but believes she'll be better off with someone else." Ty shrugged. "I'm inclined to agree simply because the poor kid needs to be with someone who actually cares about her."

The room was full of tough, seasoned men, and a few boys, namely Gabe and Charlie, and every single one of them had tears in their eyes. They all hurt for the small, frail, tender girl they'd met and felt very protective of her and wanted to fix it, somehow, some way.

Tyson drew a breath and went on. "We're still searching for Alicia's body. We contacted the grandmother in Columbus. She's in a nursing home with an Alzheimer's diagnosis."

"Well, we'll adopt her," Ricky said quickly.

Tyson nodded. "I knew you'd say that, but hear me out. Jodi and John Appel tried to have another child over the years but were unable to. Jodi is with Hannah right now, as you know. If Hannah gets comfortable with her while the Appels are fostering her, like she did with your family, Rick, would you consider allowing *them* to adopt her? *If* she wants to be adopted by them."

"Well, it's not up to me to allow or not allow."

"I realize that, but, if the Appels thought for a moment that you and Bree wanted to adopt her, they would never stand in your way, because, well, that's just the way they are."

Ricky nodded. "Of course, you're right. And I would never stand in *their* way. Have they already spoken to you about this?"

"John has, but he doesn't want to even hint at it to Jodi, because he doesn't want her to get her hopes up and then have them dashed."

"I understand," Ricky said with a decisive nod. "So, of course, let's

give Hannah some time to see how she does, and let's encourage this pathway for her."

"Do you want to speak with Bree about this first, before you say that?"

Ricky shook his head. "I don't have to. I know she'll agree with me."

Chaz put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Charlie? You're very quiet. Are you okay and do you understand everything that we've discussed?"

"I believe I do," he said softly. He shook his head. "Thanks for letting me be here, to hear what the men were discussing."

"Well, you are in high school now. It's time to start treating you like a man. But besides that, you're close to Hannah's age and it might help her to have you in the know as to what she's faced."

Charlie shook his head. "It's hard to believe that someone would do what this guy did to Hannah. I mean, I can see him, like, accidentally killing her mom, like—in a fit of anger or something. Like, it wasn't planned, ya know? But then, what he did to Hannah, or what he intended to do to her, it's just plain evil. It's sick. It's gross."

Chaz nodded. "It's hard to understand, son, but evil exists. The forces of darkness exist, and that's why God uses us to help fight that evil."

"Do you think he would've gone through with it?" Charlie asked. "I mean, do you think he really would've kept Hannah prisoner and then made her have his babies? I mean, that's totally a pervert. She's like, younger than me."

Gabe blew out a breath. "Oh, he's totally a pervert, cuz like, he intended to do some things with *me* when he invited me into his truck yesterday, and I'm pretty certain those things were perverted. His mind *is* depraved," Gabe said.

"But how does someone get that way?" Charlie asked.

"It could be something like porn," Ricky answered. "It's easily accessible and people see it and think, what's so bad about some naked pictures, but it turns into much worse. It gets to where guys can't get, um, satisfaction without it, and then, it has to be more and more deviant, until it totally consumes them. There are serial killers who say that the only way they could achieve sexual satisfaction is when they actually killed someone."

"That's just sick," Charlie muttered.

"It's Satan doing his work," Keegan answered. "Don't let him in. Don't let there be a crack in your armor. And those cracks get there by using drugs and alcohol and looking at porn. It's a huge industry for a reason."

"We have to hold the light," Chaz said.

"Well," Ty said. "I have to get back to work. I have a meeting with

the Pine Forest police and Barnes County Sheriff's departments."

As they saw Tyson out, Gabe cornered his father and Ricky. "Dad, Mr. Kino, may I speak with you privately?"

Keegan nodded and then glanced at Ricky. "Do you have time?"

"Yes, of course, for Gabe, all the time in the world."

"Let's go into my office," Keegan suggested.

"I'm gonna gather the family and head home," Chaz said. "We wanna go visit Jericho in the hospital and then we'll see you guys tonight at dinner."

They took time to say their goodbyes and then Keegan, Ricky and Gabe headed into the office.

Gabe sighed as he thought about what he wanted to say. He had to smile as both men waited in silence. That's something his father always did: used silence to begin a conversation. It didn't surprise him that Mr. Kino did the same thing. He smiled. "Well, I wanted to talk to you about the vision I had. I told you both about it."

"The one about Taylor?" Ricky said.

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. And like, remember I told you I saw a big fist—a man's fist—hit her square in the face, and then I saw her lying on the pavement, eyes open, staring up, like she was dead. And as Sheriff Stewart was telling us what Hannah saw the night her mother was murdered, I mean, it was like he was describing my vision. So, I'm wondering if I got it wrong. Maybe it wasn't Taylor in my vision. Maybe what I saw was Hannah's mom, and I thought it was Taylor, because, well, because Taylor is always on my mind. Ya know? I looked at the pictures of Hannah's mom on Sheriff Stewart's phone, and she does have long, dark hair. Or, I guess, she *did* have long dark hair. I mean, I could've mistaken what I saw in the vision."

Keegan sighed as he considered what Gabe was saying.

Ricky nodded. "Of course, it's possible to misinterpret a vision or dream. When I was born, my father had a precognitive dream that I had a giant purple birthmark on my face. He was pretty distraught about it. But when I was born, they had to use forceps and they left a large bruise on my cheek, which went away within the week. So, he misinterpreted the dream. Which tells me that yes, we definitely can misinterpret a dream or vision. So, we need to keep our minds open. Just don't draw any conclusions."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't draw a conclusion. Don't conclude that the vision must've been about Alicia Brown and not Taylor. Don't conclude that it was definitely about Taylor and not Alicia Brown. Keep it open. Maybe it was about both of them. Something in the past as a roadmark that we're getting close to something similar happening in the future."

Gabe frowned.

"Listen, I'd like to believe that you were simply mistaken about it being Taylor. But I can't write off your instincts."

Gabe shook his head. "*My* instincts?"

"Yes, son," Keegan said. "Your first instinct is that the vision was about Taylor. Instincts are like, a knowing. Like, the Holy Spirit whispering to you. So, we can't just write them off and conclude that your instincts were wrong."

"But what if it was just like I said, I mean, what if I thought it was Taylor because she's always on my mind?"

Ricky nodded. "It's possible. Still, as close as you've been to Jesus, I mean, He's hugged you, so, I'm inclined to trust your instincts."

Gabe shook his head. "Then I don't know what to think."

"Like I said, Gabe, don't think anything. Just keep your mind open to the possibilities and draw no conclusions. You don't have to choose what to think. Draw no conclusions. Listen. Trust God. He'll let us know when the time comes. Until then, I'll, we'll, still take extra precautions to keep her safe."

Gabe nodded. He drew a quick breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were moist. He smiled at Ricky.

"Did you just get a message or something?" Keegan asked.

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. I didn't get a vision, but I just heard a voice or actually, just the words came into my head."

"What did it say? Who was it?" Keegan asked.

"It was Jesus, and it was a message for you, Mr. Kino."

Ricky's eyebrows rose. "Okay."

Gabe sniffed. "He said He's hugged you too. Many times. He said He's proud of you and He loves you."

Ricky's eyes immediately teared up.

Gabe went on. "He says He loves us all and for us to stay close to Him, in everything we do. Keep our lamps filled through prayer and song and His Word and by continuing to serve His sheep and build His kingdom. The world will come against us, but don't despair, He's overcome the world." Gabe stopped as his voice became choked with emotion. "He's coming. Hold on."

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Jeremiah 33:3

"Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known."

December 6th 4:20 PM Friday Early Evening
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jodi Appel sat on the bed and looked around the room while she waited for Hannah to shower. She'd bought a new comforter while they were out buying some clothes for the sweet girl. Jodi made up the bed and looked around to see what else she might need to get. There was already a small desk with a lamp, but she was sure she'd need a computer once she got settled in. The dresser was large and Jodi was thinking she would fill it up with whatever Hannah wanted. The outfits they'd just bought included three pairs of jeans, cute little shirts and sweaters, pajamas, shoes, socks, underwear, a few beginner bras, a coat, a couple of cute dresses to wear to church, dress shoes, boots, and a casual jacket.

They'd gone shopping as soon as they left the hospital. Jodi had watched Hannah's eyes get big as they'd piled more and more things into their shopping basket. After the shopping trip, they'd eaten lunch together, just the two of them, as Jodi attempted to get to know Hannah. She was a sweet girl. She was not standoffish or closed off, as Jodi had expected her to be after the trauma she'd endured. She *was* simply a little shy. Very quiet. Jodi knew Hannah had learned to be quiet because she had quietly endured so much and might not know how to act around people. Jodi and John had called Grandmaster Kino and spoken to him about the best way to help Hannah to heal emotionally.

After a long talk, Grandmaster Kino assured them that their natural instincts would be best, to shower her with love, to pray over her, and to help her to pray. He'd shared what Taylor had learned: Hannah had begun praying and asking God to help her out of her situation, and she believed He actually did hear her prayers. So, that was huge. Jodi knew that with God, all things are possible, and Hannah would heal.

Jodi looked up as she heard the water turn off. She prayed silently while she waited another ten minutes before the girl came out of the bathroom, a thick terry-cloth robe tied snug at her tiny waist. Jodi smiled. "Hey, Hannah. I bet you feel a lot better."

Hannah merely nodded.

"Come sit down here at the vanity and I'll comb out your hair," Jodi said, patting the small round white velvet seat.

Hannah did as she was told and sat looking in the mirror at herself as Miss Jodi gently combed the tangles out of her hair. Jodi smiled into the mirror at her. "I didn't realize your hair was this long."

Hannah frowned as she tried to see, so Jodi divided her long, dark blond hair in half in the back and pulled the two parts in front over her shoulders. Jodi could see the surprised look on Hannah's face as well. Her hair had been so dirty and so tangled that she didn't even know it was to

the middle of her back. Jodi had given her a quick tutorial about using the shampoo and the conditioner and it appeared she had done a good job.

Jodi fingered the ends of her hair. “It is a little uneven here on the ends, but I can fix that up real quick, if you’d like. We can trim just a tiny bit and it will look so much healthier. Would you like me to do that?”

Hannah sighed. “Will it look like yours?”

Jodi smiled. “Well, it won’t be dark like mine, of course, but, yes, it’s about the same length and we both have very straight hair.”

“My mother’s hair was dark like yours,” Hannah said softly.

Jodi drew a deep breath. Grandmaster Kino had told her to let Hannah talk as much as she wanted about her past. To encourage it. Jodi smiled. “I saw some pictures. She was very pretty.”

Hannah nodded. “But she was mean. She was always so mad at everyone.”

“Even at you?” Jodi asked.

Hannah nodded. “She’d be real mean and yell at me, but then later she’d say she was sorry.”

“What did you say when she said she was sorry?”

Hannah shrugged. “I don’t really remember. I think I said, ‘it’s okay.’ I didn’t want her to feel bad.”

“Oh, Hannah, that is so sweet. You were willing to forgive her. That’s exactly what Jesus would want you to do. Do you know about Jesus?”

“I know he was born on Christmas and people say he is the Son of God and that he is God, but that’s all I really know.”

“Well, He must know you, because you naturally knew to forgive your mother.” Jodi paused a moment. “It’s awesome that you could forgive her, sweetie, but I want you to know that it wasn’t okay, the way she treated you—it wasn’t right. You didn’t deserve that. Hannah, you know your mother was sick, right?”

Hannah nodded her head. “Yeah, I know. She got sick when she didn’t get her pills.”

“Well, I mean, she was sick because she was *addicted* to the pills. Do you know what that means? Addicted?”

Hannah nodded her head. “It’s when people have to have drugs and cigarettes, and if they don’t get them, they feel real bad. Mom said she would go crazy if she didn’t have them.”

“Right. Drugs, pills, cigarettes, alcohol, and other things too. So, once a person becomes addicted, it’s very hard for that person to stop using those things. It’s like they have to have those things or they think they will die. It’s weird, but it’s like, they crave the very things that are making them so sick. Your mom needed help. She didn’t know how to get the help she needed.”

“She said Carl was gonna help her.”

"Carl lied to her. He used your mom."

Hannah looked down. "Do you think my mom was already dead when Carl picked her up and carried her away?"

Jodi nodded. "From what you told us, I believe she was already gone before he carried her away. Already gone and with Jesus. Out of her body. So, she didn't know what he did after that."

"So, he didn't like, bury her alive?" Hannah mumbled.

"No, sweetie. She was gone. She didn't suffer anymore. And her addiction at the physical level was gone too."

Hannah nodded.

"Sweetie, I believe you'll see your mom again one day. When we die, we don't just end. Our spirit leaves our body and continues on."

Hannah nodded. "That's what my friend always said."

"What friend?"

"A friend I had back a long time ago when I was little. She told me God was real and she's why I tried to pray to God and ask him to help me."

"Ya know, sweetie, it wasn't just a coincidence that Taylor Kino saw you yesterday. God made that happen. Taylor is very close to Jesus. Every day she asks God to tell her who He wants her to help. Yesterday, God directed Taylor to you."

"I wish Taylor didn't have to leave tomorrow."

"I know. But from now on, you two are gonna be really good friends."

"Taylor said you would get me a phone and we could do video calls every day if I wanted."

"Absolutely. We'll make that happen."

"Mrs. Kino said that she really loves you and that you really wanted to take good care of me."

Jodi smiled. "Mrs. Kino is right."

"Why?"

"Why do I want to take care of you?"

"Yes."

"Because God sent you to me. Because you and me are special."

"How are we special?"

Jodi sighed. She thought it would be a long time before she shared with Hannah what she was about to share with her. But maybe this was what she was supposed to do. Grandmaster Kino told her it might be a good idea to solidify the relationship now, by telling her how and why they were similar. No one knew what Jodi was about to tell Hannah. Only her husband John, and Grandmaster Kino. Not even her own son. Nor her best friends in the world, Lisa Stewart and Lizzy Tanner.

"I want to tell you, Hannah. I'm just not sure if I should. But, maybe I should, so that you can understand why staying with me will be good for

you. It'll be good for you because you'll know that I understand exactly what you've been through." She smiled sadly. "Tell you what, let's pick out an outfit and you get dressed and we'll trim your hair, and I'll blow it dry for you, and then we'll sit here and have a talk and I'll tell you everything. I guess you're not too young to know, because I was even younger than you when I was taken from my family."

Hannah's eyes opened wide. Jodi nodded. "How about some jeans and boots and that pretty pink sweater with the roses on it?"

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December 6th 1:20 PM Friday Afternoon

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric turned from the kitchen sink at the sound of little feet coming down the stairs. He waited for the few seconds it took for them to burst into the kitchen.

"Daddy," Noah and Abe called at the same time.

Eric smiled and knelt down to let the children run into his arms. "There's my boys," he said softly. He squeezed them and set them back so he could look into their big brown eyes. "Who wants to tell me why you're down here and not up with the others taking a nap?"

"Cuz mommy said if we can't stop wiggwing awound we had to go downstairs and tell you and you would find somefing for us to do," Noah blurted out in his adorable child accent.

"I see. Is everyone else taking their nap?"

"Yes, sir," Abe said. "But Angewina is only pwetending."

Eric chuckled. "And just how do you know that?"

"Because I saw her open her eyes and den cwose dem weally fast, wike dis," he said as he demonstrated.

Eric nodded. The three of them turned as Melody and Jordan both came into the kitchen wearing their martial arts uniforms.

"Hmm, what have we here?" Melody asked. "I bet someone was wiggling around and not taking their nap."

Noah smiled. "Yep, it was me," he said proudly.

"And me," Abe said.

Eric rose. "Well, I was about to give these young ladies a martial arts lesson. You can sit quietly and watch and learn, or you can go upstairs and take your nap."

"Can we have a cookie?" Noah asked.

Eric shook his head. "Absolutely not," he said firmly, knowing giving them a reward for not taking their nap would only reinforce the behavior.

They both made a face, making Jordan giggle.

Eric glanced at the beautiful young lady. "Are you two ready?"

They both bowed. "Yes, sir."

"Grab a hand and let's head downstairs."

They headed down to what most people called the weapons room because it was lined with all manner of martial arts weaponry. They stood in the middle of the floor, behind Grandmaster Kino. “Boys, have a seat on the floor in front of the mirror right there,” their father said softly. “And see if you can find two things that you remember the name of.”

They both said a cute little, “Yes, sir,” and went to sit, easily folding themselves into the full lotus position.

Eric then bowed to his two female students. “Let us begin,” he said firmly as they began a series of stretches.

Almost an hour later, after stretches and forms, conditioning and strength drills, Eric worked on the flow of different combat techniques. He glanced over at the boys, who were leaning against each other, sound asleep. He smiled. His heart filled with love for the children. They were his. He had to keep reminding himself that these small sweet spirits were his and Shelley’s and they were trusting them to take care of them and nurture them and teach them, but it was even more than that. They were special.

They came into the world in a strange way. An evil person brought them into the world, but God allowed it because these five new children had a special calling. It was now up to Eric to hone them, to teach them and to help them find that calling. He loved them every bit as much as he did his other children, Ricky, Bree, Mark, Joey and Jeffy. However, he didn’t know them as well. He’d been working on getting to know just who these adorable spirits were and it was nothing but pure pleasure, every single day, every minute spent with them.

He glanced in the mirror at the two young ladies as they worked against each other. He nodded his head. “That was good, Melody, but if you don’t plant the base foot firmly, she’ll knock you off balance. She’s taller than you, so you have to compensate.”

“And stronger,” Melody said as she grunted with exertion.

“We all have our weaknesses and strengths,” Eric said softly.

Eric, Jordan and Melody looked up as the door opened and in stepped Manny, Nate, and Angelina in their little martial arts uniforms, with Shelley behind holding the uniforms for Noah and Abe.

Eric smiled. “Shelley girl.” He bowed.

She returned the gesture. “Grandmaster Kino,” she whispered.

Noah and Abe woke at the voice of their mother.

“Is it our turn now?” Abe asked sleepily.

“Almost,” Shelley said. “You have to go use the bathroom and get into your uniforms. Let’s go.” They rose and followed her dutifully.

Eric had Jordan and Melody line up. “You did well, ladies. You’re both moving right along and I’m pleased with your progress. It appears young Eric and Logan are also doing their jobs well in teaching you. Keep up the good work.”

"Thank you, sir," Jordan said. "It's easy to do that with two of the hottest guys on the planet teaching us. Or, uh, three, including you."

Melody giggled at Jordan using those words to describe Grandmaster Kino's grandsons to him, and then adding him to the description.

Grandmaster Kino chuckled. "That's very kind of you, Jordan." He smiled at the girls. "Are you looking forward to the big party tonight?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison as they grabbed up their water bottles and towels and dried their faces.

"I understand everyone is meeting the limo here at the house?"

"Yes, sir, JoJo's date will be here by five and Miss Shelley is gonna help us get ready."

He nodded. "Sounds like a fun time. Listen, girls, don't leave Eric's and Logan's side tonight and don't drink anything given to you by anyone except your guys. No exceptions."

"Yes, sir. Um, what if we have to use the restroom?" Jordan asked.

"Then go together and have one of the guys wait for you."

They nodded.

Eric went on. "Even though the party is at *Rico's Club*, it will be different from when you went there before. When you were there before it was merely a restaurant lounge. Tonight it will be very crowded, almost no tables, very loud music, flashing lights, a lot of press and paparazzi." He shook his head. "I just want you to be careful."

They both nodded again.

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December 6th 5:00 PM Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jodi smiled as she watched Hannah turn from side to side in front of the full-length mirror on the closet door. Hannah looked up into Jodi's eyes and offered a small smile.

"Do you like what you see, Hannah?"

The girl nodded. "I— don't look like me."

Jodi sighed. "Yes you do. You just didn't know that this is how you look when you're clean and in some clothes that fit you properly."

"I almost look pretty," Hannah said in a whisper, almost as if she were talking to herself.

"That's because you *are* pretty. You're actually very pretty. Beautiful. I want you to see that, sweetie. Look in the mirror. Look at the shape of your face. A perfect oval. Maybe a little thin, but some decent food will fix that right up. And look at your hair now that it's clean and trimmed up. It's so pretty."

Hannah peered in the mirror. Her hair hung down straight and soft looking. It was simply parted in the middle and hung down over her shoulders. Miss Jodi had trimmed off the raggedy ends and had trimmed a few wisps of soft bangs around her eyes. Hannah blinked at the eyes

staring back at her, trying to get used to her own image.

"And you have such beautiful, big brown eyes and an adorable little turned-up nose and a lovely complexion."

Hannah smiled.

"And look at that!" Jodi said brightly.

"What?"

"You just smiled, and sweetie, I think that might be just the prettiest thing I've ever seen."

Hannah rolled her eyes, making Jodi giggle. Jodi took out her phone and snapped off a few pics. "I want to commemorate this moment, Hannah, where you began to discover your self-worth." She glanced at the time on her phone. "Well, I promised to tell you my story." She patted the bed. "Come sit down."

Hannah sat on the bed. Jodi rose and went to grab the wingback chair by the window and dragged it over to sit right in front of Hannah. She sat down and gazed into the child's eyes.

"So, Hannah, I told you that I was younger than you when I was taken from my home. You're thirteen. I was eleven."

Hannah's eyes opened wide.

"Now, actually, you were younger than I was because when your mom took you from your father you were only nine. But at least you had your mom until you were twelve."

Hannah nodded.

"The story I'm about to tell you, Hannah, no one knows this about me except two people, my husband John, and Grandmaster Kino. I know you don't know Grandmaster Kino, but you will eventually meet him. He's Taylor's grandfather and he is the kindest, most noble man you'll ever meet. My own son, Jake, whom I love with every fiber of my being, he doesn't even know the story that I'm about to tell you."

"Then why would you tell *me*?" Hannah asked.

Jodi nodded. "Because, God is putting it on my heart that me telling you this story will go a long way toward helping you to heal from your traumatic experience. And I also think He is telling me that it's time I shared my story with not only you, but with my son Jake and even with my friends. But I'm telling you first, Hannah, because I care about you, and I want you to heal and I want you to feel like there is someone right here in front of you that truly knows and understands what you've been through, and what you will continue to go through as you begin to heal from the trauma."

Hannah didn't say anything. She just blinked as she looked up at the pretty lady's eyes.

Jodi drew a deep breath. "I wasn't born in the United States. I was born in Korea. In South Korea. My mother was Korean. My father was Chinese. We were very, very poor. My father was a fisherman. I don't

remember him too well. He wasn't very nice. He drank a lot. He gambled a lot. Sometimes he gambled away all of our money and my mom would have to go ask people for food so that she could feed me.

"When I turned eleven years old, my father got into trouble because of his gambling. One night, he came to my mat where I was sleeping and woke me up and told me to get dressed. He took me out. It was winter. It was very cold. He took me down to the docks and he sold me to another Chinese man. Really, before I ever knew and definitely before I even understood what was happening, I was in a shipping container with many other children and some women. Mostly everyone was female, but there were a few boys too.

"One of the older girls told me that we were loaded onto a ship and we were going to a new country where it's warm and where we won't be hungry anymore and where the people are kind." She sighed. "I believed her. But she didn't know any better than I did. It was what she'd been told." Jodi paused for a few seconds and then went on.

"We were on the ship for weeks. The container where we stayed smelled so bad because there were only buckets to use as toilets. There was only bread to eat and some water to drink. At least ten girls died before we ever got to the new country. That new country was Mexico. I didn't know that at the time, but I learned it later. We were so happy to finally be off the ship and out of the shipping container. We thought, finally, there would be relief and life would get better, but it only got worse from there.

"We were loaded onto a truck. I learned later that we were brought across the border into the United States and to a place in the slums of Los Angeles. Not all of us. Some were delivered to some big fancy homes. The boys were special. They got fed and cleaned up and I thought they were lucky. But that turned out to be a lie. They maybe even had it worse.

"At the place where we were taken, we were fed, and bathed, and initiated into what we were there to do, and that was, to allow men to have sex with us. We were beaten and starved and tortured and whipped with belts until we agreed to do what we were told to do. The worst torture was we were made to do what we were told to do or the babies that some of the girls had would be killed. There were a lot of babies. By the time I was your age I was servicing about ten to fifteen men a day. I was like, in a zone. I wanted to die. I got really sick and I thought, finally, I'm gonna get out of this life.

"But that's not what happened. One night, there was a police raid. There'd been police raids before, and we were always told to hide or run, because the police were very bad and they would tear off your eyelids and break your arms and legs. Some girls went to closets and under beds. They got found and I heard them scream and cry because they'd been found. I hid under a basement floor, but I was watching the police as they

came searching for us in the rooms. I could see one man through the crack, but he didn't look mean at all. He was talking to another man. He had tears in his eyes. I realized he was crying over us girls. I tried to go to him, but the other girls held me back, but I screamed and fought and that got their attention and the police found the door and pulled it up. I looked up at that man. It was the one who'd been crying. He smiled at me and reached out to me.

"I grabbed onto his hand and allowed him to pull me up. I held onto his arm and would not let him go. Other police came down into the room and pulled about forty girls out of that hole. But I still wouldn't let the one man go. He tried to hand me to a lady and told me she would take care of me, but I didn't trust anyone else and I held onto the man and begged him to let me stay with him."

Jodi stopped and wiped tears from her eyes and then reached over and wiped the tears from Hannah's eyes too. She smiled and shrugged. "There's a lot more to the story, but that man, and his wife eventually ended up adopting me. I had to have lots of counseling. It wasn't easy at first, learning to trust people, learning to trust men." She stopped and smiled. "That man, his name was Quinton Hall, he became my father, and his wife, Margaret Hall became my mother. I began to heal and I started school. Most people were very kind, but I was made fun of because I was very small for my age because of lack of nutrition."

She smiled. "And then I met John Appel. He was two years older than me. He stood up for me at school. He took me under his wing. He was so cute. So strong and very popular. He was good friends with a guy named Ricky Kino, who, as you know, is Taylor's dad. John and Ricky went to martial arts classes at Kino Martial Arts and were taught by Grandmaster Kino. I started going too. I was learning so much. I was healing. And most of that had to do with John and Ricky teaching me about God. And God, oh Hannah, God answered my prayers and showed me that He is real. This was the most healing part of everything. He took away my pain, my bad memories, my suffering and He made me strong. And oh, Hannah, I am so very strong.

"Eventually, John and I fell in love. We got married. John joined the military, but I waited for him to come home to me. We wanted to have children, but I was unable. I had damage to my uterus and cervix because of what the men did to me when I was being trafficked. Then, John and I decided to come to Georgia to help run this Inn and just before we got here, a miracle happened. God answered my prayers. I got pregnant. Our little Jacob was such a blessing for us and as the doctors told me time and again, such a miracle. I was never able to have another child, though we tried and we were desperate to have one. Still, God told us to stay strong and to stay in service to His other children and He will bless us.

"And He has, Hannah. He's blessed us with so much and now, he's

blessed us with the opportunity to help you. We want to help you, Hannah. We know, because of what I've been through, that we are the perfect people to help you. So, sweetie, if you ever want to talk about it, if you just want to get mad, or be sad, or cry over everything that's happened, you can come to me and we'll do just that. Then, little by little, it'll get easier to carry. One day, it won't hurt so much, and you'll be happy again."

Hannah had tears on her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Miss Jodi, for all the stuff that happened to you."

"Oh, it's okay, sweetie. Really. Because of what I went through, I was made so strong. It made me so that I can help others with all of their problems, and that brings me so much happiness. And you, Hannah, are gonna be even stronger than me." She held out her hands to the girl whose tears continued to flow. "Oh, honey, come here," Jodi said.

Hannah rose off the bed and rotated to sit on Jodi's lap. She leaned her head against Jodi's chest and cried. Jodi wrapped her arms around the fragile shoulders of the girl and held her tight and let her own tears come. They cried together for several minutes. Finally, they quieted and Jodi stroked Hannah's head, giving comfort and human touch. She knew that no one had held this child probably since she'd been very young. She held her now, and stroked her and kissed her cheek. "Everything is gonna be okay, my sweet Hannah girl," Jodi murmured. They sat in silence, but both looked up when the door opened.

John Appel smiled at the sight. "Well," he said softly. "I think that might be the prettiest thing I've seen all day. Two beautiful girls all cuddled up."

Hannah and Jodi sat up. "Hey, John," Jodi said quietly. "We just had a long talk and now, little miss Hannah knows my secret."

"Aww, I see," John said. "I guess that makes her very special."

"It does indeed," Jodi replied.

Both Hannah and Jodi unwrapped themselves from each other and stood.

John smiled. "Wow, you ladies are two of the prettiest girls I've ever seen. Hannah, I love those boots."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said smoothly. "So, I just came to get you, Hannah, because Daisy Tanner, who is one of Gabe's sisters, is going down to the Stewart barn real quick to feed the puppies before dinner and she was wondering if you'd like to come and see them."

"Puppies?" Hannah said. "Yes, I would love to see puppies!"

John smiled. Her soul hadn't died yet. Not like his Jodi's had when he'd first met her. "Fantastic," he said softly.

"Let's get your jacket." Jodi opened the closet and took out the blue, quilted jacket with a hood that was lined in white faux fur, and helped

Hannah put it on.

Jodi smiled at her. “You look so cute.”

John held out his hand. “Come on then and I’ll introduce you to Daisy.”

Jodi chewed on her lip, wondering if it was too soon for Hannah to trust a man, but to her relief, Hannah smiled and placed her hand in John’s.

The two walked out of Hannah’s new bedroom, down the back hall and came out at the stairs. They turned left and went into the lobby and Hannah looked up at the prettiest girl she’d ever seen. She had almost white blond hair and big blue eyes and it seemed there was a light all around her. She smiled at Hannah and it almost made Hannah feel like she needed to fall down.

“Daisy,” John said, in his deep voice. “This is Hannah.”

Daisy grinned and held out her hand. “Hannah, it’s so nice to meet you.”

Hannah only nodded her head.

Daisy placed her hands on Hannah’s shoulders. “So, would you like to walk with me down to the Stewart barn and see the puppies?”

Hannah nodded her head. “How many are there?”

“There are nine,” Daisy said excitedly.

John glanced at the time. “Daisy, it’s getting late. Instead of walking, take the golf cart, it’s right out front.”

“Thanks, Uncle John,” Daisy replied with a smile. She nodded at Hannah. “Let’s go, I love driving the golf cart.”

They headed out the door and down the steps of the Inn and climbed into the cart. As they pulled toward the front gate of the Inn, Daisy pointed to the left to a wide sidewalk that was currently lined with pine garland, red bows and twinkling white lights. “That walk right there leads to the cottages and to a side gate that opens to my house, well, I mean, my parents’ house.”

Hannah looked in the direction the sidewalk went, but it disappeared around a curve. She looked back at Daisy. “And you’re Gabe’s sister, right?”

Daisy nodded and smiled. “Yes. Gabe has seven sisters and one brother.”

“Really?”

Daisy nodded. “Really. Five of us are grown, and the others are little. Iris turns three this coming week, and I hope you’ll come to the birthday party, and then the twins, little Gentian and Isaiah were just born a little over a week ago.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Would you like to meet them?”

“Now?”

"No, but by the time we get back they'll be at the Inn because we're having a goodbye dinner for the Kinos."

Hannah smiled. Daisy headed out the front gate of the Inn and turned right. She drove a half mile to where the dirt road ended at a dirt driveway. Daisy pointed to the paved road on the right. "That road leads into town," she said as she pulled in through an open gate. She pointed up to a large brick house up on a hill to the right. "That's the elder Stewarts' home. They actually own the ranch here, along with their eldest son, whom I call Uncle Chaz, though he isn't my real uncle, but we're all close, us neighbors, like family."

She drove past the home and went through a wooded area and pointed to their left. "That big log home over there is Uncle Chaz and Aunt Lisa's house. They have six kids. The two youngest are twins and they were born a month ago."

"Wow, lots of babies."

Daisy nodded with a smile. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Hannah nodded.

Daisy turned right through a split-rail gate and headed down a long gravel path to a large red building. "And this is the barn." She pulled up right next to the big doors.

Hannah's eyes opened wide. "Uh, there's a giant horse right there," she said, pointing to where Santana stood near the side of the barn.

Daisy nodded. "Yeah, that's Santana. It's Jake's horse."

"Jake? Miss Jodi and Mr. John's Jake?"

"Yes. He's not home right now. He's in the military and is in Afghanistan. Someone must have taken Santana out for some exercise."

"But, he's not even tied up," Hannah said.

"Santana is well-trained. He won't run off."

"Is he nice?"

"Yeah, he's nice. He just looks big and scary. Come on, let's go in."

They entered through the side door and headed toward the back of the barn. Charlie Stewart turned as he finished spreading a fresh layer of hay over the floor in the back corner. Georgia immediately headed to Daisy, her tail wagging.

Hannah's eyes opened wide.

"Don't be afraid of her," Daisy said. "She just wants to smell you and make sure you're not here to hurt her puppies."

Hannah bent and offered her hand to Georgia to smell. The large dog smelled her hand briefly, and then lowered her head to put Hannah's hand on top of it.

Daisy laughed. "Well, that didn't take long. You passed the test already. Now, she just wants you to pet her."

Hannah giggled and rubbed her hand over Georgia's head and down her neck. "Oh, you're a sweet dog, aren't you," Hannah whispered.

Charlie came forward. As he approached, Hannah stopped petting Georgia and stared up at the tall boy.

Charlie smiled. “Hey, Daisy,” he said, his voice already deep.

“Hey, Charlie. I thought I told you that I was gonna come down and feed Georgia this evening.”

He nodded. “Yep, you did. But Laynah asked me to take Santana out for some exercise since she was busy helping out at the Inn, and I remembered that I needed to clean up Georgia’s area here and put down some fresh hay, so that you wouldn’t have to do it.”

Daisy smiled. “You’re a good kid, Charlie.”

He shrugged with a smile. “I try.” He looked at Hannah. She looked a lot different than she did the day before. She was clean. Her hair was longer, and clean, and brushed. Her face was clean. The dark circles that had been under her eyes were gone. He smiled. “Hi, Hannah, I’m Charlie.”

“You know me?” she asked.

“I know about you. I was at the courthouse yesterday and I saw what was goin’ on.”

She looked down.

“Uh, so, all the puppies are in that big box over there. You wanna help me put them back in their little area? I moved them out of the way so I could clean up and put down fresh hay.” He didn’t wait for an answer, but just motioned for her to follow him to a big cardboard box on the floor.

Daisy and Hannah followed. Hannah dropped to her knees beside the box. “Oh my goodness, look at all of them! Oh, they’re just so cute,” she said softly. She reached in and lifted one of the black puppies and held it up to look into its face. “Hello there,” she said, then leaned forward and nestled her nose against the puppy’s sweet face.

Daisy and Charlie watched her, glad to see her come alive. Animals had a way of doing that, of healing hearts.

Charlie reached down and picked up a puppy, carried it to the designated area and placed it gently down. “There ya go, buddy,” he said.

Immediately, Georgia went back to the area to sniff at her puppy.

“Their eyes are closed,” Hannah said.

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, they’re only like a week old. Probably be another week before their eyes open.”

Hannah took the puppy in her arms and moved to put it in the little enclosure. She placed it close to Georgia. Charlie carried a few more and Hannah carried one at a time. A minute later, Georgia was lying on her side, nursing her nine little ones. Hannah sat there watching. Daisy filled Georgia’s food bowl and added more water to the larger water bowl.

Charlie stood back. “Well, I gotta put Santana up.”

Daisy smiled. “Thanks for helping out.”

Charlie nodded. “Hey, Hannah, so, do you like horses?”

She looked up, her eyes wide. “I, uh, I don’t know.”

“Ever been on one?”

She shook her head.

“Maybe one day I’ll take you for a ride. Whaddya think?”

She blinked up at him.

He smiled. “We’ll go really slow.”

She shrugged.

Daisy smiled. “Hannah, did you know, Charlie is about your age?”

She looked up. “Really?”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, I’m fourteen. But I’ll be fifteen in a few months.”

“Oh,” Hannah muttered.

“How old are you?” Charlie asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“Thirteen,” Hannah muttered.

“Cool. When’s your birthday?”

“September 18th.”

“So, we’re close to the same age. I’m about a year and a half older.”

Hannah nodded.

Charlie shifted his feet. “So, I, uh, guess I gotta get goin’. See y’all at dinner.”

“Bye, Charlie,” Daisy called as he made his way out of the barn.

“Well, I guess we’ll head back to the Inn. You can meet my baby brother and sisters. And Gabe and Taylor should be there by now.”

Hannah smiled.

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December 6th, 5:00 PM, Friday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

JoJo Adams drove through the security gate and gave a friendly smile and wave to the agent.

Ella Penn, the girl in the passenger seat, turned to look at him, a confused look on her face. “Did you just wave to that guy at the gate?”

He smiled at her. “Yes.”

“Do you know him?”

“Not personally.”

“Does he know you, or know of you?”

“Um, probably. I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“Oh, well, I just thought, you’re awfully friendly to the help.”

His brow furrowed. “The help?”

“I mean, that guy is being paid to man that gate, right?”

“Yes. He’s a security agent. So?”

“He’s being paid. My dad says they need to understand their place. They are not our friends. So, you don’t have to take time to be so friendly,

but you do."

"Okay. Well, yes, he's a paid agent, but he's an Ameritech agent, which is prestigious. I have an immense amount of respect for any Ameritech agent, and he's also a human being so his *place* is right by my side."

"Yes, of course. I just find that interesting."

"In a good way or in a bad way?" he asked as he pulled to the right instead of circling around to the front of the house.

She shrugged. "In an interesting way."

He didn't press it any further, because they didn't have time to get into a discussion. He parked his car over on the right side of the second garage and went around to open her door for her. She waited patiently. He offered his left hand and gently pulled her out of the car. He then reached into the backseat and pulled out her dress bag and a small suitcase.

"This way," he said, walking slightly in front of her.

"Why didn't we park in front of the house instead of having to walk from way over here?" she asked.

He smiled. "Well, the limo will be arriving soon and I didn't want him to have to maneuver around my car."

"That's very nice of you, but couldn't you have parked in front and had a guy simply move your car?"

"A guy?"

"Like, a servant or something?"

JoJo pressed his lips together. "My grandparents don't really have servants."

"Oh! Well, isn't that sweet. I have to say, I'm always amazed at people who choose to live so simply."

He frowned and she smiled as she followed him around the garage to the front of the house. "It's very pretty here," she allowed.

"Thanks. I actually lived here for the first four years of my life, while my dad was in college."

"Really?"

"Yes. It always feels like home to me."

"So like, how did your mom feel about living with the 'in-laws'?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I never knew my mother. She passed away from brain cancer right after I was born."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Ella said as they went up the wide set of stairs that led to the red, double front doors with gold script written vertically.

"What kind of writing is that?" she asked.

"Currently, it's Japanese."

"Currently?"

"Yes, my grandfather changes it over the years. It's been Chinese several times that said stuff like, um, 'hold hands and grow old with you,'

and ‘with love water satisfies, without love, food doesn’t,’ or something like that. It’s been Korean that said, ‘at the end of hardship comes happiness’, and um, ‘even monkeys fall from trees.’”

“Interesting. And what does this one say?”

He glanced up at the gold letters to make sure they hadn’t been changed. “It says man cannot serve two gods.”

She nodded as he opened the door and ushered her inside.

Melody and Jordan immediately came from the kitchen to the front foyer, smiling prettily.

“Hey,” Jordan said immediately. “You must be Ella. I’m Jordan.” She held her hand out to JoJo’s friend.

Ella smiled politely. “Hello, Jordan. Nice to meet you.” She daintily shook Jordan’s hand.

JoJo nodded. “And this is Melody,” he said. “Melody, this is Ella Penn.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Melody said in her soft voice.

“Nice to meet you,” Ella said. “So, you’re the one dating Logan, right?”

Melody nodded. “Right.”

Ella looked at Jordan. “And you’re dating Eric Kino, right?”

Jordan shook her head. “Nope. I’m not dating him. I’m engaged to him.”

“Oh, really? Well, how nice is that?”

It was a rhetorical question but Jordan giggled and answered anyway. “It doesn’t suck.”

JoJo chuckled. “So, hey, ladies. Are the guys here yet?”

“No, but they will be any minute,” Melody answered. She smiled at Ella. “Let’s head upstairs. We’ve been assigned the room that Miss Bree used to have when she lived here when she was younger.”

“Bree as in Breanna Adams?” Ella asked.

“Yes.”

Ella looked at JoJo. “And Breanna Adams is actually your aunt, right?”

He sighed. “Yes. She’s my father’s older sister.”

“That’s very cool,” she said brightly.

Jordan’s eyes narrowed. It was okay to be impressed by the royalty of this household, she could understand that, but she didn’t miss JoJo’s sigh, and she wondered if Ella was like another Angi.

“I’ll, uh, carry your things up for you,” JoJo offered.

“Nonsense,” Jordan said quickly as she took the dress bag from him. “We got this. You go have a snack or something and get dressed yourself.”

He grinned. “Ma’am, yes, ma’am.”

The girls led the way up to Bree’s old room. When they went in, they

watched as Ella walked slowly around the room, stopping to look out the glass doors to the deck and the ocean beyond. She turned and smiled. "Isn't this lovely?"

Melody nodded. "It is."

"It's not quite as fancy as I expected though."

"Really?" Jordan asked.

Ella nodded. "I mean, my own bedroom has real gold accents, imported crystal chandeliers and marble floors in the bathroom. I'm surprised by the simplicity here."

Jordan couldn't help it; she rolled her eyes. "So, tell me about yourself, Ella. You met JoJo at school?" she asked as she took her own dress from hanging on the front of one of the closet doors and laid it on the large bed. She began to undress.

"Yes, we've ended up in the same English classes a few times over the past years. We're both seniors now, and of course, when the famous Heisman candidate asked me out, I had to say 'yes.' Though it's too bad he's out of the running now."

Jordan frowned. "It's too bad he got hurt, yeah. And is your family from here, or are you from out of state?" Jordan asked.

Ella's mouth dropped open. "Oh, NO, I'm not from out of state. My father is Hartwell Penn."

Jordan wrinkled up her nose. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm out of touch. So, who is Hartwell Penn? Should I know who that is?"

Ella made a gesture of distaste. "My father is the founder and CEO of the StarPower marketing firm. Everyone who is anyone knows who he is and wants to be his friend. He owns and operates marketing firms around the world. If you want to be someone, if you're accepted by one of my father's companies, you will be rich. He's a very important and influential man. He can make you or break you with the snap of his fingers."

"Oh! Well, that sounds dangerous," Jordan quipped.

Ella smiled. "He *is* dangerous. Not many people are dumb enough to cross him. But if he likes you, you're as good as gold."

"I see," Jordan said as she laid out her dress. She turned to Melody. "Mel, do you think I should change bras to the strapless?"

Melody smiled at Jordan's quick change of subject. "Well, which is more comfortable?"

"Hmm, the strapless always makes me feel like it's falling down. Maybe I'll stick with the one I have on." She smiled at Ella. "What do you think, Ella?"

She frowned. "How about no bra at all? I mean, your breasts aren't that big. No one will be able to tell you're not wearing a bra. Unless you want to wear a padded one to give your breasts more substance."

Jordan giggled at the veiled insult. "Oh, I love the idea of going

without. I think that's what I'll do." She took the black dress off the hanger and pulled it over her head. "Whaddya think, Mel?"

Melody smiled and looked her over. The dress was tight, sparkly and came to about mid-thigh. It had no sleeves, which is why Jordan had debated wearing a strapless bra. "I think you look very sexy. And Ella is right, you can't tell you're not wearing a bra. But you *can* tell you're an athlete. You look amazing."

"You're an athlete?" Ella asked.

Jordan tossed her hair back over her shoulder so she could get a better look at herself in the mirror. "I play softball at UCLA."

"Oh, I see. Well, that's nice."

"Isn't it though?" Jordan asked, her voice just on the edge of sarcasm.

Melody pressed her lips together to keep from laughing as she busied herself getting into her dress.

Ella looked around. "Looks like you two brought overnight bags with you."

Melody nodded as she slipped into her dress. "Yes, we're gonna come back here and stay the night because we're gonna go with the Kinos tomorrow to cut down Christmas trees at a tree farm."

Ella made a face. "How sweet." She smiled though as she eyed Melody. "Now that," Ella began, "is a gorgeous dress," she said to Melody.

Melody looked down at her cream-colored dress. It too was sparkly and tight and came to mid-thigh. But Melody's dress had little lace-capped sleeves and a square neckline, where Jordan's had more of a v-neckline and showed a little more skin. Melody's dress was overlaid in sparkling lace. She smiled at Ella. "Thank you. Mrs. Kino helped me pick it out."

Melody didn't bother to tell Ella that she'd picked it out of Miss Shelley's own closet.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door and Shelley Kino poked her head in. "Hello, girls," Shelley greeted with her sweet smile, as always. "Oh, my goodness, don't you look beautiful in your dresses." She turned to Ella. "Hello, you must be Ella. I'm Shelley Kino, it's so nice to meet you."

"Hello, Shelley. Nice to meet you too."

Jordan's and Melody's mouths both opened in surprise at the casual way Ella addressed Mrs. Kino.

Shelley only smiled. "I've actually met your mother and father," Shelley went on. "I didn't get to speak too much with your father, but your mom is a very nice lady."

"Thank you," Ella said shortly.

"Well, let's see your dress," Shelley said.

Ella unzipped her dress bag and almost reverently took out the dress and laid it gently on the bed.

"Oh my," Shelley said. "Isn't that just a beautiful dress."

It was a red dress that appeared to be trimmed in diamonds. It was strapless and had a plunging neckline and a tiny waist, then spread out into a full skirt that looked like it was very short. Jordan wondered how she was gonna be able to keep her underwear from showing.

"It's something all right," Jordan quipped.

Ella pulled the shoes out of the bottom of the dress bag. "And these are the cherry on the bottom," she said with a sly smile.

The girls all eyed the custom red satin heels with three straps laced together by a cord that would eventually tie around the ankle.

"Oh my, those are just lovely," Shelley said. She smiled. "Well, the guys are all here and waiting very patiently. JoJo got dressed and the three of them look so handsome. So, let's get you girls done. You have about forty-five minutes before the limo gets here. How are you wearing your hair?"

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Luke 6:31

"And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."

Chapter Three

December 6th, 8:00 PM, Friday Evening
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Lily."

Lily stopped clearing the buffet and turned to look at the two people who'd said her name. It was both Mr. and Mrs. Kino. The room had quieted when they'd spoken, and it seemed all waited to hear what the Kinos had to say.

Bree smiled at her husband. "You go ahead, Ricky."

He shook his head. "No, you go, sweetheart."

She nodded. "I was just gonna compliment you, Lily, on this fine dinner. I think Miss Maddie is probably so very proud of you."

"Oh, Mrs. Kino, thank you so much."

"And I was gonna say pretty much the same thing," Ricky added. "And also that we want you to know how grateful we are to you and the rest of our East Coast family, for such a fine farewell this evening."

"I'd like to add our family's thoughts to what you just said, Mr. Kino," another man said.

Everyone turned to him. He and his family were guests at the Inn. They and all the other guests at the Inn had been invited to eat earlier or attend the farewell dinner for the Kinos, and all had elected to attend the dinner.

The man gave a friendly smile. He had dark hair, was possibly Hispanic, and was there with his wife and three children. "My name is Sam Reyes. My family and I came here from Wisconsin to experience a southern country Christmas and so far you guys have not disappointed at all. We were delighted to find that we would be able to meet the Kinos today, and they too have not disappointed. My kids, too, wanted desperately to meet Gabe Tanner and Taylor Kino, and they have been very inspiring for our youngsters. But what I wanted to say is, this place, this Inn, this town, you people, you are special. You all have a spirit about you that is so inspiring and even motivating. And you, Miss Lily, I hear that you are responsible for the menu and that you are an exquisite chef. I'm looking at you and you can't be more than a teenager yourself."

Lily smiled. "I'll be twenty-three in a few weeks."

He nodded. "Well, still, that is so young and you are amazing. I don't think I've enjoyed a meal more."

"Well, then, I've accomplished my goal for the evening," Lily said

smoothly. “Thank you for the kind words.”

“Mr. Reyes,” Ricky said. “May I ask what you do?”

The man smiled. “I’m a criminal defense attorney in Milwaukee. Why?”

Ricky smiled. “Because you speak eloquently, and you’re not shy, and I was trying to guess what you do. I was thinking either an attorney or a politician, or maybe a television personality.”

The man’s wife chuckled. “I tell him all the time he should be on TV.”

The group laughed and some of the other guests began introducing themselves as Lily and her staff worked on clearing up the food and dishes. But Lily was told to sit and relax by both her bosses, Jodi Appel and Lisa Stewart. They told her that her job was over and she was clocked out, so she sat in a dining room chair and simply watched the interactions of all the amazing people surrounding her.

She admitted she was tired. She also was feeling a little— lost. Sighing, she tried to figure out where this feeling was coming from. She’d just been given huge compliments from a bunch of people. She should feel thrilled, and fulfilled and happy. So, why did she feel this heaviness? Allowing herself to relax a minute, she let her eyes roam over the current scene.

Near the giant fireplace that was open to both the dining room and the living room/lobby area, Ricky Kino knelt down in front of little Aralyn Stewart. He was smiling as he spoke to her and she nodded her head, apparently in answer to a question he asked her. He touched her nose in a playful way and Aralyn giggled and threw her arms around the man’s neck and hugged him. Lily’s eyes shifted to find Mrs. Kino, Breanna Adams, bouncing Lily’s baby sister Gentian in her arms, cooing at her and kissing her face. Lily’s own mother held Gentian’s twin, Isaiah, as she spoke to Mrs. Kino.

Lily looked around for Gabe and found him with Taylor by his side as usual. They were speaking with the three Reyes children. Also standing in that little group were Charlie and Matt Stewart and the newest member of the “east coast family,” sweet Hannah Brown. She looked a lot different than the first time Lily had seen her. She was actually a very pretty little girl. She had long, dark blond hair that was straight and whatever Aunt Jodi put on it made it smooth and shiny. Hannah had big brown eyes that appeared even bigger because she was very thin right now. Lily was sure Aunt Jodi would remedy that pretty quickly too.

Taylor put her arm around Hannah’s shoulder as she spoke to the guests and then Hannah smiled and nodded as she shook hands with the three kids. Lily’s eyes shifted to Charlie who also was apparently being introduced to everyone. He smiled and shook hands, and then glanced in Hannah’s direction. Lily smiled. Charlie Stewart was a lot like Gabe and

would be a strong ally for Hannah as she got used to a different life. Poor kid, she hadn't been told yet that her father had been found and that he doesn't want her. Lily's eyes filled as she thought about that. She couldn't even imagine not being wanted and loved by her own father.

Lily went back to examining her own strange feelings as the cacophony of sound, laughter and conversations and hugs and prayers surrounded her. She had no right to feel down. She was about the most blessed girl in the world. She had wonderful parents, wonderful siblings, wonderful friends and a wonderful career path ahead of her. If she needed anything in the world, her father would provide it for her. What in the world was wrong with her? She needed some alone time to think and pray and consider things. She needed quiet time where she could hear herself think and more importantly, hear the Lord speak to her.

She stood and made her way across the lobby to the front desk and the large wall of pegs that held everyone's coats and hats. She found her coat and put it on, then pulled her scarf around her neck and then pulled her knit cap over her head, tucking her long blond hair back behind her ears.

Checking her coat pocket to make sure her keys were still there, she opened one of the double doors to the Inn and started to step out, but was stopped by a strong hand grabbing her wrist. She looked up, startled.

"Gabe?" She drew a breath and gave a soft laugh. "You scared me."

He smiled kindly. "Where're ya going?"

"Just out."

"Out where? Out on the porch?"

She sighed. "No, I'm going out for a drive. I need some alone time."

He frowned and shook his head. "Alone?"

"Yes."

"This time of night?"

"It's not that late, and yes, this time of night."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"No, you can't go out alone for a drive this time of night."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Gabriel Tanner, I don't know who you think you are, but I don't need your permission." She snatched her arm out of his grasp.

He sighed. "Lily, did you tell Dad you were going out alone?"

"No. He doesn't keep that close of tabs on me. Besides, he looked to be having a serious discussion with Uncle John."

"He would want to know, Lily. I'm sure of it."

"He can call me when he's done talking."

"Lily, you're not going."

She rolled her eyes and tried to step outside.

He grabbed her wrist again. "Look, I know I'm just your little

brother, but I'm bigger and stronger than you and I'm not letting you leave."

She tried to jerk her arm away again, but he held fast. "Gabe, you'd better let go," she said, this time her voice raised as her temper came through.

"Go ask Dad, or Mom, but I'm not letting you go."

"What's goin' on here?"

They both turned at the deep voice of their father. They looked up at him, with Ricky Kino standing right next to him.

Gabe sighed and backed away.

"Close the door," Keegan said softly.

Lily closed the door and looked up defiantly at her father.

"So? Anyone wanna fill me in?" Keegan asked.

Gabe looked at Lily and nodded. "Go ahead, tell him what you intended to do," he said sharply.

Lily's face fell and Gabe felt immediately sorry for being so harsh.

"I, uh," Lily began. She cleared her throat and went on. "I was gonna go out for a drive. I needed some alone time to clear my head and talk to God. I just needed to be alone."

Keegan glanced at Gabe and realized he'd been trying to protect Lily. He nodded at her. "Okay, sweetheart, I get that you need some alone time, but it's dark and late. Could I maybe escort you?"

"No, Daddy. I don't want to pull you away from Mom and the babies. You have so much to do and so many to look after and I didn't want to bother you, so, no. I won't be able to concentrate with you there."

"Well," Gabe began, "then, could *I* escort you?"

She glared at him. "No. It's your last night with Taylor so go be with her. Besides, I'm pretty mad at you right now and I don't want to be around you."

Gabe's eyes registered the hurt as his mouth pressed into a tight line.

Before Keegan could say anything Ricky jumped in. "How about me? I mean, I'm not part of your immediate family, so, it would be like practically a stranger escorting you and looking after you. I promise I won't speak to you, or distract you in any way. You can go where you want. You drive. I'll just sit silently beside you and like, pray or meditate or something while you do your thing, and then your dad and your brother will know that you're safe with me." He glanced at Keegan. "You would know that, right?"

Keegan smiled. "Of course."

Lily rolled her eyes but then nodded her head. "Fine."

"Good. Let me grab my coat and tell Bree and I'll meet you out front."

Lily slipped out the door while Ricky went to speak to his wife. Keegan glanced at Gabe, who seemed pretty troubled. "You okay?"

Gabe shrugged. “I was just trying to protect her. I didn’t think you’d want her out driving alone at night, but she said you would be okay with it. I told her to talk to you, but she wouldn’t.”

Keegan sighed. “Okay. We’ll talk about this when we get home. There are ways to handle things that won’t cause such a confrontation. Go say goodbye to everyone. It’s about time for me to get my family home.”

Gabe nodded and went to find Taylor. “Are you still coming to spend the night at my house?”

Taylor looked up at him, her brow furrowing. “Of course. What’s wrong? Don’t you want me there?”

“Of course I do. I need you there.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “I just had a little argument with Lily and she’s pretty mad at me.” He shrugged. “She’s been mad at me before and it never really bothered me. For some reason, this time, it does.”

“What did you argue about?”

“Let’s talk about it later. Dad says to say our goodbyes and head on over to the house.”

Taylor nodded and immediately started making her rounds to say her goodbyes to Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, and Laynah and Matt, and the two sweet new babies, then to Mr. and Mrs. Appel. She also said goodbye to some of the Inn’s guests and wished them a very merry Christmas. Finally she found Hannah standing off to the side talking to Charlie Stewart.

She put her arm around Hannah. “So, girl, I guess this is goodbye, but only for now,” she added quickly when she saw Hannah frown.

“Why only for now?” Hannah asked.

“Because, like, I can guarantee that as soon as school is out either I’ll be making a trip here to visit or you’ll be coming to Cali to visit because my brother and Jordan are getting married sometime around then.”

“Oh. That sounds like fun.”

“Believe me, it will be. And I’m just gonna miss you so much, Hannah, but Miss Jodi said she was gonna get your phone for you tomorrow, so as soon as you get it, call me. Or FaceTime me.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” Hannah said.

“I’ll show you,” Charlie said quickly.

Taylor smiled at him. “Charlie, you’re the best.”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say,” he quipped. He looked at Hannah. “So, tomorrow is Saturday, which means no school. Would you like to come down in the morning and help me with the puppies?”

Hannah smiled shyly. “Okay. So, I just go out the gate and turn right, right?”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, but, I’ll come and get you.”

“Oh, do you drive?”

“Only around the ranch. I’m not old enough to drive yet. But I told

Laynah I'd run Santana for her, so, I'll come get you on a horse."

Her eyes opened wide.

"It's okay. It's fun, and I've been riding horses since I was, like, four, so I'm really good at it."

Gabe nodded. "He is really good on a horse. You'll have fun."

Hannah smiled. "Okay, but I have to ask Miss Jodi."

Charlie smiled. "She'll say 'yes'."

"I'm so glad you two are becoming friends," Taylor added.

Hannah nodded shyly. "I haven't had any friends for a long time. I'm glad I get to stay here and don't have to go back to my father."

Taylor's mouth dropped open. "They told you?"

"Told me what?"

"That your father said he didn't want you?" Taylor asked.

Hannah frowned. "Oh. No. I, uh, I didn't know that."

Taylor's eyes immediately registered remorse and filled with tears. "Oh, Hannah, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I thought you were saying you knew about that. I shouldn't have blabbed that. I'm so sorry." She grabbed her and hugged her hard.

Hannah patted Taylor's back. "It's okay. Don't cry, Taylor. It's okay."

Gabe sighed. "Hannah, if you didn't know that, then why did you say you didn't have to go back to be with your father?"

"Oh, because I heard Miss Jodi and Mr. John talking. I heard them say I didn't have to go back and they were very happy that I was gonna get to stay with them. They didn't say he didn't want me. So, like, what do you know? Go ahead and tell me. You don't have to worry about my feelings being hurt or stuff like that. Please, tell me what you know."

It was Charlie who spoke up. "They found your dad and spoke to him. He has a new wife and two kids. Like, little kids. And he thinks it would be better for his new family to not have someone from his old family around to make trouble."

Hannah sighed, her mouth turned down in a pout as she thought. Finally, she looked up. "Make trouble, huh? Well, you know what? I think he's right. I think it would be better for him *and* for me. I don't remember much about my dad. I know he and mom fought a lot. But I don't really remember him spending time with me, or like, even talking to me and stuff. So, you know what? I'm glad he doesn't want me, because I don't want him either, and I'm really glad I get to stay here with the Appels and with all of you people who've been so good to me. I just wish someone could give my father a message for me."

"What message?" Gabe asked. "I'll make sure he gets it."

Hannah made a savage face. "You tell him that I'm glad he doesn't want me, cuz I don't want him, and that I hope he's a better father to his new children than he was to me. So there," she said as her voice broke

with emotion.

Taylor threw her arms around the girl. “Oh sweetie. You are a fierce warrior. You fit in with us so perfectly.”

Gabe and Charlie smiled and nodded. She did fit in perfectly. Still, Gabe thought, he needed to talk to the Appels. Because he thought that eventually, Hannah was gonna need to forgive her father. If she doesn’t, there will be a bitterness inside of her that will hurt her. It will be a darkness that will try to push away the light. For that matter, they all needed to find forgiveness.

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December 6th, 9:30 PM, Friday Night

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

“Gabe,” Keegan began as he bounced a baby boy in his arms. “I’ll see you in my office after family prayer. Everyone, please meet at the bottom of the stairs for prayer, and then you can all head up to bed. It’s been a long day.”

They gathered at the base of the stairs and stood in a circle, holding hands with those who weren’t holding a baby.

“Taylor, will you honor us with a prayer since we won’t have the pleasure of having you around for a long time?” Keegan asked.

Taylor smiled and nodded. “I’d be honored to pray with this family.” She closed her eyes. “Dear Father, hey, it’s me and the Tanner family. Well, like, we’re missing a few. Lily is out talking to You right now somewhere else, and Heather and Nolan aren’t here right now either. But Father, wherever the members of this family are, we ask Your blessing of protection on them. Also healing if anyone is in need of it. Father, we want to tell You how grateful we are for all that we have, and *I’m* so grateful for these people right here. You have blessed us with so much and with each other and I pray that whatever any person here is struggling with, that You will help them find a way. And please bless Hannah and help her to feel your love and peace. We love You. We’re so grateful for the gift of Your Son. So grateful. Be with us always, in Jesus’ mighty name we pray, amen.”

“Amen,” the family said and started saying goodnight to each other.

Gabe smiled at Taylor. “Well done, babe. So, uh, I have to go speak to Dad in his office for a few minutes. When I’m done, I’ll come up and find you to say goodnight properly.”

Taylor smiled and sighed.

“Not sure how *proper* that will be,” Rose quipped as she went by.

Taylor giggled.

Gabe smirked. “Probably about as proper as what you said to Jericho before you left the hospital today.”

“In your dreams,” Rose said from the top of the stairs.

“Gabe,” Daisy said, grabbing his attention. “Did you fight with

Lily?"

"We argued a little. I have to go to Dad's office about it."

"Oh, then it must've been bad, huh?"

He shrugged. "Yep. I'm a jerk and I know it. How's that?"

"Oh, bro, I'm sure that's not it. Well, goodnight, you two," she said as she went up the stairs.

"Night," Taylor said softly.

Gabe turned Taylor toward the steps. "Go. I'll be up soon."

"Hurry," she said as she trotted up the steps.

Gabe turned and headed to the office and poked his head in. His father wasn't there yet because he'd helped his mom get the little ones upstairs, so he slipped into the hot seat and waited. He glanced over the desk where his father had been working from almost exclusively since his mom became pregnant. He wondered when his father would be asked to go back to the office. His office, though, *had* been the office of the head of the Southeast Division of Ameritech. His father was *now* the Eastern Division Chief Director. Would he have to start traveling? It was strange that Gabe hadn't even asked about that. He'd been so focused on all the other things that were happening. He stood as his father walked into the office.

Keegan smiled. "At ease, Marine," he joked.

Gabe shrugged and sat back down.

"So, Gabe, let's get to it. Do you know why I called you in here?"

Gabe grinned. "I'm supposed to say that I don't, right?"

Keegan chuckled. "That's only when a cop asks if you know why he pulled you over."

"Okay, so, then, I'm guessing you called me in here to yell at me about upsetting Lily?"

Keegan's brows rose. "Yell at you? Not at all. Tell me exactly what happened between you and Lily," he said.

Gabe went on to tell the entire conversation and when he finished, Keegan nodded. "So, you were absolutely right, I wouldn't want her to go out at night alone to aimlessly drive around. And son, you actually did the right thing, up to a point. You stopped her by grabbing her arm. If that was just to act quickly and get her attention without allowing us all to hear, I'm gonna call that good. You asked her what she was up to. Good. You suggested she talk to me. Good. You told her 'no.' Not so good. That's a power play, Gabe, and it's not gonna sit well with anyone, female or male. You threatened her physically..."

"Wait, what? I didn't threaten her. I wouldn't do that."

"Did you, or did you not say you were younger but bigger and stronger?"

"Well, yes."

"What does that imply? What does bigger and stronger have to do

with anything unless you're suggesting to her that you will use your strength to keep her from leaving?"

Gabe nodded and lowered his head, then looked back up. "Dad— I'm a guy. Am I supposed to protect the females in my life or not?"

"Yes, you are. But not by overpowering her, unless of course, she was in immediate danger— which she wasn't. You did good by trying to get her to go and speak with me."

"Yeah, and that didn't work," he complained.

"And that is when you should've offered to escort her. Not after you had her all riled up."

"So, I have to walk on eggshells to make sure I don't upset someone when I'm just trying to protect them?"

"Like I said, no, if there is immediate danger. But there was no immediate danger, so yes, part of having a good relationship with someone is finding a way to communicate fairly, even gently. It takes effort. You can call it walking on eggshells if you want, but it's a good thing to learn. I mean, Gabe, you could've simply asked her why she needed to be alone, or asked if there was something you could do to help her. You didn't have to resort to physical restraint."

Gabe blew out a breath.

"I feel a resistance to what I'm trying to teach you, son. Is there more to this than you're telling me?" Keegan asked.

Gabe shrugged. "I don't know. It's just that, I mean, Mrs. Davis, when we went to the lake house last spring, she wanted to be alone too. She just wanted to walk alone. I offered to go with her, me and the boys, but she wanted to be alone. I shouldn't have let her, no matter what. I knew it was dangerous. I had an immediate feeling that she shouldn't go, but I didn't argue and she could've been hurt bad. I had that same feeling tonight. You know what happened to Mrs. Davis. I was not gonna let anything happen to Lily, like it or not."

Keegan nodded. "I appreciate that, son. I'm proud of you for that. You weren't wrong and I see where the resistance is coming from. I'm just telling you that there are different ways to handle different situations. Do you understand what I'm trying to get across?"

Gabe nodded and sighed. "Well, I think so. I guess it's a 'catch more flies with honey' kind of thing?"

"Correct. So now, let's go a step further, and for the sake of your future marriage, let's narrow this down to a relationship between a husband and wife. What will you do if Taylor disobeys you? Will you physically restrain her? Or, will you speak softly to her and reason together with her?"

Gabe nodded. "The second one."

"Good. That shows that you not only love her, but respect her. Your mother and I, we're partners in the decision-making department. Yes, I

can overrule her if necessary. And she can certainly overrule me, though, she's so protective of me and so supportive of me, I doubt she'd do that. She always has my back. But if she did think she needed to overrule me, she would do it in a respectful way. And so would I. We are one unit. One in purpose. We work together. Always. Without anger. Without power plays." He stopped talking and sat silently. He could drone on and on about this, but he'd learned, in the interest of time and energy, that there was a time to stop. He'd made his point. He'd learned to make his little talks with his children short and to the point.

Gabe finally nodded. "Sorry, Dad, to cause trouble. I simply love my sister so much, I couldn't bear for anything to happen to her."

"That's good to hear. And I realize, Gabe, that she said hurtful things to you when you were only trying to do your job and protect her. Don't worry though, because she and I have an appointment in the morning."

Gabe sighed. "Well, don't go too hard on her, Dad. I mean, obviously, something is bothering her."

Keegan smiled at the compassion being shown. "Yes, I agree with you. Something is bothering her. But don't worry. We'll get to the bottom of it with the good Lord's help."

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Gabe smiled as he looked Taylor over. She wore white flannel pajamas, and her hair was back in a braid. Her face was scrubbed clean of any makeup. He wondered why she even wore it, because she looked the same with or without it— beautiful. She stood in front of him, smiling her gorgeous smile.

"You look like an angel," he said softly.

She giggled. "I'm not thinking very angelic thoughts."

He nodded. "Me neither."

"Will you hold me?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah," he said with a grin. He took her in his arms and held her tight against him. "Umm, your hair smells really good."

She sighed. "You smell really good too."

He lifted her chin and kissed her softly. "Aw, Taylor, I'm gonna miss you so much. One day, baby. One day, we won't have to say goodbye."

"Or even goodnight," she whispered.

"Or even goodnight," he agreed as he lifted her into his arms.

He carried her to his bed and laid her down. "I promised my father I wouldn't stay up here with you. But, well, you know."

She giggled. "What do I know?"

"You know you can come down to the den and cuddle with me if you wake up in the middle of the night and are feeling lonely."

"I will." Her brow wrinkled.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering why you're sleeping on the sofa in the den when there's a guest room up here that's closer to me."

"Well, that's one of the reasons. It is closer and Mom and Dad think with you here, it would be too easy for us to sneak into each other's room."

"Well, they're right about that, because that's what we do at my house."

He nodded. "And the other reason is because my grandparents are gonna come spend Christmas here and my mom has already changed the bedding and I don't want to make her have to do it again."

Taylor smiled. "That's sweet, but ya know, YOU could change it yourself."

Gabe grinned and shrugged. "I'll just sleep on the couch."

She giggled.

He knelt beside the bed and kissed her again. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For just being you. For existing. For your faith and the love in your heart and for loving me."

"That part is easy," she whispered.

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December 6th, Friday Night

City Park, Pine Forest, Georgia

Ricky sat in the car watching the beautiful young Lily as she wandered around the small city park that was beside the community center. She stopped and settled in a swing, her head down, looking at her feet as she scrubbed them over the red rubber mulch beneath. She was troubled, he thought. Earlier tonight, he and Bree had lavished compliments on her about her cooking talents. She was quite a chef. Instead of making her happy, it seemed to make her sad. He wondered what was going through her head.

He'd stepped in to help Keegan out and to get Gabe off the hook. He'd been surprised when Lily took him up on his offer. He turned his head when some motion down the street caught his eye. Someone, a man, was walking his dog, but he crossed the side street and headed away from Main Street. Just for good measure, Ricky got out of the car and stood in front of it, leaning against the hood.

Pine Forest was not a quiet, sleepy little town. It was Friday night and cars cruised up and down Main Street. Music from *Joe's* drifted out to him. *Joe's Bar and Grill* was just up the street on Main, a real hub of the town. Also farther north on Main Street was *Sally's Steakhouse*, and a little farther, the *Dairy Queen*. All of those establishments always seemed to be busy. One street west, on College Street, were both the *Dillon House*, a fine-dining restaurant, and *The Ritz*, a live entertainment venue run by Lisa Stewart's half sister, Megan. Right next to *The Ritz,*

across from the courthouse, would eventually be the new *Pine Forest Country Inn and Suites.* The town was growing. West of the high school, about five miles out, was a large new complex that consisted of many free-standing establishments, including a large movie theater, a sporting goods store, a couple of different nationwide department stores, a furniture store and some eateries.

He'd been told that the people of Pine Forest weren't worried a bit about people losing interest in their downtown area, thanks to Mayor Bradbury and his push to keep Pine Forest fresh, easily accessible, and interesting with its old-fashioned Hallmark-movie appeal. It was the best of both worlds and the mayor was very good at walking the thin line between their original appeal and making things modern and up-to-date. Between him and the town council, they were on it.

Once the new Inn opened and brought in more people hungry for the small-town vibe, it would increase the town's income and help support the citizens who made the town what it was—a treasure.

Ricky looked up as Lily made her way out of the little park and toward him. She smiled as she approached, but it was obvious she'd been crying.

He nodded. "I know I promised not to interfere, but are you okay, sweetie?"

She shrugged. "Mr. Kino, do you ever feel like God's not listening?"

He smiled. "Sure. Everyone feels that way sometimes. I wonder if He's busy and just doesn't have time for me and my little life. But that's the enemy talking. Don't listen to him."

"Okay, then why won't He speak to me?"

"Sometimes our Father is quiet while He gives us time to think things through, to contemplate every side of a problem. Don't lose faith or get angry with Him for doing what He best knows how to do, which is to teach us and hone us and make us strong. Trust Him. There have been so many times that I questioned Him, and finally, when everything was over, I could see His wisdom in allowing things to unfold exactly as they did. He's really smart. Trust Him."

She nodded as she thought that over, then turned abruptly and walked about twenty feet down the sidewalk to look up at an old building that stood next to the park. She looked back at Ricky and smiled. "Mr. Kino, what do you think about this building?"

Ricky walked over to join her and looked up. It was a charming old brick building, maybe three stories tall. It looked like it may have once been some rich founder's home. He nodded. "What do I think? Well, I think it looks like it was probably once a very nice place, probably someone's home, once upon a time. It has a lot of charm, that means it has a lot of potential. Why?"

She shrugged. "I've had my eye on this building since I was little,

maybe even in kindergarten. When I was like, eight or ten, the kids at school all thought it looked haunted, but for some reason, I've always been drawn to it. I looked into the history of the building with the help of Mrs. Epps at the library and she said this building at one time was actually the town library. And after that it was a general store where the owner of the store lived on the second floor and the top attic floor was rented out to the help. But you're right, originally, this was a home, built by the very first mayor of this town. His name was Knox Sawyer. He had a wife named Birdie and eleven children."

"Wow. Do you know what year it was built?"

"1827," she said quickly.

"Almost two hundred years old. Very cool."

"I think so too. It's so interesting to me. And for some reason, I just love this house. But it does have a sad story."

Ricky smiled. "Tell me."

"Well, the town was established in 1827. Before that, Knox Sawyer grew up on a small farm in Pine County. He went away to school so he could make something of himself. He came back and married his childhood sweetheart, Birdie. Mrs. Epps says her real name might have been Bernice, but she couldn't find anything on her except her death certificate which only said Birdie Sawyer. He built this house for her in 1827 and they filled it with children. Six sons and five daughters. Apparently, Knox Sawyer was very charismatic and everyone liked him. They made him mayor because he had all kinds of plans to make the town big and rich." She smiled. "Obviously that didn't happen. Mrs. Epps said they were probably very wealthy. He had all kinds of entrepreneurial-type ventures. Things like a printing press, to make a town newspaper and he had some well-to-do friends who donated money for a library filled with books. He thought it would help to educate the poor people of the town. He opened an apothecary and talked some of his friends into coming here and helping to turn the little field school into a decent learning facility."

Ricky nodded. "Sounds like he had all kinds of great ideas."

She nodded and sighed. "Yes. And here, in this house, the Sawyers had a lot of parties. They were very happy. But then the baby girl, who was only one, and the middle daughter, who was seven, contracted yellow fever and they both died. Birdie was so distraught after losing her babies that she simply wasted away, and a year later, she too died. After that, Knox was inconsolable. He shut himself away, and he drank a lot. He depended on his three remaining daughters to help raise the family and when one of them fell in love and wanted to marry and leave her father, he wouldn't allow it and she was so distraught over that, she ended up killing herself."

Ricky frowned, but remained silent. Lily shook her head and stopped to wipe a tear from her eye. "After that, a yellow fever epidemic swept

through, and the other two girls and two boys, all but his four eldest sons, died and not long after that, Knox also died. Some say he died of a broken heart, though there is no cause listed on the death certificate. Anyway, his four boys sold the home and left town and never came back, or so they say."

She sniffed and Ricky held out his arms. She allowed him to hold her and comfort her. "Sweet girl," he said softly. "It shows how much love there is in your heart to feel the loss of these people so much." He sighed. "You know, there are a lot of sad stories in this world."

She sniffed. "Yes, I know, but for some reason, this one just hurts so bad. I look at this old building and imagine all the joy, and then all the sorrow."

"I understand," he comforted. "So, Lily, ya know, us men, when someone is hurting, or we see a problem, we try to fix it."

She gave a soft laugh and pulled away so she could see his face. "I know. Sometimes it makes my mom mad. She says she just wanted my dad to listen and understand and not try to tell her how to fix it."

He laughed. "I'm sure. That's how it usually goes. So, anyway, is this one of those times when you'd rather have me just listen to you?"

She sighed and shrugged. "I guess. I mean, how can you possibly fix this? It's done. It's history."

"Well, what good is learning *about* history if we can't learn *from* it, right? I mean, the Bible is history, right?"

She nodded. "Good point. Okay, I'm listening. Go ahead and fix it."

He chuckled. "Good. Well, let's see, how do I start?" He nodded. "Okay, so, for a long time, Knox and Birdie Sawyer were happy, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"What made them happy?"

She shrugged. "Each other I guess. I mean, their love for one another."

"Yes, each other, their love for each other, and for their children. Maybe also their prestige as the family of the mayor?"

She nodded. "Maybe."

"And getting to live in this beautiful home, and having parties, which meant they had money to spend, so they were prosperous. So, we wonder how it all went so wrong. And we start looking at the deaths as the reason, but I submit to you that the reason was something else. Those things we just named, even family love, those were *things* that made them happy. And we can't base our joy, our happiness, on things, not even on worthy things, like our spouses and our children. Lily, what is the basis of all happiness?"

"God."

"Right, but that short answer seems like a pat answer, doesn't it? It sounds like just a quick answer we can say without much thought. But the

longer, more thoughtful answer is, our *connection* to God, our knowledge that He truly exists, and our relationship with Him, and the knowledge that life is eternal, *that* is what brings us joy. Our joy cannot depend on *things* or on our *earthly circumstances*. When we have that connection to God, we can see that everything else is only a temporary thing. Our lives here, our homes, our cars, etcetera, those are only a drop in the bucket of life. When we have built a relationship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, then we understand how most things don't mean much of anything in the grand scale of things. That knowledge takes away all fear of death or separation. When we have that connection, we are comforted. God sends His Holy Spirit to give us peace and understanding and the sting of death is no more." He sighed, shook his head as he remembered the past year.

"My family—actually, *our* families, both yours and mine—we went through so much this past year with my dad and your brother and it taught us so much about the real truth that our lives are eternal. We can't simply brush that lesson aside. Thank goodness for what God taught both our families.

"Now, we can't really know what was in Knox and Birdie's hearts, but it makes me wonder if the Sawyer family didn't truly understand the realness of God. They may have been Christians, maybe not. We don't know, and I don't want to judge their faith. It sounds to me like when the children died, Birdie could not see beyond her broken heart and beyond this earth life. And then when Birdie died, Knox could not see beyond losing her. Their pain was immense.

"Before the death and pain they were happy. I surmise that possibly that happiness came from their earthly circumstances: Family, home, wealth, prestige. Then tragedy struck and sorrow became their whole world. Maybe they forgot about God's promise and couldn't find their way out of the pain to remember that death was not the end. When you have God in your life first and foremost, and you habitually start each day with Him, it makes it much easier to remember, even through the pain. God takes the pain away, death loses its sting, because we remember that life is eternal.

"That can happen to Christians too. We are all susceptible. I admit, I was torn apart when I thought my father had died. It was gonna be hard. I was gonna miss him. It was gonna hurt for a long time. I was desperate not to lose him. But, Lily, I also knew I would see him again. I will probably lose him someday, and I will have to apply what I've learned. Life is eternal. God is real. Jesus really existed, died and rose from the grave. We have to walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

"The Sawyers, I think, probably didn't have that relationship built with the Lord, and when the 'things' they had were taken away, it took away their basis for happiness. Once they were down and depressed, the

enemy was able to get into their heads and destroy them. Knox began drinking, which is poisonous to the mind, body and spirit and puts large cracks in our armor. People don't understand just how bad it is. There's a reason alcohol is legal and easy to obtain. Satan is very good at what he does. He jumps at the chance of using trauma to get into our heads and destroy. That's just what he does."

Ricky stopped, shook his head and went on. "So, how do we fix it? Well, what happens to the Sawyers now is between them and God, so we can't fix that. Still, the lesson is a good one, and we can learn from it. Hone that relationship with Jesus. Make it strong. Show faith and trust, even when you might think He's not listening. Live upright and nobly and holy the best you can. You will be happy, no matter what you do or don't have, when you have that closeness with Jesus. He gives you peace."

She smiled. "You sound like my dad."

Ricky smiled and nodded. "Your dad is a great man. I have so much love, honor and respect for him."

"Me too, but he's so busy with mom and the babies and I didn't want to bother him with how I'm feeling."

Ricky shook his head. "Believe me, your father *wants* you to bother him. He wants to be there for you no matter what else he has going on."

She nodded. "Of course, you're right."

He eyed the girl. "So, even though I just encouraged you to speak with your father, I can't help but want to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"It seemed you got sad after Bree and I complimented you on the meal. Did we say something that upset you?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! No, of course not. I'm so sorry I made you feel that way. It's just that..." She trailed off.

"Go ahead, sweetie, it's just that...what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what direction to take. I mean, I just graduated from culinary school, and I love to cook. But it doesn't feel right yet. Like something's missing."

"Okay. Can you pinpoint what you think might be missing?"

She sighed. "I mean, my sisters and my brother, they've been my everything. I love cooking for them. I love helping Aunt Jodi and Aunt Lisa with the Inn, but I don't think that's what I want to do."

Ricky remained silent.

"I mean," Lily went on. "Heather is gonna get married and help Nolan run a ranch. Violet is probably gonna marry CJ and continue to teach children music at the Center. Rose is totally in love with Jericho, and she is also totally in love with helping people at the Center and, I might add, she's really good at what she's doing there."

Ricky nodded. "I agree."

"And then there's Daisy, my twin, who, I mean, the way she's

talking, she is falling for Brody Smith and he's gonna go pro and she'll go wherever he goes. That's gonna be hard on me, because we're very close. And then what? Here I am, with nobody, not knowing what to do."

Ricky smiled because it was so obvious what was really bothering her. "And...?" he prodded. "You don't want to stay running the kitchen at the Inn, but you are interested in this old house?"

She nodded. Then shrugged. "I guess."

"But there's more?"

She shrugged.

He smiled kindly. "May I help you put some things into words?"

"If you think you can."

"Oh, I can. Lily, sweet girl, all of your sisters have someone in their lives, someone they may marry. So far, you don't have anyone. Not anyone special. Am I right?"

She nodded. "Yes, and thanks so much for rubbing that in." Lily had gone out with Micah Ferguson, one of Jericho's guys, a few times, but that hadn't turned into anything special.

"Lily, I'm pretty sure that God has a plan for your life, and more than likely that plan includes a special someone for you to marry and create a family with."

"But what if that's not in the plan?"

"Are you praying to Him and asking Him for what YOU want? Or are you praying to Him and asking Him what He wants for you?"

She looked down. "I guess I'm praying for what I want."

"If you only want to do His will for you, then you can't go wrong. But this is a lesson you'll have to learn. Ask Him again, ask Him what He wants you to do."

"Well, I sort of have done that too."

"And what do you feel?"

"I keep seeing this house in my head. I thought maybe I'm supposed to buy this house and make something of it. Make it a happy place again. It's been sitting empty for a long time now. I was thinking I could get my Dad's help to buy it, and then work at the Inn until I've saved enough money to refurbish it and maybe turn it into a little restaurant."

"Interesting. What kind of restaurant?"

"I don't know. Something homey, but not cheap stuff. Something really good and good for you, and maybe even a place where people will come to dine and be uplifted in some way. Maybe I could even sing for them in the evenings or something like that. Give it a nice vibe."

"You like to sing? I didn't know that."

She nodded her head. "I love to sing. My sisters say I sound just like Mom, but I'm a little shy. Actually, Daisy and I both sing and we're both shy, so that doesn't help because we don't go around telling people that we sing. We don't have enough confidence to do that. But, if someone

were to ask us to sing, we'd do it. We sing at church sometimes, in the choir."

"Well now, I don't suppose I could get you to sing for me?"

She giggled. "No, not here in the middle of the street."

He nodded. "I understand. Well then, Lily, my advice to you is to get down on your knees and ask God what YOU can do for HIM. He'll show you. Keep your eyes and heart open. And don't be sad. You are a special young lady, that's for sure. And most of all, Lily, talk to your father and mother and tell them how you feel. Tell them what we discussed tonight. Tell them what's in your heart. If you had a child, you'd want that child to come to you and tell you anything they were thinking. Right?"

She nodded. "Yes. I would. As a matter of fact, I do have a child, I mean, my baby sister, Iris, and I always tell her to come and tell me when she's sad or happy and we can talk about it."

He nodded. "There, you do understand. So, talk to your dad, who is probably worried about you right now. Do it soon."

She smiled. "I will. I promise."

"Good. Now, it's cold out here. Let's get you home."

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Philippians 1:6

"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Chapter Four

December 6th 6:15 Friday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Three handsome young men stood at the bottom of the large staircase as their dates came slowly down the stairs. Young Eric smiled at Jordan, who was the first to come down, as he realized she was gripping the railing very tightly to make sure she didn't mess up her ankle with a fall in the black heels she wore. His eyes traveled over her and then met hers.

"Babe," he said softly. "You look beautiful, but you're gonna have to go back upstairs and change."

She smiled. "Why?"

"I don't want a bunch of guys hitting on you."

She grinned. "Well, you shoulda thought about that when you told me to get all dressed up."

She made it down and he placed her coat around her shoulders. The coat actually belonged to his mother, who'd helped him during a video call to find the right coat for a slinky black dress. He turned her around, tilted up her chin and kissed her softly. "Lord, I love you."

Jordan closed her eyes, feeling such love and gratitude for the guy who loved her. How lucky was she? No, she corrected her thoughts. How blessed?

Right behind Jordan was Melody. Logan stepped forward to take her hand as she came down the last few steps. "Mel, you look amazing. I don't deserve this."

She giggled. "Thanks, Logan. You're looking pretty sharp yourself."

He kissed her quickly and then placed the soft faux fur wrap around her shoulders, compliments of his grandmother.

They moved out of the way to allow Ella to make her way down. She'd stopped several steps up. Jordan and Melody knew she did that to make a grand entrance. They tried very hard not to roll their eyes. They all looked up at her. Young Eric and Logan had been curious to see who JoJo had graciously allowed to come with him, a last-minute decision. They smiled at her beauty. She was gorgeous. She smiled sweetly and slowly made her way down, her eyes meeting each of theirs briefly.

JoJo moved forward to take her hand. "Ella, you are beautiful," he said quietly.

She nodded and tossed her hair back over her shoulder. "Why, thank you, JoJo. You must introduce me to your family here," she immediately

demanded.

He nodded. “Ella Penn, please meet my brother, Logan...” He stopped and waited for Logan.

She didn’t extend her hand, so he merely nodded at her. “Ella,” Logan said softly. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, you too,” she uttered softly. “I’ve heard you sing. You’re good.”

“Thank you,” Logan said.

JoJo gestured toward young Eric. “And this is Eric Kino, the third,” JoJo said as he nodded at young Eric.

Eric smiled at the girl. “Ella, nice to meet you.”

“Very nice to meet you too,” she purred sweetly. “So, *you* are the star of the big movie.”

“Well, I don’t know about being the star, but I do play the lead character. No big deal.”

“Oh dear, Eric, you have a lot to learn,” she uttered.

“Do I?” he answered with a gleam in his eye. “It appears to me that we are alike in that manner.”

JoJo coughed and looked up at his cousin, amusement in his eyes.

Jordan and Melody smiled at JoJo. They both knew it was apparent to JoJo that he’d made a mistake in asking this girl to accompany him. They wondered why he had and decided they would find out later. For now, they would all make the best of the situation.

Eric senior came down the stairs to introduce himself. His presence was always calm and confident, and he immediately made them all feel better about the night to come. He told them to enjoy themselves, and reminded them to be quiet when they came home and to try to get some sleep because of the big Christmas tree excursion they were all going on the next day. He also reminded them that young Eric, Jordan, Melody and Logan were not yet of legal drinking age, which made Ella snicker. He cautioned them to be careful what they consumed and bid them a good night.

Once in the limo, Ella made her “need to learn” more evident.

“So, that man, he’s your grandfather, right?” she asked JoJo.

“Yes. He’s mine, Logan’s and young Eric’s grandfather.”

“He’s a trip, huh?”

“A trip? How so?”

“I mean, he told you to not drink and be careful about what you consume. He does realize we’re going to a Hollywood party, right?”

“Yes, he does, and that’s exactly why he cautioned us. Though he had no real reason to, because we all adhere to certain behaviors.”

“Oh really? What do you mean?”

JoJo blew out a breath as he tried to figure out a way to sum up his thoughts.

Jordan decided to jump in to help, not because he needed help, but because she really didn't like this girl. "He means we're all pretty straight-laced. The only one of us old enough to drink right now is JoJo and he usually doesn't engage in drinking very much at all. We are all pretty cautious about what poisons we put into our bodies."

"So, what you're saying is, you don't like to have fun?" Ella quipped.

"Oh, we have LOTS of fun."

"How?"

"Well, we dance, we eat good food, we listen to good music, we talk to people, learn about people."

"Eeww. I'm thinking you haven't been to many parties."

"Nope. Not too many," Jordan admitted.

Young Eric's eyes narrowed, hoping he wouldn't have to jump in to rescue his fiancée.

"Well, I don't think you'll be too interested in talking to people once we get there, except for maybe our host, Lucie Bardot."

Jordan smiled. "Well, ya never know until you do it. People are pretty interesting."

Ella shrugged. "Well, JoJo, I'm just gonna tell you right now, this queen intends to show off her gorgeous body in this gorgeous dress, get totally wasted, do a few lines and then maybe you and I can sneak away. How does that sound?"

Like a nightmare, he thought, but smiled instead. "Um, it sounds like an interesting night."

Ella turned to gaze at young Eric. "You can join us if you'd like."

Jordan rolled her eyes because the slight to her was so obvious.

Young Eric shook his head. "No thanks."

She grinned. "I was just kidding, anyway. So, tell me how it was to do a movie with Lucie. Isn't she the greatest?"

"She is really good, and played her part well. She's a pro for sure."

"Yeah, she is. And I bet the kissing scenes weren't bad either."

He sighed as he glanced at Jordan. "Well, there was only one kissing scene, and we are professionals, and she made a somewhat uncomfortable thing much easier to do."

"How many times did you have to do the scene?"

"A few times."

"I can't wait to see the movie. What about you, Jordan?"

"I'm looking forward to it."

"How does it make you feel to know your fiancé is kissing other women?"

"To be honest, I don't really like it. But I would never hold him back. I understand there are no feelings behind it like there are when he kisses me."

"That's correct," young Eric said quickly.

"Oooh how intriguing. I bet he's an amazing kisser," Ella purred.

Jordan shrugged. "You'll never know."

Melody couldn't help the burst of laughter that came from her lips. All three guys chuckled.

It took over an hour to finally arrive at *Rico's*. They walked into the dimly lit building. The place was full. The music was loud. They deposited their coats and made their way through the crowds across the front of the large room. The music stopped and Lucie Bardot, smiling prettily in her silvery, barely-there dress, made her way toward them, her entourage behind her and her arms open wide.

"Finally," she said loudly. "Here's our star! Eric Kino, my hunky man, you look good enough to eat. You certainly clean up nicely. I'm so used to seeing you in fatigues and scratches and fake blood. Just look at you," she said as she came right up to him, put her hands on either side of his face and planted a kiss right on his mouth.

He gripped both of her upper arms in his hands and firmly pushed her away. He looked right into her eyes, his brows raised. "Stop it, Lucie. Right now and I mean it."

She pouted cutely as she used her thumbs to try to wipe the bright red lipstick from his lips. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I overstep my bounds?" she asked as she gave a soft laugh.

He firmly took her hands away from his face. "You did, and you need to stop."

"Or what?" she asked cutely.

He nodded. "Or—my cousins, my fiancée," he stressed, "and I will turn around and walk right out that door. And you know I will."

She frowned. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Really. Don't be mad. I simply needed the photo op." She looked past him. "So, introduce me to your fiancée and your cousins," she said, smiling flirtatiously.

He made the introductions.

Lucie politely shook Jordan's hand. "Why aren't you just the sweetest thing," she said as Jordan smiled at her.

Jordan raised her brows. "Actually not the sweetest. I've got a mean left hook."

Lucie frowned and for once seemed to not know what to say.

"She's talking about her pitching," young Eric said.

"Was I?" Jordan quipped.

"She's a left-handed pitcher for the UCLA softball team," he added.

"Oh! I see. Well, how wonderful is that!"

"Yes, it's really wonderful," Jordan said in a sweet voice.

Young Eric smiled at this girl. She was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

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December 7th, 12:40 AM, Saturday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

He realized he was dreaming. He was dreaming and in the dream he was sobbing. Even though he knew it was a dream, he couldn't escape the complete anguish consuming him.

He could see the wrists tied together with rope. He could see the body being dragged across the rough floor. It was a scene that he was familiar with. It was a scene he'd experienced personally. The difference this time was the person being dragged was not him. It was Taylor. It hurt so much to see sweet Taylor, bright, beautiful and innocent Taylor, being dragged by men across a rough floor. Being kicked by those men. He was watching and there was nothing he could do about it. Except— wake up. Wake up. Wake up, he commanded. He sat up with a gasp.

Catching his breath, he peered around. He was in the den. On the couch. His cheeks were wet. He scrubbed his hands over his face. What in the freak was that all about? He thought about what he'd just witnessed in his dream. He'd heard Taylor cry out in pain. He saw the look of fear in her eyes. What was going on? Maybe he was simply living out his worst nightmare and of course, Taylor being hurt was much worse than when those things had actually happened to him. He blew out a breath.

Almost without thinking, he jumped up and grabbed the remote from the table and turned on the TV, scrolled through the apps and found what he needed to play the video of his abduction.

The video was hours long. He watched the first part, the part he dreamed about. Then fast-forwarded to other parts. He rolled his eyes at some of the things he heard Mia Casellas say, and then rolled his eyes at some of the things he'd said. He watched different parts, even some parts where he'd fallen asleep. Parts where he'd tried to get a gun and escape. Parts where his father and Jake and Jeff came in to get him. Then he went back to the first part and began watching it again.

"Gabe?"

He paused the video and turned at the sound of her voice.

"Taylor," he said softly.

"What are you doing? Why are you watching that?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not sure. I had a bad dream." He motioned at her. "Come here."

She moved closer and he grabbed her and pulled her into his lap and squeezed her tight. Burying his face in her hair, he breathed deep and tightened his hold.

"Um, you're suffocating me," she murmured.

He let her go. "Sorry."

She sat up and turned toward him. "You were dreaming about this?" she asked, motioning toward the television.

"Yes and no. I was dreaming about it but it was slightly different and for some reason I felt like I had to watch it again."

"Well, don't let me stop you. Go ahead. I'll stay here with you."

He turned off the TV. "No. Don't wanna see that when I can see you." He pushed her down on the sofa and lay down next to her, then reached up and cupped her cheek in his palm. "I love you, Taylor. I thank God every day for you, for the fact that you even exist. You are amazing in every way."

"I feel the same about you, Gabe. I really do. I still wonder how you could have been right under my nose my whole entire life and I never even paid any attention to you."

He shrugged. "I think the same thing sometimes, but I guess it wasn't the right time until now. God's timing is perfect. It's like He opened our eyes to each other at just the right time." He leaned forward and kissed her.

She snuggled up under his chin and closed her eyes. "When I'm close to you, like this, it's, like, my whole body finally relaxes. I feel so content and safe and secure, like everything in the whole world is just as it should be."

"I'm glad you feel that way. I hope you'll always feel that way."

"I will." She kissed his neck, then softly touched the small scar that was there from the day his throat had been cut on the beach.

He drew a deep breath, trying to keep his body from responding. "So, Tay, do you have anything planned for when you get back to Cali tomorrow?"

"Well, there is a Christmas dance at school on Saturday. A couple of cheerleaders have asked me to do a dance with them for like, a floor-show kind of deal at the dance."

"Oh, that's cool. Are you gonna do it?"

"I think so. I told them I probably would."

"Great. Get someone to video."

"Okay."

"Anything else?"

"Not really. I have two weeks of school and two weeks of dance classes after school. My dance teacher wanted me to work on a small part in the *Nutcracker* they're doing, though I'm not sure if she still wants me to, but I guess she'll let me know. Oh, and also, my family is helping out with a church Christmas party at Desi and Alec's church."

"Awesome. I haven't heard from them at all. Have you spoken to them?"

"No. But Jordan and young Eric have. They're doing so good. The baby is due in about six weeks and he's doing well at his job and they've been spending time with Alec's mom and also with Desi's family. I'm so happy for them."

"Me too." He leaned forward and kissed her again. "What else?"

"Well, it's the first Christmas with the five new little Kinos, and so

we'll be spending a lot of time at my grandparents' home, doing traditional Christmas stuff with them. Decorating trees, baking cookies, decorating gingerbread houses, making ornaments, and mostly, learning about the birth of Jesus. And of course, we'll go to a lot of places and help bring Christmas to the homeless and the kids in need. Angelina says that she wants to feed people again. So, we'll probably do that in some way. I'm sure it won't be on the scale that we did here at the Center."

"Yeah, it would be hard to duplicate that."

Taylor sighed. "I actually really miss the little ones. They're so adorable and all the little things they say, they make me smile. I want to spend lots more time with them."

"I get that, because I sure want to spend time with Iris and with the two new babies."

Taylor frowned. "And I do too. I'm gonna miss Iris so much and I won't even get to attend her birthday party, and I didn't even get to say goodnight to her tonight. She's just the cutest."

"Well, she does look like me," Gabe jested.

Taylor giggled, then sighed. "It just seems so impossible with you guys way over here in Georgia, and us way over there in Cali. I wish we lived closer together."

"Me too. Having to go away after Christmas, it's gonna be so hard. But then again, I'll be closer to you. Wish we didn't have to choose."

"I guess we'll just have to figure something out. There's gotta be a way to have the best of both worlds," Taylor said.

"For now," Gabe said as he pulled her closer. "I have the best of both worlds. You, and my family. Just for this one more night."

"One more night," she agreed and wished the morning would never come.

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December 6th, 11:30 PM, Friday Night

Rico's Lounge, Los Angeles, California

"For someone with only one arm, you dance pretty good," Ella said with a smile as she snuggled up against JoJo.

"Gee, thanks," he replied as he held her waist with his good arm.

"So, how long until you get out of that sling? Though, I have to say, that leather sling is pretty fashionable."

"Yeah, it's all the rage," he quipped. "But unfortunately, wearing this sling to keep my shoulder still is just the beginning. I'm going into the hospital Monday morning to have surgery. After that, it's supposed to be twelve weeks before I'm all the way back."

"Twelve weeks? Then, you're not playing in the *Rose Bowl*?"

"I am not, but I will be on the sidelines."

"Well that's terrible, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "It is what it is, right?"

"So, what exactly is wrong with your arm?"

"It's a shoulder separation. A severe shoulder separation."

The song came to an end and he started to escort her off the dance floor, but another slow one came on and she tugged on his good arm. "Oh, just one more."

"To be honest, Ella, I'm not feeling too well."

"Why? What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Can't put my finger on it. Just a little lightheaded."

"Well, you only had that one glass of champagne, right?"

He nodded.

"Just one more dance."

He sighed and conceded.

She snuggled up close, ran her hands over his chest. "You're so strong, JoJo. Tell me, I've known you for four years, why is it that you have never asked me out before now?"

He gave a soft laugh. "Well, technically, Ella, I didn't ask you out this time either. You told me you were already going to Lucie's party and asked if we could go together."

"Ah, ya got me there," she said. "So, okay then, all these years, why *didn't* you ask me out?"

He sighed. He wasn't quite sure what to say. She wasn't his type. He'd never really paid much attention to her at all. And getting to know her just from today, he knew he'd never ask her out. "Well," he began as his mind raced. He seemed to be having a hard time thinking. "I guess we just don't run in the same circles."

"Well, it's true, my father can be very intimidating, but still, you seem like a big, strong, brave guy."

He drew a deep breath and pulled at his shirt collar. "Yep," was all he could think of to say, though he wanted to tell her that her father didn't intimidate him one bit. He just didn't have the energy to get into that.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Not sure. It's pretty hot in here. Do you think so?"

She giggled. "If you're talking about me, you're right."

She put her hands on his chest. His top button was already undone. She moved to unbutton the next few buttons of his silk shirt, and then put her hands on his bare skin. He tried to push her hands away, but she wasn't having it.

"You're so muscular. I mean, JoJo, your body is smokin', you know that? Hmm, what's this?"

He looked down as her fingers moved over a large scar. She opened his shirt farther so she could see what she was feeling.

He sighed. "When I was in high school, some bad guys got me and carved a big 'X' on my chest."

"Eeww," she said in disgust. "That's terrible and it looks horrible."

"Yeah, it didn't feel great either."

"How do you even show yourself, like, at the beach and stuff?"

He shrugged. "Everyone pretty much knows and understands what happened. When I'm tan it's not that noticeable. Sorry it's so revolting to you." He pushed her hands off him. "I think I need to go."

"Oh no! Don't go yet."

"Ella, I'm not feeling well. And the only thing I've had to drink other than some bottled water was the champagne you handed me. Tell me the truth, Ella, did you put something in my drink?"

She giggled. "Would I do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know you well enough to know. But I'm beginning to wonder." He stopped, drew a deep breath. "I need to go."

"You have to wait."

"Why?"

"Because we have a surprise. Lucie is about to ask Logan to sing."

"Really?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes. You want to see him sing, don't you? I mean, there are a lot of really big names here tonight. It will be really good for Logan."

He nodded, resigning himself to the inevitable. "When is..."

"Hey, everyone," Lucie Bardot said as she stepped up to the front of the small stage and took the mic.

JoJo looked over to where Logan had been dancing with Melody and then to where Young Eric and Jordan were wrapped around each other.

"I know most of you know who Logan Adams is, since he's had several videos go like, mega-viral. You also probably know that he's the cousin of our star, Eric Kino, but you may not know that he's actually here tonight." She grinned down at Logan. "Logan, wave your hand so everyone can get a look at you."

Logan frowned but quickly waved his hand.

"Logan, I know you're in the middle of recording an album and you can't sing anything from it right now, but I was wondering if you would please, please, please consider doing a cover of 'All of Me.'"

He started shaking his head.

"Please. I know you must know it. You've probably sung it to your girl there. I've heard that you don't even have to practice. You just open your mouth and beautiful music comes out. Everyone, do you want Logan to sing for us?"

The applause and chants of "Logan! Logan! Logan!" were deafening. Finally, he kissed Melody's cheek and stood her next to Jordan and young Eric. "Take care of her for me," he mumbled, then turned and went to the stage amidst thunderous applause. He spoke to the musicians on stage and nodded. Then he moved forward and took the microphone from Lucie. She smiled at him. "Oh, thanks so much, Logan." She kissed his cheek.

"You're just the best."

He nodded and smiled politely. She left the stage and Logan smiled at the crowd.

He thought he might be able to simply look at Melody and sing to her, but someone in the back of the room turned a spotlight on him and he couldn't see a thing. The music started and he began singing and the rowdy crowd became quiet as Logan's beautiful voice stunned the group.

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December 6th, 11:40 PM, Friday Night
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Cam stood in the doorway of the bathroom, gazing at the most beautiful sight. Jeffy sat up in bed, her back against the headboard and cushioned by pillows, her arms cradling their son at her breast. A mother, his beautiful wife, a healer, a miracle from God, nursing their son. It was amazingly beautiful. His heart felt like it might explode. He didn't know how he could feel so much emotion, so much love.

Jeffy suddenly looked up at him, smiling, and then the smile disappeared. She stared straight at him, though it was like she didn't see him at all. She blinked several times, then gasped.

"What's wrong?" he asked quickly.

"Oh no. Oh no. The boys. Oh no."

"Jeffy, tell me what you see. Tell me now."

"I, uh, I saw a plan coming together. I saw a girl in a red dress putting something in a drink and giving it to JoJo. He's been drugged. He's nauseated, dizzy, and weak."

"He's with young Eric and Logan though," Cam said.

She shook her head. "Logan is on stage, singing. He doesn't know what's going on." She sighed. "Young Eric has been distracted by a girl who brought him food. She dumped it on him. It was on purpose. She's helping her friend to get JoJo alone. The friend is obsessed with JoJo. She's known him a long time. She wants him. She wants to say he got her pregnant." She looked up into her husband's face. "You have to stop them."

He pulled out his phone. "I'm on it."

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December 6th, 11:40 PM, Friday Night
Rico's Lounge, Los Angeles, California

JoJo tried to pay attention to his brother singing, but he was beginning to feel like he could no longer stand up. He drew a breath. "I have to go sit down. Ella, what did you put in my drink?"

She shrugged. "It was only a little bit. Just enough to relax you."

"A little bit of what? Rohypnol?"

"No, it wasn't that. I forgot what it's called, but a lot of people call it a 'Mickey'."

"Why, Ella? Why would you do that? Why would you do that to me?" He shook his head to clear it, but it only made him dizzier.

"Don't be mad. I just wanted you to relax enough so that you and I could have some fun together."

"How could you think this is fun?" he barked.

She pouted. "I'm sorry. Come on, there's a place back here for you to sit down. Come and sit and I'll get you a wet cloth for your face, and some coffee."

He swayed, and she put her arm around his waist and ushered him toward a room behind the stage area.

Young Eric was watching, though. He sighed heavily.

"What's wrong?" Jordan asked.

"It looks like JoJo is not feeling well."

"How can you tell?" Jordan questioned as she scanned the area where he'd been dancing a few minutes ago. She didn't see him.

"Right before he left the room it looked like he almost fell down."

"Ya mean, like he's drunk?" Jordan asked.

Eric shook his head. "I haven't seen him drink anything except water."

Melody turned to find him too, but didn't see him. "Well, where did he go?"

Young Eric nodded toward a door. "He went through there with Ella."

Jordan frowned. "I don't like that girl."

"I'm not very fond of her myself," young Eric muttered. He looked up toward the stage where Logan was currently wowing the audience. He'd finished the first song and the crowd was begging for more. Logan was talking with the band members and Eric guessed he was gonna do another song. "You girls, I don't really want to leave you, but can you stay here right by the stage while I go check on JoJo?"

"Well, I mean, Three, do you think he and Ella might be— you know, doin' something? I mean, she pretty much announced what she intended and he said it sounded interesting."

"He said that just to not start an argument," Eric said. "He wouldn't actually do what she suggested."

"Okay, then," Jordan said. "Go check on him. Mel and I promise to stay right here and not wander off."

Eric nodded and turned to leave but Lucie approached with a broad smile and a small platter of something.

"Hello, Eric Kino the Third," she greeted enthusiastically.

He looked at her briefly and then looked past her. "Lucie." He started to step around her but she grabbed his arm.

"Wait. Where are you going? I came all the way over here to serve you myself. I noticed that you've hardly eaten anything all night. And

these stuffed meatballs are to die for. I promise they're made of organic, grass-fed beef and all organic non-GMO ingredients. They're a little bit messy, but that's why we have these adorable little forks. You simply have to try some."

"Lucie, I'm busy right now. Maybe later," he said as he tried to pass her.

She gave a loud squeal, and the platter turned up against his chest. "Oh, Eric, I am so sorry. It slipped out of my hand. Oh no, just look at your jacket. Oh, and your shirt. Oh, and your slacks. I'm so sorry."

She started trying to wipe at his clothing. But it was Jordan who grabbed her hand. "Stop," Jordan said firmly. "I'll take care of it."

Lucie's eyes opened wide.

Eric looked down at himself and back up at Lucie with an incredulous look. "I don't know why, but I'm not surprised." He shook his head. "I get a feeling you did this on purpose, Lucie. Why?" But he didn't have to wait for an answer because the light went on in his brain. "Excuse me."

He turned to the girls. "Melody, Jordan, come with me."

They charged across the floor to the other side of the stage and headed through a door and turned left. They found a storage room, a bathroom, and finally a lounge or break room. The scene they came upon made Jordan and Melody come up short.

JoJo's jacket lay on the floor. His sling lay on top of it. JoJo himself was sitting on a faux leather sofa, his head lying back, his eyes closed. His shirt was completely unbuttoned. The part that shocked them was Miss Ella Penn, straddling his waist, her hands on the waistband of his slacks. Before Eric could even say anything Jordan and Melody each reached down and grabbed one of her arms and jerked her off of JoJo.

Ella gasped and tried to pull away from the two girls' steely grips. Jordan actually shook the girl's arm. "Be still or I swear I'll tear you apart with my bare hands," Jordan growled.

"Jo," Eric said. "Jo, can you hear me?"

JoJo opened his eyes. "Eric, I think she drugged me. I need help."

"I got you, bro," Eric assured him. He turned to Ella just as Lucie came running in, with security. "I'm gonna go get him some help, and then I'm gonna have you arrested."

"You wouldn't dare," Ella said. "Do you know who my father is? I promise you, he can make this whole thing go away and even turn it on you."

"Yeah, good luck with that," young Eric said then looked at Lucie. "I know the two of you are friends, Lucie, but I can't believe you'd want to throw your brilliant career away to help your friend assault my cousin."

"Assault? No, Eric, that's not how it was," Lucie said. "I swear."

Eric reached down and hoisted JoJo onto his shoulder. "That's

exactly how it was." He turned to Jordan. "Babe, will you get my phone out of my pocket and call the limo driver to come get us."

Jordan let go of Ella and did as Eric asked.

Eric nodded at Melody. "Melody, please go up on stage and get Logan. Tell him it's an emergency and we'll explain later."

Melody hurried out.

Eric and Jordan turned to leave, but Lucie's two security guys, apparently not thinking straight, stepped in front of him.

Eric stopped and eyed them. "You know who I am?"

They nodded.

"Then you know that if you try to keep me from leaving, I will mess you up," he said fiercely. "And if I decide to go easy on you, I guarantee JoJo's father will have you prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

They stepped back. Eric started back down the corridor, but stopped when two Ameritech agents came charging up.

"Hey, guys," young Eric said.

They nodded casually. "Eric. Want us to take him?"

"No, I got him. Make sure you get Logan and Melody. He was on stage."

"Got it."

Eric grunted and adjusted JoJo's weight on his shoulder. "How'd ya know something was going down? Aunt Jeffy?"

"Yep."

Eric smiled. "She's just the best."

"She's definitely pretty badass," one of the agents commented.

"So, I guess, if you'd like, you can escort us to the limo," young Eric said.

"Nope. Your aunt sent an ambulance. She's gonna meet JoJo at the hospital with his parents."

"Oh. Well, okay then."

"Your Uncle Joey says you and the others are to stay here and give statements to the police."

"The cops are here?"

"Yes, they are. And we're gonna go pull all security video."

"Cool. I wonder if there were cameras in the room where she took JoJo."

"Yes, there are. Whether they're operational is the question. We'll know soon."

Eric hefted JoJo higher on his shoulder. "Good grief, he's heavy. Let's go."

He made his way out with Jordan, Melody, and Logan right behind. The ambulance was already there and young Eric laid his cousin gently on the gurney. JoJo rolled his head and tried to open his eyes, but could only grunt.

"You're gonna be okay, Jo," young Eric said. "They're gonna take you to the hospital and Aunt Jeffy will meet you there."

"Did she, did Ella ..." He couldn't get the words out.

"No. Whatever she intended was unsuccessful. We got to you in time."

"Thanks, bro." The few words took all of his effort.

"Relax, JoJo," Logan said as he leaned over the gurney. "I'll see you soon."

JoJo sighed and did as ordered.

Eric reminded the paramedics of JoJo's shoulder separation, then stood back and watched him being loaded into the ambulance. Then they were called back inside to give statements. Young Eric caught a glimpse of Lucie, who'd been crying. Lucie's parents were with her. He didn't see Ella anywhere and figured the police had her in a more private area. Pretty much everyone else at the party had left or was working on leaving. A few stayed to tell what they'd seen when asked if they noticed anything involving JoJo Adams or Eric Kino.

Young Eric, Jordan, Logan and Melody made it back to the elder Kino estate by a little after two in the morning. Eric senior met them at the door. They'd all been invited to stay the night earlier because of the big Christmas Tree hunt. Jordan and Melody went up to Bree's old room where they would sleep.

Young Eric and Logan were invited into the kitchen where they sat down with their grandfather.

"Guys, I'm not gonna keep you long. You both need to get some rest. Is there anything you want to ask or talk about right now?"

Young Eric sighed. "Can't think of anything right now, Granddad."

Eric smiled. "I'm told that you figured out something was wrong and got to JoJo before the agents even got there."

"Yes, sir. Don't know how I figured it out. It just suddenly came to me."

"Logan?" Eric senior said. "You're awfully quiet."

He shook his head. "My brother was being assaulted and I'm up on stage singing without a clue. It makes me sick."

"Logan, Jeffy said it was planned that way. They planned to pull you away from your brother by begging you to sing. They knew you would give in if they begged hard enough. It was part of the plan. Nothing to be ashamed of and Lucie spilling a tray of meatballs on young Eric was also the plan."

"But he figured it out," Logan said softly. "And thank goodness he did."

"Well, I wasn't on stage having to concentrate on what I was doing. I just happened to see JoJo stumble and Ella help him out and I knew something wasn't right. That's all. If I'd been the one on stage with lights

in my eyes I wouldn't have seen anything. Don't feel guilty, bro. JoJo knows you'd give your life for him."

"I would, ya know."

"Of course I know. We all know," young Eric said. He drew a deep breath, then smiled. "Ya should've seen our girls in action, Granddad. Before I could even react, they jumped in and pulled Ella off of JoJo. Jordan gave her a good shake and threatened to hurt her. Those two girls were awesome. All I did was lift JoJo onto my back. The girls were the heroes."

Eric senior smiled as he pictured the two girls in action.

"So, how long will JoJo have to be in the hospital?" Logan asked.

"He'll probably be home by morning," his grandfather replied. "And if I know him, he won't let this keep him from joining us on our Christmas Tree excursion."

Young Eric nodded. "Is Cam with Aunt Jeffy?"

"Of course."

"Where's Eli?"

"In our room with Shelley. Well, young men, you smell like garlic and meatballs and you need to take showers and get to bed. We'll let you sleep in, but you still have a full day tomorrow. Plus, Eric, your parents and sister will be home by noon."

They all stood and said goodnight.

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Thirty minutes later, young Eric knocked softly on the girls' door. It was Jordan who answered. She smiled at him, her eyes alight with the love she felt.

"Hey, Three."

"Hey, Two-three. So, I was wondering if you would come to my room and visit for a bit. We didn't really get a chance to say a proper 'goodnight'. Or, like, did I wake you?" he asked.

Jordan smiled. "Nope. You didn't wake me. I was waiting for you. I was hoping you'd come and get me."

He immediately grabbed her hand and pulled her out the door. She quickly waved goodbye to Melody who was giggling.

"But what about Logan?" she asked as she ran beside him.

"What about him?"

"Isn't he with you?"

"No. I'm in my father's old room. He's in his father's old room."

"Oh. Which one is that?"

He stopped and motioned toward the room just across the hall from his. "That was Uncle Mark's room. Logan likes to stay in there. He says it brings back old memories of when his mom and dad first got together back when he was eleven."

"Oh. They lived here?"

"Yes. I mean, for a little while. Uncle Mark was training for the Kino Challenge. Uncle Joey had been shot and was recovering. Aunt Bella and Logan were having a hard time recovering from the trauma they'd been through."

"Sounds like a story. But you're talking about when Logan killed his father?"

"Yes, or the time right after that. It's a long story, and I promise to tell it to you another day. Come on."

He opened the door to his room and slipped inside. Young Eric immediately took her in his arms and kissed her with all the love he felt.

Meanwhile, Melody tiptoed out of the room she was sharing with Jordan and went across the hall to Logan's room. She was afraid to knock for fear of waking up the little ones down the hall, or even worse, waking up the Kinos, so she carefully turned the knob and opened the door. The room was empty. The bed was rumpled and Logan's shoes were on the floor by the bed, but no Logan.

Sighing, she closed the door and went in search of him. She tiptoed down the large staircase, went past the darkened living room and headed back to the kitchen. It too was dark— and empty. So she headed down the hall that went past the mud room and the laundry room on the left, and Grandmaster Kino's study on the right. Farther down was a large bathroom, and a small bedroom. Next was a room that she'd been told used to be another bedroom but was now a learning/playroom for the little ones. At the very end of the hall was a small den where one could go to cozily watch a movie or play video games or simply relax or read. Though Melody almost never saw anyone come down to this room, she was sure that's where she'd find Logan.

But he wasn't there. She stood there a minute tapping her chin, then turned and went back to the kitchen and into the giant dining room. He wasn't there either. Peering out the large glass doors, she could see the multi-tiered deck, down to the volleyball area and farther down to the beach. It appeared to be deserted. She thought briefly about going out there to search for Logan on the beach, but knew an alarm would let the Kinos know that someone had entered or exited through the back doors.

Turning, she headed out the other side of the dining room that faced the living room and stood on the top of three wide steps that ran the length of the wide doorway. To her right was the "back staircase," which led back up to the bedrooms or down to the lower level where there was a large weapons room, a giant workout room, another giant playroom but it was different in that it included a pool table, ping pong table and gaming table. She started to head down, but turned at a motion in the living room.

Peering through the dark, she stepped down the three stairs. "Logan?"

He sighed. “Hey, Melody. Yes, I’m here.”

Leaning over, he switched on a lamp on the table beside the sofa where he sat.

“I’m sorry,” Melody began. “If you’d like to be alone, I’ll leave.”

“No, I’m glad to see you.”

She came to stand in front of him. He was sitting on the edge of the sofa, his forearms leaning on his knees. “Are you okay?” she asked.

He looked up at her. “I guess. I was just thinking.”

“About what?” she asked kindly.

He smiled and nodded. “Actually, about you, and about life.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “And that seems to be making you sad.”

He shook his head. “Not sad. Actually, fearful. So, I was praying about what I should do about that.”

“What are you afraid of?”

He sighed. “It’s kind of a long story.”

She smiled and knelt on the floor in front of him on her knees. “Tell me. I’ve got all night.”

He smiled. She was so sweet, wearing some red plaid pajama bottoms and an oversized red-and-gray baseball shirt, with her long, straight, caramel-colored hair hanging down over her shoulders, and her big brown eyes blinking up at him. “You are so beautiful,” he murmured.

She giggled. “Right. You like my designer outfit?”

He chuckled. “Well, it *was* designed by the all-American industry of baseball, so yeah, I like it just fine.”

She looked down and nodded. “I suppose it was. Very chic. Now, I get the feeling you’re stalling.”

He sighed and nodded. “I was in my room, which was my father’s old room from when he was a kid. I was actually thinking about you, Melody, about how much I like you. About how awesome you are. About how much I hope we remain in a relationship.”

She didn’t answer, because she wasn’t sure where he was going with all of this, but she knew she definitely hoped the same thing.

He went on. “I looked around the room I was in. My father also stayed in that room when my mom and I came here to stay for a while. So, it made me think about that time and, well, Melody, I realized that there are things about me that you don’t know.”

She only nodded because of course there were.

“And I don’t want you and I to get any closer without me telling you the main thing about me, because once you know it, you might not like me so much, and you’ll probably not want to be my girl anymore and when that happens, it’s gonna kill me and I was thinking, I can’t let this go on, I need to tell you about me.” He stopped and looked into her eager eyes.

She smiled. “Logan, just tell me. Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

He sighed. “Thanks for that. I’ll remind you of that once I tell you.”

She remained silent.

He blew out a breath. “Back when I was a kid, my father, my biological father, was, well, a very mean man. He beat up my mother on pretty much a regular basis.”

“Oh, Logan, I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, it got really bad, and my Aunt Breez, who you may not know is my mother’s little sister, went to Ameritech to hire them to protect my mom. Uncle Joey got the assignment.” He smiled. “He and my Aunt Breez hit it off right away.”

Melody smiled too.

“Anyway, I don’t want to go into the ugly details right now, but everything pretty much came to a head. My father had beaten and raped my mother the night before, the next night he attacked her again. I’d been out playing some football but I came home because I felt a strong urge that I needed to go back. I could hear her screaming. I’d been told that the best way I could help my mom was to stay away and not get hurt myself, but I couldn’t stand by another minute.

“I went into my father’s bedroom. They were fighting. He punched mom and she fell down and he lifted her up to punch her again and I got the gun out of the bottom drawer of my mother’s dresser, pointed it at him and told him to let her go or I would kill him. So, he let her go, and she fell to the floor. Then he threatened to kill us both and came toward me. And I—I pulled the trigger.”

Melody’s eyes opened wide. “You shot him?”

“Actually, yeah, but I just hit him in the arm. I’d never fired a gun before. It didn’t stop him. It didn’t even slow him down. He was really mad and he came at me in a rage because he was so surprised that I would actually pull the trigger. So, I fired the gun again. That time I hit him in the chest. In the heart. I killed him. I killed my own father, Melody. I killed a man when I was only eleven years old.

“I wasn’t even supposed to be there. My mother had sent me away. She told me to go to the school to play some football, but I knew something was up. I knew something big was happening and I felt strongly that I had to go back. So, I went back home even though she told me to stay away, and I heard her crying and screaming and I got the gun and I killed him. I’m pretty sure he was gonna kill her. I’m pretty sure she would not have survived another night. Anyway, tonight, as I looked around that room, I realized that it wouldn’t be fair to you to allow our feelings for each other to grow when you didn’t know what I’d done.” He looked down at her, into her eyes, to try to judge what she was thinking.

She smiled at him but didn’t say anything.

“Okay, so, that’s the story in a nutshell. There’s a lot more to it. But for now, I guess I want to know if this is like, a deal-breaker? I mean,

what do you think? Do you understand what I did?"

She nodded her head. "I completely understand what you did. But I also realize it's probably not what you think."

He sighed. "Okay, I don't understand."

"First, you said it was the main thing about you. You having to kill your father is not the main thing about you. You defending your mother was good, but even that is not the main thing about you. What you did, Logan, the main thing, was that you listened to the promptings of God when He told you to go back. You said you felt strongly that you needed to go back home. Who do you think prompted you to go home? You going home saved your mother's life, right? Your sweet mom, who is so gentle and so kind, who was trying to send you away to protect you. You were prompted by God to go home and protect *her*. Save *her.* Help *her.* God used you to do that. You were only a boy. But I hear that David was only a boy when he killed Goliath. If you hadn't listened to God and stood up to the man who was your biological father, you wouldn't have Emily right now, right? Emily, who you told me the other day had your heart. Emily wouldn't exist right now, if not for you."

Logan's eyes filled and he had to choke back the tears.

"So, yeah, Logan, that's what I see. A young man who followed the promptings of God, who saved his mother's life, and his sister's life and since your mom is pregnant, you saved whoever else is growing inside your mom right now. And from what I can see with your adopted father, you saved his and JoJo's lives as well, in a more spiritual sense. What a special person you are, Logan. So, yeah, this does change things a bit for me. It makes me wonder what else God has in store for you. For us. Us. That means me and you. It makes me wonder if I could ever live up to what God wants for you."

Logan had no words. He simply reached down and pulled her onto his lap and kissed her. He kissed her cheeks. He kissed her forehead. He kissed her mouth. Turning slightly on the sofa, he eased her down and lay beside her. He kissed her again and again. The seconds turned into minutes, and breathing heavily, he finally pulled back. "What if I told you that I want to make love to you right now? What would you say?"

"I'd be surprised, but I'd tell you to go ahead."

"You're kidding? Why would you say that?"

She smiled at him. "Because I trust you, Logan. I absolutely trust that you want only to do God's will, and I trust that you would never ask that of me unless you truly believed we were ready and right before God. I know what I feel when I'm with you, and if you believed the time was right, I would trust you enough to say yes. I trust you."

He rose up and cupped her face in his hand. "I think that is the most sobering and amazing thing I could ever imagine you saying."

She shrugged. "I've never felt or even understood how people want

to have sex so much. I've never felt it, that yearning, certainly not with Cade or any other boyfriend, not that there have been very many. But when you kiss me, Logan, I just want to get closer to you. I've begun to understand the term 'being one with someone.' Or *'knowing* someone.' Because you're the only one I've ever wanted to 'know,'" she said, putting air quotes around the word 'know.'

He closed his eyes a moment. "Melody, the things you say. I'm so grateful that God brought you into my life."

"I'm grateful for you, Logan. So grateful."

He stood and held his hand out to her. "Since you trust me so much, let me be worthy of that trust. Come on, I'll walk you to your room."

She smiled. They walked hand in hand toward the stairs, but turned when they heard someone at the front door.

They stopped and greeted Jeffy and Cam as they came in.

"Hey, Aunt Jeffy, Uncle Cam," Logan said. "How's JoJo?"

Jeffy smiled. "He's good. He's gone home with your parents."

"Already? That's fantastic."

Cam nodded. "Yes, it is. So, what are you two up to?"

"Let *me* guess," Jeffy said. She closed her eyes briefly and sighed with a smile. "You were troubled, you prayed, you two had a long talk, you came to an understanding, you did a lot of kissing and now you're walking her up to her room, which she is sharing with Jordan, but Jordan isn't there right now."

Logan grinned. "Aunt Jeffy, you are a scary person."

"I know, right?" Cam quipped.

Jeffy shrugged. "Yeah, it even scares me sometimes." She sighed. "I need to go up and nurse Eli. You guys try to get some sleep."

"Yes, ma'am," Logan and Melody said and headed up the stairs.

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Romans 8:14

"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."

Chapter Five

December 7th, 6:00 AM, Saturday Morning
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jodi Appel knocked softly before she turned the knob and opened the door to Hannah's bedroom. She smiled at the small girl, sound asleep in the bed. The soft comforter was pulled up to her chin. Jodi went and sat on the side of the bed and gently placed her hand on Hannah's cheek.

The child gasped and sat straight up.

"Shh, now, it's only me," Jodi said quickly. "You're okay, Hannah. It's just me."

Hannah blinked several times and let out a sigh of relief.

"Good morning, sweetie," Jodi said.

"Good morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

Hannah sighed and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Mrs. Kino told me that you were used to sleeping during the day."

Hannah nodded. "Yes, ma'am. But for some reason, I was able to fall asleep last night."

"Good. We'll get your days and nights straightened out, especially when you wake up so early. So, do you still want to go down with Charlie to help take care of the puppies?"

Hannah yawned and stretched. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. So, go ahead and get dressed. Don't forget your coat. You can go with Charlie and by the time you get back, you can eat a giant Saturday morning breakfast with us. If you'd like, you can invite Charlie to eat too. Though, he may have other plans."

Hannah pushed the covers away and sat up on the side of the bed.

Jodi smiled. "So, I heard you prayed to God to help you and you feel like He answered your prayer."

Hannah nodded. "I think He did."

"I think so too. So, it's always good to start the day with a prayer. Would you like me to pray with you this morning?"

Hannah blinked up at her. "You'll say it?"

"Yes, if you'd like me to."

Hannah nodded. Jodi took her hands in hers. "Dear Father in heaven, good morning! We just want to tell you how very grateful we are that Hannah is here with us, safe and sound. We're so grateful to have her in our home. Please bless her, Father. Heal her heart and her body, and help

her to know that we love her and that You love her. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

Hannah smiled up at Jodi.

Jodi smiled back. She didn't say anything. She just let the words soak in. Finally, she patted her hand. "Do you need any help getting dressed?"

Hannah shook her head.

"Okay. I'll leave you to it. Don't forget to brush your teeth and your hair and then come see me. I'll be in the kitchen." She rose and quickly left her.

Hannah rose and headed to the bathroom. It wasn't long before she quietly opened the kitchen door and peered in. The room was giant. Several people were cooking and lining up dishes on the counter. It smelled like heaven. The pretty blond girl turned to look at her. She smiled and came to speak to her.

"Hi, Hannah."

"Hi, Daisy."

"Oops, no, I'm not Daisy. She's my twin sister. I'm Lily."

Hannah's eyes opened wide. "Wow. Y'all look just alike."

"I know. Sometimes it's really fun. Daisy is at home right now. We live right next door to the Inn."

Hannah nodded. "I know. Taylor told me."

Lily smiled. "So, you're gonna go for a ride with Charlie this morning?"

Hannah nodded.

Jodi approached. "Well, I see you've met our Hannah," Jodi said.

"I have, and she is just adorable. Well, Hannah, I'd better get back to cookin' or someone will burn the biscuits." She turned and went back to work.

Hannah breathed deeply. It smelled so good. She found her tummy rumbling.

Jodi bent and zipped up Hannah's coat and smiled. "There. Let's go see if Charlie is here yet."

They walked out to the lobby and Jodi peeked out the window. "Well, I see him coming through the gate right now."

Only a minute later, Charlie came through the door. He grinned. "Hey, Aunt Jodi. Good grief, it smells good in here."

"I bet. You're welcome to stay and eat when you bring Hannah back."

"I might take you up on that." He looked over at Hannah. "Hey, Hannah. So, are you ready?"

She nodded.

He smiled. "Cool. Okay then, let's go." He headed back out the door and held it open for her.

Hannah waved at Jodi and stepped outside. She'd expected the cold to take her breath away like it usually did, but the new coat must be a really good one, because it was keeping her very warm. She looked up at the giant horse standing patiently by the side of the porch. She swallowed hard.

"Don't be scared. He's really gentle and he won't hurt you." He walked to the steps. "Come and meet him."

Hannah moved slowly toward the steps.

"Come here, Santana," Charlie said firmly. The horse stepped closer.

Charlie reached out and stroked his nose. "Hey, boy, this is Hannah." He took Hannah's hand and placed it on his muzzle. "Go ahead, give him a rub."

Hannah swallowed hard and rubbed her hand over Santana's face. She smiled. "He's really pretty."

"Aww, now you've gone and done it. He likes it when girls say he's pretty. Now he'll be your best friend forever."

Hannah giggled.

Charlie smiled at the sound. "So, I thought we'd use the steps here to help you get up on him. So, just put your foot here in the stirrup, hold onto the saddle horn there, and then swing the other leg up and over the horse."

"What if he moves?"

"He won't."

She nodded and did as instructed. It took her a few tries, but on the third time, she sat up on the horse.

She looked over at Charlie, wide-eyed. "He's really high!"

"Don't be afraid. I'm gonna get up right behind you. I need you to take your foot out of the stirrup."

She did. "Oh, I think I'm gonna fall off."

Charlie put his hand on her back. "No, I got you." He quickly mounted and settled in behind her. She grabbed onto his forearms immediately with both hands. He chuckled. "I need my right hand to hold the reins. But I'm gonna put my left arm around you here," he said as he did it. "You can hold onto my arm with your left hand, and if you want, you can hold onto the horn with your right hand, if that makes you feel a little steadier."

She nodded and did what he said, her breaths coming in big gasps.

"Okay, you're doing real good. I'm not gonna run him. We're just gonna walk real slow. Okay?"

She nodded.

He made a clicking sound and Santana began walking slowly toward the gate. Hannah couldn't contain it. She let out a tiny squeal.

Charlie chuckled. "Well, we're not going very fast at all. See? We're just walking really slow."

Hannah nodded, but was still breathing hard.

They headed out the gate and turned right. As they walked down the dirt road, Hannah began to relax a tiny bit.

"So, it's not so scary now, is it?" Charlie asked.

She shook her head. "No. It's okay. But we *are* up really high."

"Yeah, he's a big horse."

"And he belongs to Jake, right?"

"Right."

"But you keep him at your house."

"Well, we keep him at our stables. Jake got him for his sixteenth birthday. They don't have any stables at the Inn, but we do, so we keep him. Jake used to take care of him every day, but we do it for him since he's off serving our country."

"How many other horses do you have?"

"Well, we have Sugar, Honey, Rocky, Ginger, and Dusty. And we house a few horses for some other people."

"And you take care of all of those horses?"

"No. Laynah takes care of most of them. But not all of them. The other owners come by and care for their horses and my dad has a few hands that also help, though they have a lot of other work to do so Laynah and I help out. Especially since my mom got pregnant."

"Those babies are so cute," Hannah said.

"Yeah, they are," Charlie agreed.

He guided Santana through the gate that opened onto the Stewart homestead and pointed off to the right at the large brick house on the hill. "That's my grandparents' home."

She nodded. "Daisy told me that yesterday."

"Oh, cool."

"Are they your mom's parents or your dad's?"

"My dad's. They owned this ranch before my dad was born, and they inherited it from my grandpa's dad and they got it from my great-great-grandfather."

"So, does that mean that one day you'll own it?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. I love helping my father on the ranch. So does Matt, my little brother."

Hannah nodded. She smiled as they neared the barn. Charlie dismounted and reached up toward Hannah. "Okay, so put your left foot back into the stirrup. Good. Now, hold on to the horn and swing your right leg over and I'll catch you. Don't worry, I won't let you fall."

She did as he ordered and he caught her and set her firmly on the ground. She turned and grinned up at him. "I did it!"

He nodded. "You did awesome. Let's go see Georgia and her pups."

They headed inside. Again, Georgia immediately came running up to greet them. Hannah crouched down to pet her and Georgia

straightaway lowered her head to get Hannah to scratch her head.

Charlie smiled and nodded. He went over to the blocked-off area and stepped inside and Georgia turned away from Hannah and came to see what he was doing. While Charlie filled Georgia's food and water bowls, Hannah came inside the enclosure and lifted the puppies up and spoke to them, making sure she didn't miss one. She loved on them and stroked them and gently placed each one back down. Charlie smiled at her.

Hannah giggled. "They are just so cute."

He nodded. He was thinking that she, too, was cute. He was also thinking that maybe what happened to her made him think she needed taking care of, just like the puppies. It's not like he was actually interested in her, like a girlfriend or something. But he did feel like he needed to help her get adjusted to life. A real life. A normal life filled with people who actually care about her. She was a human being who'd been held like a dog on a chain for so long. Only in these parts, you didn't even treat a dog like that. It really bothered him.

He motioned for Hannah to come and sit down on the floor and when she did, he began piling puppies into her lap. She giggled and laughed. He pulled out his phone and took pictures and video, then sat down next to her and showed her the pics and video.

"When you get your phone later today, I'll get the number and send these to your phone."

She nodded. "Thanks. Though it's not like I have anyone to share them with."

"Well, they're for YOU. But still, you do have people to share them with. You can share them with Aunt Jodi and Uncle John. You can send them to Taylor and Gabe. And Daisy too. I'm gonna show them to my mom and dad and brother and sisters."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Because they care about you and they're interested in you, Hannah. Look, I know you're not used to that, but real families care about each other and are interested in what you're doing. And you, whether you believe it or not, are now part of our family. The Appels, the Stewarts, the Tanners, and the Kinos. That's just the way it is with us."

She smiled. "That seems real nice. Thanks, Charlie."

"You don't have to thank me."

"So, why are you being so nice to me?"

"Well, I guess I'm the closest in age to you. You need someone who's close to your age to, like, introduce you to new friends and stuff. I mean, will you be going to school?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Well, you should talk to Aunt Jodi and Uncle John and see what they think about that."

"What if I don't want to go?"

"Then I guess they won't make you. But I'm pretty sure you have to either go to school or keep homeschooling."

She nodded. "I don't even know what grade I'll be in."

"Well, I think you can take a test and it'll tell you what level you're at. I mean, I'm in my first year of high school. I figure you're at least in maybe the second or last year of middle school."

She nodded.

"What kind of grades do you get in your internet school?"

"I get good grades. Carl said I had to or I'd be punished." She shuddered.

Charlie noticed and he thought his head might explode. He didn't know why what happened to this girl seemed so important to him, but he did know he intended to be her lifelong friend.

He was shaken from his thoughts by the sound of gunfire and Hannah jumped up, panic in her eyes.

"It's okay. It's just my dad and Uncle John and Laynah and Matt getting in some shooting practice."

She nodded, wide-eyed.

"Usually Gabe and I shoot too on Saturday mornings, but he's busy saying goodbye to Taylor, and I'm, well, right here."

She smiled at him. "What time are the Kinos leaving?"

Charlie glanced at the time on his phone. "They're probably pulling away from the house right now."

"Oh."

"Well, I'm gonna go check on Santana. Are you about ready to head back to the Inn and have some breakfast?"

She nodded. He turned to leave. Georgia came up beside Hannah to get one last head rub. Hannah kept her eyes on the tall boy as she petted the dog. "Why is he being so nice to me?" she asked in a whisper as if Georgia would know the answer. He was kind. He acted very grown up. He had dark blond hair, almost the same color as hers, only his had some wave to it. He looked strong, like someone who played sports, and she wondered if he did. He had a nice smile. Pretty eyes for a boy. They were an odd color. Not brown like hers. They weren't blue either. She'd have to look closer and see what color they were.

She didn't know why he was being so nice, but she was glad he was, because it was nice to have someone her own age to talk to. She'd been alone for years now, and didn't even realize how nice it was to have someone to talk to. She didn't realize how much she'd missed that. He made her want to talk, but the thing is, she didn't know what to say. "Well, Georgia, I hope I'll get to see you soon. I'd better go. I don't want him to have to wait on me and maybe get mad at me." She put her arms around the dog and gave her a squeeze. "Bye."

When Hannah didn't come out, Charlie came back in to make sure

she was okay. She was hugging Georgia. He had to smile. His sister Laynah had told him that horses and dogs, especially puppies, help people feel connected in ways that other people don't. She told him about equine therapy and pet therapy and that she was actually thinking about using the stables that she and Jake would build to help trauma victims. It was Laynah's idea that it would be good for Charlie to get Hannah on a horse and invite her to help with the puppies. As he looked at Hannah now, all snuggled up to Georgia, he thought Laynah just might be right about that.

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December 7th, 9:30 AM, Saturday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Come in," Gabe called as he placed his martial arts uniform into his bag. He looked up as Lily came quietly into the room.

He gave a timid smile and nodded. "Good morning, Lily."

"Hey, Gabe."

"Look, I'm sorry for what I said last night," Gabe started immediately.

She shook her head. "No, Gabe, you don't have to apologize. I was the one who was unreasonable."

He didn't argue the point.

"I, uh, I know you were trying to, like, step into Dad's shoes and protect me. I know I put you in a bad place where you had no choice but to try to keep me from going out alone. I keep forgetting, Gabriel, that you're not my little baby brother anymore. I'm not sure how I feel about that. I do have so much respect for you, for the young man you've become. We almost lost you this year. And I'm sorry I said what I did. Please forgive me."

He smiled. "There's nothing to forgive. Please forgive me for being so pushy and for threatening you with physical force."

"I forgive you. Gabe, I love you. I like you too. I'm sorry I hurt you. I know what I said hurt you because I could see it in your eyes."

"It's okay. Really." He smiled. "Dad must have been pretty hard on you."

She smiled. "With good reason. Was he hard on you?"

He shrugged. "He explained to me that the way I spoke to you wouldn't work in a marriage and I'd better rethink how I intended to talk to my future wife."

She nodded. "Good."

He chuckled. "So, Lily, do you mind if I ask what has you so troubled?"

"I don't mind if you ask. Wish I knew the answer. Mr. Kino says it has to do with all of my sisters having significant others while I don't. Though he said it in a much kinder way."

Gabe smiled. "There's someone out there for you, Lily."

She nodded. “I’m gonna stop praying that God will grant me what I want and start asking Him what *He* wants for me.”

“Who told you that?”

“Both Mr. Kino and Dad this morning. Apparently, Mr. Kino and Dad had a long talk early this morning.”

Gabe sighed. “Isn’t it cool the way they always stay on top of everything? I wanna be like them one day.”

“You’re well on your way.”

Gabe smiled and glanced at the time on his phone. “So, are we good?”

She nodded with a smile. “You and me are good, Gabriel Tanner.”

“I’m on my way to martial arts. Wanna join me?”

She nodded. “Don’t mind if I do. Give me five minutes.”

“Okay. Hurry. I don’t wanna be late. I’m doing a livestream from class.”

“Stop being so bossy,” she said as she ran to her room.

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December 7th, Saturday Early Afternoon, PST

Holly Pines Tree Farm, Big Bear, California

“Okay, kiddos, we need twenty-seven trees!” Shelley proclaimed. She clapped her hands together. “Can we do this?”

Taylor jumped around in a circle making a path in the snow. “We can, we can, we can, can’t we, Manny?”

“We caaaan,” Manny yelled.

Young Eric grabbed Nate’s hand and Jordan’s hand. “We’re getting the one for the children’s home. What are you getting, JoJo?”

JoJo nodded. “Jeremy Davis and I are assigned to get one for the *Southeast Mission.*”

“You feel good enough to do this?”

“I feel fine. My ego is hurt more than anything.”

“Gotcha,” young Eric said with a nod.

“Okay, everyone, gather around and listen up,” Grandmaster Kino said. He looked around at the crowd. Such a fine group of people, he thought. “Joey is gonna read off the list and when he calls out your assignment, let us know you got it so we don’t miss anyone.”

“Got it,” Jeff said.

“They haven’t called anything out yet,” Jason quipped.

Joey chuckled and held up his phone to read. “Okay, listen up. The *LA County Children’s Home.*”

“Nate, Jordan, and I got it,” young Eric answered.

“*The Southeast Mission*.”

“Me and JoJo, got it,” Jeremy Davis said loudly.

“The *Southeast Soup Kitchen*.”

“Mel and I and young mister Abe have it,” Logan answered.

"The Brooks home."

"Jamie and I and Mrs. Brooks got it handled," Daniel Davis answered.

Jordan smiled at twelve-year-old Daniel. He was gonna grow up to be just like these men. The Davis boys were on the right track, and she definitely liked the way both boys took it upon themselves to befriend her little brother Jamie.

Young Eric smiled at Jordan. "We can help them if they need it."

She shook her head. "I think they're okay. Daniel seems like a good guy."

"He is."

"The Keith home," Joey called.

"We're on it," David and Carol Keith said brightly.

"The Davis home."

"Got it," Jeff said.

"*Hillcrest Community Center*."

"Dad and I will get it," young Eric said.

"The Lees, uh, the elder."

"Lori and I will take care of it," Justin said.

"The Kino Newport studio," Joey said and nodded. "Mark and I have it. We also have our own homes with the kids' help." He looked back at his phone and continued reading. "The two county shelters."

"Jensen and Kimmie and Jeffy and I have them," Cam said. He smiled. "Well, Jensen and I have them. Kimmie, Jeffy, and the babies are gonna go get some hot chocolate and stay warm inside."

"Good. Gotta keep those little ones warm." He went on. "The Kino Hillcrest Studio."

"We're gonna get that too," Jamie announced proudly.

"So, congratulations on this next one. The new *Gabe Tanner Community Center* in east Los Angeles has opened its doors and they need two trees."

Taylor smiled.

"We have those," Phillip and Lyle Keith said at the same time.

"Okay, and obviously Eric and Mom will get their two trees for their house, and Bree and Ricky will get the two trees for their house, and that leaves the big one. Jason and Angel need seven trees for several homes and centers where they're housing some *Angel Foundation* recipients. So, once we all complete our assignments, we can converge to help get those trees."

"Got it," Grandmaster Kino said. "Now, more importantly, no one wanders off on their own. Stay with your assigned people. And my kiddos, you listen to the person in charge. Nate, who has you?"

"Ewic."

"Good. Manny, who has you?"

"Taywor."

"Good. Abe, who has you?"

"Mewody."

"Good. Noah, who has you?"

"Bwee."

"Good. Angelina, who has you?"

"You do, you do, you do," she said, jumping up and down, unable to contain her excitement.

The group chuckled.

"Good. And Jamie and Daniel, you two guys take good care of Mrs. Brooks and Josie. I'm depending on you."

The boys nodded.

"And Taylor. Who's got you?"

"Um, Jesus?"

They all smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, and I'm gonna be Jesus' assistant in that," young Eric chirped.

Grandmaster Kino nodded with a smile.

"Everybody stay warm. Keep your coats zipped up and your hats on your head, okay?" Shelley asked.

"Yes, ma'am," they all answered. Even the grownups.

"Okay. Let's pray and do this," Ricky said.

The large group stood in a circle and prayed.

"When we get finished, we'll go on a sleigh ride and have some hot chocolate and snacks," Bella announced. "And I'm pretty sure that there is a snowman-building contest at three."

"I wanna build a snowman," little Emily said.

"I know you do, sweetie," Mark answered his daughter.

Everyone grabbed a saw and headed out across the field to find the perfect tree for their assignment.

An hour later, most of the group was working together on the last seven trees for the *Angel Foundation*. When that was almost done, young Eric and Jordan stopped to get some pictures near an old red barn. The scene was Christmas-card perfect with the barn in the background, and snow-covered pines all around. Once they stopped, though, young Eric, Nate and Manny thought it was a perfect place for a snowball war and they teamed up against Jordan and Taylor.

The war came to an end when Taylor had to stop to answer her phone.

"Hey, Gabe!"

"Hey, Taylor. Whatcha up to?"

"Well, we went up to *Big Bear* to cut down twenty-seven Christmas trees, but just now, Jordan and I were getting killed by snowballs thrown by my brother and Nate and Manny, so you calling just saved our lives."

"Cool."

"Yeah, it is. Freezing actually."

"Let me change over to a video call so I can see the snow," Gabe said.

Taylor waited a few seconds and then answered the call. She reversed the camera around so he could see the awesome scene.

"Wow, that's a lot of snow."

"Yeah, this is up in the mountains. There's a big ski resort up here."

"I don't think I've ever been around that much snow," Gabe said.

"Hey, Gabe," young Eric and Jordan called merrily as Taylor turned her phone toward them.

"Hey, guys."

"Missing your girl?" young Eric asked.

"Yep, I guess I am. So, how's JoJo?"

"He's good. We're all good," young Eric said.

"But we're gonna head in and get warm," Jordan said. "Because I'm sooo freezing."

"I wanna go wif you," Nate said.

"I'm coming. I'll be right there," Taylor said.

"You want us to take Manny?" Jordan asked.

"No," Manny yelled. "I wanna pway outside."

Taylor shrugged. "I guess I got him."

Young Eric shook his head. "Come on, Taylor. I can't leave you."

"Okay, just a minute."

Taylor turned the phone back to her face and Gabe drew a deep breath. "It's only been, what, eight hours? And I'm missing you. It's pretty bad."

"Well, I can't believe I'm gonna say this, Gabe, but ya gotta focus on the present moment," she said with a giggle.

He smiled and nodded. "Yep. Don't know what's wrong with me, but I'm having a hard time practicing what I preached."

"I'm not," she quipped. "We're having so much fun."

Gabe nodded. "Good. So, what's that building over there?"

"I don't know what it's used for, but it looks like an old-fashioned barn. Isn't it pretty? We were taking some pictures in front of it."

"Uh, well, there goes Manny heading toward it."

"Manny, stop," Taylor yelled. "Manny! Wait!" She started running after him.

"Wait, Taylor, don't go over there," Gabe said suddenly.

She laughed. "I have to go get Manny."

"No! Let young Eric get him."

"Don't be silly," she said breathlessly as she ran to catch the two-year-old. "Manny, stop right there."

He grinned and slipped inside the door of the building.

"Taylor, stop," Gabe yelled.

"I have to get him," she said calmly. "Then I'll stop."

She slipped inside the building. It held a tractor and some straw bales and other farming-type equipment. Manny was already trying to climb onto the tractor. She ran up to him and grabbed him around the waist and pulled him away. "You

are being naughty," she reprimanded. "I'm gonna tell your dad how you ran away from me and made me have to come and get you."

He started crying.

"Hush now," she said softly. "You know you have to do what I say."

He sniffed.

She smiled at him. "Okay, now, let's go find Nate and have some goodies."

She put the phone back in front of her face. "Gabe? You still there?"

"Yes, I am and I'm pretty upset with you right now."

"Why?"

"Did you hear me tell you to not go into the barn?"

"Uh, yeah, but I had to get Manny."

"You could've sent your brother."

"He was much farther away," she said as they left the building and started across the field to catch up to young Eric, Jordan and Nate.

"Taylor..." he stopped.

"What?"

He sighed. "Nothing."

"Okay, well, listen, Gabe, I gotta go. We're gonna have hot chocolate and warm, freshly baked cookies and then we're gonna have a snowman building contest. And Manny is trying to wiggle out of my arms right now. I'll call you later. Love you, bye!"

"Bye," he said, although she'd already hung up.

Taylor tucked her phone back in her coat pocket and set Manny down and gripped his hand tightly. She smiled at young Eric and Jordan as she neared. "He's fast for a little kid," she said with a laugh.

Young Eric nodded. "He's gonna be in trouble when Granddad hears that he ran away from you and then wouldn't stop when you called him."

Manny frowned and looked down at his feet.

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December 7th, Saturday Early Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan came in the kitchen door with a smile. "Mission accomplished, Lizbet."

"Jericho is doing well?"

"Yes. And he's probably gonna go home on Monday. And he and Rose were very grateful for the food and especially for the dessert."

Lizzy smiled and nodded. "He's a fine young man, isn't he?"

"Yes," Keegan stated matter-of-factly.

"He's probably gonna be our son-in-law," Lizzy added.

Keegan nodded. "Probably."

Lizzy sighed. "So, I think there's something wrong with Gabe."

Keegan waited and when she didn't go on he asked, "Is he sick?"

"No. He says he's not, but he also said he didn't feel like eating dinner. He seemed out of it. Maybe sad."

"Do you think this is about Taylor?"

She shrugged. "Could be, but I didn't want to push. I mean, he acted like he didn't really wanna talk to me."

Keegan sighed. "Where is he?"

"He said he was gonna get in another workout."

"I'll go check on him."

Lizzy smiled and nodded. "What would I do without you?"

"Don't even want to think about that," he said with a laugh.

She shuddered. "Me neither."

Keegan headed down the stairs and pulled up short, his eyebrows shooting up. Gabe was sitting on the edge of a bench. That wasn't unusual. What was unusual was the smell of alcohol. Keegan knew this was not gonna be a quick fix. Gabe looked up and offered a goofy smile. "Dad."

"Gabe. What's goin' on?"

Gabe shrugged. "Not much."

"You've been drinking?"

Gabe nodded. "It appears I have," he said with a soft laugh.

Keegan came in and sat down. "What's the occasion? Cuz I know it's not to celebrate your *twenty—first* birthday," he said pointedly.

Gabe shook his head to agree and then shrugged. "There was no occasion. I was working out and I got thirsty and I forgot my water bottle and I opened the little fridge there and there wasn't any water but, surprise, there was beer and I decided to have one."

Keegan's brow creased. "I think you've had more than one. What's up, son? This isn't like you."

Gabe sighed. "I dunno. People are always drinking when they get down or depressed, right?"

"Yes, and I know that you know that only exacerbates the problem."

Gabe nodded. "Maybe. But I wanted to check it out for myself and right now I'm feelin' pretty good."

"Are you now?"

"Yes—I—am," he said slowly, enunciating his words carefully.

"How many beers have you had?"

Gabe shrugged and looked down. "I think two. Maybe three."

Keegan sighed. "Is this because you're missing Taylor?"

"I don't think so. Can you just let me feel good and not have to analyze it?"

Keegan's lips pressed tightly together. "Yep. Let's do this. Let's have a party."

"Really?"

"Sure. If we're gonna do it, let's do it right." He pulled out his phone. "I'll be right back." He headed upstairs as he placed the call.

"Hey, Keeg, everything okay?"

"Hello, John, well, there are no raging fires but maybe a slow burn. Are you busy?"

"I can get some free time. Jodi won't mind. Whatcha need?"

"We're gonna initiate Gabe."

"Into which club?"

"The one where you wake up in the morning and puke your guts up."

"What's the occasion?"

"Not sure yet. He's not talking. He's already half gone on some old beer he found in the downstairs fridge."

"Eeww."

"Right. So, can you hit the store and grab a couple of six-packs?"

"Sure."

"And ya got anything else? Maybe something a little more potent?"

"How about some whiskey?"

"That oughta do it."

"That's a lot of booze," John said.

"It's mostly for us men, but I'm gonna let Gabe indulge a little."

"Shall we include Chaz?" John asked.

"I was gonna call him next."

"Okay then. See you two in a few."

"Thanks."

"Hey, what are friends for if we can't assist you in teaching your son how to poison his body?" John said in jest.

"Right?" Keegan said as he ended the call and went to find his wife.

"Hey, Elizabeth, so, Gabe is, um, struggling a bit. We're gonna help him wallow."

She frowned. "Wallow? What does that mean?"

"It means he needs to cry in his beer, literally. John and Chaz are coming over for a while to help and we're gonna visit downstairs. No girls allowed."

Lizzy wrinkled up her nose. "I'm not trying to second-guess you, but are you sure about this?"

He nodded. "Yes. I'll keep careful watch. I'm gonna grab some snacks and some bottled water."

"Well, don't get too carried away, Keegan. I'd better not have to take my son to the hospital."

He moved forward and kissed his wife. "Well, babe, I promise I won't let it get even close to that point."

"Do you know what his problem is?"

"Not really. He's down, but he's not ready to talk."

"Okay."

"Don't worry, sweetheart, it's gonna be alright. Do you need some help with Iris or the babies?"

"No, I have the girls to help me if I need them."

"I hate to leave you alone."

Lizzy shrugged. "It's like leaving the ninety-nine. Go. Find your son. I'll watch over the flock."

"Lord, I love you."

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December 7th, 11:15 PM EST, Saturday Night

Tanner Home Basement Game Room, Pine Forest, Georgia

Chaz chuckled. "Oh, yeah, those were some good times."

"I hardly think getting beat up by a bunch of bikers constitutes a good time," Keegan said.

John shook his head and chuckled as he glanced at Chaz. "Well, *I* didn't get beat up. And Chaz here held his own."

"For a minute," Chaz admitted.

"So," Gabe began. "Why? I mean, why did these guys jump you?"

"They were paid to do so."

Gabe shook his head. "Some guys jumped me and Taylor at the grocery store last week sometime. I don't remember when it was."

"It was just this past Tuesday," his father informed him.

"Yeah, then," Gabe said. He touched the wound on his forehead that was still healing from the incident. "I mean, why? Why does everyone have to be so violent? Why is this world so ugly? Huh? Why? And like, those guys who shot me and took me off the side of the road, why would they actually go through with it?"

"Whaddya mean, Gabe?" John urged.

He sniffed and shook his head. "I mean those guys. Mia paid them too, right? Like someone paid the bikers to fight you, Mia paid those men. But ya know what? I don't think they did it for the money, ya know? I think they, like, really liked beating up on some kid, kicking me in the leg right where I got shot. The dude was havin' a good time, ya know?" He shuddered and rubbed his hand over his leg. "Before that, I never hurt anybody in my life. But they made me hurt them. I broke that one guy's nose. And at that old barn, or poultry farm, I shot two guys, one at point blank range. They made me hurt them. Why?"

Keegan placed his hand reassuringly on Gabe's shoulder. "There is evil in this world, Gabe. You know that. What you don't know is, it's a lot worse than you've ever seen. Things you can't even imagine."

Gabe sniffed again. He leaned over from the chair and pushed his empty shot glass that was sitting on the coffee table in front of him toward John. John looked at Keegan, who shook his head. "Sorry, kiddo," John said. "You've had enough."

Chaz sighed. This kid was gonna be sorry in the morning. Three beers before they'd arrived, two beers since they'd arrived and lastly, one good shot of whiskey in about a four-hour window.

"I wish I could go back to being a kid," Gabe suddenly complained. "Go back to high school. Play some ball. Argue with my teacher." He looked down at his phone when it buzzed. He sighed. Declined the call and then texted Taylor.

~~cant tlk now

He turned the phone over.

Keegan nodded at the phone. "Are you and Taylor having a fight?"

Gabe shook his head. "Fight with Taylor? Of course not. She's the best.

She's really juz the best, isn't she?"

John chuckled. "She's a great girl. You got lucky."

"Right. And so, like, when I tell her to not go into the barn, then she should listen, right?"

Keegan sat up straighter. "The barn?"

"The barn, like, up in the mountains. She juzz ran her cute self right on in like it was nuthin."

"I see. And how did you tell her?"

"I wasn't nice like we talked about. I didden have time," he said, slurring his speech. "No time to be nice."

"Did she get hurt? Did something happen?" Keegan asked.

"No. Not this time anyway."

"Gabe, you've been under a lot of pressure lately. So many dangers. So many people trying to hurt you," John said, doing a little digging.

"Yeah. I'm not afraid," Gabe said. "But I am..."

"What? What are you?" Keegan asked.

"Dunno. Guess, I'm stressed out."

Keegan nodded.

"Uncle John?"

"Yep."

"Tell me again 'bout how my dad got my mom pregnant with me before they got married."

John coughed.

Chaz pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

Keegan frowned.

"Don't worry," Gabe went on. "I already told my dad that Brayden accidentally told me. I wanna hear it from you, cuz I know you won't like, sugar coat it."

Keegan smiled. "Yeah, go ahead, John. Let's hear your version."

John told the story, but did still try to put some sugar on it.

"So, Dad," Gabe said. "Tell me the truth. Did you marry mom because you got her pregnant with me?"

"No. Absolutely not. Your mom and I were very much in love and I already proposed to her before I even knew she was pregnant. I wouldn't lie to you about that, son. I wouldn't lie to you about anything."

"You always told me to save sex for after I got married."

"Right. Because I don't want you to make the same mistakes I made. God gives us rules to help us. If we follow those rules, we'll be much happier. But the path that brought your mom and me together, though it was a rough path, a difficult path, I'm grateful for it. Because it brought me the most amazing woman and it brought me the girls, and the new babies and it brought me you. So, I have no regrets."

Gabe blinked back some tears. He sighed and his head fell forward, his chin resting on his chest.

"Gabe?" Keegan said.

He lifted his head. "Yep?"

"Oh, I thought you were about gone."

"Nope. Juzz ressting my eyes."

The men smiled.

"So, do you feel better now that you've had some drinks?"

Gabe blinked his eyes at his father then shook his head. "No. I feel like blubbering."

Gabe turned to John. "Do you feel bad that Jake is hurt?"

"Well, I feel grateful that he's alive. I'm sorry he was hurt, but it could be a whole lot worse."

Gabe looked over at Chaz. "Uncle Chaz, I bet Laynah is upset."

Chaz smiled. "Laynah too is grateful that he's alive."

Gabe sniffed. "Me too. He's like a brother to me. If Taylor got hurt, I mean, if someone hurt her, I'd wanna kill them."

"Don't think like that," Keegan said.

"Why not? I mean, Dad, let's get real—I already killed some guys who hurt her. But ya know, Dad, ya know whazz really bad about that? I don't feel bad about it. I'm not like you. I don't care that they're dead. You said I'd feel bad eventually. But I don't. How's that? What does that say about me? How's that for a great example of a Christian? I'm a fraud. A fake. I don't feel bad. I don't feel a thing."

Keegan sighed. "Gabe, you don't feel anything because you're still in shock. You haven't had time to work through all of this, to integrate it. Too many things happened in a row. Too many things came at you. You just need some downtime, son, and some more counseling. That's all."

Gabe nodded. "Down time. Right. Down time. There is NO downtime, DAD! I have to make a video every day. I have to be a man. I have to help everyone, whoever needs help. Why? Because I always have to be a man. Like you. Like Uncle John. Like Uncle Chaz. Like Mr. Kino. Like Agent Davis. I have to be in service. I have to protect my sisters. I'll tell you what I need to do. I need to freakin' sleep. That would really help. I need to sleep, Dad. I just wanna close my eyes and sleep and NOT dream. No dreams. None. Nobody kicking me in the leg. Nobody dragging Taylor across the floor and kicking her. Nothing. I just wanna go back to the tree." He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "I'm so tired. I wanna go back to the tree. Back to the tree...."

The three men in the room watched the young man as he finally succumbed to the late hour and complete exhaustion. They sat there silently for a few minutes.

"Well, you have your work cut out for ya, Keegan," Chaz said.

Keegan nodded. "He's supposed to leave right after New Year's to start school and train at Ameritech. He may not be ready."

"Keegan, this is obvious PTSD," John said. "He definitely needs to go back to see his therapist. And, well, Gabe and Grandmaster Kino seem to have a bond.

We should get Eric to counsel him too, when Gabe goes out west," John added.

"For now, how about we all pray over him," Chaz said.

John nodded. "Prayer is the most powerful force in the world."

Keegan nodded. "I'll have Grandmaster Kino work with him, if Gabe even goes out there. We'll have to see how he's doing. And yeah, for now, will you guys help lay some hands on him and pray over him?"

"Let's do it," Chaz agreed.

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Psalm 107:13-16

"Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For he shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron."

Chapter Six

December 7th, 5:00 PM, PST Saturday Evening
Big Bear, California

"This has been an amazing day," Angel Lee said softly to Shelley Kino.

Shelley smiled warmly at her friend, reached over and squeezed her hand. "It has been so much fun. And I'm so glad that you and Jason were able to make it."

"Me too. Since he's revamped Ameritech, the higher-ups have more free time; everything is running more efficiently than ever. I've actually noticed a difference. He reminds me of the man I fell in love with. He smiles and laughs again. He's not so stressed out."

"No wonder. He must have felt like he had the weight of the world on him."

"Exactly."

"What are you two whispering about?" Jason asked.

"About you, babe," Angel said softly. "About our younger days."

"Oh, about when you were so mean to our champion there."

Shelley giggled. "Don't be ugly, Jason. It was a call for help."

Jason nodded and touched his wife's beautiful face. "I'm so grateful for that time in our lives. It seems like just yesterday. And just look what we've created since then."

Both Angel and Shelley nodded as they looked around the large U-shaped table setting. They were in the reserved party room at one of the beautiful resort restaurants. The giant picture window looked out toward the snow-covered mountain. It was so lovely. More lovely, however, were the faces of their family as they looked around the table. The ladies with the babies all sat together on the far end of the table. Jeffy, Kimmie, and Mickey sat with their husbands—Cam, Jensen, and Jeff. Each little baby slept peacefully in their carrier seat resting on a chair, though that wouldn't last too much longer.

David and Carol Keith, Jewell Brooks and Ricky and Bree sat near each other, having a deep discussion about the school system. Jamie and Josie Brooks and the Davis boys were talking and laughing as they ate. Down the other side of the giant 'U' were the older kids: Taylor, sitting next to Phillip Keith, who at age sixteen, was closest to her age, and his brother Lyle, and then Jordan and young Eric, JoJo, Logan and Melody.

Mark and Bella and Joey and Breez sat with their little ones, Emily, Sophia, and Kelstyn. Joey had Ledger on his shoulder, since the little rugrat had worn himself out in the snow and passed out with exhaustion. And finally, sitting right in front of Shelley and Angel were five sweet souls who were learning about Christmas for the first time, who were learning about family, who were learning about life outside the walls of the daycare that held them hostage since before they were born.

Meanwhile, down at the end of the table, Taylor chatted away with Phillip and Lyle.

"So, Taylor," Phillip began. "I guess it's hard to be away from Gabe?"

She nodded. "Yeah, it is, but he tells me to stay focused on the present moment, which right now, is you guys," she said brightly.

Phillip smiled. "When do you get out of school for Christmas vacation?"

"Just two more weeks. Well, actually, it's only a week and a half. How about you?"

"Same."

"This next week I have to work on a dance for like a floor-show at the school Christmas dance next Saturday night."

"That sounds cool."

"I guess. At least it'll keep my mind occupied. Gabe wants me to video the dance so he can see it."

"I bet you'll be awesome. We'll be sure to watch it."

Taylor smiled. "Why don't you come? I mean, we're allowed to invite people to the dance who don't go to our school as long as they're eighteen or under. You both can come. I'll have two dates," she said with a laugh.

"Um, how would Gabe feel about that?" Phil asked.

She shrugged. "He's told me several times that it's my senior year and to go on dates and have a good time when he can't be here with me. Really, you should come. I mean, we're kinda like family now, right?"

They both nodded. "Kind of," Lyle said.

"Yeah, but, like, Gabe is a good guy. I wouldn't want to step on his toes," Phillip said.

"Ha. You wouldn't be stepping on his toes." She picked up her phone. "I'll prove it. I'll call him right now."

She called and waited for him to answer. She had to blink when the call declined. She then read the text. "cant tlk now."

She frowned. Shrugged. "That's weird. He must be having a big discussion with his father or something. That's the only time he doesn't answer the phone. I'll try again later. So anyway, will you come?"

"I don't see why not," Phillip said. "What's the dress code?"

"Well, it's kinda dressy. So, like, a suit or sports coat—kinda that sort of thing."

"I guess we can handle that," Phil said.

Taylor smiled. "Cool. I guess it's a date!"

A little farther down the table, Logan took Melody's hand and squeezed it. "So, do you wanna come with me to church tomorrow?"

"Oh, Logan, I do want to come, but I can't." She gave a slight pout.

"Is that because you're going with your own family?"

"No. I mean, they ARE going, but that's not why I can't go with you. I have a friend I promised to go to church with tomorrow."

He frowned. "Oh. What's his name?"

She giggled. "HER name is Bristol, and she's an old friend of mine from high school. She's very sweet, very shy, and was desperate to get me to come to her church with her again."

"Again?"

"Yeah, I went to church with her a couple times back in high school, maybe when I was a junior or sophomore. It's an older church and it's actually kinda cute, like out of a storybook. It has a beautiful stained-glass window in the front and another in the back. I remember I told Bristol how much I like the church building because it's, like, so symmetrical."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, like, symmetrical. The door is right in the middle of the building. The stained glass window over the door is right in the middle of the building. The chapel is right in the middle of the building." She giggled. "We talked about how it would be a perfect place for a wedding, because it's like out of a storybook with the aisle right down the middle. It's sweet. But Bristol says they are desperate for new members. Actually, she says they are desperate for *young* new members. She says she is now the only person under twenty-one who goes to church there."

"Why does she even go to an old person's church?"

"Well, so, Bristol lives with her grandmother. Her grandmother actually raised her. She never knew her father and her mother died of a drug overdose when she was just a baby. Her grandmother goes to this church. She's gone there her entire life. It's called *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ*. It's old and run down. Bristol says it's falling apart now, and the only people who go there anymore are just the old people. Some of these people have been going to this same church since they were little kids and like, they're now in their seventies and eighties. It's kind of sad. Anyway, Bristol has always gone there with her grandmother. When I visited with her back a few years ago, there were probably less than twenty kids. Now, she says there are none. So, they're trying to get more young people to start coming out. Bristol says it's kind of a last-ditch effort to save the church. So, everyone is supposed to invite some people, preferably young people, to come out and support the church. Bristol invited me. I promised her I would come."

Logan nodded, but frowned. "Okay. So, I'm young. Why didn't you invite me to come along?"

Melody's eyes opened wide. "Oh! Well, I guess it didn't cross my mind that you would want to come to an old broken-down church with a bunch of old people."

"Why not? Do you think I'm a snob?"

"No! Of course not, Logan. I mean, but you usually go to church with your family, right?"

"Yes. But you know we go around to a bunch of different churches. And I don't always have to go where my family goes."

"Well okay, then. So, Logan, would you like to come with me to *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ*? It's in Huntington Beach, wedged in between an old motel and an apartment complex."

He smiled. "Why, yes, Melody—I would love to accompany my girlfriend to visit this old church."

They all stopped talking and looked up when Jeffy made a sound like a moan and put her hand to her head.

"What's wrong, Jeffy?" Cam asked.

She shook her head. "It's Gabe. He's in distress."

"Is he hurt?" Taylor and young Eric asked at the same time.

Jeffy shook her head. "No. It's just emotional distress." She looked up at her father. "Dad, you need to reach out to Mr. Tanner."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. He pulled out his phone and sent a text.

Taylor immediately picked up her phone and tried to call again, but it went straight to message. She frowned.

"Well," Grandmaster Kino began. "It was a wonderful day and it's been a great dinner, but we need to get the Christmas trees back and delivered to their proper homes before it gets too late."

The group agreed and began to gather up their belongings.

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December 8th, 7 AM, Sunday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

The next morning, Bree picked up her phone and read the text she'd just received. It was from Lizzy Tanner.

~~ Hello, Bree. Good morning. I hope this text doesn't wake you. Could you call me when you get a chance?

Bree immediately called and Lizzy answered on the first ring.

"Hello, Bree."

"Hey, Lizzy. You okay?"

"Yes, well, I'm working on it. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute about Gabe and Taylor. I usually don't interfere with Gabe's love life. I mean, I've never contacted the parent of any girl he's ever dated. But of course, Taylor is special and their relationship is special and I just wanted to keep you in the loop of what's going on with Gabe so that Taylor won't take it personally."

Bree smiled. "Lizzy, you are so sweet."

"Well, I'm not being sweet. I'm trying to protect my son's interests."

"Oh, well, I see," Bree said with a giggle. "But that in itself is very sweet."

"Bree, last night, Taylor tried to call Gabe and he didn't answer her. Apparently, she tried to call several more times. It's not because he's mad at her or anything like that. He's, well, he's having a hard time right now. Keegan says he's folded under the weight of all the trauma he's been through over the past year combined with not sleeping at night. He's struggling. As a matter of fact, Keegan was gonna give Grandmaster Kino a call and get him to advise us on the matter, but I don't..."

"Lizzy. Let me just stop you for a minute. Your husband already spoke to Eric. They spoke for a long time early this morning."

"Oh. Well, he didn't tell me."

"I'm sure he was going to tell you. Anyway, after your husband spoke to Eric, he then spoke to Ricky and me because of course, he says communication is essential, and I agree."

"Oh, dear, so then, did you talk to Taylor about what Gabe's actually going through?"

"No, don't worry. We wouldn't do that. What Gabe wants or doesn't want Taylor to know is up to Gabe. All we told Taylor was that Gabe wasn't feeling well last night and that's why he didn't answer and she shouldn't worry. She said something about Gabe yelling at her about not going into a barn that was up at the tree farm we went to yesterday. She said he was upset with her and we assured her that was not why he didn't answer the phone."

"Thank goodness," Lizzy mumbled. "Okay. Well, thank you so much, Bree. And sorry I called so early."

"I was up and you're welcome. Lizzy, Gabe is the best thing that ever happened to Taylor. She's grown so much and gotten so strong since she's known him—well, I mean, since they've been together. We love Gabe. We understand he's been through a lot, but we feel sure that he's gonna be okay. God healed him from the coma and infection when he was in the hospital. And Jeffy told us about the time in your home a little over a week ago when he passed out after holding your new babies and Jeffy and Gabe both said Jesus was there, like in your home. And Gabe had bruises all over his chest and he was healed completely in seconds. Jeffy said that healing was important, because Jesus said to remember it when things get difficult. So, maybe this is one of those times."

Lizzy nodded and sniffed. "I forgot all about that. It's weird, but it seems like that happened forever ago."

"Right. So, cheer up, sweetie. God is with you. He's with the Tanners and I think Gabe is chosen. He's not just one of God's warriors but he's a *chosen* warrior. What Gabe accomplishes in this life will affect millions of people. He's chosen. Trust Jesus. Gabe is gonna be just fine."

"Bree, I'm so glad I got to speak with you this morning. Thank you for your kind and encouraging words."

"My pleasure. Give Gabe a hug for me."

"Will do."

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December 8th, 10 AM, Sunday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe moaned again from where he was currently curled up in a fetal position on the bathroom floor next to the toilet. He quickly wrestled his way to sit up, got to his knees and threw up again.

Keegan looked in to check on him. Gabe was now paying for the playing. He wore only his boxer briefs. He didn't look big or athletic or strong at the moment. He looked pitiful—diminished and weak—which was a goal of the enemy. However, this time, it was a controlled burn, and Keegan would work this around to teach his son a big lesson. "Are you about done?" he asked gently.

Gabe turned his head to glance at his father. He nodded and drew a deep breath. "Think so."

"Can you make it back to bed?"

Gabe nodded.

"Wash your hands. Rinse your mouth."

Gabe silently accomplished the task, then stumbled back to the bed.

"I'm gonna make you some tea. You'll be okay soon."

Gabe nodded and mumbled, "Thank you."

"So, how bad do you feel?"

Gabe moaned. "I didn't know I could feel this bad."

"Is it worth it?"

He shook his head. "No, don't think so."

"Thoughts?"

He shrugged. "How do people do this stuff? I mean, like, guys in college, they go out drinking a lot, right? Go to frat parties. Get drunk every Saturday night."

Keegan nodded. "They may be searching for fun, or happiness, or escape, or relief, but they won't find it by drinking. They do it because it makes them care less about their pain for a little while, but it doesn't heal whatever is causing the pain. Ya know, some people don't even realize this is what they're doing. They might feel sad, but don't even know why they feel sad. They just feel drawn to have a drink, but the easing of their pain only lasts for a short time. Their bodies reject the poison. Still, if they persist, the body begins to adjust to it and may eventually begin to crave it. And then the enemy has them right where he wants them. We all have places inside us that only God can fill, but that doesn't mean there's any shame in needing counseling, treatment, or support, of course. Jesus renews us, and sometimes He uses other people to help us heal. Still, whatever trauma, small or large, also needs spiritual help. Many don't realize that the sadness they feel from their trauma can cause us to separate ourselves from God, and that separation from our Creator makes us sad. We need God's light. If we have Him, we won't need to do the drug anymore. Jesus will renew us. And I call it a drug, because alcohol is really a gateway drug."

Gabe's eyes filled with tears. "I knew better though. I know God."

"Yes, you do. You are suffering from trauma though. You're feeling the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Your mom and I listed last night all the things that you've faced over the past year. Most people don't face that much trauma in a lifetime, unless they've been to war. I'm not trying to make excuses for you, Gabriel, but I want you to forgive yourself. You sought those beers last night to try to ease the hurt and confusion you were feeling. When you should've..."

"When I should've been seeking the Lord. I know better. What is with me?" he moaned as tears welled in his eyes and spilled.

"Like I just said, Gabe, I want you to forgive yourself. I have no doubt that you're gonna be on your knees praying today and asking forgiveness, but I want you to forgive yourself. Don't be so hard on yourself. Though it may not seem it at times, you are only human."

He moaned, then looked up at his father. "Why did you let me drink so much?"

Keegan smiled sadly. "There are some things that a man has to learn through experience. By the time I found you, you had already discovered the buzz. So, I decided to be present with you while you went a little further on this little journey. I stayed to watch over you while allowing you to experience what it feels like to go past that buzz. And now, you get to experience the consequences."

Gabe sighed and nodded.

Keegan smiled. “I wanted you to see that alcohol does not help. Not ever. It’s a depressant. It puts cracks in your armor and allows the enemy to have access to your brain and to your heart.”

“But you drink sometimes,” Gabe returned.

Keegan nodded. “Socially, every once in a while. Not to get drunk. Not to ease my fears or sadness. Not to deal with trauma. The last time I did that was before your mother and I got married. Then, she taught me about Jesus, and He renewed me. He cleansed me. He made me into a new man. You didn’t have that contrast. Sometimes it’s hard to see when life has always been hunky-dory.”

Gabe thought for a minute and then chuckled. “Hunky dory, Dad?” He shook his head.

Keegan shrugged. “Sorry. I suppose that term is archaic. Let’s say then, when your life has always been—*chill*. Is that better?”

“Much.”

“I’m gonna go make your tea. You will drink it and take a shower because you smell awful, put on some clean pajamas and make your way to the living room.”

“Uh, oh. Family meeting?”

“Of sorts. Be right back.”

Gabe watched his father leave the room, then turned and looked for his phone. It was on his night table but the battery was dead. He plugged it in and turned it on. He had to blink. He had ten missed calls. Nine from Taylor. One from Jeffy. He wanted to call Taylor back immediately, but knew his father would be right back with the tea and he had to get it down and get in the shower. He thought it would be best to call her back when he had some time to talk. So, he texted her real quick.

~~Hey Tay, sorry I missed your calls. Was working through some personal things last night. I’ll...

He stopped as the nausea came back. Quickly, he hit ‘send’ and ran back to the bathroom.

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Showered, fresh and clean, Gabe donned clean underwear and pajamas and sat on his bed drying his hair with a towel. He’d drunk down the tea his father brought up to him, waited about fifteen minutes and went to brush his teeth and take his shower. By the time he emerged, he felt almost good.

He knew the next thing he needed to do before he attended the family meeting in the living room was to present himself to the Lord. He got down on his knees and talked to Jesus. He asked for forgiveness. He asked for clarity. He asked for the strength to handle his emotions. He asked for wisdom to interpret the dreams and visions. And last but not least, he gave thanks for Taylor, for his family, for his father’s wisdom, and for his life, and he renewed his vow to seek God’s will and to do God’s will and obey His commandments.

Just as he finished praying, he heard beautiful music. Violet must be playing the piano. He knew the song she was playing, *“Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer.”* Then he heard something even more beautiful than Vi’s playing and that was female voices singing the song in harmony. They sounded like angels and Gabe rose, grabbed up his

phone and made his way downstairs to the living room.

He stood just outside the room in the front hall and listened for a minute. He was so blessed. This was such a blessing. Iris spied him and cried out his name and came running to him. "Gabe, Gabe, is you okay? Daddy said you wuz sick."

He scooped her up and hugged her tight. "Hey, my flower. Yes, I'm feeling much better," he whispered to her. He carried her into the living room and sat on the couch with her in his lap, as he gazed at the angelic choir gathered around the piano, singing a Sunday morning hymn. Then it struck him. They were usually at church. His little episode must have kept his whole family from going to church. He felt so ashamed.

The song came to an end. Iris clapped her hands and ran to Rose, who scooped her up.

"That was really good," Gabe said softly.

They all smiled at him.

"Are you feeling better, sweetheart?" his mother asked.

"Yes, ma'am." He sighed. "Sooo, uh, sorry, everyone."

"Sorry for what?" Daisy asked.

"My little stunt kept you from going to church this morning. I am so sorry, everyone. I was being stupid. I promise it won't happen again."

"Gabe," Lily began. "You weren't being stupid, and we didn't miss church. And neither did you."

His brow furrowed.

"Cuz we're about to take you to church," Rose said with a laugh.

Violet started playing the piano again and the women began singing a rousing song about goin' down to the river to get baptized.

Keegan came in, holding both babies in his arms. He went to Gabe and handed first one to him to hold in the crook of his left arm, then carefully placed the other in the crook of Gabe's right arm.

Gabe peered down at the two tiny, angelic infants, both sound asleep and looking soft and sweet and his heart swelled. He blinked up at his father.

Keegan smiled. "You haven't had a lot of time to bond with your new brother and sister."

Gabe shook his head. "I know what you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

"You're doing the same thing for me that Charlie is doing with Hannah."

"Oh yeah, smarty pants, whaddya think that is?"

"Therapy. I mean, with Hannah it's pet therapy or equine therapy. I don't know what the official name is."

"It's AAT, or animal-assisted therapy," Keegan answered.

"So, for me, I guess this is BAT—baby-assisted therapy."

"I guess you *are* smart. BAT, I like the sound of that," Keegan said.

"Me too. I've always wanted to say, I'm Batman." He laughed. "Now I can," he said with a grin.

Keegan chuckled and sat down next to him. "Where's your phone?"

"Right there on the table," Gabe said, motioning with his head toward the coffee

table.

"You have to make a video this morning, right?"

"I don't have to, but I'm expected to. It's harder than you think to come up with some kind of content every day," Gabe said with a sigh.

"Your life is exciting enough to not have to 'come up' with anything. Gabe, you're putting too much pressure on yourself. Anyway, today especially you don't have to think of content because I'm gonna go live for you. All you have to do is say hello and introduce your baby brother and sister and then invite your listeners to listen to the Tanner Family choir and stay if they'd like to join our family church session, because we're gonna have a service right here in our living room today. You can tell them we're doing this because you were feeling under the weather, which is not a lie. And we'll take it from there."

Gabe teared up again and sniffed. "Don't know what's wrong with me. I'm so emotional today."

"That's another side effect. You ready?"

Gabe nodded and then turned to his mother and sisters who'd been quietly listening. "You ladies are the best."

"We love you, Gabe," Lily said softly.

He sniffed. "Love you guys too."

"Bruh, get a grip now," Rose said brightly. "Smile for the camera."

"Oh, wait. Dad. You need to get a charger and plug my phone in, 'cause it's only got, like, five percent."

"There's one plugged in on the kitchen counter, honey," Lizzy said quickly.

Keegan went to grab the charger and plugged it into the living room socket and then into Gabe's phone. "You ready?"

Gabe nodded, then turned to his sisters. "I look okay?"

They giggled.

"Hair looks like you stepped out of a salon, face clean, no boogers. You're ready," Rose said with a nod.

Keegan waited for the stream to go live and then nodded at Gabe.

"Good morning, everyone. Let's give it a minute to let people get on. While we do that, let me just take a few minutes to introduce you to my brand new brother and sister." He jostled his left arm. "This one here is Gentian. In case you didn't know, all of my sisters were named after a flower. My sisters are Heather, Rose, Violet, Lily, Daisy, Iris, and now little Gentian. My father always tells them that they're prettier than any flower he's ever seen and I gotta say, I agree with him. They are really special. And this year, it's been a really hard year for me and for some of them too, but no matter what, they're always here for me and I'm really grateful for them. Dad, can you pull the blanket away from Gentian's face more so everyone can see her?"

Keegan pulled the blanket away and got a good shot of the baby girl.

"And this little guy over here," Gabe said as he bounced his right arm. "This guy is Isaiah, named after the prophet in the Bible, though we'll probably end up giving him some silly nickname, cuz, like, that's what we do around here."

Keegan pulled the blanket away from Isaiah's face and gave the viewers a good look

at him.

"Okay, so now that more people have joined us," Gabe went on, "here's what's happening. I wasn't feeling very well this morning, and my whole family surprised me by deciding to stay home and do a church service for me. I just heard some beautiful music, sung by my Grammy-winning mom and joined by my sisters, and I think they're about to do another song, so let's watch and see what they have in store for me, because I don't know either."

Keegan turned the phone from Gabe's face to the lovely ladies standing around the piano. Gabe smiled at them as he realized they were all dressed up.

Violet began to play and the girls sang a beautiful version of *Abide With Me.* As Gabe listened closely to the lyrics, he found himself again having to blink back the tears.

"Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

"I need Your presence every passing hour.
What but Your grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like Yourself, my guide and strength can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

"I fear no foe, with You at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, your victory?
I triumph still, if You abide with me."

Gabe listened closely to the words and knew they'd chosen that song especially for him. The ladies finished and they and Iris went to sit down on the sofa and chairs, all except Lily.

She smiled at the unseen audience. "Hello. I'm Lily Tanner. My twin, Daisy, and I are the closest in age to Gabe. I'm going to introduce you to three speakers today for our little family church event. The first is my sister Rose who is just one year older than Daisy and me in years, but fifty years older in swag."

The family all chuckled.

"She runs the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* here in Pine Forest, Georgia, and was responsible for the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* that happened here on Thanksgiving. We're all terribly proud of her— and scared of her," she added with a giggle. "Rose Tanner."

Rose came forward smiling and hugged Lily. "That was very brave of you," she said softly.

Gabe thought that Rose might do a roasting of sorts of him, but instead she simply bore her testimony. She spoke of times in her life when things seemed as though it was the end of the world, but Jesus was always there with her. She could feel His love. He

gave her peace. “Sometimes,” Rose went on to say, “God uses one of his warriors to help me and to protect me, and my brother, Gabe, he is one of those warriors. One time I was walking across a field at the park and Gabe saw a ball coming right at me. He literally flew across the field, jumped up and caught the ball before it could hit me.”

Gabe rolled his eyes and shook his head because that was not what happened at all, and the whole story was an inside family joke. They’d been playing football and Rose walked right into their field of play.

They all looked up as CJ came in the front door. He quickly smiled and nodded at everyone. “Sorry I’m late.”

He found a seat quickly next to Violet, who smiled at him. He briefly leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Rose went on. “And one time an ex-boyfriend of mine tried to manhandle me a little bit, and Gabe stepped up out of nowhere and made him let me go. That was the moment I knew, my little brother was becoming a man, which was a pleasant thought and a horrible thought at the same time. What I know to be true, though, is my little brother is one of God’s chosen warriors. I love him with all my heart and I’m so very proud of him. Sure, he makes mistakes, cuz like, he’s human. I think he is, anyway. But we all make mistakes, don’t we?” She shook her head. “I sure do. Even when we make mistakes, I know Jesus still loves us. He’s still with us, and His grace will always be His gift to us. So, each day, let’s renew ourselves in that grace and move forward. That is my prayer, in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

“Amen,” the entire family said, which woke up Gentian. She started to fuss and Lizzy came and got her from Gabe’s arms and went to sit in the corner chair with a blanket, so she could discreetly nurse the baby.

Lily stood back up. “Rose, thank you so much for your words.” She smiled at the phone her father was still holding. “Our next speaker is a good friend of ours. Especially of my sister, Violet.”

Surprised, Gabe looked over at CJ.

“This guy, he’s an agent for Ameritech Security, and he has a little story to tell. He’s shared this story with some of our family, but he’s never spoken about it publicly. He’s been through quite a trauma. One that would make many people turn their backs on God. He’s gonna give us a little abbreviated version of what happened to him the summer he graduated from high school. His name is Carson Blackmon, but we all call him CJ. Come on up, CJ,” she said with a sweet smile.

CJ rose and came to the front of the room right in front of the piano.

Violet smiled at her sweet guy. He’d dressed up the best he could. He wore a suit but only had one arm through the jacket since his broken arm was in a sling. He still had a few cuts on his face.

He glanced in her direction and smiled at the girl he loved. “Hello, everyone. I was invited to speak at this little family church meeting today because they thought it might be inspirational for people to know that we don’t have to give in when things go bad. The problem is, I did give in. I gave in and I gave up. But even when you do that, when you become the prodigal son, you can still go back, and God takes you back immediately. God is an awesome God. I’ve never spoken about this in public, but I am today, because

I've been convinced that it would help others and that it would also help me. Allow me to tell you briefly what happened to me.

"I had just graduated from high school. I lived in a modest four-bedroom home with my parents, my little brother and even littler sister." He stopped because he immediately got emotional.

Since the Tanners knew the story, they too had to blink back the tears that threatened.

CJ cleared his throat. "Some bad guys broke into our house and I happened to be the one who'd come downstairs in the middle of the night and I caught them. We fought. I lost the battle. They knocked me unconscious, and stole my father's car. But they also decided they would burn the house down, so they started a fire before they left.

"Like I said, I was unconscious. But my best friend had spent the night with me and came downstairs and saw that I was down and the house was on fire. He pulled me out through the garage door and my friend, always the hero, went back in to try to rescue my family. But the fire had progressed too far. My friend fell through the floor from the second story.

"When I woke up in the hospital I learned that my friend was injured and because of that injury, had lost his full scholarship to play football at a D1 college. Then I heard the *real* bad news. My entire family perished in the fire." He paused for a moment to let that sink in. "My sweet mom, my hardworking dad, my awesome younger brother who worshiped the ground I walked on, and my adorable little sister. They were gone. And I totally lost it. I'd been a Christian my whole life, but when God tested me, I turned my back and walked away. I did things I never thought I would do. Drugs. Alcohol. Lying. Stealing. And other things. I think it may have been a form of self-flagellation. This is a young audience, so look that up. It means, I was beating myself up.

"That was ten and a half years ago. Oh, but God didn't give up on me. He was working on me. I had to show a little bit of faith. I had to take a few steps toward Him. That is what brought me to become an Ameritech agent, cleaning myself up and taking those steps toward Him. And it was what brought me to the little town of Pine Forest, Georgia. A few months ago, I walked up to the Tanners who stood together talking at the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* and had to blink my eyes. My friend. My best friend from all those years ago stood talking to the Tanner family. He recognized me and acted very happy to see me. But I couldn't stand to look at him. I felt so ashamed. Ashamed that I'd gone off the deep end. Ashamed that my friend got hurt at my house and lost his scholarship. I found it almost unbearable to be in his presence. It's like his light was too much for me.

"Then, last Sunday, I was sitting in church with my girl, who I'll just say publicly right now, is Violet Tanner. She was working on me too and she had me going back to church. I heard a little talk given by Toby Nash and what he said resonated with me so much. It was a turning point in my life. So, I contacted my old friend, and we met and had a long talk. Cleared the air. Now, the circumstances of that talk are huge and good for another whole sermon. Let me just skip to the end. There was repentance involved. There was forgiveness involved. There was honesty involved. There was healing of my soul. And one of the big things I learned was that I had to forgive myself.

"I could stay miserable and cut myself off from people I loved and who loved me, or I could let go and let God heal me. Oh, and He did. The light of Jesus flooded me and healed me and after all this time, I've never been so happy in my whole life. Yes, I still miss my family. But God has whispered to me in that still small voice that it's time for me to stop looking back and start looking to the future. And that's exactly what I intend to do.

"So, my brothers and sisters, no matter what trauma you've been through in your life, be kind to yourself, allow the pain, then turn it over to Jesus. He will heal you. He will take away that pain. He will restore your heart. I know this of a surety. I love Him, and I love all of you. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," the family whispered.

There were a few sniffles as they all realized just how far CJ had come since that day.

Lily stood back up. "Okay, we have one more speaker. Our father, Keegan Tanner. Today, people who think they know him are gonna see a whole different side of him. It's the side of him that us kids remember most. Okay, Daddy, hand off that camera to CJ and come on up."

Keegan rose and went to the front of the room. He smiled. "I'm gonna tell you a little story. Once upon a time, there were five little angels," he began. "Well, four angels and one little imp," he corrected.

The girls all smiled. First, he looked so handsome in his suit. He was forty-nine years old but was fit and trim. He had dark hair with a tiny bit of gray at the temples. It was thick and wavy like Gabe's. He had a few laugh lines around his dark eyes. He had a bit of a stubble of beard right now, but you could still see the dimple in his left cheek. Gabe had that same dimple. They were proud of their father, and they loved when he told his stories.

Lizzy also smiled. This handsome strong man was hers. It always amazed her and she was always grateful that God sent him to her.

Keegan went on. "Now, these five little angels all had blond hair and blue eyes, just like their mother. The mother angel named her five little girl angels after flowers, because flowers were some of her favorite things that God created, and these angels were as beautiful as any flower could be. The angels loved their mother and always did nice things for her, like filling her bathtub with flowers or painting her door purple."

Violet giggled, because she had indeed done that.

"Then one day, their mother met an ugly toad of a man. He had a broken leg, and though he was a very mean and ugly man, she helped him. She took very good care of him and helped him to heal; after all, she *was* an angel. And then, the strangest thing happened; the angel and the ugly man fell in love. The angel didn't seem to care that the man was ugly; she loved him anyway. The man vowed to work hard and take care of the angels. They got married and they had a new baby. It was a boy angel and they named him Gabriel."

Gabe rolled his eyes.

"Oh, how the little angels loved their new brother. When he was born, their hearts grew three sizes that day."

"Uh, plagiarize much?" Rose asked, making the others laugh.

Keegan smiled at her. "You're just mad because I called you an imp."

"Oh, that was me?" she asked, pretending to be surprised.

When the laughter stopped, he went on. "Gabriel grew up to be a prince of an angel, because God chose him to be so. He loved his sister angels and they loved him. Gabriel was strong, and he wasn't an ugly-toad-looking man like his father. He was *very* handsome."

"Stop," Gabe ordered.

Everyone laughed again.

"But he was mischievous. He was always getting into trouble. Not on purpose. He just made mistakes, like breaking the window with his ball, or spilling paint on his sister's project, or wrecking the car. But he also tried very hard to do good things and to help people and to always do what God wants him to do no matter how hard it seems to be. And then the angel mother and the ugly toad of a father had another baby girl and they named her Iris."

Iris clapped for herself. "Yaay."

Keegan chuckled. "And Gabriel and his older sister angels loved her so much. She was beautiful like her sisters, but mischievous like her brother. They were very happy. Then one day, Jesus spoke to Gabriel. He let him know that life was gonna get hard for him. That people were gonna try to hurt him and hurt the people he loved. Jesus told Gabriel that he had to be strong and that the things that would happen to him would help to make him very strong. And Gabriel agreed to do whatever God wanted him to do."

Keegan nodded. "Of course, this is just a story, right? But what if this was real? What if all of us here on earth who are God's children, what if He's waiting for us to tell Him that no matter how hard it gets, we'll do whatever He needs us to do? Maybe all God wants us to do is be kind to each other. Or to reach out and help each other. Maybe He wants us to tell others about Jesus and that He's real. Maybe He wants us to teach people how to be a good, strong family. Maybe He wants us to protect those who are smaller or weaker and need protection. The point is, we all need to find out what God wants us to do for Him. Each person has their own path to walk. And God is not gonna tell us the whole plan. He just shows us a little bit and asks us to walk in faith. That's what Prince Gabriel in my story will do. Can we..."

He stopped and pulled his buzzing phone from his pocket. He glanced at the text and sighed, then looked up. "Lizzy, will you finish this up for me? I gotta take this." He hit a button, put the phone to his ear. "Whaddya got?" he asked as he rushed from the room.

Lizzy handed the sleeping baby off to Daisy and went to the front of the room. "Well, I know my husband, who, by the way, is not an ugly toad at all, was pretty much summing up his story. He was probably about to challenge you to find out God's will for your life. It may not be what you've been thinking. It may not be about being rich or famous. But whatever it is, if we're doing His will, it will make us happy. My husband would only take a business call in the middle of church, if it was an emergency. So, whatever is happening, I hope you will all put your prayers around the people affected. I'm sure he would have finished his remarks with 'I say these things in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,' because we always do everything in Jesus' name. So, in

Jesus' name, I leave these things with you, Amen. Lily?"

Lily moved back to the front. "Alright, thanks to the wonderful speakers we've heard today. And now, we have a special surprise for you. Mom, our mother, Lizzy Tanner, is gonna sing **O Holy Night for you and then we're gonna ask Gabe to give us a closing prayer."

Violet took her seat at the piano and Lizzy stood just in front of the piano. Gabe started to bounce little Isaiah in his arm as he was starting to stir. He was probably getting hungry, Gabe thought. Gentian had already been nursed. "Shh, little man," Gabe whispered as he bounced him and looked up as his mother began to sing and her sweet voice flowed over them.

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Proverbs 23:29-33

"Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has conflicts?
Who has complaints? Who has wounds for no reason?
Who has red eyes? Those who linger over wine, those who go looking for mixed wine. Don't gaze at wine because it is red,
when it gleams in the cup and goes down smoothly.
In the end it bites like a snake and stings like a viper.
Your eyes will see strange things, and you will say absurd things."

Chapter Seven

December 8th, Sunday Morning
Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Logan took Melody's hand as he helped her from his car. They'd had to park on the street about a quarter of a mile down the block. They walked slowly up the sidewalk toward the church hand in hand. It was mostly a low-to-medium-income residential neighborhood. Right before they got to the church was a driveway into a small apartment complex. The apartments appeared to be old and run-down. They passed the apartments on their right and stared up at the white church.

"Hmm," Melody said. "It's gotten a lot worse than I remember."

Logan looked it over. Melody was absolutely right about it being symmetrical. There were steps leading up to the arched double front doors of the church. Above the arched front doors was a large, arched window, only there was no glass. Instead, it was boarded up. The chapel of the church was obviously in the center area. The building wasn't very wide, but was long and skinny. There was a large steeple with a cross on top. The building was white brick but had black streaks of mildew or mold. The same was true for the walkway that led up to the concrete steps, and the steps themselves.

Logan pulled out his phone and snapped off a few pics.

"Well, it is most definitely run-down," he said. "But it's actually a nice building. If you were to put this building out in an old country neighborhood, like in Pine Forest, it would fit in perfectly. Still, I like it, and I, too, like the symmetry."

Melody smiled up at him. "It is sweet, isn't it?"

"Hmm, sweet. I guess." He glanced over to the left of the church. There was almost no room, maybe three or four feet between the edge of the church property and the high chain-link fence that enclosed the parking lot and property of an obviously abandoned motel. The motel was on the corner and faced the busier street on the other side. It was T-shaped, with the office and some rooms in the front and the base of the 'T' with the majority of the rooms reaching back toward the church. The motel was surrounded on both sides by a large parking area. It seemed the parking area was much too big for such a tiny motel that probably only had about thirty rooms in it.

"Melody!"

Logan and Melody turned to see Bristol come out of the church and head down the stairs. "Hey, Bristol," Melody said sweetly as the girl approached. She hugged her. "It's so nice to see you."

"You too, and I'm so happy that you came! Thanks so much!"

"Thanks so much for inviting me. Bristol, this is my boyfriend, Logan Adams. Logan, this is Bristol Palma."

Logan smiled warmly and took her offered hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"I hope it's okay that I brought him along," Melody said.

"Oh, it's more than okay. 'The more, the merrier,' the reverend said, though I have to say, I don't see how just inviting some young people to come out to church today will help the church in any way. I mean, it's not like you're gonna say, wow, this is a cool church, let's start going here."

Melody shrugged. "You never know." She touched Bristol's shoulder. "So, how's your grandma?"

"She's okay. She walks with a cane now. I'm trying hard to take care of her, but things are getting difficult. I'm worried that I'm not gonna be able to take care of her much longer. She really needs someone to be with her, but I'm working two jobs to try to make ends meet."

"Oh, Bristol. I didn't know you were struggling so hard."

Bristol glanced at Logan. "Yeah, it's okay. Anyway, that's personal stuff."

Melody nodded. "We'll talk later for sure."

"So, you wanna head in?" Bristol asked. "You're early, so we can walk around and I'll introduce you to a bunch of very nice old people."

"Sounds like a good time," Logan said.

Bristol laughed. "Very funny."

Logan smiled. "I wasn't joking."

Bristol looked him over then looked over at Melody. "Looks like you found yourself a good guy."

"Oh, I did indeed."

Logan looked Bristol over too, as they headed up the steps. She was petite, with long, thick dark black hair and warm tan skin. She might have been Polynesian or Filipino. Her knee-length brown dress and long gray sweater were plain, and seemed slightly drab for such a young, pretty girl.

They walked in through the heavy, wooden, double-arched doors. Logan looked closely at the doors. They might be a hundred years old. They were definitely quality. Inside was a vestibule with an antique secretary desk with envelopes and pens on it along with a locked slotted box for the envelopes.

The room should have been bright and airy, but it was dark. Logan turned and looked up at the boarded-up window.

"That used to be a stained-glass window," Bristol said. "Someone shot it out and broke it and they weren't able to get it fixed."

"No insurance?" Logan asked.

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. But thank goodness the one at the back of the church is still there. It's the one at the back of the chapel, Melody, that you liked so much, remember? It's so beautiful."

Logan nodded and glanced around. He pointed to either side of the front wall where the broken window loomed. "I guess they didn't feel like shooting out the smaller windows?"

"They did, but they were able to get those replaced," Bristol said. She smiled. "Anyway, through these doors and then through the next doors is the chapel."

"What's down that way and that way?" Logan asked as he pointed down the corridor

that symmetrically went off to the right and to the left.

"Oh, those lead to a hallway that runs alongside each side of the chapel. There are classrooms and offices and there's a stairway on the back left side that leads down to the basement where there are more classrooms and a large community room where they used to have potluck dinners and stuff like that."

Logan nodded. "So, it's actually bigger than it seems. I mean, at first glance, I thought there was only a chapel and that's it."

"Well, it's not much bigger. And there's some water damage in some of the downstairs rooms and there's only one bathroom for the men and one for the women. Come on," Bristol said, "I want to introduce you to MY boyfriend."

"Oh, yes, please introduce me," Melody said.

They went into the chapel. Immediately, one couldn't help but gaze up at the large stained glass window behind the pulpit.

"Wow, that's prettier than I remember," Melody said.

"I love it," Bristol whispered.

Logan studied the window. Jesus was the prominent figure. He had a golden light shining on Him and He was surrounded by children. "Suffer the children to come unto me," he mumbled.

Melody smiled. "I guess that's what they're trying to do today."

Logan smiled at her.

They walked down the aisle and a young man rose from his seat in the second pew from the front where he sat next to an older woman. He turned and smiled.

"Melody, this is Banny."

"Banny?" Melody questioned to make sure she heard it right.

He smiled and took her hand. "Yes. It's a nickname. My real name is Banoy."

"Banoy," Melody repeated.

"Yeah, but call me Banny." He offered his hand to Logan.

Logan smiled and shook his hand. "I'm Logan."

"Nice to meet you. So whaddya think about the church?" he asked.

Logan nodded. "I think it's cool. Needs work."

Banny nodded. "Yes, it does. I been workin' on the water damage problem downstairs. But it's slow going."

"You're a plumber, or in construction?"

"Well, I work for my father and he does remodeling. I know a little bit, but I think I bit off more than I can chew."

"So, Banny, do you usually come to this church with Bristol?" Melody asked.

He shook his head. "No, I don't usually go to church at all. But since I been working on the water problem and Bristol begged me to come today, I decided to come just for her."

Logan nodded. "That's nice for Bristol. So, mind if I ask if you have ever thought about going to church?"

He shrugged. "Naw. I mean, my parents are from the Philippines, and they are big-time Catholics, but that's not for me. I mean, I got no problem with Jesus and all. He's a good guy I guess. I just haven't ever thought about goin' to church as bein' all that

important."

Logan nodded. "Well, it's not really. Or, I mean it is but it isn't."

Melody's head whipped around, the same time as Bristol's.

Logan smiled at them and then looked at Banny. "Jesus didn't actually command us to go to church. But He did say that fellowshipping with the saints, meaning the fellow believers in Christ, fellowshipping is important. So, you don't have to go all the time, but you should take a day to praise and worship whether you're at church or home or walking in nature. Rest on the seventh day, be it Saturday or Sunday, or whenever. Still, it's good to go to church. Talk to people and mingle with people who have your same beliefs. Back in Jesus' day, after he was crucified, it was joyful when the followers of Jesus came upon another follower. They had to keep their beliefs a secret, so it felt good to find some who believed in Jesus the way *they* did."

Banny nodded. "Interesting. So, what church do you go to?"

"Well, my family and I go to a lot of different churches. We find some that are really filled with the Spirit and some that are all for show. No matter what we find, we try to spread God's Word. It's actually a lot of fun."

Bristol gave a soft laugh. "The way you talk, you sound like you could be a preacher yourself, Logan."

"He could," Melody put in quickly.

"So, what do you do?" Banny asked him.

"I'm in school right now, studying music and religion, but I'm gonna be making an album this spring. I'm writing it now and I'm grateful that I already have a label that will produce it."

"Wow, that's awesome," Bristol said.

"What kinda music?" Banny asked.

"Christian music."

"Who's the record label?"

"Nash Records."

"Oh, that's a big label."

Bristol grabbed Mel's arm. "Well, I hate to interrupt, but Melody, I want you to say hello to grandma before the meeting starts."

Bristol turned to the older woman who'd been sitting quietly in the pew right next to them.

"Grandma," Bristol said, gently putting her hand on the woman's arm. "Grandma, do you remember Melody?"

The woman looked up at Melody. "Oh yes, of course I do. She came here several years ago, right?"

Melody smiled. "Yes, ma'am. Hello, Mrs. Palma. It's nice to see you again. I'm sorry, I didn't even realize that you were sitting right here. I hope you didn't think I was being rude."

"Oh, that's okay, dear. You young people needed to talk. I'm a good listener. So, who's the cute young man with you?"

Logan didn't wait for an introduction. He leaned over and took the woman's hand in his own. "Hello. I'm Logan. Shall I call you Mrs. Palma?"

The woman smiled. “Well, Logan, hello there, young man, and I believe that YOU may feel free to call me Christina.”

Bristol and Banny gasped. She’d never offered her first name to anyone.

Melody giggled because she knew Logan had a way with the ladies.

Logan patted the woman’s hand. “Christina, that is a beautiful name. It means, follower of Christ.”

“Yes it does, dear, and I’m not at all surprised that you would know that.”

“Christina, it’s so very nice to meet you.”

She squeezed his hand. “And you as well. Such a lovely young man,” she said, her eyes shining.

Logan looked around. “Well, I imagine the music will be starting any moment to get the people to come in and sit down.”

“Oh, there won’t be any of that,” Christina said.

Both Melody and Logan looked to Bristol for an explanation.

“They had to sell off the organ and the piano to pay some back taxes before the end of the year. So, we’re down to just singing a cappella, and most of these older people don’t really feel like they can sing, so, a lot of the time there is no music at all.”

Logan shook his head. “No way, not when I can help it. Where’s your preacher or pastor or whatever you call it?”

Bristol sighed. “He’s a Reverend. I’ll introduce you. Follow me.”

“I’ll stay here with Grandma,” Banny said.

Bristol, Melody and Logan headed down to the front of the chapel. Bristol tapped the shoulder of an elderly gentleman in a black suit. The man excused himself from speaking to a few other elderly people and turned to look at Bristol.

Logan had to blink his eyes. The man was tall, thin, extremely old, and very solemn looking, though his smile was warm and kind.

He smiled kindly. “Well, Miss Palma, it appears we have a lot more people here today.”

She nodded. “Yes, Reverend Clark, it looks like we have at least fifteen new faces that I can see from here,” she said as she looked around the chapel.

“I guess it worked.”

Bristol frowned. “Well, not to be rude, Reverend, but it’ll only work if they keep coming back.”

He nodded and smiled kindly. “Well, I’ve prayed over this and I feel pretty *good* about today.”

“That’s nice. So, Reverend Clark, I’d like to introduce you to a couple of friends of mine. This is Melody Keith and this is Logan, uh...”

“Adams,” Logan supplied quickly. He held out his hand.

The Reverend smiled kindly. “It’s very nice to meet you. I’m so glad you could come today.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s nice to be here,” Logan said. “Sir, I was just informed that there will be no music here today because you had to sell your organ and piano.”

The Reverend nodded. “Yes. It’s so sad, really.”

“Well, sir, I’m a musician and I have a keyboard in my car. I was wondering if you

would allow me to bring it in and play some music for the church today."

"A keyboard?"

"Yes, sir. Like, an electric piano, uh, or organ, because I can make it sound like either one."

"Hmm, what kind of music do you play?"

"All kinds of music. But for today, I'll only play traditional hymns if that's what you're worried about."

He shook his head. "No. I'm not worried. I was just wondering if you could play any of those Christian songs the young people are listening to nowadays. You know, so that maybe the kids here might come back next week."

Logan smiled. "Oh, yes, sir. I can. I play pretty much anything you'd like. Anything. I'm pretty good."

The man smiled. "Oh, you're that good, are you?"

"Well, sir, I've worked hard and I've come a long way and well, yes, sir, I'm that good. But I'm not bragging, sir, I'm just saying it to give you reassurance that I won't mess up the service."

The man nodded with a knowing smile. "Ya know, young man, God told me He would send somebody good. He used those words. 'Somebody good.' I didn't know what He meant at the time, but I think this is it."

Logan smiled at the thought that God would speak to this man about little old Logan Adams.

Reverend Clark smiled. "So, Mr. Logan Adams, how long will it take you to get your electric keyboard and get set up?"

"Not long at all. Just a few minutes. I'll go get it."

"Good. And then, why don't you be our minister of music today?"

Logan nodded. "I would love that. I'm happy to help. Just tell me when and how long and I'll take it from there."

He nodded. "Go get your thing. We'll talk while you set up."

He'd swung into action so fast, it almost made Melody dizzy. "So, Logan, what can I do to help?" she asked.

He smiled at her. "Thank you. Will you find out where the outlets are? And grab me one of those hymnals I saw. Oh, and make sure your phone is charged because we're gonna use some video to get more people out next week. And start a list." He looked at Bristol. "You too. Write down everything we can do to make this place look like Christmas. Flowers. Decorations. Garland. Whatever. I'm not good at that stuff, but you know what I mean. If we're gonna get people out here, we gotta get cleaned up. I'm goin' to the car. Be right back."

He was back in only a few minutes. He had his keyboard, the stand and an extension cord slipped over his shoulder. He brought it to the front of the chapel and set up in the space where the piano used to be, then turned and went looking for a folding chair or something to sit on.

Reverend Clark came over to speak to him. "You can play some prelude music now, if you'd like. Then I will welcome everyone, and then, what if we start the service with a couple of Christmas hymns?"

"Sounds great. Any hymn in particular?"

He nodded. "I've always loved *'O Come, All Ye Faithful*' to begin a service. And then maybe, something like *'Joy to the World*' or '*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.'* You pick one of those and let me know."

"We'll do '*Joy to the World,*'" Logan said immediately.

"Well, young man, you have a quick mind, don't you?"

Logan smiled. "I guess I'm on a roll, and when my mind gets goin', I have no choice but to try to keep up."

"Wonderful," the man said. "I think you are an answer to my prayers. Okay, so, after those first two songs, then we'll have a prayer, and I'll speak to the people about what we're trying to accomplish, which is essentially to save the church. We need to fill up the pews and fill up the collection plate. That's the only way to keep our doors open."

Logan nodded. "I have a feeling it's gonna happen."

The man's lips trembled and his eyes misted over. Logan put a hand on his shoulder and gave a nod, then looked down and started playing an elaborate version of the two hymns they would sing as prelude. As he did, he closed his eyes and asked God to touch the hearts of the people present. He looked up and smiled at his sweet Melody who was beaming at him from her place next to Bristol. She tapped her hand over her heart and he smiled bigger.

Almost as soon as the music started, the people milling around out in the vestibule and out in the hallways started filing in. The older people who were used to coming to this church were astounded at the good-looking young man playing the keyboard. More importantly, the young people seemed interested.

Melody held her phone as discreetly as possible and recorded video.

Bristol looked back to see how many people had come today. Instead of the usual ten to twenty elderly people, there were about fifty, and maybe half of them were thirty or younger. She smiled. It was a better turnout than she thought would happen. Still, those fifty only took up the first three rows on either side of the aisle. She never dreamed that Melody would bring her boyfriend and that he would be able to play real music for them. Bristol hadn't even known Melody had a boyfriend other than Cade. If only Melody and Logan would come back too.

She had no idea the amazing ideas and inspiration and whisperings that were so loud inside Logan's head. She also had no idea who he was, what family he was from, and what miracles were about to take place.

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Melody stood on the sidewalk outside the *Hopewood Chapel* and watched her guy as he walked to the end of the street, turned right and started taking pictures of the motel. He'd already loaded his equipment back into his vehicle. He'd come back to escort her and asked her to wait a minute while he took a few pictures. He'd taken pics of the church from a bunch of different angles and then started taking pictures of the old motel.

Bristol came to join Melody. "What's he doing?"

"Well, looks like he's taking pictures."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure what he's thinking."

"Well, anyway, Melody, your boyfriend, I mean, wow, he can sing."

Melody turned from watching Logan to smile at Bristol. "Yeah, he can," she answered dreamily.

"When we were all singing that last song with him, I just wanted everyone to be quiet so I could hear him," Bristol remarked.

Melody giggled. "I know what you mean. But it's good for everyone to be able to praise and worship through song."

"So, you said he's making an album?"

Melody nodded.

Bristol sighed. "He's gonna be famous one day."

"Uh, he already is. His videos have gone viral."

"Oh, he makes videos?"

"Bristol, where have you been?"

She shrugged. "I work two jobs and I take care of my grandma. I don't have a lot of time for, like, social media and stuff."

"I'm so sorry, Bristol. That was really mean of me to say. So, anyway, if you can find some time, go online and watch videos for Logan Adams. He recently sang on *America Can Dance*, and he has his own website and YouTube channel and all the other social media sites. And he's on several of Gabe Tanner's videos on GabeTanner.com."

"Oh, Gabe Tanner. I've watched him, because Banny loves martial arts stuff."

"Okay, then, Gabe is dating Taylor Kino, have you heard of her?"

"Yes, of course. Such a cute thing."

Melody smiled. "Well, Taylor Kino is Logan's cousin."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. And Taylor's father, Ricky Kino, is Logan's uncle, and Taylor's mom, Breanna Adams Kino, is Logan's aunt."

"Oh, Logan *Adams*, Breanna *Adams*. Oh, wow! He is from a very famous family!"

"Yes, he is. And I work for that family. I work for the elder Kinos. Grandmaster Kino and his wife Shelley."

"I thought you were doing child care."

"I am. They have five little two-year-olds. But it's a long story." She smiled as Logan came back up the street toward her.

"So, Logan, I would really love to know what's going through your head," Melody said.

He glanced at Bristol before he answered the question. "A lot of things, actually. We'll talk later." He smiled at Bristol. "Well, Bristol, it was a great pleasure meeting you and your sweet grandmother."

"It was nice meeting you too," she said. "I hope you might consider coming back. I loved hearing you sing, and I don't think I've heard such beautiful music coming from this church in a long time. Probably not since they had a choir, which was years ago."

"Well, thank you, and I don't have to consider coming back. I'll be back next Sunday. And I have a feeling I'll have a lot of people with me."

"Really? That would be so awesome."

Melody smiled.

Logan looked up as Reverend Clark made his way down the steps, holding tightly to the handrail. Logan rushed forward to help the man by grasping his arm in his strong fingers.

"Thank you, young man," Reverend Clark said with a nod of his head.

Logan looked around. "I don't see any wheelchair-accessible ramps."

"Oh, our accessible entrance is down there through the side doors," he said, pointing toward the left side of the building. "It's the best we could do."

Logan nodded. There was so much to do.

"You did a remarkable job with the music today," the Reverend said as he held his hand out to shake.

Logan took his hand. "Thank you, sir. It's what I do. My heart is full of the Spirit when I'm singing and praising."

"I could feel that."

"Reverend Clark, I'd like to come back and do even more for you. Can I reach you by phone?"

The man nodded his head. "Let me give you my card."

Logan watched as old, shaky hands pulled a wallet from inside his suit pocket, slowly opened it, and took a minute to find a business card and pull it from between a few dollar bills. He handed the card to Logan.

Logan looked it over. "This is your home phone?"

The man nodded and smiled and pointed at the house across the street from the church. "I live right there. I don't own a cell phone, but I do have a landline."

Logan looked over at the house. It was an older home. Maybe as old as the church. He nodded. "It looks like a lovely home."

The man smiled. "It used to be, when my wife was alive. Lived in that house sixty-nine years."

"Sixty-nine years?" Logan asked incredulously. "Were you born in that house?"

The man chuckled. "Oh, no, I was twenty-three years old when I married my sweet wife, and moved into that house fresh out of theology school and became the assistant to the pastor of the Hopewood church."

Logan tried to quickly do the math. He needed young Eric. He looked closely at the man. "So, you're what, ninety-something years old?"

The man smiled. "I am ninety-two."

"Wow," Logan said, though it didn't really surprise him. He looked incredibly fragile. Logan looked again at the old house. It too was run down. "Do you live there alone, then?" Logan asked.

The man nodded. "I do now that my wife passed."

"How long ago did your wife pass?"

"It's been twelve years now."

"I'm sorry for your loss, sir."

He nodded. "Thank you. I will see her again, and it probably won't be long now."

Logan smiled. "No children?"

"Oh, yes, we raised a boy and a girl. Ron Junior and our little Linda. Ron died in Vietnam back in 1973."

"I'm so sorry," both Logan and Melody whispered.

The man shook his head. "That boy, that was a headstrong boy." He sighed. "I miss him."

"And has Linda passed too?" Logan asked.

He shook his head. "No, well, at least I don't think so. Our Linda left home a few years later. She left the fold. Rebelled. I think I was too hard on her. She ran off with some boy, lived in one of those communes for a while. Did lots of things that broke her mother's heart. She should be sixty-six years old now. I tried to find her when her mother passed, but failed. I handled things poorly with her. I would do a whole lot of things differently if I had a chance. It would do my heart good to see her again before I leave this old world. I have lots of things to say to her." He sighed and blinked as if coming out of a trance. "Well now, I haven't spoken about my past in a very long time. There's something about you, young man."

Logan chuckled. "There's something about you too, sir. I'm gonna speak to my family about what we can do to help you keep your church. I'm not meaning to be pushy, but would you be open to that?"

"Oh, absolutely," Ronald said with a smile. "When God answers prayers, one doesn't shut the door on His angels."

"Well, sir, I'm no angel, but I may give you a call a little later this afternoon if that's okay," Logan answered.

"I'll look forward to hearing from you, Mr. Adams."

Logan and Melody said their goodbyes and headed down the street to his car. They drove away and Logan turned and took Melody's hand. "Mel, thank you so much for inviting me today."

She giggled. "I didn't invite you. You finagled an invitation."

He gave a soft laugh. "Babe, my mind is moving so fast, I can barely keep up. I feel the Spirit so strong, telling me to act fast."

"Act in what way?"

"Work a miracle. Save this church. It feels so important. I feel so invigorated."

"Well, what do you have in mind?"

"Everything. Everything. But I need the family on board because I don't personally have the means to do anything. Not yet, anyway. And I don't know if I'll have the time. I have exams this week. JoJo has surgery in the morning. I know there are already Christmas parties and activities planned. But this is important and I have to try. First, we need to accomplish the lists that you and Bristol made up."

Melody smiled. "Those aren't real big projects. The problem is, Bristol has to work. But I could work on it, though I'm supposed to work tomorrow, but I bet Miss Shelley would probably bring the kids and we could work on it together. But some of the things, like, have to be done professionally, like, someone to pressure-wash the building and the steps to get rid of the mildew. And someone to handle the water problem in the basement. But other stuff, like hanging wreaths on the front doors. Bristol and I thought we need to put up two Christmas trees outside, on either side of the steps, to get attention from the community. And we'll need to decorate the vestibule and the chapel. I could take care of that, I think."

Logan nodded. “Well, I can help once I get out of class. JoJo’s surgery is outpatient, so he’ll be home recovering but I can come help. Young Eric has a couple of free days before his big premiere on Friday. First things first, I wanna talk to the family. They might be able to help more than we think.”

Melody nodded. “Yeah, and my family might be able to help. The boys have school, but they might work after school for a few hours. Mom and Dad too.”

“That would be great.” He sighed. “Let’s have some lunch with the fam and I’ll present my thoughts to them. Everyone will be together at the Grands’ cuz we were supposed to help the new kids decorate the trees.”

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A few hours later, the extended family gathered around the giant dining-room table: Mark and Bella; JoJo; Joey and Breez; Ricky and Bree; young Eric and Jordan; Taylor; Jewell Brooks; Jeffy and Cam; Jeff and Mickey and their son Daniel; David and Carol Keith with their sons Phillip and Lyle, and, of course, Grandmaster Kino and Shelley. Jeremy Davis and Josie and Jamie Brooks had taken the younger children to the playroom to keep them entertained.

Logan and Melody told everyone at the table what had taken place at church. They described the hardships, the sweet elderly people, the lack of music, everything. As they sat there, Logan sent everyone pics of the church, the surrounding neighborhood, and the motel to their phones and they all studied the pictures as Logan described what he was thinking.

“It was so weird,” Logan went on, “but the moment I looked up at the church building, I felt the spirit come over me so strongly. So look, I know an old church building is not a good investment. I figure that there is no return. So, I don’t know how you’ll feel about this, but it’s like God is telling me to present it to you. So, I’m asking you what you think. I have no revenue yet to operate with. So, the only way I can make this happen is with the help of my family. I mean, can we refurbish the church? Can we buy the motel to make it part of a youth mission for the church? Can we refurbish Reverend Clark’s home? And can anything be done about the run-down apartments on the other side of the church? And the motel really needs to be purchased because the church has no parking. Zero. Everyone parks along the street. And there is water damage to the basement of the church. And I don’t know about other structural problems. I do know that the accessibility problem needs to be evaluated and corrected. And all of this has to take place ASAP. Like, a lot of it before next Sunday, because I’m gonna invite a lot of people to come. And we need a piano, and an organ. And I want to invite you all out to come to the church next Sunday. Actually, if you can come to help work on some of these projects this week, that would be great. I know I’m asking a lot. I know we all have other plans for Christmas, parties and such. I don’t know how we’ll get it done, but maybe if we pray about it, God will lead us in the right direction. But still...”

“Logan, hold up,” Mark said softly.

“Oh, sorry,” Logan said quickly. “I guess I’m getting carried away. I know I have no right to ask all this of you. I feel like my mind is gonna explode—there is so much stuff running around in it. I’ve never felt so motivated in my life. This feels important. It really does. I know JoJo has surgery tomorrow. Young Eric has his big movie opening

on Friday. Everyone was gonna decorate trees and help out at some other places this week. I don't know how we'll get it all in. I have school. Exams."

"Logan," Grandmaster Kino said quietly.

Logan drew a breath and waited.

"Sit down and relax. You've presented your ideas. You don't have to try to convince us. If it's meant to be, God will do that. And you have every right to ask us to help you with this. Sit down now, son, and let some of us other folks get a word in edgewise."

The table chuckled. Logan nodded and slid back into his chair.

Eric senior smiled. "Let's start from oldest to youngest. Tell me what you think, Rick."

Ricky grinned. "I think—I'm not the oldest."

Everyone laughed again.

Eric nodded. "Okay then, I guess that's my cue. I don't know how we'll get it all done, but that's not the problem. We'll figure that out. So, if I push that aside, I would say, our family prays every day offering ourselves up to service to God. We ask Him to put things in our path. This seems to me like something God has put in our path and we can't turn away." He squeezed his wife's hand. "Shelley?"

"Well, I think it will be a great learning event for the children. Not just our children, but all of them. What better thing is there at Christmastime, than to focus on serving others rather than going to parties and getting presents? Besides, we can make every minute we spend working at this little church, like a party. We'll have refreshment tables, even meals at every work party. I'll plan that and make it happen. I'm in."

"Ricky?" Eric said.

Ricky grinned. "I like it. I like it in so many ways. We can get our handy-dandy attorneys," he said, winking at Mark, "to arrange a quick sale of the motel. Tear that fence down first thing so there will be parking. Make a master list, arrange it in order of importance and get to work. We do have the red carpet on Friday. Other than Jordan, Taylor and Bree having a fitting on Wednesday, the rest of us have no other preparations to make for that." He looked at his wife. "Bree?"

"I love it. I love it all so much. Ricky and I can start first thing in the morning. Taylor can't help much because she has dance practice at both school and the Academy and a performance on Saturday at the school Christmas Dance. She might also have another performance at the Nutcracker at the Dolby. But she won't know about that until Tuesday. But Taylor's and young Eric's events aside, we'll give the rest of our time to whatever needs to be done." She looked around. "Who's next?"

Jeff nodded. "I'm 44, so I guess I'm next."

"I'm forty-five," David Keith put in.

"Oh, cool, then you go."

David smiled. "I do still have two more weeks of school, but I'll be happy to dedicate my nights and weekends to help in any way. Sounds like a great learning experience. Jeff?"

Jeff nodded. "I'm on board. I agree with Shelley. Having my boys concentrating on being in service and on helping a church celebrate the birth of Jesus, ya can't go wrong for a Christmas activity. Mickey has the baby, but I don't have to work because I'm still

on family leave until after Christmas, so I'll be available, and the boys can help after school and on Saturday. Mickey, my love? Are you next?"

"I don't know. Anyone else forty-two?"

"I am," Jewell said. "I was forty-two last July."

"I was in February. So, it's me, and I too am on board. And yes, I have the baby," Mickey said as she kissed the forehead of her sleeping baby. "But Scarlett won't keep me from helping. I have the baby carrier Jeffy got me."

"How old is she now?" Carol asked.

"She's two weeks old today."

"Just precious," Shelley whispered.

"Jewell, you're next," Mickey said.

"I love what you want to do, Logan. Except for a few Christmas parties I'll be catering in a few weeks, I'm free. I can be there tomorrow morning and get to work. Josie and Jamie will be available too, after school and on Saturday."

Logan smiled at Jordan's mom. She was always so sweet.

"Who's next?" Bree asked. "Mark, you're forty. Anyone else forty?"

"I am," Carol said. "And I'm in. My husband and the boys have two more weeks of school, and I have work, but we're free on nights and weekends."

Mark nodded. "Awesome. Well, I have to say, son, I'm feelin' ya. The excitement you said you were feeling, I'm feeling it too. I can't wait to go see this place. To talk to the pastor. To meet Miss Christina Palma. I feel it stirring my heart and I'm really happy that you knew you had to do something and I'm really happy and grateful that we have the means to be able to help on a giant scale. I will do my best to clear my calendar and work on this. I think I'll get our guy Alec to do a lot of the legwork on the legal aspects. I'll be on the phone first thing in the morning to work on buying the motel. I'm all in, son."

"Thank you, Dad," Logan said softly.

Bella smiled at her son. "Logan, I'm so proud of you. You've been nothing but joy to me from the day you were born. Em and I will be there first thing in the morning to assess and figure out a plan of action."

"But Mom, I don't want you to strain yourself. I mean, ya know, because of the baby and all."

Bella placed her hand on her abdomen. "Don't you worry about that. Being pregnant doesn't make you an invalid. I'm healthy and good to go. I'm not even due until the end of May." She smiled. "Who's next? Joey?"

He nodded. "Yes, and I do have to work, but I can still help out. And I too, am all in on the idea. Love what you're doing, Logan."

"Me too," Breez said. "And I'm proud of you, sweetie."

Logan smiled. "Thanks, Aunt Breez."

"Well," Cam began. "As of tomorrow, I'm no longer on family leave, so I have some big assignments coming up. But I'll support you whenever I can."

"And I," Jeffy began, "have a baby carrier just like Mickey's and I can help too. I'm strong and healthy."

"I think that brings us to me," JoJo said. "So, I won't be much good to anyone since

I'm having surgery tomorrow."

"But you will," Logan argued. "You can't do anything physical. But like, what degree are you about to have?" He asked the question not because he didn't know, but so that his brother would understand he is completely qualified.

JoJo frowned. "I will only have a bachelor's degree in psychology."

"Only?"

"Well, it's not a master's."

"Okay, so maybe you'll continue on in that, get your master's and your doctorate, but you still have a degree in psychology. And what did you minor in?"

"Christian theology."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why religion and psychology?"

JoJo shrugged. "Well, since you and I both minored in theology, you know why. It's so that one day we can have our own ministry. As you know, I think I want to work with kids in some way and be an influence for good."

"Right. So, I was thinking, you've thought about one day having your own ministry for kids, and you would know or could figure out, what we could do with the motel, how to redesign it to fit the needs of a ministry for kids. I mean, you can dream, right? Dream big, and figure out what we should do with the motel. Pray about it. Walk around the place. Talk to Reverend Clark. Use your brain instead of your body. For now."

JoJo nodded. "Okay, if you think I could help in that way, bro, I'll do that."

Logan smiled. "Awesome." He turned to his other cousin. "Young Eric?"

Young Eric grinned. "Other than Friday night, you got me, bro, all the way."

Logan looked at Jordan.

She smiled. "Logan, I just love you and Melody so much and I know that she knows that I'll do anything for both of you. I'm in. But I do have school. And softball practice. But I'll still make time."

"It's my turn," Taylor said. "And like Mom already pointed out, my calendar is full. But I'll figure out a way to help somehow too."

Phillip nodded. "Yeah, my brother and I are taking Taylor to her dance Saturday night, but we'll work our butts off before that and after that."

Lyle nodded. "What he said."

Finally everyone looked at the youngest person at the table, twelve-year-old Daniel Davis who would turn thirteen in a month. He shrugged. "Well, Dad knows all he has to do is point me and Jeremy in a direction and tell us to get to it and we work for free."

Everyone laughed.

"But really, I think this is actually gonna be fun."

"I agree," Grandmaster Kino said quietly. "Such a fine group of people here."

"Okay, so then," Logan jumped right in. "Then if we're all in agreement, I guess I need to ask, what can I tell Reverend Clark, I mean, as far as what we'll put into the project?"

"We all just said we're all in," JoJo said.

"I think he's talking about money," Mark said. "And we have some money put away

for..."

"Mark," Grandmaster Kino interrupted. "Before you say what you're about to say, please allow me to say what I think about the financing of this project."

Mark sighed.

"Mark, you've always been very conscious of doing things on your own, making sure you're not spoiled and teaching your kids to work hard and not take advantage of certain lifestyles, and I truly commend you on that. I know you've worked hard and have grown quite a nice nest egg that you've put into trusts for your kids. Please, allow those to continue to grow. You know that buying this motel will only be a drop in the bucket for me. Let me do this. I've been trying to think of things I can do for my grandchildren that would be more than simply giving them money after I'm gone."

"Eric, will you please not talk like that," Joey said.

Eric smiled. "I appreciate the sentiment, son, but let's face it."

"Been there done that, and would like to stop going there for a little while," Joey returned.

Eric nodded. "Okay. But still, this is something I can do that may bring huge benefits and it won't make a dent in my savings. As Logan pointed out in the beginning, a church doesn't make a return. And Mark, I can recognize the fact that you want to take responsibility for your son's project, but I hope you will allow me to give this to you. You wouldn't allow me to pay for your schooling, or their schooling. Allow me this. If you don't, I mean, you're starting to hurt my feelings."

Everyone chuckled.

Mark smiled. "I don't mean to hurt your feelings, Eric. You're my stepfather and I love you and respect you with all my heart. When you died, I thought I would die too. I just don't want you to think that I'm taking advantage of you, or really, taking advantage of your wealth."

"Your down-to-earth nature is noted and very much appreciated. I would never think that you are all about the money. But logically, Mark, let me do this. I'll buy the motel. I'll finance the renovation of the church and the Reverend's house. I may do more. Allow me, please. I want to give you this. I need to give you this."

Mark sighed. "Okay, okay. Have at it."

"Wonderful. Thank you."

Logan took over again. "Okay, so, we're gonna do this? One more thing. I'd like to give the Reverend a call and invite him to dinner tonight so that we can tell him what we have planned and make sure he too is on board with it all."

"Oh, dinner. I have to get the roasts in the oven," Jewell said immediately. She excused herself.

"Yes, Logan," Shelley said. "Give Reverend Clark a call. I'm excited to meet him." She rose from the table. "I need to go help Jewell."

"Before we adjourn," Taylor said quickly. "I just wanted to remind everyone to make sure you take some time to watch what was posted on Gabe's site this morning. The Tanners put on a home church event and it was awesome."

"Will do," Eric said.

Shelley poked her head back in. "Eric, will you gather everyone together in the

living room to decorate the trees? If we all work together we can get it done before the Reverend gets here."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, and someone let the kids know our meeting is over."

"I got it," Breez said.

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December 8th, 5:30 PM, Sunday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Hannah Brown came out of her room and made her way to the Inn lobby. The Christmas decorations were everywhere and they were beautiful and they made Hannah smile as she looked around. The pine and the dinner that was cooking in the kitchen made the place smell so good. She drew a deep breath and let out a sigh. Just a week ago, she was hungry and cold and sick and dirty, and now, life seemed like she'd walked into heaven. She imagined heaven was just like this. Now, she was clean and warm. She had on nice clothes. She'd just brushed her hair and changed from her church clothes into some jeans and a sweater and some warm, fuzzy boots. Was this new life even real?

She watched Mister John come in through the kitchen door with his arms full of wood. He went over to stack it neatly by the fireplace, then he turned and headed toward the front of the lobby. He smiled at her as he approached.

"Hello, Hannah," John Appel began as he stood behind the front counter near the front doors of the Inn, taking off his coat. "So, what did ya think about today?"

She looked up at him. He was a big man, with a lot of muscles. His hair was kind of a darkish blond or maybe light brown with gold streaks through it. It was a little bit longer than most men, but it was always neat and clean, not like Carl's greasy scraggly hair. Mister John looked almost exactly like Charlie's dad. Hannah thought they were brothers, but Charlie said they weren't related, which was a good thing since their kids just got married. Charlie said both men looked like Brad Pitt, but Hannah had no idea who that was.

All she knew was, Mister John was so big and strong that she thought most people would be afraid of him. But Hannah wasn't afraid of him at all. He was so nice. He was very quiet and very calm. And when he talked to her, his eyes sparkled, like Santa Claus or something. Right now, he was smiling at her, just patiently waiting for her to answer him.

"Um, it was a nice day."

He nodded. "Be honest now, what did you think about going to church?"

She smiled. "I liked it. Everyone was so nice except one girl, and Matthew said that was because she was jealous of me."

"Hmm, I see," John said, making a mental note to get Jodi to talk to her about that. "And, what did you think about what the preacher said?"

"Well, I was trying to listen, but I couldn't think fast enough. I mean, stuff he said, I'd be thinking about that, and then I would miss the next thing he said and then I'd try to catch up."

"What did he say that made you think so hard?"

"Well, I guess one thing he said was there is nothing anyone can do that is so bad

that they can't go to Jesus and have him forgive them, except to sin against the Holy Spirit." She looked up at Mister John.

He nodded. "What part of that made you think hard?"

"Oh, well, I guess two things. I was wondering if that means Carl would be forgiven for like, killing my mom, and for keeping me like, a prisoner."

"Well, if Carl were to feel remorse for what he did, to understand that he did wrong, and then pray and talk to Jesus and tell Him he was sorry and ask for forgiveness and say that he would not ever do that again, Jesus would probably forgive him."

"But Carl would say that and then laugh about it later."

John smiled. "Well, the thing is, Jesus knows our hearts. He knows if we're sincere and if we're really trying to change and if we're being honest. We can't fool Him. He'll know."

Hannah nodded. "Okay, that's good."

John smiled. "What's the other thing?"

Hannah looked up, her brow furrowed. "The other thing?"

"You said there were two things about what the preacher said. One was if Carl would be forgiven. The other thing was...?"

"Oh, yeah, the other thing was, um, what is a sin against the Holy Spirit? I mean, you can't kill the Holy Spirit, right? Because like, He's already a ghost, right? So, what can you do against the Holy Spirit?"

"That is a really good question, Hannah. That shows me that you were really listening and really trying to understand."

Hannah smiled, her face beaming.

"Okay, let me see if I can help you to understand without going into a deep discussion, since Jodi is about to call us into dinner. When Jesus warned about sinning against the Holy Spirit, which is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, in the Bible some religious leaders had just watched Jesus do something good through the power of God, and they claimed the power came from Satan. They actually saw God's light and deliberately called it darkness. So, this isn't about making one mistake, ignoring one prompting, or asking a confused question. It's about a person becoming so hardened that they keep rejecting what the Holy Spirit is showing them. They call good evil and refuse to repent.

"But Hannah, forgiveness is always there for someone who truly turns to Jesus. But a person who rejects the Spirit also rejects the One who leads them to repentance."

Hannah blinked. "So, if somebody is worried that they may have sinned against the Holy Spirit, then they probably didn't, right?"

John smiled at the sweet girl because she was indeed right. "Yep, that worry is a pretty good sign their heart is still listening. You're asking because you want to understand the truth. That's not rejecting the Holy Spirit, sweet girl."

"Can you tell me a little more about the Holy Spirit?"

"Hmm, let's see. Well, when Jesus sent us the Holy Spirit, it was right after he came back to life and ascended into heaven. Even though Jesus wouldn't be with us, the Holy Spirit would touch our hearts and let us know deep in our souls that God is real, Jesus is real, He really did die and then was resurrected. The things Jesus taught are true. He was

the Son of God. If we pray and talk to God, the Holy Spirit will let us know, like deep inside our minds and hearts that all of these things are true. If we stay quiet and in tune and listen, whatever question we ask, the Holy Spirit will whisper the truth to us."

Hannah nodded. "I prayed to God and I felt like, I mean, like I just knew that everything was gonna be okay."

"Right, sweetie. That was the Holy Spirit talking to you, making you feel calm and peaceful, telling you to hold on, it's gonna be okay. The Holy Spirit is so special, such a gift that Jesus gave us. He didn't want to leave us and have us be alone, so, He sent the Holy Spirit to be with us. Still, sometimes I know, Jesus Himself has spoken to me too. I've heard his voice a few times. Just keep praying and listening."

Hannah frowned. "So, it's serious to sin against the Holy Spirit, I get it, but like, I think Carl killing my Mom is so serious."

John nodded. "It was. But Jesus knows your mom's soul is eternal and she isn't dead or gone to Him. She's present with Him. She's just in another form, and He has her. So He's not really worried about her. But when He sent His Holy Spirit, it's a gift not to be taken lightly." He smiled at her look of confusion.

"Let's say, hmmm, it would be like if I had some friends who needed someone to come and help them. Uh, let's say they were sick and needed someone to help them come clean their house. They wanted me, but I was busy and couldn't be there, and I said, 'okay, I'm gonna send you my precious friend to help you. Her name is Hannah and she's gonna come and help you, clean your house, and whatever else you might need help with. But Hannah is very precious to me. Be good to her. Be respectful to her, or I will never help you again.'

"So, I send Hannah to help the family, but they are rude to her. She cleans up all the dishes and they go and swipe them all off the counter and break them on the floor and then they tell Hannah to do it all over again. They laugh at her. They spit on her. They even kick her and slap her. If they had done all of those things to me, it wouldn't bother me, and I could forgive them, but they did them to my Hannah, who is dear to me and who went there on my request only to do good. And I know, if they would do that to the very thing I promised them, a helper, if they could do that to her, then they are beyond help. For they didn't know that only Hannah would bring them close to me. Therefore, I cannot forgive them. But that is just a small part of it. Bottom line, sweet girl, this isn't about someone knowing better and still making a mistake. It's about continuing to reject the Holy Spirit, calling His light darkness and refusing to repent. Jesus won't force someone to accept the help they keep refusing. But someone who truly turns to Him can ask for forgiveness, just like we talked about."

Hannah blinked up at Mister John, her eyes moistening.

They both turned as they heard Jodi's sweet voice coming over the loudspeaker. "Beautiful guests and therefore family of the *Pine Forest Inn*, your dinner is now being served."

He smiled and put his arm around Hannah. "I think that's enough for now, sweet girl. Let's go chow down."

"Are the Stewarts coming over to eat?"

John shook his head. "Not tonight. They are having a family dinner with Lisa's parents and her sister's family."

Hannah frowned.

John smiled. "But— Charlie and Matt are coming over to get you to help with the puppies in about an hour or so, and we'll sneak them some dessert."

Hannah smiled. "Are they coming on horses?"

"Probably. Why? Do you like the horses, or do they scare you?"

"I like them. I love them. Charlie is gonna teach me how to ride."

"No better one to do that."

"Hey, you two, come on now, we're all waiting for you."

John nodded. "Sorry, sweetheart. We got to talkin'." He entered the dining room and everyone looked up at him. "Hello, honored guests. We here at the *Pine Forest Inn* are so happy to have you join us for Sunday dinner. As you know, we always say a blessing on the food and as you may not know, I always ask if anyone present would like to honor us by saying the blessing."

"I'd be happy to bless the food," a man said.

John smiled at the man, in his forties, here with his wife and three children. "Mr. Layton, I was hoping you'd say that. Please go ahead."

Everyone bowed their heads.

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Matthew 12:31-32

"And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven,
but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven,
but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."

Chapter Eight

December 8th 5:45 Sunday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Grandmaster Kino picked up his phone and glanced at the message. "Logan," he said quietly. "The car is here."

Logan smiled and jumped up from where he sat in the living room talking to the family. He'd intended to go and pick up Reverend Clark himself, but his mom suggested they find a driver who was in the vicinity of the Reverend, have him bring him here, to save an hour, and then Logan could take him home personally. Logan had then decided

to ask Reverend Clark how he would feel about staying the night here at the Kinos'. The man had seemed pleased by the invitation and said he was having quite an adventure today, and so he agreed.

Logan headed out the door and down the front steps. He stood there waiting for the car to come up the long drive. Grandmaster Kino gave his sons Manny and Noah each a kiss on their cheeks and set them down. "Daddy has to go welcome our guest." He looked at his young children. "Now, I would like you children to be polite. This man is older and I would like you to show your very best manners."

"Okay, Daddy," Nate said quickly.

"Is he old wike you, Daddy?" Abe asked.

Ricky laughed. "He's even older than our father."

Eric went to the door and stood in the threshold. Logan went to the car and opened the door for Reverend Clark. He helped the man out and then reached in and grabbed his small bag.

Logan placed the man's hand on his own arm. "We don't have a handrail here, so, hold onto my arm," Logan explained.

They made their way slowly up the steps. There were only five, very wide steps. When they got to the landing, the man straightened and looked up into Eric Kino's eyes.

Eric smiled at him. "Reverend Clark, I'm Eric Kino. I'm Logan's grandfather. Welcome to our home."

"Oh my," the Reverend said. "You look even younger in person than you do on TV. Grandmaster Kino, it's an honor to meet you, and even more to be invited to your home."

"The honor is mine. Please, come in. There's a lot of people inside waiting to meet you."

Logan walked the man over the threshold and into the front entrance foyer.

Shelley stood there, smiling sweetly.

"Reverend Clark," Eric said. "This is my wife, Shelley."

Shelley held out her hand and the man grasped it firmly. "Shelley, it's so nice to meet you."

"You too, Reverend Clark."

"Please, you mustn't all be so formal. My name is Ronald. But I'd be honored if you'd call me Ronny. That's what my wife called me."

Shelley smiled. "Well then, Ronny it is. So, Ronny, dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes, and while we wait, please come in and be comfortable and meet the rest of the family."

"Thank you, dear," he said as he allowed Logan to escort him into the front room and sit him down in the wingback chair that was usually occupied by his grandfather. "That is a magnificent tree!"

"Thank you," Grandmaster Kino replied. "The little ones just finished decorating it right before you arrived."

Mark approached first. He held out his hand. "Reverend Clark, I'm Mark Adams. I'm Logan's father. He hasn't been able to stop talking about you since he got home from church this morning."

"It's nice to meet you, Mark. And your son is a very talented young man." He

chuckled. “He assured me himself before the service, that he was very good, and he didn’t disappoint at all. He was so helpful. You’ve raised a fine young man.”

“Thank you. We’re very grateful for Logan.”

“And who is this little one?” Ronny asked, as a beautiful dark haired girl with big blue eyes grabbed her father’s leg.

“This is our daughter, Emily. Em, can you say hello?”

“Hello,” she said softly.

“Reverend Clark,” Logan began. “I also have a brother,” he said, motioning at someone who approached. “He’s a year older than me.”

Ronny looked up to see a smiling young man with his arm in a sling. “Oh, I know who you are. I’m a big football fan. You’re JoJo Adams. You too are very talented. I’m sorry you were hurt.”

JoJo offered his left hand, which the Reverend took and squeezed. “Thank you, sir. God must have other plans for me. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You as well.”

“My wife is in the kitchen right now,” Mark said. “But you’ll meet her soon. We’ll get out of the way so that you can meet the others.”

JoJo, Mark and Emily went to sit on one of the sofas and Joey approached with his three children. He smiled and offered his hand. “Hello, Reverend, I’m Mark’s little brother, Logan’s uncle. My name is Joey Adams and these are my kiddos. Say your names, kids, oldest first.”

“I’m Sophia.”

“I’m Kelstyn.”

“I’m Ledger,” the boy said really loud, making everyone laugh.

“Oh my,” Ronny chuckled. “It’s very nice to meet you all.”

“My wife is also in the kitchen,” Joey said. “We’ll step back so you can meet Ricky and Bree.”

“Come on, kids, mom wants me to get you into your seats at the table.”

“Me too,” Em said loudly.

Joey held his hand out to his niece. “Come on then, munchkin.”

Ricky and Bree approached and introduced themselves and their children, young Eric and Taylor. Young Eric then introduced his fiancée, Jordan, and her brother and sister, Jamie and Josie.

Jeff Davis and his two boys then stepped up quickly. “Reverend, I’m Jeff Davis. I’m not part of the family, and yet I am. Once this family invites someone into their home, it’s also into their hearts and they won’t let you go. So, I’m just warning you, consider yourself adopted.”

Ronny smiled. “Sounds delightful. And who are these two fine young men?”

“These guys are my sons. This is Daniel,” he said as the boy stepped forward and shook hands. “And this is Jeremy.”

Jeremy also shook hands.

“Right now, my wife is nursing our new little one, Scarlett, but I’ll introduce you later.”

“It’s a pleasure meeting you, Jeff,” Ronny said as they moved aside.

Logan pulled Melody forward. “Reverend Clark, you remember my girlfriend, Melody? She was at church this morning.”

“Oh, yes, the quiet one. I remember her.”

Melody smiled. “Well, I’m not always quiet, but when Logan is on a roll, I like to just sit back and watch him operate.”

The Reverend gave a knowing smile. “I see a match made in heaven.”

Logan grinned and Melody blushed.

“Melody is the one who asked me to come along with her to visit your church.”

“Well, I’m so glad she did, because you were a huge help this morning.”

Melody then introduced her family and finally, Eric senior lined his little ones up and introduced them to the Reverend. Just as he finished, they heard Shelley say to someone, “Please go ask everyone to come to the table.”

They didn’t wait for whoever it was that was supposed to deliver the message. They all started up the steps to the dining room. It turned out to be JoJo and he smiled and simply followed everyone into the dining room.

Once everyone was seated, Eric asked Reverend Clark to give the blessing but he surprisingly declined.

“Thank you so much for honoring me,” Ronny said. “Please humor this old man. I was very much looking forward to someone else blessing my meal for a change. Someone other than myself. I would be delighted to have you pray instead.”

Eric nodded with a smile. “Well then, sir, I am at your service,” he said and went on to give thanks and bless the food.

As the delicious meal was complimented and some children were convinced to eat their vegetables, Eric looked across the table and smiled at the Reverend. “Reverend Clark,” he began, but stopped when the man frowned. “I mean, Ronny,” he amended. “If our timing had been a little better today, we would have had a discussion *before* dinner to tell you all the things our family would like to do for you. We had no time before dinner and I don’t want to make the meal awkward by having you wait until we’ve finished eating, so, if you don’t mind, I’d like to tell you while we eat what Logan and our family would like to do to help.”

Ronny smiled and nodded. “So, I’m guessing that means you’ve come up with ideas on how to get more people to come to our little church?”

Most everyone at the table gave a slight chuckle, and the Reverend looked around. “Did I misspeak?”

“No, sir. Not at all,” Eric said. “They’re laughing because we want to do so much more than that. We definitely can get more people out to the church. That’s the easy part. Keeping them coming, that’s the harder part, but we do have some solutions in mind. Logan has asked me to convey to you what we discussed at our family meeting.”

Ronny nodded. “I am very much looking forward to hearing your ideas and hopefully implementing them. I’ve learned the hard way that I need to be flexible in some things.”

Eric smiled. “That sounds like a conversation I’d love to have with you when we have some time. And I hope we will have some time. For now, let’s begin with this. In order for people to come to *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ*, lovely name

by the way, they will have to drive to get there. They will pull up to the church and have no place to park."

Ronny sighed. "It's been difficult. The church used to have a large lawn where we had picnics and revival meetings, and there was a parking lot on the right side. There are some apartments there now. We were asked to sell off some of the property to help the community and to be honest, because we needed the money. It was a bad decision, with no forethought. At the time, which was back in the early 1980s, it seemed no problem, since most of the people who came to our church simply walked there from the surrounding community. I don't know how I can change the parking situation."

Eric smiled. "Well, we do. We are going to buy the abandoned motel on the other side of the church. This week, we will tear down that fence and use that parking lot for the people who will be driving to visit your church next Sunday."

Ronny's jaw dropped. He was totally speechless.

Eric smiled and went on. "We will eventually turn that motel into some kind of kids, probably mostly teens, learning center or ministry to funnel them into your church. The property itself will be donated to the *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ*, once we get all the details worked out."

Ronny used his napkin to dab at his eyes, then whispered a 'thank you, Jesus' under his breath. "That property has been sitting there for years. Once they closed down there was a big influx of crime, vandalism, gangs. That's why the city put up the big fence. But that property has to cost millions of dollars."

Eric sighed. "What it costs is inconsequential. We'll see. If it's been sitting there, then more than likely it belongs to the city. We may have to only pay the back taxes to take ownership. We'll see. I have experts working on it and we'll know something by tomorrow."

Mark smiled.

"Why would you do this?" Ronny asked, his voice just a whisper.

"Well, first, Logan was quite moved when he attended your church this morning, so, we met together as a family. We all feel that if God put you and your church in our path, then we are supposed to get to work. It's nothing more than simply a desire to serve God, to do His will." He smiled and went on. "Now, I understand there are some renovations that need to be made on the church. Some of those will take some time, but we're hoping to get the water damage problem in the basement taken care of quickly.

"Also, Melody says the women's bathroom needs attention and therefore, I assume the men's bathroom does too. We'll look into those things immediately. Also making sure the church is up to code for accessibility. Would we have your permission to build ramps on either side of the steps, if we make them attractive and keep within the symmetry of the architecture?"

"Yes, yes," he said, again in almost a whisper.

"Please don't be offended by all of this," Eric went on. "We are here to truly help and not just put a Band-Aid on things. Now, moving along, we'd like to put up a small, attractive sign out front that advertises what is coming next Sunday, which we hope is a lovely Christmas sermon to get everyone into the Christmas spirit with music and a choir."

"But how..."

"Logan will take care of the music and the choir. He has some friends at school and some family members who will love to come and be your choir for now. You and he will have to collaborate to come up with a program. I'm sure between the two of you, it will not disappoint. Next Sunday, thousands of people will be watching, either in person or online. We are good friends with some tech guys who will take care of cameras and monitors if you'll allow that."

Ronny smiled. "This is just the most wonderful..." he stopped as his emotions surfaced.

"Well hold on, because there's more," Eric declared. "Much more. But take a few bites of food before it gets cold."

They waited while everyone put food in their mouths, including Eric. Shelley looked around the table. The entire family had been so quiet but she could see that they all were so happy to be a part of this wonderful undertaking.

Ronny finally looked up. "Well young man, don't keep me on pins and needles. What else do you and your marvelous family have planned?"

Eric chuckled. "Well, like I said, eventually, we will completely renovate the whole church. For now, we just want to get it ready for a Christmas crowd. So, the ladies are going to take it upon themselves to decorate the church for Christmas. Wreaths on the doors, Christmas trees out front on either side of the steps, like between the ramps and the steps. Lovely garlands and flowers inside. A nativity and every other thing they can think of. If the ladies of your church, whom I'm told are all seniors, would like to come and help and donate some decorations, that would be a good activity for them. Also, if they'd like to bake cookies and treats for the workers who will be at the church all week, then that would also be great."

Eric gestured to Bree. "My daughter, Bree, has been elected by Melody and my wife to be in charge of the decorations. Part of the reason for that is to use her name, so that people will want to come help and donate their time and decorations to the cause. Miss Jewell," Eric added as he pointed to Jordan's mom, "will be in charge of the food donations, and she'll give you her number to have all of the church ladies coordinate with her, if they'd like. We don't need them to, but if they'd like to serve, that would be great.

"Now," Eric went on because there was so much to cover. "Let's talk about the stained glass window. We, of course, will have it replaced. The question is, would you like it to be like the original one, or would you like a new design?"

"Eric," Ronny said softly. "We had an appraisal on that. If we were to replace the original it would cost close to fifty thousand dollars."

"Ronny, the cost is inconsequential. Please don't worry about that. So, are you saying you'd like the original?"

Ronny sighed and thought a moment. "Actually, no. It's time to move forward. But I'm not sure what to replace it with."

Shelley spoke up. "Melody tells me that the other stained glass window that's in the chapel, it's a beautiful picture of Jesus surrounded by children."

Ronny nodded. "Yes. It's enchanting. It was my wife's favorite part of the entire church."

"What was the front window?" Shelley asked.

"It was a lot of pretty colors, of course, with sunlight in the middle and a cross in front of the sun and a dove in front of the cross."

"That sounds nice," Bella said.

Everyone nodded.

"So, if you don't want that one, what would you like to replace it with?" Eric asked. "If you can have any design you wanted, what would it be?"

The Reverend thought a minute. "Over two thousand years ago something happened that changed us all. Changed the world. And without that occurrence, we would have nothing. And that was the birth of our Savior. And this *is the time of year* that we celebrate His birth, though I know it's not His real birthday."

"It's His birthday party," Logan said quickly.

Ronny nodded with a smile. "Exactly. So, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have a lovely depiction of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, surrounded by angels and shepherds? In my mind's eye I can see it so clearly."

"Me too," Breez said.

Ronny looked at her. "I didn't get to meet you earlier. Are you Logan's mom?"

"I am so sorry," Logan said. "We told you we would introduce you to the ladies who were in the kitchen and we didn't. Reverend Clark," Logan said as he pointed across the table. "That lady there is my mother. Her name is Bella Adams."

Bella smiled and lifted her hand. "Hello, Reverend, it's nice to meet you."

"And that is Jordan's mom over there. Her name is Jewell Brooks. She's an amazing chef and is about to open her own restaurant."

Ronny smiled. "It's nice to meet you."

"And this is my Aunt Breez. Breez Adams. She's Uncle Joey's wife. And she's an amazing artist." He pointed to the giant picture on the dining room wall behind Eric's head. "She painted that."

Ronny gazed up at one of the most beautiful pictures he'd ever seen.

"That is a depiction of the innermost part of the island of Kauai, the island where I was born," Eric offered.

Ronny took a few seconds to peruse the painting. There was a double waterfall trickling down over the edge of a cliff into a small pool at the bottom and surrounded by thick lush grasses and mango trees and palms. The detail was exquisite. He smiled. "Miss Breez, you are an amazing artist."

"Thank you. It is my passion. Though I don't have as much time now that I have another passion."

"And what is that?"

She smiled. "My husband and three children."

He nodded. "Commendable."

"Thank you. But back to the discussion. I could draw up what you're envisioning, make it exactly like you want, and we could submit that to make the window."

"That would be lovely. Why don't I give you free license to go ahead and make the drawing. You know what I described. I have learned that I can't be in control of everything. So I will turn that over to you."

Eric listened carefully. This man has been through some trauma, learned some hard lessons. He wanted to speak to him in private. He felt a real kinship with him. Right now though, he nodded at his daughter-in-law. “Breez, will you get to work on that ASAP?”

“Yes, sir, I will. I’m excited to do it.”

“Good. Now, Ronny,” Eric went on. “It has also come to my attention that your own home could use a little bit of a renovation.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. You’re already doing so much. I’m used to living simply. It’s fine.”

“Will you deprive these women of doing something they really love to do, which is take a house and make it a home? I’m thinking your own wife would love to have these ladies take care of you in her absence.”

Ronny’s eyes immediately teared up.

“What was your wife’s name?” Eric asked softly.

“Constance. I called her Connie.”

“Connie and Ronny,” Ricky said. “I love it.”

Ronny smiled and nodded. “She was also very tickled that our names rhymed. She said it proved we were meant to be.”

All of the women at the table sighed.

“May I ask how she passed?” Eric said.

Ronny smiled sadly. “Well, it began with the flu.” He shook his head. “That’s what they said anyway. They say the flu weakened her heart. Six weeks after she had the flu, she had a heart attack. She’d stayed home from church that day. I came home that Sunday to find her in bed. She was already gone.”

“Ronny, I’m so sorry for your loss,” Shelley said.

He nodded. “Thank you. I miss her terribly. And I have many regrets.”

“You mean regrets about leaving her that day?” Logan asked.

“No. The regrets have to do with our daughter, Linda. Connie missed her so badly and just wanted to see her again. But I couldn’t find her. I tried so hard.”

“Logan told us that you were unable to find your daughter when Connie passed,” Eric said quietly.

He nodded. “I’m beginning to wonder if Linda herself is even still alive. She left home when she was just eighteen. We heard from her at first, she would come by for money, or to have a decent meal. She went to live in a commune with a bunch of hippie type kids. Then one day when she came by, she was very drunk. She was spouting all kinds of horrible things and said things about her mother. I didn’t care that she hated me, but her mother was the sweetest, most loving person, and I stepped in and she and I had a huge fight. I said things I deeply regret. She left that night, and I never saw her again. A few years later, she called her mother and apologized. Connie tried to get her to come home and we would all work things out, but she wouldn’t budge. She was stubborn, just like her father. We were heartbroken that the wonderful life we’d begun in that home with so many young hopes and dreams had deteriorated to two lonely old people mourning for their children. I had a reckoning coming. Then I lost Connie. It was only after that that I admitted that maybe everything that happened was because of me.”

“Certainly you don’t believe that,” Shelley said.

"I don't believe it. I know it. I realized that I'd been gifted with amazing opportunities and somehow stopped hearing from God. I thought I knew best. Somewhere along the line I stopped listening to His voice. I thought I was so smart and knew all there was to know. My preaching at home and at church had begun to lean toward a 'fire and brimstone,' type of thing. I forgot about the love and the grace. Once Connie passed, I went back to the mountain. Back to where everything started and God had a few choice words for me."

Eric sat up straight. "Back— to the mountain?"

Ronny nodded. "Yes. It's a crazy story that I don't tell to many people. Mostly because people think I've lost my mind. They think that my whole life was based on some hallucination of a ten-year-old boy."

The entire table went quiet. Most everyone looked toward Eric. He cleared his throat. "Um, Reverend Clark, Ronny, after dinner, would you consider coming into my study and we can talk about this?"

"Well, are you sure you want to hear a story that is extremely hard to believe?"

"Yes. I'm sure. And once I share *my* story, maybe you'll understand why I am able to believe you."

"Well now, that sounds very intriguing."

Taylor glanced down at her phone when it buzzed. She quickly texted.

~~ Cant talk now (heart emoji)

She looked back up so she wouldn't miss a bit of this conversation.

Eric smiled. "You know, I lost my first wife."

The man became alert, and glanced over at Shelley.

"I'm only telling you that because it was a crucial time in my life, when I could have chosen to stop listening to God."

"May I ask you, how did she pass?"

"She passed from uterine cancer. Ricky, our only son, was only ten years old when she was diagnosed. It was already stage four by the time we discovered she was sick. We'd been trying to have another child. We'd been so happy. Suddenly my world, our world, mine and Ann's and Ricky's, it seemed to be falling apart. I begged God to heal her. I had friends help me lay hands on her and heal her. Over and over. Nothing was working. I felt very far from God. Why wasn't He listening to me? Why couldn't I hear his voice? I'd always felt so close to God, so why wasn't He hearing me now? Why wasn't He granting my plea?"

Ronny nodded his head and gave a knowing smile.

"It was a huge turning point in my life. I was having a very hard time accepting it. Of course, I discovered later that the reason I couldn't hear Him was because I wasn't really listening. I would only hear Him if He gave me the answer I wanted to hear. We say we want to do God's will until His will is something we truly don't want to do or face or deal with.

"One day, I'd been praying on the beach. Right out there," he said, pointing out the glass doors. "I yelled at God. I said, 'Why won't you hear me? Why can't you understand? Why won't you heal her? Why? Why can't I hear you? What did I do to deserve this?'" He paused. "When I didn't hear anything, not a thing, I rose and took off

running. I ran for miles. I ran until I actually collapsed. I lay on the sand miles away, staring up at the night sky, breathing hard, sweat pouring from my body. I guess I was so exhausted that my mind relaxed for a moment. I remember changing up my question a bit. I was crying and in between my sobs I asked, 'What can I do to save Ann's life?' And finally, He spoke to me. Actually, it was finally, I heard His voice. He said, 'There is nothing you can do.'"

Eric looked over at his granddaughter Taylor as she sniffed and wiped at her eyes. A few others were doing the same. He nodded. Everyone at this table needed to hear this story again. "This time I didn't argue. I simply asked, 'Why?' It wasn't asked in an arrogant way, like I'd been asking. It was asked in an accepting way. Like, okay, I get it, but could you at least tell me why? And He answered. He said, it was because Ann's path was different from mine. Some people are meant to come here and lead a long life, learn lots of lessons, and some are here for a short time. Ann had been sent to me. To learn from, to love, to give me Ricky. And then she left early to teach both Ricky and me, and my friends Justin and Jason, and many others, including everyone at this table—to teach us how to accept God's will and to teach us that each person has a different path to walk. God was not being mean. He had *not* turned His back on me. Ann simply had a different path."

He stopped and sighed and smiled. "And just look at what was given to me since then. My wife, my Shelley. Her daughter and two sons. Our miracle baby, Jeffy, and her husband and son. Our five new babies. Ricky's wife. Their children. Mark's and Joey's wives and children. Jeff Davis and his family came into our lives and we claim them as ours. Young Eric brought Jordan and her family, Shelley brought Melody into our family, and I'm sure Logan is grateful for that, and together he and Melody brought her family, and now, we have Ronald Clark, and his whole congregation. If I'd lived happily in my little shell with Ann and Ricky, all of this wouldn't have come to pass. It was meant to be. As I've said many times, 'God's universe is not random. It's not chaos. It's ordered and planned. God has a plan. It's hard for us to conceive, but He really does have a plan for each and every one of His children.'"

"I absolutely agree, Eric, and I believe that even this meeting was planned," Ronny said. "You see, I've been praying, asking God what He wants me to do. The church was not sustainable. Shall I simply abandon the ministry? Shall I sell the property and simply live out alone the little time I have left on this earth? Or shall I fight to the end? Can you guess what the answer was to that?"

It was Ricky who answered. "I imagine He told you to fight to the end."

Ronny nodded. "Very good. Of course that's what He said. Just a few nights ago, though, God spoke to me in a dream. He said, 'Let go, Ronny. Let go. I will send you someone good.'" He smiled. "I had no idea what that meant. Someone good? Good at what?" He winked at Logan. "And then, when I met Logan this morning, one of the first things he said to me was, 'I can play anything you would like because I'm good.' Of course that got my attention immediately. I asked him, 'Anything? Are you that good?' And he said, 'Yes, I'm that good.' And I told him that God said He would send me someone good. And indeed He did."

Everyone chuckled.

JoJo hit the back of his brother's head. "You *are* that good, brother."

Everyone agreed. The meal continued. After dessert, Eric called for everyone's attention one more time. "It's been a pleasant evening. Ronny, I just wanna warn you that we intend to move as quickly as possible."

"Well, I am ninety-two years old. And I ain't gettin' any younger, so the quicker you move, the better for me."

✞✞✞

December 8th 7:00 PM Sunday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Well young man," Ronald Clark began as he sat in the comfortable leather chair in front of the desk in Grandmaster Eric Kino's study. "You now have my undivided attention. What can I do for you?"

Eric smiled. "It's been a while since anyone has called me a young man, but I like it. You do have twenty-two years on me."

"I do, and that means that when you were just beginning to be a man at eighteen years of age, I was already forty."

Eric nodded. "That puts it into great perspective. Reverend Clark, I promise to show you the respect and honor of your years."

Ronny shook his head. "That's not necessary. As I said, I have many regrets."

"Don't we all."

"Yes. But some are more egregious than others."

"And you believe your misdoings fit into that category?" Eric asked.

"I know they do."

"Well, we can get to that in a bit. But before we do, Ronny, the main reason I asked you in here for some privacy is to see if you would discuss the experience you mentioned, the one at the mountain as a ten-year-old boy."

"Ah yes, the 'mountain experience.' That's what my wife and kids called it." He shook his head sadly.

Eric nodded. "My wife and kids call it my 'miracle of the cave.'"

The reverend sat up straight at Eric's words.

Eric nodded. "And I was ten years old as well. And it is what shaped me from that time forward, throughout all these sixty years."

"You have my curiosity piqued, for sure."

Eric smiled. "I imagine I do. Ronny, not long ago, I stood down at the ocean shore and stared out toward the island where I was born, the island where I encountered an angel, a messenger of God, who not only spoke to me, but caused wonderful miracles, and I wondered or speculated that there must be others who've had the same experience as me. Someone who's been contacted by a heavenly messenger, set on a path, same as me. I have a feeling that someone is you. I want to hear your story, Ronny. I'll share mine as well. Let me just say, you will have no problem with me believing you. Please, share it with me."

Ronny pulled a folded handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his eyes. "Thirty seconds," he said softly. "It took you about thirty seconds to bring me such comfort, such ease, more than I've ever known since that very day." He gestured at Eric's computer

sitting on his desk. “Let’s start here. Can you do a search for ‘*Redding, California— Boy Scout Lost near Mt. Shasta?*’ It should come up even though it was eighty-two years ago. I’ve looked at the article many times. There’s even a grainy photo from the day I was found.” He nodded. “Go ahead.”

Eric did as asked, clicked on the article and read silently for a minute and then aloud. “It says, ‘a boy on a camping trip with a scout troop somehow became separated from the group and was missing near Mount Shasta for three days. He was believed to be dead from hypothermia but was found alive near the base of the mountain, at four thousand feet. He was slightly scratched up and dehydrated, but was overall in good condition when found. The boy claimed to have spoken to an angel and said he’d been taken up near the top of the mountain by that angel. Authorities believe the child was hallucinating due to lack of oxygen when he tried to ascend the mountain on his own.’” Eric looked up.

Ronny shook his head. “I would never have tried to climb Mount Shasta alone and with nothing on but my longjohns. Even at ten years old, I wasn’t that stupid. You must believe me.”

“I do.”

“Well then, you’re one of only a very few; my wife, my son, and Reverend Frank Abbot, who built the Hopewood Chapel.”

Eric nodded. “Before you tell me what actually happened to you on that mountain, may I ask a few questions?”

Ronny smiled. “By all means.”

“First, you lived in Redding with your parents?”

“That’s right. At that time I did. With my mother and father, two younger sisters who were just babies really, and an older brother. When I was ten, we were a normal, relatively happy family. We lived in a small home on Grace Avenue.” He smiled and sighed.

“What did your father do for a living?”

“He was a manager of a small grocery store. It was a big deal back then. This was after the depression and he had a steady job when a lot of people didn’t. He didn’t make much but it was respectable. Still, our family of six lived in a tiny home and I know my parents struggled to make ends meet.”

He stopped and sighed heavily. “I once overheard my father bemoaning the fact that my mother got pregnant with my sisters. He was actually cursing at her, and belittling her. I remember that because it upset me. It disappointed me in my father. I thought it was illogical. I mean, she didn’t get pregnant by herself. I only tell you that because it was the first time I was disappointed in my father, but not the last.”

That statement told Eric a lot. He nodded. “And you were a member of a boy scout troop?”

He smiled. “Ah yes. *Boy Scouts of America troop number 56,”* he said with a sigh. “It was like, a very reputable thing to do, to get involved in the Boy Scouts, and my father was quite big on reputations. It was what boys did to become a man. It was a relatively new thing and a big deal to be a scout. The organization had only been around about thirty years. There was a lot of pride involved in being a scout. A lot of pride in the

uniform. My older brother, who was five years older than me was one of those over-achiever types. He did everything bigger and better than everyone else. He made Eagle Scout at age fifteen. There was a lot of pressure from my father and brother for me to do the same."

"And did you?"

He shook his head. "No. Everything fell apart after the 'mountain experience'."

Eric nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Ronny shook his head. "Well, I handled the whole thing wrong. If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't have told anyone what I'd seen, what I'd learned, not until I was older. But, it is what it is."

"What happened?" Eric asked softly.

Ronny sighed. "It was summer. We were camping, I mean our scout troop was camping, in the National Forest there. I got up in the middle of the night to make a nature call. I did my business and was headed back, or so I thought. I walked far enough and I should have seen our camp but I didn't. So, I thought, I must've somehow headed in the opposite direction. So, I turned and went the other way. But after some time I still didn't come upon the camp. I realized I was lost and knew better than to wander farther into the forest, so I sat down on a fallen tree. I was shivering," Ronny said in his soft, shaky voice. He shook his head as he remembered. "It gets down into the fifties and high forties at night in the summer there. I was thinking I would stay put until morning and the troop would call for me and come looking for me."

Eric nodded. "Good decision."

"Yes, but then I saw a light. I could see no source. Just a light. A pinprick really. A pinprick of light at first, like maybe a firefly, except it was steady, not flying around. It grew brighter and bigger, much bigger, and after about thirty seconds I could see that it wasn't just a light. It was a man."

Eric smiled and nodded.

"My logical mind knew there should be no man out there in the middle of the forest with light coming off him as if he were his own power source. Strangely though, I felt no fear. He didn't scare me a bit. He beckoned for me to come to him. I stood and went to him. He spoke then. He smiled and said, 'Are you a bit lost, Ronald?' I told him I was. He said, 'Well, I'm here to help you find your way.' I realized years later that those words had a double meaning. He went on to say, that first he had much to tell me. My mind was rebelling. I told him, not very politely, to please just show me the way back to camp. I didn't want to hear what he had to say. My words made him seem sad. The man sighed, and then he said for me to call out to God and then just listen. He said God will help me and then— he simply disappeared right in front of my eyes."

Eric smiled and watched Ronny's face as he stared off, recollecting the amazing phenomena.

Ronny went on. "Once he was gone and I was in the dark, I decided I wasn't going to wait until morning after all. I started walking in the direction I thought the camp should be. It seemed I walked for hours. I was starting to panic. I remember turning around, to see if maybe I should go back. It was then I realized I'd been walking uphill. It didn't make any sense. It didn't feel like I'd been climbing. But when I turned, it

seemed I was on a very steep incline. I panicked and started to run back down the hill, but it was too steep and I lost my footing and I tumbled down the hill. It seemed I fell forever hitting rocks and sticks and fallen trees but nothing stopped my fall. When I finally came to a halt, I lay on my back dizzy and disoriented, every inch of my body throbbing in pain.

"I checked myself over the best I could. I didn't think anything was broken but I also didn't feel like moving. I just lay there. Finally, I began to realize that this was a really bad situation. It dawned on my ten-year-old mind that I could be lost forever. That I would freeze to death or be eaten by a mountain lion or torn apart by a black bear. I needed water. And food. I looked around and didn't know which way to head and thought it would be better to stay put. I figured I couldn't be more than a mile or two away from the scout camp.

"It was so silent there. Almost unnaturally quiet. So quiet, it was almost as if I could hear my own thoughts. As I sat there thinking, I remembered I'd seen that man and that he'd told me to talk to God. So, in my desperation, I did just that. I started praying. I started asking God if He was there, did He know I was lost, would He help me find my way back? After a few hours of that, I began begging God to help me. I begged and pleaded. But there was nothing.

"Then I realized it should be getting light soon. So I waited. Yet, hours later, it still wasn't light. There wasn't even a small sign of maybe just some gray light. That scared me. I began to think that I'd died when I'd fallen down the hill, and didn't realize it and that I was in like, some kind of darkness. I remembered something about outer darkness in the Bible or something. The fear started to grow. It was so very quiet, and it seemed so very dark. I actually screamed out loud, first to my troop, hoping they'd hear me, and then finally, I cried out to God. So loud. So long. So hard. Until my voice would no longer make a sound and my energy drained. I lay there on the forest floor, crying. It was pitiful really.

"And I remembered the man said— to listen. So, I tried, but I couldn't hear anything. Finally, I came to the conclusion that either I was dead or I was going to die. I was at the point where I didn't care. I was cold and shivering so hard, and every inch of my body was aching. I gave in. I mentally said goodbye to my mom and dad and my brother and sisters. I remember letting out a sigh. Waiting for my spirit to leave my body, and then, out of nowhere, the light came back.

"The man appeared beside me again and lifted my head and gave me some water. He smiled and said, 'finally— you let go.' 'Let go of what?' I'd asked. 'Let go of trying to live, of being saved. You had to let go of controlling your own destiny in order to hear God's voice. It requires a surrender.' Well, I was a smart alec and I told him that I still didn't hear God's voice. He actually laughed and said that he was God's messenger and that he was there to remind me about the path I was supposed to be on."

Ronny shook his head. "I didn't understand. What path was I supposed to be on? He said, 'remember when you told your mom just the other day that you were going to save the world one day and it wasn't gonna be because you were an Eagle Scout?'" Ronny smiled. "I'd said that because my parents were always throwing my brother up in my face, you know, the classic, 'why can't you be perfect like your brother' kind of thing."

"What became of your brother?" Eric asked.

"Marcel became a doctor. A renowned cardiologist, and he died of a heart attack when he was fifty-two."

"Ironic."

"Exactly."

"You sound bitter."

"I was back then. My brother was very self-righteous. Very condescending. I know he wished I would simply disappear."

"No brotherly love?"

"After the 'mountain experience' I'm pretty sure he despised me, but we put on a show. We acted civilized. I mean, we went through life when we became adults being polite to one another."

"When you became adults, but not as kids?"

"No. Not as kids. Anyway, back to what happened on the mountain. The man, I thought of him as an angel because of the light all around him, he helped me up. He said he was gonna show me the world I would save. He took my hand and suddenly we were at the top of Mount Shasta. It was covered with snow but I wasn't cold at all. As a matter of fact, I felt wonderful. My body didn't hurt anymore. I wasn't hungry or thirsty. And it was awesome to be at the top of Mount Shasta. It was so beautiful. It was no longer dark and I could see forever it seemed, though it was only for many miles. Hundreds of miles. He pointed down toward the south and toward the ocean. 'That is the part of the world you're going to save.'

"He said, 'It won't be easy. You'll have to work hard. Tirelessly. The dark forces of this world will try very hard to work against you. You must not allow yourself to fall in with them. Live nobly. Live honorably. Live in love. Keep God's commandments. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Study the Bible. Live holy. Allow Jesus to live in your heart. Stay morally clean. Live so that you can hear God's voice. Do not compromise with evil, but do not judge, only love and help."

Ronny sat there quietly for a moment, going over in his head what he had committed to memory. He finally shook his head. "Those last words, I should have paid more attention to those last words."

"Only love and help?" Eric asked.

"*Do not judge*, only love and help," Ronny corrected. He sighed. "Anyway, he then went on to tell me that God is real. Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father. He is real. He told me that God has a plan for each of His children. Life is not random. There was a plan for me. I would learn that plan a step at a time as I move through life as long as I pray and listen and talk to God often throughout each day. He then did something strange that I've never understood. He ripped off the bloody sleeve of my long johns, rolled it up, wrapped it in some piece of white parchment that seemed to magically appear, then kneeled and buried it where we stood. He then rose and smiled and said, 'come back one day, to soothe your soul.'

"Then the light that was him shone brighter and circled us both and next thing I knew, I was lying on the forest floor with my back against the fallen tree that I'd sat on at the very first. The pain in my body was back. And the cold. I was shivering again. And

it was daylight. The light was shining in through the trees. I was alive, was my first thought. Then, I heard someone yell, 'Here! He's here! I found him!'

"After that there was a rush of activity as people converged on the area and I was rescued. I was astounded when I learned that I'd been missing for three days. I was also excited to tell everyone what I'd experienced. That was a big mistake."

Eric nodded. "People weren't ready to hear."

"No they were not. I insisted that I wasn't lying. I insisted that it really happened. My father said I was just trying to get out of trouble for wandering off and causing so much trouble. He told me to never speak about it again. I was an embarrassment to him. He actually ended up losing his job over it. That made my brother livid, and he told me that he'd beat me to a pulp if I ever spoke about it again. He said he was ashamed of me. He kept his word. When I accidentally mentioned the angel, Marcel thrashed me. My mother tried to console me but had to do it in secret, behind my father's back. Though later I found she was just as ashamed of me as everyone else. Because my father lost his income, we sold the little house and packed up and moved to a suburb of Los Angeles where he got a job stocking shelves in a larger grocery store chain. We moved into an even smaller house and I was put in a room in the attic."

Eric sighed, his heart hurting for the young boy, shunned by his own family.

"Marcel refused to talk to me and left for college. The only reason he was able to do that was because he was indeed very smart and earned the attention of a few prominent doctors in the area where he worked part time in their practices, cleaning and such. A few years later the war started. WWII. A few years after that, my father enlisted. He was wounded at Normandy and died of an infection two months later. I was only fifteen. My mother was inconsolable. During all of this I was still trying to do what the angel had told me to do. Study the Bible. Live nobly and clean. Do good. Be holy.

"Long story a little shorter, my brother became a renowned doctor and brought my mother and sisters to live with him. I was invited too, if I renounced my belief that an angel had appeared to me. But I couldn't. I just couldn't. I became a homeless teenager and was taken in by Reverend Frank Abbot, the man who built and owned the Hopewood Chapel. He believed my story. He put me through school, where I met my beautiful and sweet Connie. I got my degree, and married Connie and rented that old home across the street from the church. I eventually bought it. Finally, life was happy and exciting and hopeful. I was on the path to do what God had called me to do."

"And how often did you see your mother or brother or sisters?" Eric asked.

"We'd get together a few times a year. My brother remained condescending and cold toward me. Both he and my mother actually told Connie that I was trouble and she could find someone better and she'd better get out while the going is good."

Eric grimaced. "Harsh."

Ronny shrugged. "I kept having to forgive them. They seemed to be working actively against me, and I chalked that up to the dark forces that the angel had spoken about."

"What about your sisters?"

"I saw them a few times, when they were teenagers, when I would visit at my brother's house. They were very quiet. I think they were told to not speak to me."

"Are they still alive?"

"No. I discovered that they both passed. They were together and had an automobile accident."

"Who notified you?"

"No one really notified me. You see, apparently, Donna had some outstanding debts and she must have written my name down as a reference. The creditors tracked me down and that's how I found out that both my sisters had died. After that, I did some of my own research and found they had both married, had children, and divorced. I assume those children had children. I wouldn't know any of them if I met them on the street."

"This is a very sad story," Eric whispered.

"Well, it could be," Ronny said, "if I allowed it to be. I'm doing God's work. I'm doing it better now than I used to, which is another whole story. I've had to carry a heavy cross at times, but I'm willing to do that. Still, I'm not unhappy. And especially after today, I'm nothing but joyful and grateful, because I was led to you, Eric. And I know somehow, that my life is not gonna end in doom and gloom. I will continue to do what I can do to further God's kingdom, to be in service and to help the fine people at *Hopewood Chapel*. That does bring me joy."

Eric smiled. "I just got a big surge from the Holy Spirit and I too know that you are doing what God would have you do, and I'm about to do what God has placed in my path to do."

"So, are you going to tell me your story?"

"Yes, but I'll try to keep it brief since it's getting late."

Eric reached inside a drawer of his desk and handed Ronny a small, blue book. Ronny took it and looked it over. *Messages from God, the Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino.* "This is for you, sir, when you have time to spare. It's a more detailed version of my story. I wrote my memoirs a few years ago. I only give it out to certain people. I was going to wait to make it public when I pass, but felt urged by the Lord to make it public immediately, and so, I did. Though, I actually need to add to it. But for now, here's my story in a nutshell."

He smiled and leaned back. "I was born on the island of Kauai. I didn't have any brothers and sisters but I did have six cousins. We used to go climbing waterfalls. I always felt a call to the middle of the island, but we were told to not go past the first waterfall. However, one day, we decided we were going anyway." He smiled again. "It's been almost exactly sixty years since that day. Anyway, the five male cousins and one of the females, Kai, we headed off. We made it past the first fall with no problem, and then we got to the second.

"All the guys had topped the second fall. I shouldn't have, because I'd promised to stay with Kai to make sure she didn't fall. But somehow I got ahead of her. She was just about to pull herself up when she fell. It was a thirty-foot drop over rocks. There was no way she could've survived that fall.

"We were in shock. We all just stood there, staring in disbelief. Then we started to climb down, one at a time. I thought I would be sick. Kai was dead. I was the last one in line to climb down and as I waited my turn, the ground where I was seemed to give way and I fell, like, inside the earth. It seemed I fell forever. When I finally hit bottom I was

pretty banged up, like you described when you fell down the mountain. I was deep inside the earth, so, when a light appeared I knew I was either dead or something amazing was happening. It was a man and he told me the same thing. To cry out to God then just listen and then he disappeared."

Ronny nodded as tears formed in his eyes.

"I went through all the same emotions you described. Finally, I let go. I gave up on trying to live and I asked God to just take me. I surrendered completely. I said goodbye in my head to my mother and father and cousins and my dog. That was when the light came back. But unlike your story, this man was a different man. The first man was an actual member of my eternal family. The second being was an angel. He told me pretty much the same things your guy told you. He reminded me that I'd always said I was gonna teach the world. I told him I didn't know how or what to teach. He said, 'You teach what you know.'" Eric shrugged. "I knew martial arts. I was a prodigy in the martial arts, and that ended up being the path I chose to teach the world through example, all about living for Christ."

"You've done a remarkable job," Ronny said. "You may be younger than me but I am in awe of you."

"I appreciate that, but you had it a lot harder than me."

"How so?" Ronny asked.

"Well, for some reason, I knew not to tell people what happened. That was your first mistake. It made it rough for you from the very beginning. I did eventually tell my father, but only when he came to me calmly and quietly and asked me what really happened out there for those days I was missing. Even since then, I pretty much kept my experience to myself. For a long time, years, I told only a handful of people, my most trusted people. Wife. Children. Best friends. Then a few years ago, I told more of my closest friends and eventually wrote that book I gave you.

"But Ronny, I had it different. My father was supportive and encouraging of me. I had amazing support. The dark forces were able to get to you through your family. They knew just how to break you. Thank goodness you didn't quit. You didn't give in."

Ronny's eyes twinkled. "I didn't— cave."

Eric chuckled.

Ronny sighed. "However, there were other things I also did wrong, but that was later. Reverend Frank Abbot got old and sick. He'd never had any children and he and his wife treated me like their own son. When Frank died I found that he'd willed the church to me. At first, everything was going well. But when my son died in Vietnam, I went a little crazy. I saw the world goin' to hell. All these love-ins and drugs and communes and hippies and orgies. Those Manson people. To me, it was like in the days of Noah. I changed my preaching. The angel had said to never compromise with evil. So I didn't, but I forgot the part about keeping love in my heart. I was like the church of Ephesus in Revelation. I had, 'forsaken the love.' My sermons were full of hell and damnation. I didn't even realize I was driving the members away. The young ones especially."

"Well, yes, you have to remember to love, but you also can't preach things to quote, 'tickle their ears,'" Eric tried to comfort. "You have to speak the truth. Don't murder.

Don't steal. Keep your bodies pure. Don't lie. Don't worship idols. Don't kill children without or within the womb. Homosexuality is an abomination."

"Right. You're right. You have to tell them the truth, but I forgot about the love. I forgot about telling people that they can overcome and Jesus will be right there to help cleanse them. I pretty much told them they'd better overcome or else. Yes, Jesus didn't just love. He told the adulterous woman to 'Go and sin no more.' So, he didn't say it was okay to just go do whatever you want, sleep with whomever you want, kill whomever you want. But He did say to love. Love your enemy. Don't judge. That was the part I forgot. I lost my compassion, Eric, and I drove my own daughter away. It was my harshness that drove my own daughter away. And that hurt Connie, yet she forgave me. My sweet Connie, she taught *me* by example. She didn't judge me. She showed me the love that I was forgetting to show my daughter and my congregation. I messed everything up." He stopped because his voice broke.

Eric rose from his desk and went to stand by the man, put his hands on Ronny's shoulders as he wept. When he quieted, Eric handed him some tissues, pulled another chair up beside Ronny and sat face to face with him. "Reverend Clark, why do you think God placed you in our path today?"

He sniffed. "Obviously to help the church."

"I think it was more than that. I think it was also to help you. You've been in service since you were ten years old. It's been a hard road. Your own family turned their backs on you. You lost your father. You kept on. You didn't quit. You didn't give in. Even just you asking your few members to bring a young person to church with them today, that shows that you hadn't given up, that you were willing to fight to the end. I'm really in awe of you and how long you've been carrying a very heavy cross." He smiled and patted Ronny's hand as the tears welled up again.

"Ronny, it is gonna be my honor and great pleasure to help you right all of this, to help ease your burden, to do whatever I can do, and because God has blessed us so much, what I can do is considerable. My calling was no more important than yours, and I think God saw that your calling, your ministry was in need of some renovations. Your heart too. Take rest, Ronny. Ease your heart and mind. Relax for a bit and let me take over. You just work with Logan tomorrow and put together a wonderful program for next Sunday. It's gonna be great. Will you do that? Will you let me carry your burden for a little while? I feel the need to heal the heart of a sad, ten-year-old boy who'd been sent to stay in the attic. Let me do this."

Ronny nodded. His voice was raspy and hoarse when he spoke. "I cannot say anything but yes. God sent me angels, I don't dare send them away."

"Wonderful," Eric said with a soft laugh. "And now, I would be honored if you would allow me to pray with you and over you."

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Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,
and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Chapter Nine

December 8th, 10:15 PM, Sunday Night
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe sat on his bed, his back against the headboard. He picked up his phone for the third time and reread the text she'd sent.

~~Can't talk now ♡

It was the same thing he'd said to her the night before. Was she mad at him? Probably not. After all, hers ended with a heart emoji. That should mean something more. Right? But maybe that was just habit and she was giving him what he'd given her. If so, it was well-deserved. He'd declined her call and didn't pick up eight more times. Now, he just needed to speak with her. The only other thing he'd received was a couple of pics on the group chat he had with the guys, the brothers. Gabe, Jake, young Eric, Logan and JoJo. The pics didn't make him feel very good either. They were taken at dinner, apparently. She was leaning cheek to cheek with Melody's brothers, Phillip and Lyle Keith. Okay, there were also a few others in the pic. JoJo, young Eric and Jordan, Logan and Melody, Josie and Jamie Brooks. He sighed. What was wrong with him?

He shook his head. Was he losing his mind? How could he even think about drinking anything when he'd just watched his friends Carlos and Luke get arrested for a slew of offenses, all because of drinking. How could he think downing some beers would be helpful after knowing Agent Dalton's story? But fine. It was over. His father had shown him just how bad it could feel. He was done. He was over it. He had learned his lesson. He just wanted to talk to his girl. He looked up at the knock on his door. "Come in."

Lizzy poked her head in. "Hey, sweetie. I just wanted to check on you before I went to bed."

He smiled. "Hey, mom."

"You feeling okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mom, I'm sorry for what I did."

"I know, sweetie. You made a mistake, but it's not that big of a deal. It certainly doesn't define you. It's over and I'm not going to hold it over your head. I am concerned that you were hurting so badly that you would hide downstairs and drink alone, and we're gonna help you work through the pain, but I'm not a bit worried about your character. So, you stop worrying about it and stop condemning yourself."

He sighed. She forgave so easily. "Thanks, mom."

"Honey, what else is wrong? Hmm? Where's my happy baby boy?"

Gabe gave a short laugh at her wording. He shrugged. "I dunno. I think Taylor might be mad at me."

Lizzy came and sat down on the bed next to him. "Why do you think that?"

"I've tried to call her a few times today. One time she didn't answer and the other time she sent a text that just said, 'can't talk now.' Do you think she found out what I did and she doesn't want to talk to me?"

Lizzy sighed. "That doesn't sound like Taylor at all to me. If she found out what you did, she'd probably call you immediately to make sure you were okay."

Gabe nodded. "Right? But, maybe she won't because like, the last time I talked to her, I sort of yelled at her."

"Yes, your dad told me about you being mad at her for going inside a barn when you told her not to go. Right?"

Gabe nodded. "The fear that came up in my heart, it was so strong, I yelled at her. If I could've reached through that phone, I definitely would have physically restrained her."

"Honey. I think you're just feeling guilty and being too hard on yourself. Your dad and I talked about it and he said that getting you to forgive yourself may be the hardest part. Sweetheart, we all make mistakes. It's not the end of the world. Not for trying to protect the people you love, and not for drinking."

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, but I have no excuse, Mom. I'm not just anybody. I'm not sayin' I'm special. I'm just sayin', like, Jesus healed me and He's spoken to me. I know better."

"But that's why, Gabe. Because Jesus singled you out in some ways, Satan is gunning for you. He came looking for you in your weakest moment. And even now, he's getting into your head. He would love to use your fear and shame against you. And he would love to make you feel insecure about your relationship with Taylor. But you have agency, Gabe. You get to choose what you do. And I think you need to get on your knees and talk to Jesus and put an end to this little episode."

He nodded. "You're right. I know you're right."

"Did you drink a lot of water today?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good, because you need to hydrate. It will help your body recover. Do you want me to pray with you?"

He sighed. Started to turn her down, but he'd never done that before, turned down his mother or father, or anyone for that matter, who wanted to pray with him. Why did he even consider turning her down? Maybe the dark forces really were getting into his head. So he nodded. "Yes, ma'am." He sat up and sat on the side of the bed and she took his hands and closed her eyes. She prayed in her sweet voice. A voice that always gave him comfort and made him feel warm and loved. Tonight was no exception. When she finished, she squeezed his hands.

"Get some sleep, sweetheart. We have a lot to do this week."

"Like what? All the decorating is done, right?"

"Oh, yes, that part is done, but that's just the beginning. There are a bunch of Angel Tree tags that haven't been claimed yet. The tree at City Hall and the tree at your community center. So we're gonna make sure they're all taken care of one way or the other. And that means some shopping, wrapping gifts, and some investigative work to see what else can be done for the families. Sort of like, what you did for Peyton's family."

Gabe nodded. “Okay, that’s cool and I’m all in. But what if someone needs a car like the Murphys did?”

“Well, we have some contacts, some new members of this town, who want us to be their stewards in making sure people get helped. Not in an extravagant way, but in a ‘teach a man to fish’ way.”

Gabe nodded and smiled. “New members of our town? Are you talking about the Kinos?”

She smiled. “Maybe. But it’s completely anonymous.”

Gabe nodded. “Okay. Are my sisters also working on this?”

“Oh yes. They have so much to do. And Rose has activities at the center every single day. And Vi is working on a Christmas program with the children and some of the parents. There’s a letter writing activity to go to soldiers that will accompany large tins of cookies and candy. And we’re working with Mayor Bradbury to make sure every single resident of this town has food for a Christmas dinner. There’s a giant party at the Center on Christmas Eve Eve, and the usual gathering at the Inn on Christmas Eve. And our family is gonna sing for the Inn guests on Christmas Day and do the little scripture reading we always do. So much to do. And that doesn’t really include what the men have to do. And don’t forget, Iris’ birthday party is Tuesday. Oh, and I was gonna ask you if you would please pick up the cake for me Tuesday morning, and there is so much more to do. So much.”

“That’s right,” Keegan said as he walked into the room.

Gabe smiled up at his father. “Hey, Dad.”

“Just stopping in to say goodnight. And to let you know the first thing you have to do in the morning.”

“Okay. Throw it at me.”

“So, I have to work and you need to go with Uncle Chaz and the Inn guests to fill two pickups with wood. You go pick up John’s truck and three of the guests. Chaz will be there getting four other guests in his truck. Follow him to the area he’s decided to clear. The trees are already down. You know the drill. Cut the logs into sections with the chainsaws, and show the guests how to split the wood. Teach well. Teach safety. Allow them to try. Help and instruct. Just like when you teach someone to shoot. End of the drill, make sure the wood gets chopped, loaded into the pickups and delivered to the Inn, to the Stewarts and here. Got it?”

Gabe nodded. “Yes, sir. Got it.” But then Gabe frowned. “Sooo, is this sort of like, a punishment?”

Keegan chuckled. “No, son. I guess you can call it work therapy. Perform a difficult physical task, get your mind in the zone, work off some tension and sweat out some of those poisons.”

“I could do that just by working out.”

“This way, your workout will be in service to others.”

Gabe nodded. “Would you mind if I got in a run before I go chop wood?”

“Wait until after. You need to reserve your energy.”

“Yes, sir.”

Keegan smiled at his wife and held his hand out to her. She took his hand and

allowed him to pull her to her feet. They left his room hand in hand. Gabe sighed. His parents were awesome. They were a team. They were united. They talked about everything. He loved it.

He sighed, picked up his phone again and glanced at the time. It was after ten here, so it was only after seven in Cali. The picture he'd seen had been taken at her grandparents' home. They'd probably had Sunday dinner there, but it should be over now. It appeared that almost everyone in what was called, 'the West Coast family,' had attended the dinner. That was probably a good time. At the same time he thought he would wait for her to call him, he pushed the green button, almost involuntarily, making the call to her. He found his breath hitching as he waited for her to pick up. But she didn't pick up. It went to message. He sighed. "Hey Tay, just wanted to talk for a minute. I miss you. Call me when you get a chance. Did you see the video I posted this morning? My family did a home church service. Okay, well anyway. Call me. Love you. Call me even if it's late. Okay, well, bye."

He ended the call. Taylor was probably helping to watch the kids. That's probably why she didn't answer. Why was he feeling so insecure? This wasn't like him. He needed to get his head clear. He needed to talk to Taylor. Maybe confess. Sighing, he pulled the covers up over him and decided to pray until he fell asleep.

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December 8th, 9:15 PM, Sunday Evening
En route to South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

In her parents' car on the way home Sunday evening, Taylor thought over all the happenings of the day. They'd gone to church at the church where Alec and Desi got married, *Lake Forest Baptist*. They'd wanted to touch base with the couple and with Desi's family, the Copelands and Alec's mom, Ivana Morgan. They went back to the 'Grands' and at lunch Logan and Melody were brimming with excitement about saving a little old church in Huntington Beach. Taylor had to admit, it sounded like so much fun and she couldn't wait to see the church.

She yawned. She was tired and had to go back to school in the morning. After school she was to report straight to the gym to work on the dance for the floorshow and also try on the outfits they were supposed to wear. She'd already seen pictures of the costumes. They were cute red velvet dresses made like a Santa outfit. The circular skirt would look cool when they did turns. There was white fur along the V-neckline and around the edge of the skirt, and a thin shiny black belt at the waist. They would wear dance shoes but they were covered with red faux-boot covers that came to the knee. The outfits included a white fur headband. They were kinda cute. They would wear white tights and little red bloomers under the dress. Taylor was anxious to see the choreography and get it down.

She pulled out her phone to show her mom the pics of the costume and remembered that she had a message from Gabe. She frowned though, as she listened. He sounded tired, or down. She wanted to call him back, but needed some privacy, so instead she sent a text.

~~ Hey sorry I couldn't answer your call. Been really busy with family stuff. I will

call when I get home in about forty minutes. Yes, I saw the video. It was awesome. Sorry you're not feeling well. Is it just a cold or something more serious? Anyway. Will call you soon. Love you and miss you too. ♡

She tucked her phone away and leaned back in the car. The next thing she knew, she was sound asleep.

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December 9th, 12:15 AM, Wee Hours Monday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

The sound of a text coming in roused Gabe immediately. He reached for his phone, rolled onto his back and read the text. And then read it again. He breathed a sigh of relief. Okay, he thought, she doesn't sound like she's upset with him. She asked if he had a cold, so she doesn't know he was sick because of his own stupid attempt at self-sabotage. The question is, should he tell her what he did? He was so ashamed. And he always wanted her to be able to admire and respect him, if like, he was gonna be her husband. But he'd been taught that when you do something that you're sorry for doing, acknowledging what you did, confessing what you did, is one of the ways to compensate, especially when there's no way to take it back or fix it. He closed his eyes. But this really wasn't a big thing. At least that's what his mom and dad and sisters kept saying.

He drank some beer. Big deal. His dad had supplied the hard liquor stuff, but Gabe had still chosen to drink it. It was really no big deal. He'd had alcohol before. But the other times he'd done it were in full view of others, not hidden down in the basement hoping no one would find out and trying to soothe some pain in his heart that he couldn't seem to make go away. So, there was that. But it's not like he'd hurt someone on purpose or stolen money or done something really bad.

Still, he wanted Taylor to be able to look up to him and he wasn't sure how this would affect her opinion of him. Oh how he wished he hadn't been stupid. He really regretted it. This is what they mean when they say live with no regrets. He'd had to correct some friends once, who'd spouted that line as if it meant to do whatever you want and don't feel bad about it. That's not what it meant. It meant to live such an exemplary life that you won't have to have regrets. Though, that was almost impossible. Gabe knew, however, that was where Jesus came in. He took away the shame. Gabe breathed a deep breath to clear his mind. Okay, so, he thought, if he was supposed to be a man, he had to face this like a man. He had to be brave enough to take the heat. Tell Taylor. Let the chips fall where they may. The decision made, he rolled over and tried to sleep as he waited for her call.

✝✝✝

December 9th, 6:50 AM, Monday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Taylor?"

Taylor moaned, stretched, and blinked up at her mother. "Mom? Is everything okay?"

"That's what I want to know. Are you okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. Why are you asking?"

"Because it's almost seven and you're still in bed."

She gasped and sat straight up. "What? Oh no. Why did my alarm not go off?"

"You need to check that, but for now, get up, you have a full day."

"Did Dad and Eric go down to the beach this morning?"

"No. It's raining. But they did train downstairs."

"Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

Bree smiled. "Are you saying that you shouldn't be responsible for getting yourself up and ready for your day?"

Taylor sighed. "No. Sorry."

"I let it go until I thought you might not be well. So, hop up, sweetie, get going. I'll make you a breakfast to go and we're gonna drop you at school because we're on our way to go see the *Hopewood Chapel*. Agent Ward will be there for you in the gym when you get finished."

Taylor swung her legs over the side of her bed. "I sure do wish I could go with you this morning."

"I'll take lots of pictures and maybe you can come over this evening. We'll see. Now go on."

Taylor stumbled into the bathroom, stripped off her nightshirt and got in the shower. Finally, she actually woke up. She'd gotten home last night, threw off her clothes, grabbed a nightshirt and gotten into bed. She'd been too tired to kneel beside her bed like she usually did, but instead, she got in bed and closed her eyes and started to pray. That had been the last thing she remembered. The hot shower spray hit her face, and she gasped as she remembered that she was supposed to call Gabe. Ugh. She hated saying she'd call someone and then not doing it. It was inconsiderate, and she never wanted to be that person. Of course, her Gabe would understand. Maybe she should give him a quick call. It's ten in the morning there.

She finished her shower quickly. When she stepped out of the bathroom, she looked around, surprised. Her mother, who'd just asked her to take responsibility for herself, had made her bed and put away her clothes she'd thrown into the chair last night and set out some clean clothes for Taylor's day. She smiled. Her mom was always doing little things like that for her family. Her mom, whom everyone thought of as a big fancy movie star, was really just a real person, who did chores and took care of her family. She was awesome. In a few minutes' time, her mother had just taught her to be responsible for herself, and how to be in service to her family at the same time.

Taylor dressed quickly, sat on the side of the bed and picked up her phone and decided to FaceTime Gabe instead of just calling. She missed his gorgeous face and his smile and his dimple.

✝✝✝

December 9th, 10:20 AM, Monday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

"That's better," Gabe said with a nod. "Remember, swing for the center, since this is a smaller log."

The girl giggled. "I *was* swinging for the center."

The group standing around all laughed.

Chaz looked around at the group of people who had wanted to help cut firewood. It had originally been mostly men and teen boys, but when the ladies heard that Gabe Tanner was gonna come show them how it's done, suddenly there were women and teen girls who also tagged along. They'd had to get the guys to volunteer to ride in the truck beds.

When they'd arrived out where the trees had been felled, Chaz and Gabe had to very quickly cut the rounds a little shorter and set things up so that the group could all work at the same time, so that more hands would make the work go faster. Before anyone picked up a tool, they handed out gloves and safety glasses and spaced everyone far enough apart that no one could enter another person's swinging range. Everyone had complained about having to fill two pickup trucks full of wood. They'd said it seemed an impossible task. But as they worked, they realized it wasn't as difficult as they'd thought. Well, Chaz amended in his head, not as difficult for *them*. He himself and Gabe were working pretty darn hard. It did help that some of the younger boys were loading the wood into the trucks almost as quickly as it got cut.

Gabe and Chaz walked along the line of people learning to swing either a maul or an axe at the logs. Gabe and Chaz had already brought the rounds down to smaller, more workable pieces for the novices. They instructed and stepped in to help when needed. Finally, they were near the end of the task.

"You show us again," one girl said to Gabe.

"Yes, you show us again," a couple of the women said.

Sighing, Gabe nodded. He glanced at his Uncle Chaz who was trying hard not to laugh. Gabe rolled his eyes, but agreed. He began to explain again the difference between using a maul and an axe. The whys and the therefores. He lifted a large round onto the base. Grabbed the heavier eight-pound maul and swung it hard. He turned. "See, this is a large round, so, I'm not aiming for the center. I'm gonna chip away from the edges until it becomes more manageable." He demonstrated.

He looked over the log he had left. "Now, this one has some knots in it that are gonna make it a little harder to split. So, I'm gonna use the axe instead."

"Why don't you just use the axe all the time?" a girl asked.

"Well, like I said, the edge of the maul is a larger surface and it's less likely to get stuck, while with the axe, you have to be strong enough and have good enough aim to swing hard and make it all the way through the wood so it doesn't get stuck." He set the knotted log on the base, backed up and swung hard. The wood split cleanly. The women all oohed. Gabe set the next log up, and split it again. He stopped when his phone started ringing. He pulled his phone out and stepped away. "Uncle Chaz, I need to take this."

Chaz nodded and stepped up to continue the demonstration.

Gabe walked away and accepted the video call.

His heart beat hard as the beautiful face of Taylor Kino appeared on the screen. He smiled. "Hey, Tay," he said softly.

"Hey, Gabe. I am so sorry I didn't call you last night. I fell asleep while I was praying and slept through the night."

He sighed. "It's okay. I'm just really happy to see you right now."

"Where are you? I see trees behind you and hear a bunch of noise."

"I'm out on the ranch teaching a bunch of people how to split logs."

"Oh, that sounds like fun."

He chuckled. "Loads of fun. Two loads actually."

"Well, I can't really talk because I overslept and I'm gonna be late for school."

"Oh, yeah, okay." He sighed. "So, maybe we can talk later? How about maybe tonight sometime?"

She frowned. "After school I have dance practice and then I might be going over to a church our family has decided to help renovate. So, I don't know what time I'll be free. If it gets too late, then you'll be asleep."

"It's okay. Wake me up. Call me, no matter what time it is."

"Okay. Are you alright? You sound strange. I mean, you don't seem too sick or you wouldn't be out chopping wood. Are you better?"

"I'm not sick and I'll tell you about it when you call me tonight."

"Hold on," Taylor said quickly. "Yes, ma'am, I'm coming!" She turned to face the screen again. "Sorry, I have to go."

"Okay. Love you, Taylor. Call me tonight."

She smiled. "I love you too and I promise. If I don't, like if I fall asleep again or something, you call me."

"Okay. I will."

"Bye, Gabe."

"Have a good day, Tay."

"You too. Byeee."

He watched the screen go black. It was like, when she wasn't in his presence, his world was a little darker. Sighing, he tucked his phone away and went back to the group and started gathering up some of the wood that Chaz had split. "Okay," he said. "We're almost done."

"Will you show me one more time?" a girl asked.

He nodded. "Yes. Come here." He handed her a six-pound maul.

She frowned. "It's so heavy."

"Well, the other one is heavier. Anything much lighter and it won't do much good."

"So, how do I hold it again? Like this?"

He shook his head and took her hands in his and placed them on the maul. He then stood behind her, pulled her arms over her head and down to show her the swinging motion.

"Oh, do that again," the girl's mother said. "And let me get a video of that. My city girl daughter, doing actual work."

"Mo-om," the girl complained.

Gabe smiled. And showed her again, standing with his arms essentially around her and helping her to swing the maul. They had to stop a few times and smile for the camera. He helped her in slow motion several times and then stood back and let her go. "Okay. Try it."

She swung hard but actually missed the entire log. She frowned.

"It's okay," he said patiently. "It takes practice. Go ahead and keep trying while I help get the trucks loaded up." Before she could argue, he quickly jumped up into the bed

of a truck and told the boys to toss him the logs one at a time. It became quite the game. Thankfully, it didn't take too much longer before they accomplished the task. They filled two trucks with the chopped wood, gathered up the tools, and loaded everyone up into the additional vehicles before heading back to the Inn. Gabe was tired, sore, and feeling considerably better than he had that morning.

✞✞✞

December 9th, 8:15 AM, Monday Morning
Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Ricky and Bree waited for a school bus to go by, whipped a U-turn and parked right in front of the church. They got out of their car, stood on the sidewalk and stared up at the building. Standing there in person, they could feel why Logan had felt so drawn to the property. They too felt a strong pull.

A minute later, Shelley, Eric and Ronny pulled up and parked just across the street in front of Ronny's house. Right behind them, Melody pulled up. She got out of her car and went to help Shelley get the little ones out of the van and then cross the street. They all stopped and gazed up at the church. Shelley smiled. "Oh, how adorable." She knelt down. "Whaddya think, babies? Isn't that a pretty church?"

Angelina frowned. "It wooks dutty to me."

"Oh, I see. Well, you're right about that. That's why we're here. We're gonna see if we can get it all cleaned up and make it pretty for Christmas. And guess what? You guys are gonna help and I'm gonna be so proud of you. So, when we go inside I want you to tell me what you think we should do. Like, what you think would look pretty. We'll make a list of your ideas and then we'll see which ones would work best. Not all of everyone's ideas will be used, but at least one of each of your ideas will be used, so I want you to just say whatever you think of and Melody will write it down and then we'll read them over later when we get home."

Bree turned to Ricky. "What are your initial thoughts?"

He smiled. "I think we have our work cut out for us, and I think it's gonna be very rewarding." He turned and walked up toward the motel to look at the church from the side. Then gazed over at the motel assessing the project at hand. He nodded.

"Well, come in, everyone," Ronny said as he walked over to the right side of steps so he could grab the handrail.

Eric moved quickly to take his other arm and held it firmly. Ronny smiled at him. "Thank you, sir."

Eric smiled. "My pleasure, sir."

They all followed Ronny up the steps. But Bree stopped because she noticed some kids coming out of the drive of the apartments next door and heading up the walk toward them. She smiled at them as they approached. The little boy sniffed and nodded and pulled harder on the little girl's arm and she fell down.

Bree immediately went to help her up. Now that she was closer to the children, she saw that they both had been crying. There were tear tracks down both their sweet faces. "Are you okay?" Bree asked the smaller child.

The little girl sniffed. "I hurt my knee."

"Oh my goodness," Bree said. She looked down at the knee but it was covered by

some dirty pink stretch pants, so Bree just patted it.

"Come on, Brittney. We gotta go," the boy said.

"Are you two on your way to school?" Bree asked.

"Yeah," the boy said shortly.

Bree looked him over. He was thin, and wore jeans that were a little too short for him and a gray hoodie and some old Nike tennis shoes. He had big beautiful brown eyes, but they were sad eyes.

"We missed the bus," the little girl offered. "And mommy is mad."

"Oh dear. Missed the bus," Bree commiserated. "How far is the school?"

The boy shrugged. "It's a long way."

"What's the name of your school?" Ricky asked as he walked up closer.

Both children's eyes opened wide at the masculine voice.

Ricky knelt in front of them and smiled kindly. "I was just asking because I can look it up on my phone and if it isn't too far, we could give you a ride."

The boy swallowed. It was obvious he was torn between getting a ride to school and probably being told to not ride with strangers.

Ricky nodded. "You've probably been told to not ride with people you don't know, but you probably know me. I'm a movie star."

Bree smiled, because she knew he hated to refer to himself that way, but did it for the boy's comfort.

The boy blinked. "Really?"

He smiled and nodded. "I bet you've seen some of my movies. Did you ever see *Shadow Warrior*?"

The boy smiled. "Everybody seen *Shadow Warrior*."

Ricky nodded. "Well, that was me. A long time ago, when I was a little boy."

"Uh uh," the boy said, looking harder at the man.

"No, really," Ricky said. He pulled up pictures of himself from the movie on his phone. "See?"

The boy looked hard at the phone.

"Do you know the name of the guy who played *Shadow Warrior*?"

"Ricky Kino."

"Wow, very good. Well, I'm Ricky Kino." He pulled his wallet from his pocket. "Can you read yet?"

The boy nodded.

"Okay, so, what does that name say?" he said as he pointed to the name on his driver's license.

The boy looked closely. "Um, it don't say Ricky."

Ricky chuckled. "Right. It says Eric, because Ricky is my nickname. Er-RIC. RIC-ky," he said slowly. "See? And then, look at the last name. What does it say?"

"Kino," the boy said, his eyes opening wide. "Wow, are you really Ricky Kino?"

"Yes. And my wife and I were looking at this church because we're thinking about fixing it up. But we'd be happy to get you to school first."

The little girl sniffed and blinked her big brown eyes.

"What grade are you in?" Bree asked.

She smiled. “Kindegawten,” she said slowly.

“I see. And what grade are you in?” Bree asked, smiling at the boy.

“Third grade.”

“Wow,” Bree said and then frowned. “Hmm, that means you are probably about eight years old?”

The boy nodded. “I’m nine and Brittney is five.”

“Brittney, what a pretty name. And what’s your name?”

He sniffed. “Amari.”

“Amari?” Ricky said. “That name means ‘really strong’.”

The boy smiled and nodded, obviously surprised and impressed that Ricky Kino knew what his name meant.

“Well, Amari and Brittney, will you let us take you to school?”

The boy nodded.

Ricky texted his father quickly to let him know they’d be right back.

They helped the kids into the car, pulled up the school on GPS and drove. Ricky looked up in the rearview mirror. “So, Amari, do you live in those apartments next to the church?”

Amari nodded. “Uh huh.”

“With your mom and dad?”

“Naw, just with my mom.”

“Mommy is mad at us,” Brittney said.

“Hush,” Amari said quickly.

“Because you missed the bus?”

Amari sniffed. “Yeah.”

“Mari couldn’t find his shoes.”

“Oh, I see. I hate when that happens,” Ricky said.

Bree giggled.

In only a few minutes they pulled up to *Lake Crossings Elementary School*. Bree got out and helped Brittney out and she and Ricky both walked the children into the school. A lady in the front office smiled as they approached. “Amari, did you sleep late again?” she asked, though not in a stern way but in a joking way.

The boy smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And he couldn’t find his shoes,” Brittney added.

“Oh, I see.” The woman glanced up at the adults who’d accompanied the children. Her eyes got wide. “Oh! Oh my goodness. You’re Breanna Adams and you’re Ricky Kino!”

Amari smiled with satisfaction.

“Yes,” Bree said quickly. “We saw the children and convinced them to let us get them to school.”

Several of the school employees came to the front counter when they heard the names. A woman behind the first lady who’d spoken, smiled and held out her hand. “Hello, I’m Patricia Coburn, the principal here at *Lake Crossings*. It was very kind of you to give the children a ride. Thank you so much.”

“It was no problem. We were in the neighborhood,” Ricky said. He glanced at the

children. “So, Amari, you have a great day at school. I’m gonna be working at that church all week, helping out, so come up and see me anytime, okay?”

Amari nodded and grinned.

“Amari, I’ve listed both you and Brittney as present. Will you walk your sister to her class?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the boy said.

Bree smiled and waved. “Bye, Brittney, Bye, Amari, have an awesome day!”

The kids smiled and waved and headed out of the office and down the hall. Ricky and Bree turned their attention to Mrs. Coburn. “So, are they late to school a lot?” Bree asked.

The first lady spoke. “Yes, and, I really shouldn’t say, but I think they have a pretty hard home life.”

“Well first,” Ricky said, “I have to say that I really appreciate how kind you were to them when they came in. It’s probably a relief for them to see a smile when they approach, because when we saw them, they’d both been crying.”

The principal nodded. “That’s something we try to do here at the school is make them feel like it’s a place they want to be.”

“So, do the children usually get breakfast and lunch here at the school?” Bree asked.

“We make sure children who need breakfast and lunch receive them,” the principal said carefully.

Bree nodded. “Thank you for trusting us with that information. So, quick question, do you think it might be possible to get them out of class for fifteen minutes and allow them to eat some breakfast real quick?”

The woman nodded immediately. The secretary smiled. “I’ll take care of it.” She immediately left the office.

“Mrs. Coburn,” Ricky said as he offered his most charming smile. “Do you think you could trust us just a bit more? We’d like to help some of the kids here in your school, I mean, like, help them with their home life and we’d like to start with Amari and Brittney. Can you tell us their mother’s name? Or give us an address?”

The woman shook her head. “I really can’t do that. But, I’ll have a little talk with Amari, and let him know that he can talk to you about anything. So, next time you see him, he will probably be a little more forthcoming.”

Ricky nodded. “That would be helpful. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*, Mr. Kino. May I ask, why? I mean, why have you decided to help children at this school?”

He sighed. “Well, God put Amari and Brittney in front of us today. In our path, so to speak. So, when He does that, we try to take action. We don’t always get it right. But we try.”

The woman smiled. “That is wonderful. So, the bus they take home usually leaves here at about 2:40 which means it probably gets to their stop around 2:50 or maybe 2:55. Just in case you were wondering.”

Ricky smiled. “Thank you so much.”

Bree smiled and nodded. “Thank you. Hope to see you again.”

“You as well,” the woman said as the Kinos turned and left the school.

The women in the office all watched them go.

"That— is one good-looking man," one woman said.

"He is indeed," Principal Coburn agreed. "And that Breanna Adams is more beautiful in person than she is on the big screen."

"They are pretty amazing," a school counselor said. "I follow them and their kids on social media. They seem to be the real deal as far as living up to their beliefs. And their daughter is dating that Gabe Tanner, whom I just love."

"He is a cutie. I'd like him too if not for the gun thing."

The counselor shrugged. "I have no problem with him shooting guns. Anyway, he lives in Georgia and they're like, a different breed over there."

Meanwhile, Ricky and Bree drove back to the church, but instead of making a u-turn, they turned into the apartment complex and drove around the four apartment buildings. It was pretty run-down. There were four large trash dumpsters, overflowing. There were bikes and toys in the small yards. Most of them appeared to be broken. Some of the units had little flower gardens planted out front. That was nice. Some appeared clean and well taken care of, while others appeared to be run-down, with broken windows and no curtains.

"Whaddya think?" Bree asked as they drove around the buildings and headed back out to the street.

He sighed. "Again, I think we have our work cut out for us. And I think I'm about to employ a contractor who can work miracles. What do you think?"

"I think I'm about to own a small apartment community in Huntington Beach."

His eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"Yes. Would that be okay? Do you think we should do this?"

"Well, let's talk to some people before we make a decision. But I can see why you'd want to buy the place. Whoever owns it doesn't really care about the conditions the people are living in, and the people themselves probably contribute to the problems that I see. But I'm sure there are underlying problems and stories for each family here."

"Which seems overwhelming," Bree said.

Ricky nodded. "Well, babe, don't be overwhelmed. I mean, from what I see, there are twelve units in each building, which means there are forty-eight families here that we need to get to know, but we start where God asked us to start, with Amari and Brittney, and we go from there. And for that matter, we start with the *Hopewood Chapel*."

Bree nodded. "Yes. That feels right. The church might be just what these people need."

"Oh, there's no doubt about that," Ricky said.

They pulled up to the church at the same time that Jewell Brooks arrived. They all went in to join their family inside. Immediately, Bree pulled out her phone and started taking pictures and making a voice recording of all the ideas that sprang to life in her mind's eye.

Ricky smiled. She was in her element.

Once they finished going through the entire church, they headed across the street and were invited into the old home. This time all the women, Shelley, Bree, Jewell and Melody were taking pictures and making notes inside and out.

Ricky and Eric started the ball rolling immediately by asking a few contractor friends of theirs to hire a large crew of local workers who needed jobs for a giant project to be done in record time because it was only fifteen days until Christmas Eve.

After some discussion, Melody and Jewell stayed to start on the cleaning of the church. It was dusty and needed a thorough scrubbing. A few of Ronny's regular church members joined them, bringing cleaning supplies and showing them where things were kept. Shelley and Eric helped for a while, but then left to take the children home and feed them lunch and go over their ideas.

Reverend Clark was on the phone to Logan when he called in between classes to start working on the program for Sunday. Ricky got on the phone and by the afternoon, already had people pressure washing the walks, steps and outside of the church. He also had a specialist come in to look at what it would take to repair the water problem in the basement.

Eric left Shelley at home with the children and came back to help. When he promised a bonus for any of the workers who would come and work overtime, his contractor friends said they would have no problem getting the job done.

When Eric realized that the Reverend had to come over to the church to use the internet and the computer, he immediately arranged for his on-call tech guys to come and install high-speed internet and an easy-to-use laptop at Ronny's home. While he was at it, he got the man a cell phone, so that he could be reached at all times and upgraded the computer and phone systems at the church.

Shelley got a call from Jeffy and let everyone know that JoJo's surgery had gone off without a hitch and he was already home and resting.

Young Eric arrived at the church after an interview on the morning news and started working on polishing the wooden pews and the cleaning and polishing of the old wood parquet floors in the chapel proper, which, he realized as he worked, was gonna be a two-day job for sure.

Jewell worked most of the day in the basement of the church where there used to be social gatherings. There was an old kitchen that needed to be completely gutted. For now, she simply scrubbed it and then worked on the community room itself to see if it could be useful for any Christmas activities.

As the afternoon arrived, Ricky kept an eye out for the bus and sure enough it arrived at 2:55 PM. Ricky stood on the walk and watched as close to twenty kids emerged from the bus at this particular stop. A few of the kids walked down the street to their single-family homes. The majority of them made their way down the drive toward the apartments. When Amari and Brittney got off the bus they saw him standing there and immediately came to him, big smiles on their adorable faces. Some of the other kids followed them over, their eyes wide open.

"Hey, guys," Ricky said. "How was your day?"

"Okay," Amari said. "But these guys tried to fight me cuz they said I didn't really talk to you. And I told them you said you were gonna be at the church."

Ricky raised an eyebrow and stared hard at the older kids. Or if they weren't older, they were bigger. The kids lowered their eyes to the pavement.

"Well, here I am and Amari and I are friends and I suggest you don't ever try to fight

him again."

The other kids didn't say anything but Ricky was pretty sure the firm warning hit home.

"Are you really Ricky Kino?" an older boy asked.

"I really am. What's your name and how old are you?"

"I'm Shawn and I'm ten."

Ricky held out his hand. The boy looked at him like he was crazy. Ricky smiled. "So, when someone holds their hand out to you like this, you shake hands with him. You look him right in the eye and shake hands. That's what a man does."

The boy did as Ricky asked. Ricky nodded. The boy smiled.

"Can you do some karate stuff for us?" a younger boy asked.

"Hmm," Ricky murmured as he quickly tried to think how he could make that happen. "How about, um, maybe on Saturday morning if you'd like." Saturday was a busy day. It was the day after young Eric's premiere. It was also young Eric's birthday and Taylor's school Christmas dance. He looked down toward the apartments. "See that little grassy area down there where that pink bike is?"

"Yeah."

"You guys clean up that area and I'll come there on Saturday morning and teach you a little bit of martial arts."

"Really?" Shawn asked.

"Really."

"But can you show us just one thing now?" the same younger boy asked.

"What's your name?"

"Caleb."

"How old are you?"

"I'm nine."

"You're a big boy for being just nine."

He smiled. "Yessir. I'm gonna play football."

"Awesome."

"So, can you show us just one thing right now?" Caleb insisted.

Ricky looked around. There were probably ten kids standing there. He smiled. Shrugged. "Okay. Everyone line up. Two lines." He shook his head. "If you fight to be in front you get sent to the back. That's the first thing I need to teach you. No fighting and have respect for other people." He raised his eyebrows at one of the boys. "And no pushing girls. Not ever."

The boy looked down. Ricky smiled. "Okay. Everyone look up."

They did.

"Bow, like this." He showed them how to bow.

"My mom says we don't bow to no one."

"That's fine. This bowing is not to say anything other than I give you respect." Ricky stood up straight. "So, in martial arts we always give each other respect. The teacher bows to his students." He bowed to the children. "And the students bow to the teacher, if they want to be taught." He smiled. "Okay, if you want to be taught, go ahead and bow to me."

They did, even the one who'd spoken out.

"Good. Now, take your right foot and place it back like this."

They all copied him.

"Good. Bend your knees. Good. Hands into fists. Good. Elbows bent and hands up, one higher to protect your eyes, one a little lower to protect your throat. Good. Now let me hear your kiyai."

"What's that?" a girl asked.

"It's a sound you make that helps to direct your energy. For now, we can just say that you're making a karate sound. You know, like, auuuh-yuut," he said loudly.

Startled, some of the children's mouths dropped open.

"Okay, let me hear you," Ricky said.

They all screamed out, making Ricky chuckle. "Well now, that was better than I expected. Good job. Okay, everyone bow."

They did and Ricky returned the honor. "Good job, kiddos."

"Show us something else," Caleb said.

"Saturday," Ricky said calmly.

Caleb nodded but the others didn't give in so quickly. "Aww, come on," the kids pleaded.

"Saturday," he said again, his eyebrows raised. "And if you keep complaining it won't be Saturday either."

"Shut up," Caleb warned the others.

Ricky realized he was dealing with a bunch of kids that seemed hungry for some consistent adult attention. He sighed. They needed direction. They needed discipline. They needed encouragement. Ricky was good at that, but Amari and Brittney were first. "Okay, kiddos, I guess you'd better go on home before your parents get worried."

The kids all took off. "Amari," Ricky said.

The boy blinked up at him.

"I'm gonna be here tomorrow too. Be at the bus on time in the morning so I can wave at you as you go to school."

"Okay."

"Yes, sir," Ricky corrected.

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir."

"So, is your mom at home waiting on you?"

"I don't know."

"Does she go to work?"

"No."

"Is she usually home when you get home?"

He shrugged.

"Can I meet her?"

His eyes widened. "Uh, she don't like me to bring anyone home."

He sighed. "Okay. Well, ask her if she'd like to meet me or my wife. We'd love to meet her."

He nodded.

"You're doing a great job looking after your sister. Keep up the good work," Ricky

admonished.

Amari looked at his little sister as if seeing her for the first time. He nodded. “Come on, Brittney.” He turned to start home.

“Hold her hand,” Ricky called out.

The boy stopped and held his hand out to his sister. She smiled as he took her hand. She waved at Ricky.

“Bye, Brittney, bye, Amari,” Ricky called. He sighed as he watched them walk down the street toward the apartments. They crossed the grassy area where he said he’d teach them on Saturday, and went into the door just behind. Ricky smiled. Well, that was easy enough.

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December 9th, 3:35 PM, Monday Afternoon

Brookside High School, Newport, California

Taylor walked into the girls’ locker room. The cheerleaders were all there and they all squealed when she walked in. Several ran to her to give her a hug. Taylor smiled and hugged them.

“We’re so glad you decided to help us with this dance,” Amber said. Amber was the captain of the cheer squad. She almost never spoke to Taylor, but Taylor didn’t mind. Relationships can sometimes be based on what’s needed at the time. Her grandfather had taught her that, and to not be offended.

“I’m glad you asked me. It sounds like fun,” Taylor answered. “Am I the only lucky one that was asked?”

“Only you and Madison because you two are like the real dancers at the school,” Amber said.

“Me? Madison is the real dancer. She’s been taking dance since she was five. I just started training this year. I’m a late bloomer.”

“Yeah, maybe, but it’s obvious you know how to dance and you’re the only one who’s danced on national TV and Taylor, you were awesome.”

“Thanks. I was actually really nervous, but Gabe had enough confidence for both of us.”

“That Gabe.” Amber shook her head and sighed. “You are so lucky.”

Taylor smiled and nodded, because she knew she really was blessed to have Gabe in her life. “Yeah I am, though I’m missing him right now.”

“I bet. I wish he was here to see you dance.”

“He’s with his family for Christmas, but I did promise him I’d video the dance.”

“Oh, awesome! Hey, so maybe you could go live on his website like you do sometimes!”

Taylor smiled. “Maybe. I’ll ask Gabe.” It was so obvious to Taylor that they wanted her to be in their dance hoping she would go live on Gabe’s channel and make them all famous. She sighed. Being the daughter of movie stars and the girlfriend of the national phenomenon of Gabe Tanner, she was bound to be used, even here in a private school with kids who were used to being around famous people. Still, Taylor really didn’t mind helping them out. It just seemed dishonest in some way.

“Okay, everyone,” Sophie said as she and her mother came in and laid down two

large bundles of costumes on hangers in plastic garment bags. “We have the costumes.”

Sophie’s mom took over. “Ladies, it would be a good idea if you would put on your outfits and rehearse in them today so we can see if we need to make any adjustments in size or if there will be any problem with anything. We want no wardrobe malfunctions. So, please find the one with your name and put it on and let’s see. Of course, those in the red dresses will get your own white tights and use your own dance shoes. The others will use their cheer shoes with the faux elf toppers.”

Taylor was surprised to see that only three of the actual cheerleaders, plus Madison and herself had the Santa-style red velvet dresses. The other seven cheerleaders had cute little elf suits with red and white striped tights. Taylor put her costume on and, of course, it was a little big, the skirt was longer than the other girls, the v-neckline a little too low for her liking and the waist a little big. Yep, she definitely needed adjustments.

Once they were all dressed, Amber took over. “Okay, everyone. You all look great. Now, as we already talked about, Sophie is teaching the elves’ dance and I will be teaching the Santa girls’ dance. So, let’s head out to the gym, the guys are waiting.”

“Guys?” Taylor asked.

“Oh yes. That’s gonna be the best part of the dance. Our two male cheerleaders didn’t want to be left out, so like, it’s gonna be so cute. We have the elves, and the ‘Santa girls’ and the guys are like the sleigh/horses/reindeer. They’re gonna wear brown jeans and brown turtlenecks and these awesome brown sherpa vests. It’s gonna be so cute.”

“Sounds just adorable,” Taylor said, trying hard to not sound like she was mocking her.

“Oh, it really does,” Amber said with a grin. “And of course, only two guys were not enough, so we recruited some guys from the football team who said they could dance. We got football guys because they’re gonna be lifting us a lot so they have to be strong.”

“Yeah, aaand because her boyfriend plays football,” Sophie added with a giggle.

“Come on, ladies, we only have a few hours,” Amber said.

They all headed out to the gym. All Taylor could think was, please don’t let Lance be one of the guys. Please don’t be Lance. Please don’t be Lance. But they got out to the gym and there he was. Taylor sighed.

As if it couldn’t get any worse, when Amber asked everyone to pair up with a guy, she stood back and shook her head. “Hmm, something doesn’t look right. No, Quincy, you’re too tall for Taylor. You change places with Lance.” She stood back and nodded. “Okay, that’s better.” She wrinkled up her nose. “Oh, Taylor, I know you and Lance had a little spat. Do you want me to change them back?”

Taylor didn’t want to appear petty, so she shook her head. “No, it’s okay. Lance apologized. We’re good.”

Lance smiled. “Yep. We’re good.”

Taylor sighed and glanced over at Agent Ward who sat inconspicuously in the bleachers across the room. He nodded at her and touched the corner of his eye to let her know he had his eye on the situation and she was okay. Just knowing he was there made her feel much better.

“Okay, let’s get to work,” Amber said seriously.

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Colossians 3:13
"Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

Chapter Ten

December 9th, 6:00 PM, Monday Evening
Jericho's House, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose finished wiping down the counters, then checked to make sure all of the food was put away. She smiled at Jericho's right-hand man, Max Hooks. "Okay, Max, looks like you guys are good for tonight."

"Rose, thank you so much and please thank your mom for the best meal we've had in a long time."

"No need for thanks. Thank you in advance for taking care of Jericho." She frowned. "He's probably not gonna be a very good patient for the nurse tomorrow. He's gonna need help and I don't see a way around it. I have to work. You guys have to work. He said he couldn't stand being in the hospital one more day. And since he doesn't want me all up in his business, I talked to my mother and she helped hire this nurse. He's just a day nurse. I mean, you guys can help in the evenings and in the morning before you go to work, right? But when he's alone during the day, he could fall out of bed, and he'll need to go to the bathroom, so he shouldn't be alone."

Max nodded. "He'll behave. He's the one who said he needed a nurse rather than having you take care of him, so I'll help him to remember that. Don't worry, Rose, it's gonna be okay."

Rose smiled and nodded. "Remind him it's only gonna be for a few weeks. Just until his leg has healed enough that he can lower it to the floor and maneuver safely by himself. Once he's up on crutches, he'll be good to go."

"I'll remind him. Don't worry. He won't make a scene."

"No, I wouldn't think that he would. Still, I don't want this to get him down or make him frustrated. He's been pretty up and positive. And I have so much going on at the center, I can't even concentrate for worrying about him."

"I'll use that," Max said.

Rose laughed. "Good. Ya know, you'd think the way you guys always have to take care of all different kinds of people, that he'd be a better patient."

Max smiled. "JJ is like, a man's man, I guess you could say. He takes care of others. Having others have to take care of him makes him feel, uh, weak, I guess."

"Whatever. That is so silly."

"Yeah, I *won't* tell him you said that."

"Thanks for being such a good friend, Max. To him and to me."

"Yep." He nodded, uncomfortable with the warm fuzzies.

Rose giggled, turned and headed back to Jericho's bedroom where he'd been ensconced since they brought him home a few hours ago. She poked her head in and smiled. He was asleep. The past few days at the hospital, he'd been energetic and excited

about the new plans for his business. Getting moved home today, it took a lot out of him and he seemed a little down, or maybe just tired. She stood there watching him.

Almost from the moment she'd met him, he'd been her hero. He'd held the ladder when it almost blew over. He'd taken charge to save Aunt Lisa and helped bring her babies safely into the world. He'd been a huge help with the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*. He'd taken care of her when some random dude stabbed her.

She sighed. He'd helped her heart to heal when Mike Moreland destroyed her self-confidence. And he kissed her in a way she'd never felt before. In a way that touched her soul. He loved God. He loved her. And it made it so easy to fall completely in love with him. He was handsome, with his thick brown hair, brown eyes, athletic body and boyish smile. He was happy and easygoing and ultra-masculine. He was a lot like her father and that was a big plus. He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Hey, RoseRose."

She gave a soft laugh. "Hi, Jericho. I just finished helping Max get the food put away and clean up a little. I left some breakfast in the fridge. Max is gonna heat it up for you before he leaves in the morning, and I'll be here tomorrow around 1:00 to bring you some lunch. How is your pain level right now?"

He sighed. "I'm okay, Rose."

"I know that, but are you in any pain?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

She moved closer to the bed, leaned over and kissed his forehead, smoothing his hair back from his face. "Are you upset with me?"

He blinked. "No, baby. I'm not upset with you. I'm just not happy with the whole situation."

She gave him a fierce frown. "What situation is that? The one where you miraculously survived a forty-foot fall? The one where you almost bled out but didn't? Or maybe the part where you found your long-lost friend and made amends. Or," she said softly, "or maybe the part where you confessed your love for me?"

He sighed. Looked deeply into her beautiful blue eyes and smiled. "I love to see that fire in your eyes. I love that I put that fire in your eyes. And I want you to know that you don't scare me a bit."

She bit her lip to keep from smiling. "Well, you'd better be scared."

He reached out and placed his hand on her lower right hip slightly toward her abdomen. Anyone watching would think it was an intimate gesture but she knew what he was doing. "Yes, I'm carryin'. I'm almost always carryin' so you'd better watch it."

He smiled. "My tough girl. I guess you don't need me to protect you."

She leaned close. "We already know that isn't true. I need you, Jericho. I need you beside me. I need you to get well, to stand tall right next to me. I need your calm strength and your logical mind. I need you to use that logical mind to do what you need to do to heal. Take your meds, drink the smoothies we bring you, stay hydrated. Get lots of rest."

"I promise, RoseRose."

She held her hand out. "Pinky swear?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Can't bring myself to do that, but I'll seal it with a kiss." He grabbed the back of her neck, pulled her forward and kissed her until she gave a soft moan. He let her go.

Rose straightened and placed her hand on his face. “I love you, Jericho. I’m so grateful you came into my life.”

“I love you, RoseRose. Wait for me.”

“As long as it takes,” she confirmed and then sighed. “I’d better get home and get some things done. Tomorrow is Iris’ birthday and Mom has the twins and with everything at the center, it’s gonna be a hard week.”

“I wish I could be there to help you.”

“If you were well, you’d be at work. I’m okay. I have Violet, and Gabe is home, and Laynah and her brothers are gonna come help with the after-school program this week. There’s a bunch of women coming to the center in the morning to finish writing letters to the service members and boxing up the packages to send out.”

Jericho sighed with a smile. “I’m so proud of you.”

Rose shrugged and shook her head. “Be proud of Gabe. I’m just supplying what opportunities his center is providing. I’m just trying to take advantage of every single thing the center can do for the town.”

“I’m proud— of YOU.”

She smiled. “Okay, thanks, Jericho. Well, I think I have to get going.”

“So, let’s have a prayer before you leave,” Jericho said.

Rose smiled, her heart taking such comfort in his words. He may be bedridden right now, but he was still stepping up and being a man, being a spiritual leader.

They prayed together and when they finished, Rose bent over and squeezed his hand. “Call me tomorrow for any reason. No matter what you need.”

“I will. Be careful driving home.”

“I will.” She kissed him once more and left.

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December 9th, 7:30 PM, Monday Evening
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

As Bree and Ricky rode home, they went over all the things they’d accomplished and what else needed to be done, and what had to be taken care of in the morning. There was so much. Bree made a list on her phone as they each thought of one more thing and one more thing. It was a lot to do, but they weren’t dreading it or bemoaning it. They actually looked forward to serving and prayed that God would give them strength, wisdom, clarity of thought and would not let them overlook anything.

Young Eric had finished cleaning and polishing the floors and pews in the chapel, then went to work on the pulpit area, cleaning, dusting, vacuuming. When he’d finished he headed to see Jordan. He thought she might want to come over to see the church but she was too tired after practice, so instead, he fed her and saw her to her apartment.

Logan had arrived at the church just after four in the afternoon and was surprised by the amount of cleaning that had already taken place. He’d gotten to work in the vestibule and looked up only when his aunt Breez walked in. She’d been getting a good personal look at the window where the stained glass would go, and wanted to see the other one in the chapel. Logan would finish his work in the vestibule and then he and Melody would head across the street to have dinner with Reverend Clark and work some more on the Sunday program.

Ricky and Bree drove through the gate of their home, and were looking forward to a quick dinner, making a few more calls and getting some rest, because a whole lot of work was gonna take place tomorrow. They were anxious to get to it, and also eager to know what Mark was able to find out about the apartment complex.

Right behind them, coming up the drive, was Agent Ward, bringing Taylor home after stopping for some fast food on the way. Her little dance practice had gone much longer than expected.

Once inside, Ricky and Bree quickly threw some dinner together.

"So, how did your dance practice go?" Bree asked her daughter.

She sighed. "It was okay. The dance is not great, and I'm thinking I'm gonna tell Amber that I can help her fix it up. But she might not be happy about that, but it's a pretty stupid dance. Mostly just doing lifts."

"Lifts? Who's lifting you?" Ricky asked.

Taylor sighed. "Well, there are two male cheerleaders and she recruited three other guys from the football team."

Ricky glanced at Taylor, but didn't say anything.

She went on. "One of the guys is her boyfriend and I think she just likes him lifting her. She kept saying she wanted it to be like the dance Gabe and I did on *America Can Dance*."

"Who are the other two?" Ricky asked casually.

Taylor eyed him. Sighed. "I don't know one of them, his name is Quincy. And the other— is Lance."

There was silence in the kitchen.

"Go on," Ricky finally said.

"At first I was paired up with Quincy, but then Amber told him to switch with Lance. Then she made a big deal about asking me if it was okay and I told her it was no big deal, Lance had apologized to me and we were good."

Ricky nodded. "Is that the truth?"

She sighed. "I don't know. I mean, I guess so. I don't hold a grudge against him or anything, but I also don't like him putting his hands all over me, like when he has to lift me and stuff. I think he likes doing it a little too much. It might seem silly, but I almost feel like Amber is doing this to get to me."

"She doesn't like you?" Bree asked.

Taylor shrugged. "I don't know. I know she's using me to get lots of views for the dance. She wants me to go live on Gabe's site."

"Taylor, you don't have to do this if you don't want to," Ricky said.

Taylor frowned. "I really can't drop out now. It will seem like I'm being petty, you know, about Lance. So, I'm gonna do it. By the way, Mom, I brought the costume home. It's too big for me. Can we get someone to fix it for me?"

"Yes. We have a fitting on Wednesday morning. I'll contact Gloria and ask if she could take care of it for us. She has people that could do it in a few minutes' time. So we'll bring it with us and wait on it."

"That would be great. Thanks, Mom. So, enough about me and the stupid dance. How was the church? Did you get a lot done?"

"Oh, Taylor," Bree said, clapping her hands together. "It was amazing and we have soooo much to do. I took lots of pics today, before and after some cleaning." She handed her phone to her daughter.

"Scroll through. It already looks so much better. The ladies are arriving tomorrow to start decorating the chapel and the vestibule. Some guys are coming to build the accessible ramps first thing in the morning. They said they'd be done by noon. Then the trees will be arriving tomorrow about two in the afternoon. They'll need to be decorated. We were thinking about doing that ourselves at first, but then we thought we'd invite the children from the apartments next door to come and help and maybe have like, a pizza party to feed them."

"That sounds awesome. I have a dance class but should be out by 5:30. Maybe I can make it at least for some of the time."

Bree nodded. "We'll make that happen."

"Cool. But Mom, aren't the trees gonna be right between the steps and the handicap ramps?"

"Yes, why?"

"I mean, the ramps need to be painted, right? You want them to match the building, right? You'd have to move the trees to get the ramps painted so maybe you need to wait to decorate the trees."

Ricky smiled.

Bree smiled too. Bree had said the same thing to Ricky and she gave Taylor the same answer he'd given her. "Well, my smart daughter, that would be true if your father wasn't so brilliant as to have them build the ramps using a special white composite decking. It will be totally finished, capped, with white nonslip treads, beautifully designed rails with a white brick base. It's just perfect."

Taylor grinned. "My brilliant father. Score for you!"

"Score for you too, Taylor," Ricky said. "I'm glad to see your mind moving forward to the details of a project."

Taylor smiled.

"Do you want something to eat?" Bree asked as she spooned some soup into bowls and Ricky cut grilled cheese sandwiches in half.

"No. Agent Ward and I stopped at Lulu's for burgers. I'm not hungry and I am so tired. Can we pray, cuz I wanna go to bed."

"Okay, sweetie," Bree said.

Ricky nodded, came forward and clasped hands with the two beautiful ladies who graced his home and gave a heartfelt, yet short prayer and blessing on their food.

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December 9th, 9 PM, Monday Night
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor undressed, slipped on some PJs, laid out her clothes for the next day, went to her desk and pulled out her homework assignment. She opened her tablet and skimmed through the English lit assignment, pulled up the assigned reading, read it quickly, wrote a quick summary and explained why she liked or didn't like the passage, which she didn't. She stated her reasons. Sent the work to her teacher and yawned as she closed the

tablet. She was too tired. She'd have to do the math problems in homeroom.

She got into bed without getting on her knees, closed her eyes and prayed. "Father, I'm sorry. I'm so tired. I'm trying to get everything done. Please bless me with some energy or help me figure out why I'm so tired. I love you. Please lead me and guide me. I want to do Your will. In Jesus' name, amen." She closed her eyes and snuggled against her pillow. Her eyes popped open again. "Oh, Father, I can't believe I didn't say 'thank you' one time in that prayer. I don't want You to think I'm taking all my blessings for granted. So, thank You for everything. For my family. For my talents. For all that we have. And for my future husband. Thank you so much for Gabe. In Jesus' name, amen."

Smiling, Taylor picked up her phone and rolled onto her back to place a call, but frowned. She had a bunch of notifications. Sighing, she clicked on one. Her eyes grew big. She sat up and hunched over her phone scrolling through a bunch of pictures and videos of her with her arms around Lance's neck, and another with her being held up on his shoulder while she did a split with his hand on the back of her thigh and his arm around her waist. Another showed her in the air over Lance's head, and another with his hand under her thigh as he was lifting her in front of him as she did an arabesque. There were still photos taken from the videos zoomed in on where his hands were on her body. And one from the time they both fell on the floor and he landed on top of her.

Tears welled in her eyes. She lifted her head as there was a soft knock on her door. "Come in," she muttered.

Young Eric poked his head in. "Hey, squirt. Just wanted to check in with my baby sister."

She sniffed. "Hi, Eric."

He came in. "What's wrong?"

She handed her phone over to him.

He scrolled through and sighed. "First question: why are you dancing with hashtag QB Lance?"

She quickly explained the situation.

"Okay, so, did you know you were being videoed?"

"Yes. It was Madison's mom. She said she was videoing because it helps to see where the dance needs some work. But what I'm seeing is not just the video. It's been edited to show only me and Lance doing all of the lifts. Well, I mean, the whole dance is pretty much just moving from one lift to another. And then there are all the stills. I can't believe Madison's mom would do that. Hand me the phone."

He did and Taylor went to Amber's Snapchat and Instagram. She shook her head. "It was Amber. Madison's mom must have sent the video to Amber so she could see how awful the dance is. And it is, Eric. Madison is a real dancer. She's been dancing since she was tiny and she's been in the Nutcracker a few times. She's amazing and I bet she's moaning about how awful this dance is."

Young Eric nodded. "Okay, focus. So, next question. What does Amber have against you?"

"I don't know. I can't think of anything I've done to her, but it seems obvious that she's trying to cause trouble."

He nodded. "You know, you don't have to continue doing the dance if you don't

want to, though I guess you're worried that it might look bad if you drop out now."

She nodded.

"You need to tell Gabe before he sees it."

Taylor nodded. "I was just about to call him."

"Okay, I'll leave you to it."

"Well, thanks for checking in, Eric."

"No prob."

"Um, I'm being selfish. So, like, are you excited about Friday?"

"A little excited. A little anxious."

"You're gonna be great. How about Jordan?"

"What about her?"

"Is she nervous or excited?"

He smiled. "She's a little nervous and a little excited. She'll probably be better after the fitting on Wednesday."

"Have you two decided on a date?"

"Tentative date is in mid-June."

"That's only six months away."

"I think we can handle it," he said dryly. "If Jake and Laynah and Alec and Desi can throw together such nice weddings in just a few weeks, I think we can handle doing it in six months."

Taylor sighed. "But it's different for you. *You* have to put on a show. And the main, most important thing is getting the venue, so, if you have the date, you need to tell mom so she and Miss Jewell can get a venue and start the planning."

Young Eric nodded. "Okay. I'll talk to Jordan and we'll pin it down."

"Okay." Taylor sighed and then grinned. "Well, that's a first."

"What?"

"I think I just helped you with something for a change instead of you always being the one to help me."

He smiled at his sister. "You help me more than you know, TayTay. You are an awesome person."

She sniffed. "Yeah, if that's so, then why do people always try to hurt me, or trick me, or kill me, or kidnap me?"

"Because you're an awesome person," he began with a smile, but got serious at the frown on her face. "Really, TayTay, you are a light, and that makes you a target, and I think you understand that. It's okay to feel hurt, but sis, don't fall into victimhood. You are blessed. You are strong. You are protected. Keep your chin up, because you got this."

Taylor nodded. "You're right. Thanks," she whispered.

"Good night, sweetie."

"Night."

He closed the door and she snuggled down in the bed and called Gabe. He picked up on the second ring.

"Hey, Tay, finally, I get to talk to you."

She sniffed. "Hey, Gabe. Sorry, I've been really busy."

"It's okay. It probably wouldn't seem like a big deal at all except I really needed to

talk to you about something."

"Sounds serious."

"Well, I hope you're not gonna be too upset by it."

Taylor shook her head. "If you're about to break up with me, I'm gonna hang up right now."

"What? No! Why would I break up with you?"

Her eyes welled with tears again and she sniffed and wiped them with the back of her hand.

"Taylor? What's wrong, baby?"

"I'm doing this stupid dance for the floorshow for the Christmas Dance on Saturday, and I ended up getting partnered with Lance."

Gabe sighed. "Lance the quarterback?"

"Yes. And the dance is awful. There's a lot of lifts. And Madison's mom videoed the practice and Amber took the video and made a bunch of shorts and stills of nothing but me and Lance and it's blowing up with really ugly comments about people knowing it was more than we said from back when Lance kissed me and wasn't I just a slut and me always talking about being a Christian and you deserve better than me and you're just with me because of my name anyway and one day you're gonna wake up and see that you can get anyone in the world and..."

"Okay, that's enough. I get it," Gabe said softly. "Taylor, take a deep breath. It's gonna be okay. This is just another obstacle the enemy has placed in your path. We can handle people saying mean things. It doesn't really hurt us or change us. It won't affect us. Haters gonna hate, babe. You know that. I think you taught me that. I know people can be really hateful and the things they say can sting, but we're stronger than that. Think of all the things people said about Jesus, all the false accusations. It didn't break Him. He stood strong in the face of the enemy, in the face of a horrible death. We just need to weather the storm. It'll pass. Stop caring what other people think or say about us. It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is our relationship with the Lord. The ONLY thing. Do you believe me?"

Taylor sniffed again. "Yes."

Gabe chuckled when she didn't say anything else. "Well, okay then. That was easy enough."

She gave a soft laugh.

"I wish I was there to hold you, Tay."

"I wish that right now with all of my heart," she replied.

"It won't be much longer. A few more weeks. And please understand that I really need this time to say goodbye to my family. They are very important to me."

"I know. That's why I love you. You understand how important the family is. I'm not begrudging your time with your family. Really, I'm not. I just felt weak for a minute."

"Well, I truly understand 'feeling weak for a minute,' because that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"About me being weak?"

"No. About me being weak. I, uh, I did something stupid and I wanted to tell you, I guess because I don't want to ever keep any secrets from you."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"But I also don't want you to be ashamed of me, so, I considered not telling you, but I felt a prompting to be honest with you."

"Okay, I'm listening," she said again.

Gabe sighed. "So, Saturday after you left, I was working out and feeling a little stressed, and my mind went to all the crazy things that have happened over this year. That was stupid, dwelling on all those things. It was weak. Very weak. And I'm ashamed of even thinking that way, because like, I've also been truly blessed this past year beyond anything I could've imagined. But for some reason I was feeling sorry for myself and there was some beer in the fridge downstairs in the workout room and I drank it."

"Really? How many?" Taylor asked.

"All of them."

"How many were there?" she asked again.

"Three. And then my dad came in and I was a little buzzed and he realized something was wrong. He called Uncle John and Uncle Chaz and we had a little men's night while they pretty much tried to get me to open up about what I've been thinking and feeling. I had two more beers and a shot of whiskey and I got drunk enough to say everything I'd been, like, holding inside. I was totally sick the next morning."

Taylor giggled. "Do you have any video?"

"No, thank goodness."

"I bet you were funny."

"Taylor, this is serious."

"Oh, sorry. It sounds funny to me, but I'll try to stop smiling."

He sighed. "I got totally wasted, Taylor. I threw up the next morning like about six times. It was horrible. I was so sick."

"Oh, so that's why your family did the church service at home. That was so sweet of them."

"Do you understand what I did?"

"Um, you drank some beer. You're underage. I get it. You drank because you were hurting and wanted to numb that feeling. I get that too."

"That's it?"

"I mean, do you want me to say how terrible you are for doing that?"

He sighed. "Uh, I guess so."

"You want me to fuss at you and tell you what? That I'm disappointed in you? That you're a very bad boy? That I can't believe you actually did that?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what I thought you'd say. It wouldn't be undeserved. I was stupid."

"Okay, well, it sounds like you're beating yourself up enough for the both of us. I'm not ashamed of you, Gabe. I am concerned about how you're feeling, I mean like, mentally. Or I guess that might be emotionally. Either way, I mostly hope you know you can talk to me when you feel that way."

Gabe sighed. "I wouldn't want to put that on you."

"Well, I'm gonna be your wife one day. You're gonna have to allow me to be your partner in all things. But I get that right now I'm young and you might not want to tell

me. But like, you have your parents, or my parents, or Granddad, or a counselor."

"Thanks, Tay, for understanding."

She smiled. "Ya know, young Eric did that once. When he was nineteen, I think. He was so sick. I felt really sorry for him."

"Do you know why he did it?"

"Not really. I think it started out as curiosity and he got in over his head. Or it may have been when he was thinking about dropping out of school. Either way, do you think it made me think less of my brother?"

"Did it?"

"No, silly. Sometimes we feel like we have to try stuff, experience stuff in order to know how bad it is or good it is, or just know the consequences. Dad says we always have a choice and we always have to face the consequences. We make mistakes and we learn. I didn't judge young Eric and I certainly wouldn't judge you. You, Gabriel Tanner, are the best thing that ever happened to me. I love you so much. I thank God for you several times a day."

He drew a deep breath and blew it out. "Okay, I mean, that's really good to hear, but like, weren't you mad at me when I yelled at you on Saturday, when we were on the phone and you went into that barn?"

"You yelled at me? Huh, I didn't realize you were yelling at me."

"Hmm, maybe I need to be louder next time."

She giggled. "I guess so. Anyway, why would you yell at me? What was the big deal about going into the barn?"

"It was, I mean, I just thought it was dangerous."

"But you didn't want me to keep Manny from that danger?"

He sighed. "I had a dream about you being hurt and in that dream you were in a barn of some sort. It actually looked a lot like the place where Mia Casellas was holding me when I was abducted."

"Oh! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't want you to live in fear. I told your father. But I've begun to think that my dream may have been just me projecting my own experience into your life, because it looked exactly like the place where I'd been held. My father thinks I'm having some post trauma issues."

"That makes sense," she said thoughtfully.

"No it doesn't. Because Jesus is with me and He healed me. I feel like I shouldn't even be affected by all of this stuff. Jesus hugged me, and I have no right to pretend to be a victim of anything."

Taylor thought. "Hmm, that's an interesting thought. Jesus can heal you and give you peace but that doesn't mean you just forget everything that happened to you. He didn't erase your memory. You were shot, kidnapped, beat up, attacked a bunch of times, it takes time to forget all that stuff."

Gabe was silent.

Taylor went on. "I know Dad says Jesus allows us to work through things. It makes us stronger and wiser. So, you thinking about all that stuff, it's probably Jesus helping you to sort things out and heal. Or sometimes, when you're a bright light, the dark forces

try to get into your head and make you feel unworthy. I know you've been told that you're a light and therefore you are a target." She smiled. "Ya know, young Eric just talked to me before I called you and I asked him why are people always out to hurt me and he said because I'm awesome, which I just realized he was saying that people are trying to put out my light too."

"I think he's right," Gabe said. "And I think you're right. So, let's pray together and ask the Lord to make us strong and vow to not let them get to us. I promise I won't try to numb my stress with alcohol anymore. I'll find my comfort in Him and I'll go back to counseling."

"And I won't let ignorant comments on social media get to me."

"Good. That's real good, but still, actually, we have the power to do a little something about that."

"Really? What?"

"You'll see tomorrow."

"Oh, come on. Give me a hint."

"Here's your hint. I now have more followers on my website than Isla has on Teenspotter."

"Okay, and..."

"I gave you a hint, not the answer."

She giggled. "Okay. Ahh, Gabe, I am so glad we got to speak with each other. I always feel so strong and so comforted once I speak to you."

"I feel the same way about you. That feeling is one of the reasons I believe we were meant to be together. One day, Miss Taylor Kino, you and me, we're gonna walk down that aisle."

"Ugh, just thinking about that makes me yearn so much for that day."

"Live in the moment and it will come faster."

"Live in the moment," she said in a mocking voice.

He chuckled. "I love you, Taylor Kino."

"Backatcha, Gabe Tanner."

"Hey, so, I'd better try to get some sleep. But tomorrow can you call while you're on the way to your dance class?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It's Iris' birthday and she would be so happy to be able to speak to you."

"Oh, that's right. Was it really just a week ago that we went into that grocery store and ordered her cake?"

"Uh huh, and got jumped in the parking lot. Yep. Just a week ago."

"So, how's your head?"

"It's good. You can barely tell there was a cut there."

"No scar?"

"Well, a tiny one. Ya know, Dad says to go easy on myself, like for having some PTSD, because for every scar that was put on my body this year, there's a scar on my mind that has to dissolve. And I have lots of scars. Three on each shoulder, one on the back of my thigh, one on the front of my thigh, one on my throat, one on my chest and one at my waist, and then this one on my forehead."

Taylor sniffed. “When I think of how those scars all got there, it makes me want to cry.”

“There’s no crying in baseball,” he quoted.

“What?”

“It’s a quote from a movie. Have you never seen A *League of Their Own*?”

“No. I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never seen it.”

“Gosh, Taylor, we need to spend a lot of time together. Watch all the required movies, go to football games and baseball games and who knows what else.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to you teaching me all about those things.”

“I will. I promise. But for now, I guess we’d better get some sleep,” Gabe said.

“Oh, wait, I didn’t get to tell you about this church. I mean, Gabe, the pastor is a man named Reverend Clark. He’s ninety-two years old.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, and he’s so cute. I mean, in an old man kind of way. He’s really thin, and he looks like he might fall over, and his church, it looks the same way, but we’re gonna help out and fix everything up.”

Gabe yawned and turned on his side. “Cool. Tell me all about it.”

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December 10th, 7:00 AM, Tuesday Morning

Brookside High School, Newport, California

Taylor held her head up high as she walked into the gym for the early morning dance rehearsal. They’d decided on rehearsing early for Taylor’s sake, since she had to be at her dance class at *New York School of Dance, Los Angeles Campus* right after school.

Taylor sat on the bleachers and put on her dance shoes. She was one of the first ones there. Lance came in and glanced at her. He sighed and came to her quickly. “It wasn’t me. I uh, I just wanted you to know, I had nothing to do with it.”

Taylor nodded. “Thanks for that.” She looked over as several of the cheerleaders came in. They were quiet. A few came straight to her. “Hey, Taylor. I hope you’re okay,” one said.

“Yeah,” another said. “I’m glad you decided to still come today.”

Taylor’s brow furrowed. She shrugged. “It’s just a few pics. I don’t care.”

“You are so cool, Taylor,” one said. “And that Gabe, the way he stands by you. You are so lucky. That video he made this morning. He’s just, like, amazing.”

Taylor looked up. “He made a video?”

“You haven’t seen it?”

“No.” She immediately pulled out her phone and played the video.

“Hey, it’s me, Gabe Tanner. I’m making an early video this morning for two reasons. First, to invite you to my little sister’s birthday party. I’ll be livestreaming at 5:00 PM Eastern Standard Time. My little Iris is turning three, so join us if you can! But also I’m on here early because I wanted to talk about the video that was put out last night of my girl Taylor rehearsing for her school Christmas Dance. For those of you who don’t know, her high school is having a Christmas Dance and the cheerleaders are doing a little floorshow, and they invited Taylor to join them, since she’s such a good dancer, and also because they were hoping to get her to livestream the dance on Saturday night. And yes,

that will happen.

"So, I can't be there right now, because I'm spending Christmas with my family before I have to leave for my new job in January. The cheerleaders recruited some guys from the football team to help with the dance because they needed more guys. And some people are upset because Taylor was paired up with Lance, the guy who forced a kiss on her back during football season. He apologized for that little stunt, and of course, Taylor and I both forgave him. So, when he was paired with Taylor for this dance, she agreed to do it, and I trust her completely. I mean, that would be kinda silly to stay mad, right?

"Now, the cheer team captain took a video of the practice and spliced it up and made the pics and video shorts that you saw on social media. I'm sure she did that to get some publicity for their dance and not to cause Taylor any trouble. But, if you read any of the comments, you will see that they were pretty hateful. And I'm not talking about this today to defend Taylor, because she simply does not need defending. I'm talking about this to make a point about some people's tendency to jump to the negative, to be ugly, and to be hateful as they hide behind a screen. So, if you, my awesome followers and Christian warriors, if you know any of these people who made such hateful comments, I hope you will pray for them. Because they need some Jesus in their lives, don't ya think? We answer cruelty with kindness.

"Some people were very quick to judge my girl and like, for your own sake, I hope you will stop doing stuff like that, because you will be judged with that same judgment. Taylor is a strong and devout Christian who loves the Lord with her whole heart and she loves me too and I love her too. So yeah, like, there, I said it out loud for the whole world to hear. Taylor and I are good. We're more than good. I trust her completely and she trusts me. That's how a good relationship should be. Strive for it. Be honest with your friends and girlfriends and boyfriends. If Taylor didn't want to be my girl anymore, I'd be the first person she would tell.

"So, that's pretty much all I have to say about that. Oh, and by the way, Taylor and I have a few really close friends, who will be escorting her to the dance. Don't talk bad about them. They honor me by watching out for my girl. Here's a challenge. Those of you who made some harsh comments, go forth today and make it right. Apologize. Or pray about it and try to fill your heart with love and kindness. It's the best way to go through life and it makes you have better days, happy days. Be in joy, people. Tanner out."

Taylor smiled and sighed after watching the three-minute video. She looked up. "I didn't know he made that. He's so sweet."

"You are so lucky, Taylor," a cheerleader said.

She smiled. "Yeah, I am."

The room quieted as Amber came in. She headed straight to Taylor. Taylor stood as she approached and noticed the girl had been crying.

"Taylor, I am so sorry. I didn't know that would cause so much trouble. I've been online all morning trying to tell people that I put up those pics for publicity. I thought, putting up pics and videos of you with Lance, it would generate a lot of publicity. I didn't think it would cause people to like, lash out at you. Please forgive me."

Taylor nodded. "Of course. I admit, it hurt a little bit. I thought maybe you posted

them to try to hurt me and I couldn't understand why you didn't like me. But I'm glad to know that's not how it is."

"So, you forgive me?"

Taylor smiled. "Of course." She gave Amber a hug. "But will you please take the posts down and explain it was a supervised dance rehearsal? I can help make the explanation with you if that is easier. And I just have one question. How did Gabe know that you posted the videos for publicity?"

"He called me."

"Oh! How did he get your number?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I asked him the same thing and he said he had contacts."

Taylor giggled, knowing that contact was most likely his own father. "What did he say to you?" Taylor asked.

"He was very up front. He asked me why I did what I did and thanked me for explaining. He told me he was gonna make a video. Taylor, he is so awesome. And so are you. You deserve each other."

Taylor smiled. "He really is a good guy, isn't he? Well, we're wasting time. Let's get to rehearsing. By the way, I thought of a few ideas to help with the dance, if you want to hear them."

"Sure. I think I'm in way over my head anyway."

Taylor nodded. "Let's get to it."

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December 10th, Tuesday Morning

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Ricky Kino and his beautiful wife and their eldest child stood on the sidewalk in front of the apartment complex that was next to the church, chatting with the kids as they waited for their bus. Young Eric was crouched down as he spoke with several little ones. Ricky and Bree introduced themselves and shook hands with several parents who'd walked their young children up to the bus stop. The parents and children alike were excited about meeting the celebrities.

"Mr. Kino," one woman began. "My kids tell me that you're gonna come here on Saturday morning and teach them some karate stuff."

Ricky smiled. "Yes. Well, not just karate, but a mixture of martial arts. I was just going to give them a little demonstration and then teach them a little bit, whoever wants to learn. Parents are also invited."

"Why would you want to do that?"

Ricky frowned, trying to figure out what she was getting at. "Hmm, well, they asked me to show them some stuff, and I knew I'd be here working at the church and it would be no big deal for me to come talk to the kids for a little while."

"So, it wasn't your idea?"

"No, but I'm happy to do it."

"So, you're not trying to drum up business?"

The words surprised him. He sighed. "What's your name?"

"I'm Leila. Leila Kekoa."

"Ah, that sounds like a very pretty Hawaiian name. Well, Mrs. Kekoa, surely you know that I have no need to try to drum up business. The Kino martial arts studios are not short on students. We have over eight thousand students in the state of California alone. We have over two hundred thousand students worldwide. I spoke to these kids yesterday because they came to speak to me. They asked me to teach them and I have no problem doing that. Like I said, I'm happy to do it."

She looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kino. I didn't mean to insult you. I guess I'm a little wary."

He smiled kindly. "And I guess I understand."

The woman looked up at Bree. "You're Breanna Adams, right?"

"Yes." She held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Leila."

"Mrs. Kekoa," Ricky said. "Are you from Hawaii?"

"Yes."

"Which island?"

"Maui."

He nodded. "My father is a native Hawaiian, from the beautiful isle of Kauai."

"Yes. I've heard that."

"Well, Mrs. Kekoa," Ricky began.

"Please, call me Leila."

He nodded. "Leila, our family is currently working on helping out this church and we're putting up some Christmas trees outside this evening and we wanted to invite all the children from your apartments to come up and help decorate the trees and we'll have a big pizza party."

Her eyes opened wide. The children standing around started jumping up and down in excitement.

"All of us?" one boy asked.

"Yes, all of you. And your parents too. And if you have any brothers or sisters, them too."

"That's very nice of you," the woman standing next to Leila said. "Are you sure? I mean, that's a lot of people."

"The more hands the better. The trees are very big."

"Do we need to bring anything?" a large man asked. "I work for a beverage company and I can get drinks for almost nothin'."

"Awesome. Well then, bring some drinks, and I'll pay you for them. Ya know, keep things honest."

The man nodded. "Always gotta keep things honest."

Ricky smiled and held out his hand. "What's your name?"

"Name is Leonard Garcia. My son told me about you yesterday."

"Which one is your son?"

"Caleb."

Ricky smiled with a nod. "Ah yes, the big boy. I should've known."

Leonard laughed. "Yep. He takes after his dad for sure."

"Well, Mr. Garcia, ladies, I see the bus coming up the street. Will you do me a favor and pass the word around? Pizza party and tree decorating tonight at the church at five

o'clock."

"Oh yes," the women said. "We'll tell everyone."

"How about us?" a boy said, motioning to a few others he was standing with. "We don't live in the apartments. We live right down there in that blue house and that brown house."

Ricky smiled. "Of course, you're invited too. The whole street. And your parents and if you have any other family members. You're all invited."

The bus pulled up and the Kinos and parents stood and watched them load up. They waved as the bus left.

The parents hurried down toward the apartment community. Ricky watched to see if any of them went into Amari's and Brittney's unit, but none did. He noticed a few teen boys then, walking toward the street from the apartments. The teens' eyes opened big and they got excited. They picked up their pace.

"Man, my brother said you guys were here yesterday and I hit him upside his head for lying. But he wasn't lying. I mean, you're Ricky Kino, right?"

Ricky nodded. "Yes. So, your brother wasn't lying. And this is my wife, Breanna Adams and my son, Eric Kino."

They all shook hands with the boys.

"Man, you the one that just won the Kino Challenge, right?"

Young Eric nodded. "That's right."

"Man, you are badass."

Young Eric chuckled. "Only when I have to be."

"Yeah, and like, you got kidnapped, right? And you killed a bunch of guys, right? That was you, right?"

Sighing, young Eric nodded again. "Yes, I was forced to defend myself and other people."

"Man, that had to be tough."

"It was a difficult time."

"Hey," another boy said. "So, like, where's your sister?"

Young Eric smiled. "She's at school."

All the boys turned as a group of girls walked up from the apartments to join them, and more teenagers came from down the street.

The Kinos went through all the introductions, confirmed the martial arts lesson would be taught on Saturday, and invited them to the pizza party. When their bus arrived, the teens were buzzing with excitement.

Only a few minutes after the second bus pulled away, the troops arrived. A construction crew, a road crew, a landscaping company, a real estate agent, two attorneys, a building inspector, an interior designer, a plumber, an electrician and a contractor to handle them all. Along with the hired workers, who had been lured by Christmas bonus pay, was the family themselves.

Justin and Jason Lee and their wives. Mark and Bella with Emily and JoJo. Joey and Breez, with their three. Eric and Shelley with their five little ones along with Jeffy and her little one. Melody Keith. Jewell Brooks. And Alec and Destiny Morgan. It wasn't everybody. But it was a good start. Logan would join later. Jordan would arrive by five.

Taylor would arrive by six. Both the Davises and the rest of the Keith family would be there as soon as school was out.

Most of the women and children headed to the upstairs classrooms to clean, organize, and decorate. Alec, Mark and JoJo headed to the motel. Eric senior headed to the church office to assess and clean and see what was needed. The designer and Bree headed to Reverend Clark's home. Breez sat in the chapel, finishing her sketch which she hoped to turn over to the stained-glass company before noon. Bella and Destiny, both pregnant, used the vestibule area to organize the decorations. The ones for the trees in one place, and then separating out the ones for the chapel, for the vestibule, the wreaths for the doors, the lights. They yelled at Alec as he came through for a moment, and asked him to move the large boxes that held the nativity into the chapel for them and then they would unpack, assemble it and place it.

Jewell went downstairs to the kitchen and took measurements for a new stove and refrigerator. If she hadn't just done something similar with Ricky for her restaurant, she'd be way over her head, but that little bit of experience gave her the confidence she needed in order to plan this kitchen area. She even made some plans to rearrange a few things to make it a more workable space. By Thursday, the new commercial stove, large refrigerator, and counters should be installed. Jewell smiled. How much fun was this?

After Reverend Clark spoke with the designer, he came across the street and joined Eric in the office.

"Good morning, Ronny," Eric greeted.

"Good morning. Well, you people really don't mess around, do you?"

Eric smiled. "I warned you that we would move fast."

"Well, I'm so excited to see this. I left Mrs. Kino and Miss Draper in my home and told them they were free to do whatever they pleased," he said in his slightly shaky voice.

"That was very brave of you."

He smiled. "Well, I probably won't be there very long."

"Why do you say that?"

Ronny grinned. "Because I'm ninety-two years old. Just, what is it the kids say nowadays? Just keeping it real?"

"Do you have any health problems?" Eric asked.

"I don't think so. Haven't been to a doctor in many years. Don't like 'em. Don't trust 'em."

"And I certainly don't blame you for that, however, my daughter is a doctor and I trust her."

"Ah yes, the Nobel Prize winner. That is a special young lady. She's doing God's work. And I would trust her too."

"Good. Then maybe we should have her take a look at you."

He shook his head. "Thank you, but no. I don't wanna know. I'm ready to go home. Can you respect that for me?"

Eric nodded. "Yes." He sighed and looked around. "So, Ronny, when does your church secretary usually work?"

Ronny sighed. "I haven't had a secretary for a few years now. Couldn't afford to pay her. We actually used to have two. Mrs. Farrel used to take care of all the finances. Make

deposits. Pay the bills. Take care of maintenance. And then Mr. Hicks organized the Sunday School classes, printed up programs, scheduled special meetings and events. Kept track of church membership, babies born, people dying. That kind of thing. Had to let him go first, and after a few more years, Mrs. Farrel."

"And so, you try to take care of everything?"

"I try."

"Well, that is going to have to change. You're gonna need to train someone to do all the things that need to be done."

"Well, most of the members are pretty old. I guess I could ask Mrs. Thompson. She's only in her late fifties. She's a pretty sharp lady. But she's pretty busy most of the time with her two new grandchildren."

Eric frowned. "Okay, then I suppose we should keep our eyes open. For some reason, I see a young person in my mind's eye. Someone with lots of energy and a good quick mind."

Ronny shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't think of anyone like that who doesn't already have employment."

"Then let's stop trying to think of a solution ourselves and ask the Lord to show us the right person," Eric suggested.

Ronny nodded. "Yes. That is the right thing to do. Even at my age, I have to keep reminding myself to stop trying to figure everything out on my own. Simply let go, and let God."

Eric smiled. Both men turned as two women came into the office.

"Reverend Clark," an elderly lady said, a big smile on her face. "Gertie and I have brought some goodies for all of you people. Those two sweet ladies in the vestibule said they wouldn't mind if we set up some tables out here in the hall outside of the chapel so we can set up a refreshment table."

"Thank you, Lottie," Ronny said. "Lottie, Gertie, this is Eric Kino. Eric, Lottie and Gertie are sisters. They've been coming to our church for going on forty years."

The women giggled and held their hands out for Eric to take.

"Such a pleasure to meet you," Eric said kindly as he took their hands and gave them a squeeze. "So, Lottie and Gertie, is that Charlotte and Gertrude?" Eric asked.

The women giggled. "Why, yes it is, and you are just so clever for knowing that. It's so nice to meet you, and Gertie and I are very excited about what you're doing for our little church."

"My wife and I, too, are very excited," Eric said. "We're so happy that we can be of service."

"Oh, is she here? We simply must meet her."

He nodded. "Yes, they're just down the hall working in a classroom. I'll go find a table to set up for you. Why don't you go find my wife? Her name is Shelley. I'll be right back."

Ronny nodded. "Thank you, Eric. There are some extra tables in a few of the classrooms. You might have to get a couple of them because they're not very long."

Eric nodded. "I got it. You relax, have a seat at the desk, and start a list of things you'll need to teach to your new church secretary."

"I must say," Ronny said. "Your mind is very organized."

Eric smiled. "Not always. But I try. Right now I'm in the get-things-done business type mode. This mode sometimes makes my wife exasperated."

Ronny chuckled. "I can imagine that."

Eric laughed and went in search of tables. So far, it looked like it was gonna be a very productive day.

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Ecclesiastes 9:10

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might,
for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom
in Sheol, to which you are going."

Chapter Eleven

December 10th, 11:30 AM, Tuesday Morning
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe smiled at the young Hannah Brown as she held open the kitchen door for him. He carried two milk crates holding eight gallons of fresh raw milk. He moved past her and quickly set them on the floor in front of the larger refrigerator. She watched quietly as he promptly put them away. Gathering up the two now empty crates, he smiled at her. "You ready?"

She nodded.

"Are those the lunches for Rose?"

She nodded again.

"Thank you, Gabe," his Aunt Jodi said as she came into the kitchen.

He saluted. "My pleasure, ma'am," he said in a mock southern drawl.

Jodi laughed, moved forward and pinched his cheeks. "Oh, you are just so cute."

Gabe rolled his eyes.

"So, tell me again what you two are gonna do?"

"We're gonna go to the Center to drop off the lunches and then head to the store to pick up Iris' cake, and then go back to my house to help Mom do whatever she needs doing and to keep Iris occupied and hold little babies."

Jodi frowned. "I wish I could come with you to hold those babies, but I can't get away until Wendy gets here."

"Uh, who's Wendy?"

"My new day manager."

"Oh, cool. Well, Aunt Jodi, ya know Gentian and Isaiah will still be there for you when you get there."

Jodi nodded and then smiled at Hannah. "Well, you and Gabe have a good time and I'll see you in a few hours."

Hannah smiled. "Okay."

Gabe gave a quick tug on a lock of Hannah's hair. "Okay, let's head out." He smiled. "See ya later, Aunt Jodi." He turned to the two people working on lunch for the inn guests. "Hi, and bye, y'all."

"Bye, Gabe. Tell Iris we said 'happy birthday.'"

"I will."

Gabe and Hannah went out the back to the side drive where he'd parked his truck. Once she was seated in the passenger seat, he looked over at her. "You look really nice today, Hannah."

She smiled. "Thanks."

"Is that a new outfit?"

She looked at him funny. “Uh, yeah. Everything I have is new.”

“Oh, yeah,” he grinned and then nodded. “I like it.”

“The outfit?”

“Well, yeah, but I mean, I was talking about the attitude. I like that you weren’t too shy to remind me about that.”

She nodded. “I don’t think I’m shy. I just don’t talk a lot. You know? Unless I have something to say.”

“I think that’s awesome. There are a lotta people in this world that should learn to do that.”

Hannah looked over at the boy, mostly to see if he matched what he looked like online. She’d spent hours and hours watching everything on his website. Then she’d searched for other videos about him and Taylor. She was intrigued by him because he’d been shot and kidnapped. She’d watched those videos over and over. And she’d watched everything she could find on Taylor.

Gabe glanced over at her. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Yes. How’s Taylor? Have you heard from her? I’ve been waiting for her to call me.”

He frowned. “Um, yeah, me too. She finally called me last night in the middle of the night. She’s been super busy and hasn’t had any time to call anyone. By the time she finds time, it’s the middle of the night for us over here in Georgia.”

“What time is it in California?”

“Well, they’re three hours behind us, so, like, right now it’s almost noon here, which means over there it’s only nine in the morning and she’s at school. Then when she finally gets home after all of her activities it’s nine or ten at night for her, which means it’s midnight or one in the morning for us. But I told her it didn’t matter what time it is, to call me, so she finally did.”

Hannah nodded.

Gabe smiled at her. “You know, you could text her though. When she gets out of class she’ll read the text, and she might have time to respond. That way you can at least touch base with her.”

“Okay, I’ll do that,” Hannah said with a nod.

“You know how to text?”

She nodded. “So, what school does Taylor go to?”

“She goes to *Brookside High School*. It’s a private school in Newport Beach, California.”

“Private means only certain people can go there, right?”

“Yes. It’s not funded by government money, so not just anyone can enroll. The people who go there have to pay a lot of money.”

“Okay, so, what kinda school is *Pine Forest High School*, where Charlie goes?”

“It’s a public school. It’s not so bad, as public schools go. I graduated from there last year.”

“You’re eighteen, right?”

“Yep.”

Hannah was quiet a moment while she tried to decide if she should tell him what

was troubling her. “The DFCS people say that I have to go to school.”

Gabe nodded, wondering what he needed to say to help her. “So, are you happy about that or not so happy?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. I have to go to *Pine Forest Middle School* on Friday and take an assessment test, like, to see what grade I need to be in. The school got in touch with the online school I was doing, and it says I was doing tenth-grade level in English and reading and history, but only fifth-grade level in math and science, so they don’t know where to put me and now I have to go take an assessment test.”

“What grade are you hoping they’ll put you in?”

She sighed. “I just wanna be around kids my own age.”

“That makes sense. And you’re thirteen, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s seventh or eighth grade. And I think if you’re so smart in English, we should hope for the eighth grade, because I have a feeling you’ll catch up in math and science once you have a teacher to teach you. Maybe you could even get a math tutor to help you catch up, because it’s hard to learn math by yourself. But like, even what you’ve managed to do all alone, it’s pretty impressive. You must be really smart.”

She smiled. “I like to read. I think that’s why I’m good in English.”

Gabe nodded. “Probably. Anyway, if you end up in seventh or eighth grade, you’ll have Matt Stewart there to help you meet people.”

“What grade is he in?”

“Seventh. And if you end up in high school, you’ll have Charlie to help you, so either way, Hannah, you’re gonna be okay. Ya see, Charlie and Matt are really popular, and if they say you’re their friend, everyone, or I guess almost everyone, will also want to be your friend.”

“Why almost?”

He shrugged. “Well, because there’s always gonna be people who are snotty or mean. That’s just the way it is. But if anyone gives you trouble, you make sure you tell the Appels, or Charlie, or Matt. They’ll help you handle it. You’re safe now. You have people around you who will help you and protect you, and we won’t let anything bad happen to you, Hannah. You won’t face things alone. Not anymore. But we have to know what’s goin’ on, so always talk to someone. You were a victim of a bad dude, but we’ll protect you now. Just know that. You’re smart and very brave and this is a whole new life for you. So, like, you don’t have to identify as the girl who was kept hostage. Be free.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Gabe sighed. He may have said too much. “Oh, well, I mean, you’ve had a pretty hard time these past few years. You’ve had some pretty hard things happen to you. Some people might play victim, like, look at poor little me, I had a horrible life, everyone be sad for me, everyone feel sorry for me. It gets them attention. Not that needing attention is bad. We all need to be seen. But you are seen now, Hannah girl. We see you and Jesus sees you and He sent people to help you heal, so you are not gonna be that poor, hurt little girl ever again. You’re gonna be strong and happy.”

She nodded in understanding. “I wouldn’t act all sad to get attention. I wouldn’t do

that. I sure don't want people to feel sorry for me. I just wanna be normal."

Gabe smiled at the phrase that he so often used.

"Why would people do that?" Hannah asked. "I mean, why would they want people to feel sorry for them?"

He shrugged. "It's a victim mindset and I think they probably do it for the attention they get. Maybe they have a bad home life, and feel like no one loves them, so they're actually looking for love or something to fill the emptiness they feel. They don't realize that there's only one thing that can fill that emptiness, and that is Jesus. Once you establish a connection to Him, the emptiness goes away and you don't need anyone to feel sorry for you or give you attention because He heals your heart and mind." Gabe turned and smiled at her as they pulled into the Center. "But sometimes, we revert back to victimhood without even realizing it." He was now speaking about himself. "If that happens, we just gotta stop it and start fresh."

Hannah nodded as she tucked her hair behind her ears.

He smiled and opened his door. "Let's go in and look around for a minute and see what kind of stuff Rose has going on in there. I hear she has a whole bunch of fun things planned right up until Christmas."

Hannah opened her door and Gabe ran around and took the lunches from her.

"I'll get those," he said.

She smiled. Gabe was so nice. Everyone here was so nice. But he just said not everyone was nice. Hmm, she wondered what made some people nice, and some people like, well, like Carl. Or like her own mother for that matter. And her father too. One thing for sure: they didn't have Jesus in their lives.

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December 10th, 1:00 PM, PST Tuesday Afternoon
Ronald Clark Home, Huntington Beach, California

Grandmaster Eric Kino, Ricky, Mark and Ronny stood on the sidewalk just outside of the reverend's old, two-story home, watching a large construction crew working across the street on removing the tall chain-link fence that had been erected between the church and the old motel property. At first they thought they might just tear the fence down using heavy equipment, but they didn't want to damage the tarmac of the parking lot, so this group of twenty men armed with high-powered drills, fence cutters, and muscle were working at an amazing speed. The fence fabric would be rolled up and reused. The hardest part was the fence posts. Still, it was coming down in record time.

Also standing on the sidewalk, Melody was looking over the work that had been done on the church as she waited for Logan, who would be arriving any minute. It already looked like a different building. Once the plywood covering the opening for the stained-glass window was gone it was gonna be beautiful. All the black mildew stains were gone and the church looked bright white. They were not gonna paint it until the roof could be replaced. With rain expected on and off throughout the winter, the new roof and fresh paint would happen in the spring. Still, right now, compared to how it looked just two days ago, it was like night and day.

Two beautiful wreaths had been hung on the large, double arched doors. The beautiful new ramps had been placed symmetrically on either side of the large concrete

porch area. There were prettily designed solar lights on each post of the ramps. After lunch, the men would put up the two large Christmas trees that had just been delivered on either side of the wide steps. Tomorrow, concrete would be poured to create walkways leading to the edge of the ramps.

Also happening at this minute, two men were digging holes to place a beautiful white post-mounted sign in the tiny yard area on the right side of the property. The sign would be glass-enclosed, but not a sign that one would have to go out and change out the letters manually. It was a video screen that would announce times of meetings, special events, and an uplifting message.

Melody's eyes moved from the men putting up the sign across the street to the car that pulled up in front of her. It was Bristol. She lowered her passenger-side window.

Melody smiled and leaned in. "Hey, Bristol! Whaddya think so far?"

"It's amazing. Grandma wants me to come get her and bring her up here to see. I only have an hour for lunch, so let me go get her and I'll be right back."

"Okay, awesome. So, you work nearby?"

"Yes, just a mile away."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a clerk in an accounting office. I was gonna get my degree in accounting, but I had to put those plans on hold because I have to make ends meet, but at least I'm working in my field. Anyway, I'll be right back."

Melody nodded and stepped away from the car.

Just as Bristol pulled away, Alec pulled up. He parked just past Ronny's house and walked up to speak to Mark, greeting Melody as he passed.

"Alec," Mark said. "Were you successful?"

Alec smiled and nodded. "Yes, I was. I walked it through personally. I had to be a little insistent and that was kind of scary, but I stood firm and got the permit." He turned and held his hand out to the Kinos. "Mr. Kino, Grandmaster Kino, it's very nice to see you."

"You too, Alec. So tell us, how's married life goin'?" Ricky asked with a smile.

Alec smiled with pleasure. "I had no idea that married life could be so good. Thanks to your example, Mr. Kino, it's pure heaven. And life in general is amazing right now, thanks to you and young Eric. Thanks to all of you, actually, we have a roof over our heads, food to eat, transportation and a job, absolutely amazing."

Mark nodded. "And he's doing well at that job. He's learning fast and once he gets his degree, there's gonna be no stopping this guy."

"Thank you, sir," Alec said, his tone reverent as he gazed at the man he'd grown to truly admire and respect. He was a man Alec hoped to mirror in his career. He drew a breath and turned to the reverend. "Reverend Clark, nice to see you."

"You as well, young man. So, what feat did you just stand firm and make happen?" he asked, in his slow shaky voice.

Alec smiled. "Well, sir, Mr. Adams thought we might need a permit to have such a large gathering outside the church this evening. So, I did the paperwork, got a special appointment, went to the permit department at City Hall and got it." He held it out. "Who wants it?"

"Give it to Reverend Clark," Mark said. "Since he owns the church."

Ronny smiled and took the paper. "You guys think of everything, don't you?"

"We try," Grandmaster Kino said.

"Which reminds me," Ricky said. "Joey has arranged for some security just to keep things safe, and Jason has notified the *Huntington Beach Police Department* and actually invited them to come by and have some pizza."

"Well, I am very impressed," Ronny said. "So, what else do we need to do to prepare for tonight?"

"Well, you will only need to welcome the people who show up. Logan will be setting up a sound system so you won't have to try to speak over a crowd. Welcome them out. Have a prayer. Logan will provide some Christmas music as the children decorate the trees," Eric answered.

"Bree has arranged for tables to be set up outside, over there," Ricky added as he pointed to the front part of the now open parking lot. "Jewell is arranging for the pizzas to be delivered from several different places to spread the business around and to offer a wide variety. Jewell has also spoken to the church ladies and they are preparing desserts to bring up here. She and Bree are taking care of all of the necessities like plates, forks, and napkins. Drinks are being provided by a man in the community and we'll have large coolers filled with ice for them, and also bottles of water. Bella and Breez have already purchased all of the decorations needed for the trees. The men will be putting up the trees soon. We were just taking a few minutes to rest and digest after lunch, and then we'll get the lights on the trees before everyone gets here."

"And when is everyone coming?" Ronny asked.

"We told them five, but I'm pretty sure they will be arriving earlier than that. We'll do some decorating first and then eat and enjoy the party and then shoot to clean things up at eight and be completely done and gone by nine."

Ronny nodded. "Way past my bedtime."

"When you get tired, head home and we'll take care of things," Ricky said. "It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. After seeing the windows that had already been vandalized, I felt like we should invite the neighborhood to help. If people feel included in what we're building, they'll be more likely to take pride in it and help protect it. By the way, Jason, Joey, and Jeff have arranged security for a while, until the neighborhood gets used to the idea of taking care of the area, and there are some tech guys inside the church right now installing motion detector lights and silent alarms and security cameras."

"But the idea," Grandmaster Kino added, "is to get the community involved in their area and help them to feel some pride in what they are accomplishing, so that they will take care of their own community."

"That sounds good when you say it. But that apartment complex is so run down, it's hard for those people to feel pride in their community," Ronny countered.

Ricky nodded. "You are exactly right, Reverend. And that's why Bree and I are looking into purchasing the complex."

A few gasped. Everyone was surprised by the statement, except for Mark. Ricky chuckled. "I know, right? Bree and I drove around down there yesterday. We'll find out more on Saturday, but from what we could see it's pretty broken down. I'm sure there

are units with broken appliances. We saw broken windows. Broken doors. We asked Mark to get his real estate attorneys to look into the owners. The place is owned by a group called *Oasis Properties* which is pretty much owned by a man named Thomas Wood. He owns over four hundred properties in the greater Los Angeles area. Not all of his properties are this bad, but many are. Not only does he *not* provide healthy, habitable homes, but when something breaks, he charges the renter extra money to pay for the repair, always claiming it was the renter's negligence."

"Is he willing to sell the property to you?" Ronny asked.

"We haven't made an offer yet. Of course, we won't let him know who is actually trying to buy the property until we're ready. We've notified the city about the conditions there because the tenants deserve a legitimate inspection. If the property is as bad inside as it appears to be from the outside, Mr. Wood will have to decide whether he wants to spend the money to bring it up to code or sell it to someone who will. Either way, the tenants win. He won't want to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on fees and repairing the property and we will come in and take the property off his hands for a fair and decent price. Nothing will be dishonest. He actually is breaking the law. He has his tenants living with broken windows and doors while he has a multimillion-dollar estate in Delly Point. He has the means to maintain his properties, so there's no excuse. It's absolutely detestable. The fact that he's gotten away with it for so long makes me suspect he has connections. But then—so do I, so there's that."

Eric senior smiled. "And then what will you do once you own the property?"

"First, renovate and give these people a decent place to live. Running water with no leaks, ovens and refrigerators that work, and much more. They're paying their rent. From what I was able to find out so far, only a few of the tenants are seriously behind in their rent. They're all afraid of missing a payment because others have immediately been evicted and as you know, getting into another place is difficult. After that, as we get to know the tenants, we'll see who God will ask us to bless. And not only in the apartments, but on this entire block."

Mark nodded. "Well, with the church and the motel being renovated, and now the apartments being renovated, it's a huge start in rebuilding this whole area. Most of the homes down that way"—he pointed down the street away from the motel—"are fairly decent. Some could use some sprucing up, really just some curb appeal type of adjustments."

"We can work on that easily," Eric senior said. "It won't take much, a simple hand up, to upgrade this area. Still, we need to keep in mind that the purpose of upgrading the area is not to upgrade the area. It's to get the people's attention and give them something they can take pride in, build relationships with them, and show through our service what it means to live with faith, love, dignity, and care for one another."

He looked around. The landscapers were almost finished with Ronny's yard and they had worked miracles. Cut grass, trimmed bushes, edged the yard and used different colored rocks and pavers to landscape and actually planted some winter flowers. It was a complete one-eighty from a few hours ago. He glanced over at the two-story house on the corner that was right next to Ronny's home.

"So, Ronny, what's up with that house? It looks abandoned and the grass is as high

as my knees in some places."

Ronny nodded. "That was owned by a lovely woman named Elsa Channing. She died a few years ago. Her kids live out of state. Every once in a while they put it up for sale, but it needs too much work. Her kids actually asked me to help maintain the yard, but they haven't sent the payment to me in a while and frankly, I'm a little short of funds right now. It was only getting done about every three months."

Eric nodded at Ronny. "We'll take care of that today for sure. The yard I mean. If the house has been sitting empty that long, it might be a good place for one of the *Angel Foundation* homes."

He turned and motioned for the head of the landscaping crew. Eric shook his hand with a smile. "Hello, Louis. I gotta say, you guys are doing a great job. This yard looks so much better, and the front lawn of the church is perfect."

Louis smiled and nodded. "Well, sir, we haven't put in the solar lighting yet, and it will look really good after that. It's actually an easy landscape because it's so small, but in the spring we can do much more."

"I'll keep that in mind. So, tell me, do you have other appointments for today?"

"No, sir. Not today. Why? Do you need something else?"

Eric nodded at the house next door. "Ya think your guys can take care of that?"

"Yes, sir. We can."

"Wonderful. It's a pretty big mess so I'll pay you double what you would normally charge for such a big job."

"You don't have to do that. I'm just grateful for the work."

"It will still be doubled, and worth it for the last-minute appointment. Have you come up with a plan for the back area of the church yet?"

"We've measured and my son and I will draw up some designs. Then we'll need to meet with you to finalize. I understand that you're going to want to connect the backyard of the church to the parking lot, and I know you want a picnic area, and an area for playing games or mingling. It's actually a pretty large area since the backyard extends all the way to the street on the block behind it. We will draw up some ideas and then collaborate with you. And again, Mr. Kino, we're grateful for the work. It's been hard getting a foothold and building up clients."

"I am certainly glad to assist in that. We're gonna have a lot more work coming up for you, so, make sure you have enough employees, because we like to move fast. And when this is done, we'll recommend you to some of our friends who own commercial properties."

Louis smiled. "We'll do a good job for you. I can promise you that. Thank you so much, Mr. Kino."

"You are most welcome," Eric replied sincerely. "So, Louis, do you live nearby?"

Louis nodded. "Not too far. About fifteen minutes away."

"Well, we're having a little pizza party and tree decorating party tonight at the church. You and your crew and their families are welcome to come."

Louis offered a large smile. "Thank you, sir. I'll let them know."

"Thanks again," Eric said as he turned back to Ronny.

"You truly do act fast," Ronny commented.

"I try to. Like you said, I'm not getting any younger."

Ronny sighed and Eric realized the elderly man was tired.

"Well, Ronny, I just want to say thanks for offering your three extra bedrooms to the ladies and kids for naps so that they didn't have to drive all the way home."

"Oh, certainly, it was my pleasure. It's nice that those rooms can be of good use to someone, if only for a day."

"It's been a hard day so far and it's gonna be crazy in a few hours. Why don't you go in and get some rest too? I assure you, you don't have to stay out here. I'll take care of things."

Ronny smiled. "I appreciate your kindness, Eric. And I am tired and I will take you up on that offer."

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Just as Ronny took his leave and headed into his home, Bristol, in her silver Camry, pulled up with her grandmother.

Eric immediately headed over to open her door for her and help her out of the car. He held her cane for her and allowed her to lean on his arm as he helped the woman onto the sidewalk in front of Ronny's home.

"Why thank you, young man," the woman said.

Eric chuckled at the 'young man,' but didn't dare say anything about their ages. "It's my pleasure. Let me introduce myself. I'm Eric Kino."

"Oh, yes, I know. And my name is Christina Palma."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Palma."

"Call me Christina, and it's a pleasure to meet you too."

"So, Bristol is your granddaughter?" Eric asked as the young lady came to stand next to her grandmother.

"Yes," Christina said, smiling proudly. "She's my pride and joy."

Melody then introduced Bristol and Mrs. Palma to Ricky, Mark and Alec and then pointed across to the motel parking lot. "And that guy over there walking around the parking lot like he's lost is young Eric. That's what everyone calls him except his fiancée. He's Mr. Kino's son and Grandmaster Kino's grandson."

"Hmm, what's he doing?" Christina asked.

"I'm not sure," Ricky answered.

Young Eric looked up as if he knew they were talking about him, and trotted over to where everyone had gathered.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Eric, this is Mrs. Palma and her granddaughter, Bristol. It was Bristol who invited Melody to church Sunday that started this whole thing," Ricky said.

Young Eric flashed his brilliant smile and shook their hands. "So nice to meet you and I'm so glad you invited Melody."

"We definitely are also very pleased about that and that she brought her young man with her. That Logan is a fine boy," Mrs. Palma said.

Young Eric grinned, realizing Logan had worked his magic on the lady. "He truly is," young Eric agreed. "He's my cousin, but I think of him as my brother."

"May I ask, young Eric, what you were doing over there?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I was getting the lay of the lot. It needs a good pressure washing, some new lines painted, and I was thinking how we might design the parking spaces to make it easier to navigate. Once I figure that out, we'll have it painted. We also don't want it to be an eyesore, so, we'll do some landscaping, maybe put in some medians and eventually build a breezeway from the back door of the church over to the motel, which will be a teen ministry center and will have a gym with a stage, and classrooms, and a small kitchen and community room, and some offices for maybe, counseling or other services."

Christina's eyes opened wide and filled with tears. "Oh dear, that is just wonderful. Just wonderful. I never would have imagined such a fine thing."

"It's gonna be really nice once we get finished," young Eric assured her.

"But things are already looking great inside the church," Melody inserted. "Do you want to come in and see?"

"Oh I certainly do."

"Bristol?" Melody asked. "How much time do you have before you have to be back at work?"

She frowned. "Only about fifteen minutes."

"Where do you work?" Eric senior asked.

"At the Eglan Accounting firm. It's only about a mile and a half away, but I only have an hour for lunch and I have to get Grandma back home first and..."

"I'll be happy to get her home," Melody said quickly.

"Really?"

"Of course. No problem."

"Grandma? Is that okay with you?"

"Oh, yes, dear, you run along."

"Well that's great. Then that means I can stay about thirty minutes."

"Let's head over and look around. I think you'll be pleased," Eric senior said.

"You guys go ahead," Melody said. "I'm waiting on Logan. He's almost here and he's got Jordan with him."

"Oh, well then, I guess I'll wait with you," young Eric said quickly.

Grandmaster Kino, Ricky, Mark, Alec, Bristol and Mrs. Palma walked across the street. Melody and young Eric watched them head inside the church. They saw Grandmaster Kino lead Mrs. Palma to one of the new ramps. She stopped and patted the rail and nodded and smiled.

"It really does look so nice now. So welcoming," Melody said softly.

Young Eric nodded. "Yep. It's amazing what a little cleanup, a little landscaping, and some lighting can do. And the wreaths on the doors, they look really nice. Good job."

Melody smiled. "Thanks. My mother actually made those. She's real crafty like that. I'll tell her you said that. It'll make her happy."

"I'll have to compliment her when she gets here. She is coming, right?"

"Oh yes. My mom, dad, and Phillip and Lyle should all be here by 3:30 and ready to work hard."

"Good. Maybe we'll get your dad and the boys to work on putting lights on one of the trees and Dad and I will work on the other tree."

"And here comes Logan," Melody said excitedly.

Young Eric watched her and chuckled. "You really like him, don't ya, Melody?"

She glanced up at Eric's sincere face and nodded dreamily. "It's more than like. So much more."

Young Eric smiled and nodded. "That is very cool."

Logan parked just behind Bristol's car and hopped out. He hurried to Melody, grabbed her and gave her a quick kiss. Then he just stood there, holding her hands and smiling at her.

"What?" Melody asked.

"Just so happy to see you."

"Well, I probably look pretty bad right now."

Logan shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. The paint-splattered jeans. The dirt-streaked T-shirt. The messy bun. It might just be the cutest I've ever seen you."

She giggled. "Oh yeah, right, with no makeup and dark circles under my eyes and paint on my fingernails."

"What were you painting, anyway?"

"The men's restroom. It looks so much better now. Bright and clean."

Jordan pulled away from a long kiss with young Eric. "So, where is everyone?"

"Well, your mom is downstairs making sure the men who were installing the new stove and refrigerator didn't make any mistakes or hurt her new countertops."

Jordan smiled. Her mother was having a blast handling this kind of stuff.

Melody jumped in. "And *your* mom, Logan, is inside taking a nap in one of Reverend Clark's empty bedrooms. Jeffy is also in there resting and nursing Elijah and Miss Shelley is in there sleeping with the kiddos, and Reverend Clark also just went inside to rest. Mrs. Davis went home to rest and nurse little Scarlett since they don't live that far away. And Mr. Davis is with JoJo over at the motel because they're trying to get an idea of what can be done. Grandmaster Kino, Mr. Kino, your dad, and Alec are giving Bristol and her grandmother a tour of the progress being made, and Destiny, last I saw her, was in the vestibule, rearranging some decorations. Joey was here but had to leave, and Miss Breez, hmm, not sure where she went, but her children are napping with their Aunt Bella."

"I wonder how much rest Mom is getting with those little rugrats," Logan said. "Especially with Emily. She's like in hyper-drive this week because her birthday is tomorrow." He smiled at his girl. "Well, Mel, thank you for that breakdown, and now, I have to unload my car and set things up."

"Let's do it," young Eric said.

"I'm in," Jordan said.

Melody drew a deep breath. She was ultra-tired, but she would keep up, or try to anyway. JoJo came over from the motel to see his brothers.

"Hey, JoJo," Logan said. "How ya feelin'?"

"I'm good. I'm even goin' back to school tomorrow."

"Cool. So, we're just about to unload my car and set up. You can supervise."

They started pulling a keyboard, speakers, extension cords, lights, and several large

plastic trash cans, nested inside each other.

"So," Jordan began. "Would you like me to go find some trash can liners and set these out around the area?"

The guys smiled at each other.

"They're not for trash," Logan said.

"Oh."

"Okay, I'll bite," Melody said. "What are the trash cans for?"

JoJo grinned. "You'll see."

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December 10th, 3:00 PM EST, Tuesday Afternoon

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lizzy Tanner sat in her favorite rocking chair with her now three-year-old daughter in her lap. Lizzy was reading a storybook to little Iris. The book was written by her very own husband, Keegan Tanner, illustrated by Breez and Sophia Adams, and published by MacKenzie Daley Davis. Once Mickey heard about how Keegan had told the girls stories for years and actually recorded them in a book as a gift for Lizzy for her last birthday, she became obsessed with a line of storybooks for children using Keegan's stories. She began with the stories he already had recorded in the book. After that, Mickey asked him to simply make a voice recording or video whenever he told Iris another story and she would take it from there.

He had recorded this one recently, specifically so it could be read before her birthday party, so it was a rush job since Mickey had only just come up with the idea to publish the line of children's books. The book was large, 11 by 18 inches, not because it was such a long story, but mostly to accommodate the beautiful pictures that Breez and her seven-year-old daughter Sophia created. The title, *The Birthday Girl*, was simple and alluring. Of course, to help parents with their *boys*, there was another one, *The Birthday Boy,* with the corresponding title and characters for them. Lizzy and Iris gazed at the beautiful cover of the book.

"Dat wooks just wike me," Iris said.

"She does look like you, doesn't she?" Lizzy touched the shiny cover. "She has dark hair like you, with little curls like you, and big, blue eyes like you and a pretty smile, like you!" She opened the book and began to read.

"Once upon a time there was a little girl who was almost always such a sweet little girl. Her name was Iris, like the flower, because she was beautiful just like the flower. Iris was usually a very good and kind little girl. She loved her mommy and her daddy and she loved all of her sisters and her brothers. She loved Jesus and she tried to be kind to everyone like Jesus taught. She didn't cry when it was bedtime, and she picked up her toys and put them away whenever her mommy asked her.

"Now Iris had a nickname. She was called 'The Birthday Girl' even when it wasn't her birthday, because Iris loved birthday parties. She loved them so so so so much. She loved them this much!" Lizzy stopped reading as they took a moment to look at the picture because the artists had drawn a little girl with arms that reached across the entire two pages.

"Dat's weally wong arms," Iris declared.

Lizzy gave a soft laugh. “Yes, and that’s how much I love you.”

Iris responded by simply pressing the back of her head firmly against her mother’s chest. Lizzy stroked her dark curls and turned the page.

“The Birthday Girl loved everything about birthday parties. She loved the pretty decorations and balloons. She loved having friends and family come over to play games. She loved the cake and ice cream. She loved blowing out the candles. But most of all—Iris loved the presents! She loved all the pretty bags and boxes and ribbons. She loved opening them to see what delightful prize was inside. It was just so much fun. It was the best thing ever.

“Usually Iris opened the presents as fast as she could because she was just too excited and just couldn’t wait to see what was in the next present. It was just so so so so much fun! But this year, Iris felt something a little different. You see, Iris had a friend named Teddy. Earlier in the year both Iris and Teddy had been invited to Billy’s birthday party. Teddy told her that he couldn’t come to the party because his family didn’t have enough money to buy Billy a birthday present. Teddy was so sad that he couldn’t go to the party. Iris was also so sad, because she cared so much for her friend, Teddy.

“Then Iris had a big idea. She asked her mommy and daddy if she and Teddy could do some work and get paid some money so that Teddy could buy a birthday present for Billy. ‘Yes,’ her mother said. ‘You can clean up the playroom and dust the furniture in the living room, and water all the flowers in the front yard and sweep the walk.’

“Iris’ and Teddy’s eyes opened big, because that sounded like a lot of work. They started right away. They picked up all the toys in the playroom. They put away all the crayons. They stacked up all the blocks and put away the puzzles. Next Iris’ mommy gave them special soft cloths that had lemon oil on them. They rubbed the cloths over all the tables in the living room, over and over to make them shiny. When they finished the tables, they went outside and had to ask Iris’ daddy if he would turn on the garden hose. They took turns spraying the water over all the flowers. It was hard to squeeze the sprayer and they had to squeeze really hard using both hands. Finally, they were each given a small broom and they swept the walk. The walk was very long. They worked very hard.

“When they finally finished all the work, Iris’ mommy started to give them the money, but she stopped. She made a face like this. Iris knew that was her mommy’s thinking face.”

Lizzy stopped and made the thinking face. Iris copied her. Lizzy laughed, then continued the story. “Then Iris’ mommy said, ‘You want to use this money to buy a present for Teddy to give to Billy, right?’ ‘Yes, ma’am,’ both Teddy and Iris answered. ‘So, how will you get to the store to buy the present?’ Iris’ mommy asked. Iris and Teddy both frowned, because they hadn’t thought about that and they didn’t know how they would get to the store.

“‘Will you take us?’ Iris asked. Her mommy shook her head. ‘No, I don’t have time, but maybe Daddy will.’ So, the children ran to find Iris’ daddy. He smiled as he looked up from his desk. ‘What can I do for you, children?’ he asked kindly. ‘Daddy, we just did a lot of work so that we could make money, so that Teddy can buy a present for Billy, so he can go to Billy’s birthday party, but we need someone to take us to the store and buy

a present for Billy, and Mommy doesn't have time to do it, and so, Daddy, please, will you do it?'

"The daddy smiled at the children and agreed. Iris and Teddy got in the car and Iris' daddy drove them to the store to buy Billy a present. There were so so so many toys and books and puzzles to choose from, but finally, Teddy chose a red fire truck. He was just sure it would be the best toy ever. It was big and bright, with a siren that really worked and lights that flashed. They bought the toy and got back in the car to drive home. But they didn't go right home. Iris' daddy stopped and bought each of them an ice cream cone. It was yummy. When they got home, they showed the fire truck to Iris' mommy and sisters and brothers. They were all very happy that Teddy was able to find such a nice gift for Billy.

"One of the sisters, whose name was Rose, said, 'Now you have to wrap it up and put a bow on it.' Iris and Teddy frowned. 'Can you help us?' Iris asked. Rose took them to the kitchen table and spread out the wrapping paper. She showed them how to wrap the gift. It took a long time, but finally, the children proudly looked at the gift, all wrapped up in paper that had pictures of balloons on it. Last but not least, they stuck a big, red bow on the present. Both Iris and Teddy smiled so so so so big. It was a beautiful present, and now Teddy could go to the party! They just had to wait one—whole—day.

"The next day, both Iris and Teddy arrived at Billy's party. They both wore their very best jeans and their very best shirts. Billy's mom welcomed them into the home and told them to place their gifts on the table. They did that very carefully. Iris' gift was in a gift bag. She placed it on the table, then watched as Teddy carefully placed his beautiful big gift with the red bow next to Iris' bag. They both stepped back and smiled. They were so excited.

"They were each given special hats to wear and they played games with all of the other children. There were a lot of children. They all laughed and played games and had so much fun. Then it was time for cake and ice cream! Everyone sang the happy birthday song to Billy and watched as he made a wish and blew out his candles. They all gobbled up their cake and ice cream. Finally, it was time for Billy to open his presents. Teddy and Iris were so excited, they couldn't stop smiling.

"The kids were all noisy. Billy opened the first gift. It was a game. He smiled, set it down, and reached for the next gift. 'Wait,' Billy's mom said. 'Who was that from?' 'It was from me,' a boy said. 'What do you say?' Billy's mom asked him. Billy smiled at the boy. 'Thanks,' he said quickly and reached for the next gift. He opened two more presents before he reached for Iris' bag. She was bursting with excitement. He looked into the bag and pulled out a dinosaur. He looked at it, then smiled, and put it back in the bag. 'Thanks,' he said without even looking at her. Iris frowned. 'Billy,' she said. 'It makes sounds and moves when you say stuff,' Iris explained. Billy smiled. 'Cool,' he said. He pulled it back out of the bag and looked a little closer at it. 'It has directions,' Iris said. 'It tells you what to do. You can make him roar and laugh and stuff.' 'Great. Thanks,' Billy said as he quickly put it back into the gift bag and reached for the next present.

"Iris frowned. She felt disappointed. She'd thought that Billy would really love her gift to him. She sighed. He reached for the big present wrapped in balloon paper with a

big red bow. It looked so big as it sat on Billy's lap. Iris and Teddy looked at each other and smiled. It looked amazing sitting there. They'd worked so hard at wrapping the fire truck and they were proud of their work. Billy didn't take time to look at the wrapping at all. He ripped the paper and bow away in one second. He held the fire truck up and looked at it. He smiled. 'Thanks.'

"'Who is that from?' Billy's mom asked. 'It's from me,' Teddy answered softly. 'Thanks, Teddy,' Billy said again. He dropped the fire truck onto the floor and reached for the next present.

"Iris frowned. Teddy frowned. They didn't feel excited anymore. They didn't feel happy anymore. When the party ended they were quiet as they left and went to their homes. At home, Iris' daddy asked her why she seemed so sad. Iris shrugged. 'I don't know, Daddy. I think it was because the people who gave presents to Billy were really excited to give him their presents. But Billy wasn't real excited to get them.' Her daddy frowned. 'Do you think maybe he *was* excited but not very grateful?' Iris frowned too. 'Yes. But he said "thank you," but I don't think he really meant it.'

"'Do you think it's important that he really is thankful for the gifts he receives?' 'Yes.' 'Why?' 'Because Teddy worked very hard to earn money to buy that present and then he picked out the best present and then it was so hard to wrap it in the paper and it was big and pretty and we were excited to give it to Billy.' Her father smiled. 'So, what do you think Billy should have done to show you how thankful he was for the gift?'

"Iris put on her thinking face. 'Go slower,' she finally said. 'So, you think that if he went slower he would take time to truly appreciate the gift and make the giver feel good about the wonderful gift he'd been given?' Iris smiled. 'Yes. I think so, Daddy. And maybe if there weren't so many gifts, he wouldn't have to go so fast.' Her father smiled in surprise. 'Very good, Iris. Sometimes, if we have too many gifts at one time, we don't really appreciate them.' 'Maybe you can remember these things when it comes time for your birthday again.' Iris smiled. 'I will remember.'

"And sure enough, she did. When it was time for Iris' birthday, she only invited a small number of children. She hugged each person and thanked them for coming as soon as they walked into her house. She opened each present slowly and complimented the pretty wrapping paper, or the bag or the bows. She took a few minutes to really look over the gift and even asked questions about it. She placed the gift down carefully and got up and went to the giver and hugged them and thanked them sincerely. When she was finished opening her gifts she thanked everyone again. More importantly, when the party was over, Iris felt happy. She wasn't happy because of the gifts she'd been given, or because she was the center of attention during her party. She was happy because she knew she had helped the other children to also feel happy. And giving to others is the happiest feeling of all."

Lizzy turned the last page and read the final words, printed across a beautiful picture of Jesus sitting in a chair with children surrounding Him, listening to Him speak. She read, "Our Father in Heaven gives us so many presents that we forget to tell Him how grateful we are for them. I hope He doesn't get sad when we forget to say 'thank you.' Do you know what was the greatest gift of all? That's right. Our Father in heaven sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to help us. Jesus was the greatest gift of all."

Lizzy slowly closed the book and lovingly ran her hand over Iris' head. "Did you like the story?"

Iris nodded. "Yes. Will you read it again?"

Lizzy smiled. "We don't have time. It's almost time for everyone to come to *your* birthday party."

"I hope we don't have too many people coming," Iris said.

Lizzy laughed and hugged her daughter. "Well, our family alone is very big and of course, Aunt Jodi and Uncle John, Aunt Lisa and Uncle Chaz and their kids are coming. And Mrs. Murphy and Lucas. But we don't have too many little ones coming. Just you, and Ava and Zoe and Jimmy and Everett. Come on, sweetie. Let's go check on the babies and see if Gabe and Hannah are finished blowing up all those pretty balloons."

Iris jumped down off her mother's lap and went running through the house. "Gabe, Gabe, are you ready fo my birfday?"

Gabe let go of the balloon he'd been blowing up, and it whooshed through the air. He swooped Iris up and swung her around. "I'm ready. Are you ready?"

"I'm weady!"

"How old are you again? Was it twenty?"

She giggled. "No, I'm fwee."

"Free? You're not free. You're worth about a dollar at least."

He set her up on his shoulders. "Tell ya what, let's go see if anyone is coming up the driveway."

She grabbed him under his chin and pulled to the left. "No. This way, I wanna find Hannah. Where is Hannah?"

"Hannah is helping Violet with the babies and we're not going up there because the babies might finally be asleep."

Lizzy stood in the kitchen doorway, smiling at her son and daughter. Gabe smiled at her. "You okay, Mom?"

She nodded. "Just a little tired. Aww, Gabriel, I'm gonna miss you so much."

"Is you goin' away again, Gabe?" Iris asked sadly.

"Yes, but not until after Christmas. Until then, let's have lots and lots of fun, starting today, okay?"

"Okay!" she yelled, pulling his chin to the right. He turned to the right. "No, go the other way," Iris said.

"Then you have to pull me the other way. You're in control. Pull me which way you want to go."

She pulled his chin to the left, and he went left, but she didn't let go so he kept going in circles. Finally, she got the hang of it and directed him all over the house and out the front door. They stopped playing though, when a car pulled up the drive. It was Rose. She pulled up and waved at Gabe. "Just the person I wanted to see. Come help me get the wheelchair out of the trunk and then help me get Jericho out of the back seat and into the chair."

"You brought Jericho? Cool!" Gabe said as he set Iris down. "Go see Mommy," he said as he ushered her back inside and then headed down to the car.

"Yeah, I felt sorry for him and decided we could make this happen. We could set

him up in a corner somewhere where his leg won't stick out in everyone's way."

Gabe opened the trunk and pulled out the wheelchair. Rose opened the back door. Gabe smiled. "Hey, Jericho. Did ya hear that? We can stick you in a corner somewhere."

"I heard."

"I didn't mean it like that and you know it," Rose said.

Jericho smiled at her.

Gabe looked over the situation. Jericho sat beside the open door with his injured leg up on the seat.

"The nurse showed Rose and Max how to transfer me safely," Jericho explained.

Rose locked the wheelchair brakes and fastened the gait belt around his waist. Gabe supported him at the belt while Jericho pushed himself up using his arms and his good leg. Together, they carefully pivoted him into the wheelchair while protecting the injured leg.

Rose leaned over him. "You good?"

He smiled. "I'm in heaven."

Gabe tapped the arm of the wheelchair. "Now I just need to go get the wheelchair ramp out of the garage. Be right back."

Jericho and Rose watched Gabe as he hurried away.

"He's a good guy," Jericho said. "I know you're gonna miss him."

"I really am. I don't know how we'll live without him being around," Rose said softly.

"Well, when I get better, I'll help out around here, and so will CJ."

"It's not just all the physical stuff he takes care of. It's, well, I guess it's his light. It shines so bright."

Jericho nodded. "It does seem a little darker when he's not around. But we're gonna have to learn to shine a little brighter ourselves, because we can't depend on Gabe's light."

"You're right. And really, Grandmaster Kino says, don't try to be like him, try to be like Jesus. *He* is the light."

"I'll keep trying," Jericho said softly.

"I will too," Rose said as Gabe came back carrying a large metal ramp. He secured the portable ramp over the porch steps. Both Gabe and Rose helped push the wheelchair up the ramp. It was a good thing they were both so strong.

Gabe was breathing hard. "You're a lot heavier than my mom."

"I'm sure I have her by at least a hundred pounds," Jericho said. "Thanks, Gabe. I appreciate the help."

"It was worth it to have you here at the party. Let's go find a corner."

Rose giggled.

They entered the home where every room was filled with streamers and balloons and birthday signs, which Lizzy was big on. The large kitchen table had both inserts in and a special purple tablecloth. The cake was giant and beautifully decorated, thanks to Taylor. There were hats and noisemakers and bunches of goodies and also good—for—yous. A term Gabe had started when he was a kid.

After Jericho was settled in the den where much of the fun and games would take

place, the house filled up pretty quick.

Iris wore her purple party dress and all the other children were also dressed up nicely. Pics were posed for and taken.

Because his mother had said earlier that she was tired, Gabe told her to go sit with the other ladies and he would take care of the kids' part of the party. He got Aralyn Stewart's help. She was much older than Iris at age seven, and was very sweet to participate and kind of lead the group of younger children in the games, along with the help of her brother Matt who was twelve. Charlie Stewart and Lucas Murphy, who were both fourteen, and thirteen-year-old Hannah chatted together, filling Hannah in about school, and telling her about their own families. But Gabe wasn't having it. He made them get up and participate in some of the games.

A wild game of duck, duck, goose was played as the adults chatted and watched and laughed and videoed. Next, the men became fully involved as they became the horses for a race. Keegan with Iris, Chaz with Aralyn, John with Jimmy, Gabe with Zoe, Nick, one of the two dads who showed up to the party, had his daughter Ava on his back, and Bud, Everett's dad had him on his back. There wasn't room for them all to run at the same time. So each horse was timed by Jodi as they ran a course. There were guards, namely, Charlie, Matt, Hannah, Lucas, and CJ at the checkpoints to make sure they touched their points. They had to touch the refrigerator in the kitchen, and then the front door, then the mirror on the wall in the living room, the dictionary on the shelf in the dining room, and finished by touching Jericho's cast. It was a blast.

Lizzy and Lisa and Jodi and Rebecca watched and laughed and talked about how much they appreciated their men taking time to play a silly game at a little girl's birthday party. Rose and Violet, Lily and Daisy and Laynah nodded as they listened to the women's conversation. They had to smile at how blessed they were to have the men in their lives, the fathers and boyfriends that they did. So very blessed.

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Psalm 103:13

"As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him."

Chapter Twelve

December 10th, 3:35 PM PST, Tuesday Afternoon
En route to New York School of Dance, Los Angeles, California

"Hey, Agent Ward," Taylor said brightly as she climbed into the front seat of the car.

"Taylor," he said kindly. "How was your day?"

"It was awesome!"

"Did you kids get everything sorted out?"

"Yes, sir. And Gabe was a big part of helping with that."

Ward smiled and nodded. The two kids were fun to watch, to see how they handled things. They were fun to be around and they were fun to protect.

"Speaking of Gabe," Taylor said. "I have to make a video call to him."

She pulled out her phone and called him. He answered quickly. "Say hello," Gabe said.

"Hi, Taywor!"

Taylor smiled at the now three-year-old. She was sitting on Gabe's lap and he had the phone held where she could see them both. "Well, hello there, birthday girl! Happy, happy, happy birthday!"

"Say thank you," Gabe instructed.

"Tank you," Iris said.

"Are you having an awesome day?" Taylor asked.

"Yes. I wove birthdays!"

"You do? Me too! Guess whose birthday is gonna be tomorrow?"

"Whose?" she asked excitedly, without venturing a guess.

"Do you remember Emily?"

"Yes. We calls her Em. She is JoJo's sister."

"Right! Very good. She's Logan's little sister too."

"I know dat." She frowned. "But how old is Em gonna be?"

"She's gonna be four tomorrow."

"Oh."

"But she's not gonna have a big party. She's gonna have a birthday breakfast with her family and then a family birthday dinner next Sunday with everyone."

"I had a party, and it was so much fun and we played silly games."

"Really? Who was in charge of the silly games?"

"Who do you think?" Gabe asked.

Taylor giggled. "Did you get some presents, Iris?"

She nodded solemnly. "I got pwesents and I was berry good cuz I tanked everyone

weally hard. I hugged them and I swowed down and I looked weally hard at all the pwesents and I talked about dem and I tanked everyone for coming to my party and I hugged dem."

"Wow, Iris, I'm so proud of you. It sounds like you were the perfect hostess and it sounds like you've read the book. Did you already blow out your candles and have cake?"

"Yes, we had cake and we had ice cream, 'cept I didn't eat my ice cream cuz I was so full."

"Oh, what else did you eat?"

"We ate teeny tiny wittle hamburgers on teeny tiny buns and I ate a hundwed of dem."

"A hundred? Oh my goodness, you're gonna pop!"

Iris giggled.

"Where are you going?" Iris asked.

"How do you know I'm going anywhere?"

"You are in da car."

"Well, aren't you just so smart."

Iris smiled.

"I'm on my way to my dance class."

"Oh. I wove to dance."

"Me too. Next time we get together, let's dance together."

"Okay."

"Who's driving?" Gabe asked.

Taylor turned her phone.

"Hey, Agent Ward," Gabe greeted.

"Hello, Gabe. How ya doin'?"

"I'm doin' awesome."

"Of course you are."

"Gabe, be quiet. I'm talkin' to Taywor," Iris said.

"Oh, well, excuse me," Gabe said with a laugh.

"Hold on," Taylor said. She put the phone down for a second and pulled a plastic bowl of fruit and a protein bar from her backpack and started eating the protein bar. "Okay, I'm back."

"What is you eating?"

"A protein bar and some fruit."

"Why?"

"Cuz I'm hungry and I have to have energy to do my dance class."

"Oh."

"So, tell me all about everyone who came to your party. Did Hannah come?" Taylor asked.

"Yes. I wove Hannah. She is so nice. And she helped us pway games. And Aralyn came too, and she had on a really pretty dress and..."

Taylor ate and listened as Iris went on to explain all about all the people who came to her party and all the presents she got. Every once in a while, Gabe would help her

remember and would add his two cents' worth. Taylor smiled and listened and her heart was so full of love for Gabe and little Iris, whom Taylor guessed would one day be her sister-in-law. The best part of the whole conversation, though, was the fact that Gabe took time with Iris to have this conversation. Taylor understood that Gabe realized it was important to two of the most important girls in his life. Two out of nine, if you count his mom and six other sisters.

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December 10th, 4:30 PM PST, Tuesday Evening
Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Reverend Ronald Clark came out of his house and slowly walked to the end of the drive. He stood on the sidewalk in front of his home and gazed across the street. It was a sight to behold. The church itself was bright white, almost shining. The double-arched doors to the church were pushed back, opened all the way, inviting everyone in. You couldn't see the wreaths hanging on the outside of the door, but you could see the ones hung on the inside of the doors because the doors were pushed back against the outside brick of the building. The open doors revealed the vestibule and one could see that it was decorated to the hilt with greenery and floral arrangements and more.

The new sign out front was operational and had been landscaped around the base. The new ramps were beautiful and fit the architecture of the church building perfectly. They had solar lights included on each column that would come on in an hour or so. The grass was neatly trimmed and edged. The two giant Christmas trees stood on either side of the front steps.

He lifted his eyes to the steeple. The cross at the top seemed to glow in the afternoon sun. He lowered his gaze to the boarded-up window. Mrs. Breez Adams had told him it would be a week or more before the new window would be ready to install. But the two smaller stained-glass windows on either side of the large window seemed brighter than usual.

Looking to the left of the church, the difference was the most noticeable. The fence was gone. There was a small sign that said "Church Parking," and an arrow pointing to the large lot. All the Kinos and their family had moved their cars to the lot. Before they did, they had a large crew out there pressure washing the entire lot. The difference was amazing. He'd been told there would soon be landscaping and new parking lines painted. The old lines were pretty much nonexistent, and the spaces appeared to have been marked for trucks.

Also in the lot, along the front near the sidewalk, were several canopies set up with long tables underneath. The canopies had twinkling lights all over them and under each canopy were larger lights. These tables would hold the pizzas when they arrived, and currently were being filled with desserts, plates, and napkins. At the other end of the line of canopies and tables were large ice chests which were being filled with the drinks and water that a man named Leonard Garcia had provided. Ronny had been told that Mr. Garcia lived in the apartments next door to the church. He also had a young son, Caleb, who wanted to play football.

Ronny shifted his gaze again to the steps and large porch of the church. Logan Adams, a fine young man, and his brother and cousin were testing a sound system. They

already had some Christmas music playing softly. There were also large plastic trash cans turned upside down along the walk that led up to the steps. He wondered what that was about. There were two tables on the grass, one near each tree, and they were laden with ornaments and decorations for the trees. Everything looked to be perfectly organized.

Ronny's eyes were drawn to two children who were walking up from the apartments. They got to the sidewalk and turned right toward the church. A boy held a small girl's hand. Ricky Kino also noticed the pair and headed toward them immediately. He knelt down in front of them. He shook the boy's hand first, and then the girl's. Smiling, Ronny headed across the street.

"Hello, Amari," Ricky said as he held out his hand.

Amari shook the hand offered to him.

Ricky smiled kindly at the little girl. "Hi, Brittney! How are you doing today?"

She smiled shyly. "Hi. I'm okay, but Mari is mad."

Ricky's gaze shifted to the boy. "Why are you mad, Amari?"

He gave his sister a mean glare. "I ain't mad."

"He is too. He's mad cuz Mommy didn't believe him that you wanted to meet her and she told him to stop lying and she smacked him."

Amari unconsciously raised his hand to his cheek as he remembered the slap.

Ricky sighed. "Amari, would you like me to go down to your house to meet your mom?"

He shook his head. "No. She'll be mad if I bring someone."

He nodded. "Well, then, I won't go down there." He'd have to think of a way around the delicate situation. He smiled kindly at the boy. "So, are you okay?"

Amari blinked up at the man as if surprised by the question. Ricky wondered if anyone ever asked the poor kid if he was okay. A simple question like "Are you okay?" shouldn't stun a child. Ricky smiled at him. "I'm just asking if you're okay because I care, Amari. I want to make sure that you're okay."

The boy offered a small smile and nodded.

"Well, it looks like you're the first ones here!" Ricky said. "That means you get to be the first to put a decoration on the tree. Come on over here and say hello to everyone."

Ricky turned as Ronny walked up. He introduced the children to the Reverend. They stared up at him, their eyes large.

Ronny smiled. "I know, I'm really old-looking, right?"

"How old are you?" Brittney asked.

"I'm almost a hundred years old," he said with a laugh. "Did you come to help decorate the Christmas trees?"

The kids nodded.

"Wonderful! This church really needs some good children to come and learn all about God."

"Do you know God?" Brittney asked.

"I do," Ronny said. "Come on, let's go over to see what we need to do to help decorate the trees." The children followed Ronny and Ricky, stopping briefly to greet Bree as she came to join her husband. Amari and Brittney then continued over to meet

the others.

More kids and some of their parents started coming up the drive from the apartments and onto the sidewalk that led to the church. Ricky and Bree stood together greeting everyone warmly, shaking hands and asking names. More kids and parents came from down the street. Cars started pulling into the parking lot. Bristol arrived, but her grandmother decided she would stay home. She had decided it would be too much excitement for her. Banny also arrived and pulled into the parking lot. Grandmaster Kino and Shelley and their little ones milled around greeting people. Logan, young Eric, JoJo, Melody and Jordan also went into hospitality mode, greeting everyone, paying special attention to the teens.

David and Carol Keith and Phillip and Lyle had been there, helping with last-minute details for the past hour. Phillip was only three weeks out of surgery for his brain injury, so he couldn't drive. He wore a knit cap over his head because there was a fairly large scar from where the staples had been removed and he thought it was pretty ugly. They hadn't shaved his entire head, but there was a good three-inch bald spot and he didn't like the way it looked. Fortunately, the hair was beginning to grow back.

Jeff and Mickey Davis and their boys and tiny baby Scarlett were also there, helping to keep things organized. Also there were Justin and Lori, Jason and Angel, and Kimmie and Jensen with their little baby boy, Jason Jensen, whom they simply called "Jay."

The entire front lawn filled up quickly and by five, there were hundreds of people there, including four Huntington Beach police officers who parked their cars on the street in front of Ronny's home, just as a warning to keep the peace. Also present were fifteen Ameritech agents—ten who were on duty and the five who were part of the family, Jason, Joey, Jeff, Cam, and Jensen.

Logan helped Ronny to the top of the steps and took up the microphone.

"Attention, everyone. Hey, everyone, listen up a minute," Logan said loudly. It took him another minute or two before he could get the crowd quiet. Finally, he nodded with a smile. "Thank you, and welcome to *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ*. So, we're gonna decorate these two giant trees in just a few minutes. The pizzas will be here in about thirty minutes, so that will give us time to get the work done. But before we get started, let me introduce to you the reverend of *Hopewood Chapel,* Reverend Clark. He's gonna welcome you and call on someone to give us a prayer over this little event. Reverend?" Logan handed him the microphone.

Ronny took the mic and smiled at the crowd. "Hello, everyone, and thank you so much for joining us tonight. We have some big things taking place at the church and we want to invite you all to come out this Sunday. It's gonna be a Sunday of music and worship in a way that this old man has never done before. And don't worry, there won't be a long, boring sermon by some old guy. There's gonna be some amazing young people running the show. So please come and join us. For now, let me call on one of those young people to pray. This young man with his arm in a sling is the USC quarterback who was a Heisman candidate this year and last year." Ronny stopped talking a moment as a loud murmur went through the crowd. "He was injured in the final game of his season and he's been an amazing example of rolling with the punches. JoJo Adams, will you give our prayer?"

The crowd applauded and hooted and whistled and cheered for JoJo as he made his way up to the top of the steps. He took the offered microphone. “Thank you, Reverend, for the opportunity to pray over this amazing group of people.”

JoJo smiled at the crowd and bowed his head. “Hey, Father, hey, from all of these people here, Lord. We’re gathered here to decorate trees to help to celebrate the birth of Your Son and to eat food and celebrate together. We ask Your blessing and Your Spirit to be here with us as we get to know each other. We’re grateful for the opportunity to get to know more of Your children. Help us, Father, to know Your will for our lives, to know how to reach Your children. Bless this group. Bless this crowd from the oldest to the very youngest, we pray. Help us to learn more about You. Help us to know and understand Your way. We pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.”

“Amen,” some, but not all, of the people repeated.

Logan took the microphone back. “Okay, everyone—kids especially—grab up ornaments from these tables and get to decorating. No pushing, no shoving, and help the little ones. Okay, let’s do this!”

He leaned down and turned up the music, a mix of classic Christmas songs and contemporary Christian music.

Logan helped the Reverend to a chair at the top of the stairs so he could see everything, then went down the stairs to make sure little ones weren’t overlooked. He found Melody helping his grandmother with their little ones. He put his arm around her briefly, leaned down and kissed her. “You okay?”

She smiled, her eyes twinkly. “I’m good.”

“Are you sure? Because you’ve been pretty quiet.”

“I’m a little tired. Been going all day, but I’m okay.”

“If you’re sure, I’m gonna go help some of these kids.”

“Go, Logan. I’m sure.”

He started to leave and then came back and simply blurted out what he was thinking. “Mel—I am totally in love with you.”

Her face lit up. He used the word. “I feel the same about you, Logan,” she quickly returned.

He grinned. “Okay. Just wanted to get that straight. Good talk.”

She giggled.

He turned quickly and went to help a kid reach the branch he wanted.

Bree and Ricky were also helping children. Bree had Brittney by the hand. They were walking around finding the perfect place to put her styrofoam ball that was covered in red glitter and tied with a gold ribbon. “Okay, Brittney, can you see where you want to put it?”

“Right there,” Brittney said, pointing to a branch at her eye level.

“Good choice,” Bree praised. She watched as Brittney carefully fastened the small hook on the tree branch. “Perfect,” Bree said as they stood back and looked. “Let’s do another one.”

Meanwhile, at the other tree, Ricky had Amari on his shoulders so he could reach a higher branch.

“What are you doin’?” a woman barked from behind. “Get yourself down off that

man's back," she snapped.

Ricky turned to see who was talking. He lifted Amari off his shoulders and set him down by his side, leaving a protective hand on Amari's shoulder. He smiled at the woman. "Hello."

She frowned up at him suspiciously; then her eyes widened in recognition. "Oh! You're that Ricky Kino." She laughed. "I thought Amari was lying."

Ricky held out his hand. "What's your name?"

"Tisha."

He shook her hand. "What's your last name?"

"Oh, uh, Meeks. Tisha Meeks."

He smiled warmly. "It's nice to meet you, Ms. Meeks. I've met your children, Amari and Brittney. They are really nice kids."

She laughed. "You talkin' 'bout the same kids?"

He smiled.

"Where is yo sister?" Tisha asked, glaring at Amari. "You supposed to be watching her."

Amari looked around and pointed at Bree. "She's right there."

Ricky nodded. "My wife is helping her decorate the tree."

"Your wife, so, that means that's Breanna Adams, right?"

He nodded. "Right. So, thank you so much, Ms. Meeks, for coming up to join the party. Pizzas are gonna be here in a few minutes. I hope you and the kids stay."

"Oh, they gonna stay, cuz I gotta go. Gotta date."

Ricky nodded as he looked the woman over. She was dressed provocatively in very tight jeans with holes at the knee and upper thigh, and what looked like a red, lacy, corset-style bra with a black faux leather jacket over it. She wore spiky black boots and a lot of makeup. Her nails were long and painted red and decorated with faux-diamond stones.

Tisha looked at her son. "Mari, Miz Garcia gonna take you home tonight. So, when she tells you to come home, you go with her."

"Who?" Amari asked.

"Caleb's mom," Tisha barked. "Don't be actin' like you don't know who I'm talkin' 'bout. Miz Garcia fancy pants gonna take y'all back to the house and you and your sister go to bed, cuz, party or not, you goin' to school in the morning."

"When you leavin', Mom?" Amari asked.

"Why? You want me to go? Am I ruinin' yo game?"

When Amari didn't answer, she laughed. "I think I'll stick around and have some of that pizza." She reached out and touched Ricky's chest. "Maybe get to know Mr. Kino a little better."

Amari's eyes opened wide.

Ricky laughed as he firmly removed her hand from him. "You're welcome to join the party, decorate trees, have some pizza, sing some songs." He placed her hand firmly back at her own side. It was a clear, '*and that's all you're welcome to do.*'

At that moment, a black Corvette pulled up on the street. The driver revved the engine. Tisha smiled. "Oh, well, that's my ride." She turned and sashayed to the car and

climbed in without a goodbye or backward glance.

Amari peered up at Ricky. Ricky knelt down in front of the nine-year-old and smiled kindly. “Don’t you worry about a thing, son. Your life is about to change.”

Amari blinked to control his emotions and just shrugged because he didn’t know what to say to that, or what that even meant.

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Bristol, Melody and Logan stood with JoJo, young Eric, and Jordan. The pizzas had arrived, young Eric had been called on to bless the food, and everyone was chowing down. Logan had changed the Christmas music over to Christian pop to entice the teens to stick around, although now that food and drink were being served, there was no chance of the teens leaving.

Melody smiled. “You guys, this is amazing, isn’t it?”

They all nodded in agreement.

“I can’t believe how many actually came,” Bristol said.

“Yeah, I’d say there’s at least two, maybe three hundred people here,” young Eric said, as he looked over the crowd.

“Do we have enough pizza?” Jordan asked.

“Yeah, Mom called in for more and they should be arriving anytime now,” young Eric informed them.

“This is just amazing,” Bristol said with a smile. “So many. Do you think any of them will come back, like on Sunday?”

“Some will,” JoJo answered. “But even if they do, that won’t be the answer to the church’s financial problems. Reverend Clark says, if we can show how we can be a help to the community, the church would be able to get sponsorships.”

Bristol nodded. “Well, you guys have only been at it two days, and the change in the community is already like, a complete turnaround.”

“Well, it’s not complete,” Logan said. “But it’s a great start. And Rev Clark and JoJo and I have been planning a great program for Sunday.”

Melody smiled at Bristol. “Bet you didn’t know when you asked me to come to church with you that it would turn into all of this.”

Bristol shook her head. “I sure didn’t know, but I guess God knew. I almost didn’t ask you. I thought, what difference would it make for me to ask one friend to come to church here? But something told me to go ahead and call you.”

“That ‘something’ was the Holy Spirit,” JoJo said.

Bristol nodded. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? I mean, if we just trust God and follow His promptings, He knows what’s what.”

Melody smiled. She was right. God was using His warriors, namely the Kino and Adams families and friends, to work a miracle right here in Huntington Beach. She glanced around. “So, Bristol, where’s Banny? I saw him with you earlier.”

“He actually went to check on Grandma.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he just loves her. He’s always spending time with her.”

JoJo, Logan and young Eric exchanged glances. They’d already spoken to each other about the strange feeling they had about Banoy. Something not quite right. In

addition, he'd said he'd been working on the water problem in the basement of the church, but nothing had been done, except a concrete floor had been torn up. The standing water had not been pumped out. No plumber had been called. Once they got the right people in there, the problem had been a two-day fix. They then had a waterproofing specialist come in and inspect and take care of any additional problems.

To be fair, the plumber and waterproofing specialist were not cheap and there was no money in the coffers of the church. Still, Banny had said he'd worked down there, donating his own time and money for weeks. They weren't sure what to think about that. And why was he spending so much time with Mrs. Palma? It didn't make sense and the three were suspicious of Banoy Cruz.

"So, how long have you and Banny been together?" Logan asked.

Bristol shrugged. "About six months."

"And not tired of each other yet?" JoJo joked.

She laughed. "I can't get tired of him when I hardly ever see him."

"And here, he has time to see you and he's gone to check on your grandmother," Jordan said. "That's so sweet."

Bristol nodded. "He's like that. He spends a lot of time with many of the elderly people in our congregation. He has a soft spot for old people."

They all looked to the street when an Ameritech vehicle drove up and a beautiful girl jumped out, waved, and headed up the steps toward them.

Taylor Kino hugged everyone.

"Hey, Tay," young Eric said. "Glad you could make it."

"Me too." She turned when Phillip and Lyle called her name. They came up the steps to greet her. "Hey, guys!" Taylor said.

"Hey! So, are you hungry?"

"Starved."

"I'll go get you a plate," Phillip offered.

"I should be getting you a plate," Taylor countered. "How are you feeling? I mean, your head. I notice you always wear a knit cap."

"Well, not always, but usually when I'm out and about because the scar is so ugly right now. But the hair is starting to grow back and will eventually cover it."

"Do you feel good though? I mean, are there, like, headaches, or dizziness?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I mean, sometimes, but it's not been a problem. I'm goin' to school and there's no problem. *But I* can't drive for another few weeks. You know, just to make sure there are no neurological problems lingering that could cause an accident."

"So, coming to the dance with me on Saturday, it's not gonna hurt you or anything, right?"

"Right. Unless like, someone bashes me over the head."

Taylor grinned. "Well, if anyone tries to pick on you, Lyle and I will step in."

"Gee, thanks. I'll go get you a plate," Phillip said.

"I'll go help him. B-R-B," Lyle said.

They left and several teens approached the group.

"Hey, guys," JoJo said.

"Hey, so, like, we wanted to meet Taylor, if that's okay. Ya know, like, uh, we follow her and Gabe Tanner on social media."

Taylor smiled brightly. "Of course it's okay. Hey, everyone, I'm Taylor. Tell me your names."

There were four boys and three girls and they all introduced themselves.

Taylor took time to shake their hands and ask them about themselves. They chatted for a few minutes and took selfies with them until Lyle and Phillip came back with her plate.

"Well," Logan began as he glanced at the time on his phone. "We're about to rock this place out. You girls watch and learn." He glanced at the teens standing there. "Any of you happen to know how to play the drums?"

The group laughed and jostled one of the boys.

Logan zeroed in on him. "You do?" he asked the boy who was shaking his head and acting embarrassed.

"Yeah, he does," another boy answered for him. "He plays percussion for the high-school marching band."

"And you go to Oceanside, right?" JoJo asked.

They all nodded.

"That's awesome," JoJo said. "I play the drums too, of course, not right now," he said, touching his right arm in the sling. "But I stopped playing in high school to focus on football."

Logan nodded. "And he was good on the drums, but even better at football. Okay, sooo, anyone else have enough rhythm or courage to come pound on a drum?" A few more volunteered. "Follow me, we're gonna stir this place up."

He led them down the steps to the six empty trash cans turned upside down. Logan and young Eric each grabbed a bunch of sixteen-inch-long dowel sticks and gave two to each boy. They then showed the boys the beat to the song "Praise," by Elevation Worship. They went a little slower than the song usually went, but the point was to get them all going. The crowd started to quiet when they heard the drumming. Logan stopped drumming as young Eric and the one boy continued. Logan grabbed up the mic. "Who else wants to drum? Come on, there's gotta be someone else with enough rhythm to drum. We need four more people."

A few more teens stepped forward and took up the beat. To Taylor's surprise, Lyle stepped up too.

"Okay, we just need one more," Logan called out. "One more. Anybody?"

Finally a man who lived down the street stepped up. They all got in sync, and Logan grinned and nodded. "Awesome. Keep it up. Don't stop." He ran up the steps. "Come on, everyone, clap your hands." When everyone was participating he began yelling out the words, "Let everything, now you say it," he said.

The members of the crowd who knew the song repeated the words.

"Good. Let everything, (Let everything) that has breath, (that has breath) praise the Lord, (praise the Lord) praise the Lord, (praise the Lord.) Good, do it again. Let everything...."

He went on to call it out to the rhythm of the drumming and everyone repeated it

several times. Some of the teens and small kids and even adults started jumping up and down as they chanted the words. He did it over and over until he had everyone participating. Then he began to sing the song, every once in a while, going back to the chant. Once he started to sing, all the people there were obviously surprised at the quality of Logan's voice. It was so good that the crowd got really into it. Logan had them going. "Come on, come on," he called as he himself jumped up and down, really getting into it. "Come on, come on!"

Everyone was grinning from ear to ear. Everyone was participating. Everyone was praising the Lord.

Grandmaster Kino and Shelley were helping their children to chant and sing and dance. Ricky and Bree were encouraging everyone to chant and sing and dance with them. The entire crowd was going crazy as if it had been rehearsed, with hands all up in the air, people dancing and jumping up and down to the beat of the 'drums.' Ronny sat at the top of the stairs, chanting and clapping, tears in his eyes at the miracle he was witnessing.

Melody and Jordan and Taylor and Bristol were going hard like everyone else. Taylor was livestreaming. She wanted the whole world to see what was taking place here, to feel how strongly the Spirit was moving. As Taylor moved through the large crowd holding her phone high, the kids realized they were being streamed onto Gabe Tanner's website and they went full tilt.

Logan kept it up as long as he could, but finally, the song came to an end. He was delighted when the drummers started in on another song and the crowd kept dancing and praising the Lord.

Logan made his way to Melody. He was sweaty and smiling. "How was that?" he asked her.

She laughed. "That was amazing. You never cease to amaze me. Logan, you are so awesome. Lord, I am so in love with you."

"Wow. That is so good to hear." He grabbed her and abruptly pulled her to him and kissed her. "I'm in love with you too. Everything about you. Everything you do and say. Everything. Whaddya think about that?"

"I think that makes me very happy," she said quietly.

He looked into her eyes and brushed some hair back from her face, then frowned. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm fine. Like I said earlier, I'm just a little tired. Been going hard all day."

He put his hand on her head. "Mel, I think you're running a fever."

"Nonsense."

"I'm not kidding." He shook his head as he moved his hand to another spot on her forehead. "I mean, my hand is hot because I've been running around here, singing and jumping, and you should feel cool to me. But you're warm, Mel."

"I'm okay."

"Babe, you're pushing yourself too hard. Please, do me a favor. I need for you to go inside the church. There's a big comfy chair in the corner of Reverend Clark's office. Go sit in there, relax, rest. We'll finish up out here and I'll come get you. This is pretty much

over, and we're gonna start cleaning up soon."

"Yeah, and I need to help with that."

"No, you don't. We can handle it without you."

"How about the kids? I need to help Miss Shelley."

"Grandma is fine and she won't want you around the kids if you're getting sick. I'll tell Granddad that you're not feeling well and he'll help Grandma. Don't worry. Now please, go rest."

When she only sighed, he went on. "Baby, I can tell you're feeling guilty. Please don't. I need for you to feel better, which means I need for you to rest. Go rest. I'll come get you in about an hour. Please. Will you do that for me?"

She sighed and nodded.

"Good. Come on, I'll escort you up."

Logan took Melody's hand and walked her up the steps. They went inside the church to the office. He sat her down in the stuffed chair. She drew her legs up the best she could. He took off his jacket and put it over her.

She rested her head on the arm of the chair. It did suddenly feel so good to lay her head down. She sighed and closed her eyes. Logan kissed her head and left the room, closing the door behind him.

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The tree decorating party was coming to an end. Ricky and Bree stood on the sidewalk, shaking hands and chatting with the people as they left for their homes. They signed autographs and chatted with teens, encouraging them and offering advice. Ricky reinforced his promise several times that he, Mark, young Eric, Logan, and JoJo would be at the apartments to give a little martial arts lesson and demo Saturday morning. Daniel and Jeremy Davis spoke to a few friends who attended their same middle school and told them they too would be at the demo. Amari and Brittney stayed right next to Ricky and Bree until Leonard and Paula Garcia came to take them home.

Bree took a few minutes to chat with Paula and get to know her better while Ricky and Leonard stepped away to talk.

"I don't mean to put you on the spot, Leonard, but I *am* concerned about Amari and Brittney. Their mother left for the evening and said that your wife would be looking after the children?"

Leonard nodded. "You have a reason to be concerned for them. We live two doors down from them. Their mother won't be gone for the evening. She'll be gone all night. And then she'll come home high or drunk and pass out and push them out of the house so she can sleep."

"There's no father?"

Leonard shook his head. "Mari's dad is in jail. Brittney's dad, we don't know about. Tisha doesn't talk about him. But as far as men, she has several that she brings home to party with her, or to make some money, if you know what I mean. So, my wife, when Tish asks her to look after the children, how can she say anything but 'yes'? So, like, tonight, when we take them home, she'll go in and get them cleaned up and in bed. She'll lay out their clothes for the next day and then clean up the house the best she can. She'll stay until they're asleep and then leave and lock the door behind her. Amari is old

beyond his years and is pretty responsible. He won't go out or get into anything. We keep an eye out for them and feed them as much as possible."

Ricky sighed as his mind went through what could be done. First, he would talk to Justin or Mark and see what legal action could be taken. At the very least, the kids were being neglected. He hated to take children away from their parents, but these kids were living a nightmare and he had to think of them first. He would definitely look into what could be done for Amari and Brittney. The way Amari had clung to him the rest of the evening after his mother left broke Ricky's heart.

Ricky smiled at Mr. Garcia and held out his hand. "Well, Leonard, it was nice meeting you. We very much hope to see you and your family at church on Sunday. If not, please let me tell you how much we appreciate what you and your wife do for Amari and Brittney. Oh, one more thing. We drove around the apartments yesterday. They seem to be in need of some repair."

Leonard gave a short laugh. "Yeah. That's an understatement. They need a lot of repair. But the owner refuses to take care of things unless we pay extra to have them fixed."

Ricky sighed. "That's not legal."

"Yeah, well, that doesn't seem to matter to him, or to anyone involved."

Ricky nodded. "I'll look into it."

Leonard's eyebrows shot up. "Oh! Well, don't use my name, please."

"Don't worry. I promise to be very discreet. Nothing will come back to bite you."

"Thank you. So," Leonard began. "What brought you to this area to renovate things?"

"God did. We came here because a friend invited my nephew's girlfriend to visit. She then got my nephew involved and he got the rest of the family involved. You see, every morning, we pray and ask God to place in our path the ones He would want us to get involved with. This week, it began with Reverend Clark, moved into the neighborhood in which the church is located, and moved on to the people who live here. This one is a big one. Lots of moving pieces. Lots of different problems. We'll steadily work our way through it." He smiled. "Let me give you my personal number. If you need anything, anything at all, please give me a call. And if anything happens with Amari and Brittney, please call me."

"Will do, Mr. Kino. I'm really amazed that you would stoop to help our little corner of the world."

"Call me Ricky, and I'm not stooping. You and everyone here in this complex are God's children and all I'm doing is just giving a hand up."

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Deuteronomy 15:7
"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites
in any of the towns of the land the Lord your
God is giving you, do not be hardhearted
or tightfisted toward them."

Chapter Thirteen

December 10th, Tuesday Evening
Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Melody slept in the office chair for all of ten minutes. She felt hot and stuffy, but she couldn't go back outside because Logan would be all worried about her. She looked around the office to entertain herself. She knew the computer and large monitor were new. Grandmaster Kino had seen to that. But stacks of papers and file folders were everywhere. A secretary or assistant or something like that was desperately needed.

She went to the desk and thumbed through a thick handwritten book of sermons. She picked it up and looked closer. This book was from 1987. Reverently, she placed it back down and headed out of the office.

She walked up the hallway, but instead of turning right to go through the vestibule to the outside, she turned left and went into the chapel. It was quiet and cool. It had a nice feeling to it. Peaceful and reverent, she supposed. The beautiful stained glass had a lot to do with that.

Melody made her way down the aisle. She smiled because it was perfectly symmetrical. While some churches had a central seating area with two aisles, one on either side and then smaller seating areas on the far left and right, if a bride were to walk down the aisle in those kinds of churches, it wouldn't be the center. In churches like this one, there was one aisle, right down the center, and then very small aisles on either side between the walls and the pews. For just a moment she allowed herself to pretend to be walking down the aisle on her father's arm, looking ahead to the handsome guy waiting for her at the front of the chapel. She smiled.

Shaking her head, she snapped out of the fantasy and slipped into a pew on the right about halfway down. She sat and stared up at the beautiful stained glass window. The scene with Jesus surrounded by children was well done and had always made her feel peaceful. It was like the children could see the light of the Savior easier than everyone else. She sighed. Her head was aching. Maybe she actually was getting sick. Folding Logan's jacket, she placed it on the bench and laid her head down on it. Her eyes drifted shut.

It seemed only a few minutes later, she was awakened by what sounded like angry voices. And one of those voices she recognized. It was Bristol's boyfriend, Banny. She didn't recognize the other voice. Banny spoke loudly.

"I told you not to take that much. You're gonna get us all caught. Only a few hundred at a time."

"Sorry, man, but who put you in charge?"

"Me. Since I'm the one who recognized the opportunity. All these old people with their houses filled with jewelry, real gold jewelry, and stashes of cash money in their

closets and attics. But we gotta play it smart, you idiot. You don't take more than a few hundred at a time right now. And you get in good with the ones who are gettin' ready to kick it, and let them leave you all they have."

"I'm workin' on that. But I don't have the advantage you have."

"Sucks for you. But Bristol is my ticket. I marry her. Her grandmother will leave her everything. The house, the life insurance, the cash. Then get rid of her. It's almost too freakin' easy. So, keep playin' your part, man. And don't get carried away where you get caught. There are millions of dollars of cash and assets to be made out of the almost thirty grandmas who are getting ready to kick it. Be patient."

"Yeah, but how many of those grandmas intend to give all of their assets to this stupid church?"

"You gotta play it well, man. You gotta make them think they're helping you when no one else has ever done anything for you during your entire life. Tell them sob stories. They'll help you because they wanna go to heaven."

Both guys laughed.

"Now go on and get out of here," Banny said, "before anyone comes snooping around."

Melody didn't know what to do. It was quiet now. Did they both leave? She thought she heard footsteps. Someone was coming down the aisle. She closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. She heard him slap the benches as he walked past them. He was definitely coming down the aisle. Her heart pounded.

The footsteps stopped. She kept her eyes closed, but knew he was right there beside her bench. She heard him exhale. Could feel him draw closer and bend over her.

"Well, what have we here?" he mumbled.

She wasn't sure if she should act like he woke her up or not. Deciding to keep pretending to sleep, she willed her breathing to slow and her heart to calm.

"Must be my lucky day," he said softly.

He put his hand on her thigh.

Melody stirred and opened her eyes, pretending to regain awareness as she sat up. "Oh! Oh my goodness, I must've fallen asleep." She looked up at the guy. "Banny? What are you doing here?"

"The question is, what are *you* doing here?"

"I wasn't feeling well so Logan told me to come in the church and rest. I guess I fell asleep. Is everyone gone?" she asked as she started to stand up.

But he quickly grabbed her arm and pulled her back down. "You were sound asleep?"

"Apparently."

He rubbed his hand up and down her arm. "You know, you are one gorgeous babayi. How'd you get to be friends with Bristol?"

Melody's brow furrowed. "You already know, we went to school together."

"Yeah, but pretty girls like you don't make friends with pangit girls."

"Pangit?"

"Ugly."

Melody drew a breath. "Ugly? Bristol is not ugly. Are you blind? She's a beautiful

Filipino girl."

"Yeah, but that's what makes her pangit. The Filipino part."

"You are horrible. *You* are Filipino."

He touched her arm with a devious smile. "I like pretty white girls."

Melody tried to stand, but he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her down again.

"Don't go gettin' all crazy on me. I just wanna talk to you, maybe get to know you a little better."

"Well, Banny, I don't think I wanna talk to you and I know all I want to know."

"Aww, come on now. We don't have to tell Bristol that I think you're pretty. It would hurt her feelings. And pangit or not, I'm gonna ask Bristol to marry me, and that's the only marriage proposal she's ever gonna get. But you, you'll probably get a lot of proposals, though, it may not be marriage that they'll be proposin'. You and me, we could just be havin' some fun like that."

"You think mighty highly of yourself, Banoy. I wouldn't give you the time of day. Now let go of me."

She stood, but he grabbed her hand.

"Fine, go on then, but you'd better not say anything to Bristol, cuz all it would do is break her heart and I know you don't wanna do that."

She jerked her hand away.

He stood and moved close. "And you'd better watch the attitude."

She glared at him. "You're the one who'd better watch it. You obviously have no idea who you're dealing with."

"Oh really? Whatcha gonna do? Go runnin' to your little canary boyfriend? Whaddya think he's gonna do?"

She laughed. "You are such an idiot, ya know that?"

He angrily grabbed her wrist. She immediately threw a chop to his throat with her other hand and took off. He choked. It took him a few seconds to catch his breath before going after her.

The chapel doors opened and Logan and Bristol came in together.

"There you are!" Bristol said.

Melody hurried up to stand next to Logan.

Logan smiled at her. "What's goin' on?"

Banoy stepped forward. "I came in to check to make sure no one was here before we lock up the doors and saw Miss Melody sleeping on the bench so I woke her up."

Logan looked at Melody. "How are you feelin'?"

"Not so good."

"Well, let's get you home."

Melody nodded. She waved at her friend. "Bye, Bristol."

"Bye, Mel, feel better."

"Thanks."

Logan nodded at Banoy. "Guess we'll see you two later. Oh, and hey, you don't have to worry about checking out the church because we have security that's gonna do that and lock up from now on."

"Oh, well, Reverend Clark always asked me to do that whenever I was here."

"Well, that won't be necessary anymore," Logan said with a smile. "We have it covered." He watched Banoy's face, getting the information he wanted to know. Banny thought of himself in charge of this place. He'd been trusted and given free rein. He thought he was in charge. He'd taken ownership in his own mind.

Logan escorted Melody out of the church. "You're shaking, baby. You really are sick, aren't you?"

"Logan, I need to talk to you."

"Okay."

Outside only a few security agents remained, along with young Eric and Jordan and JoJo. They stood out front on the sidewalk looking up at the decorated trees and taking in the vast changes made in two days. Logan and Melody joined them and turned to look up at the church. "Looks great, doesn't it?" Jordan asked.

They all nodded. "It really does," JoJo agreed. "Very Christmassy and inviting."

"How ya feelin', Mel?" Jordan asked. "Logan said you're sick."

"I feel pretty bad actually."

"Well, let's leave your car here and I'll take you home," Logan offered.

"Actually, no," Melody said as she watched Banny and Bristol come down the steps of the church. "And I'll tell you why in a minute. Say goodbye to Bristol and Banny first," she said in a whisper.

"Well, good night, again, Bristol," Melody said.

Bristol smiled. "Good night, Mel, good night, you guys. Thanks so much, all of you, for all the hard work and effort. My grandmother is tickled pink."

"It's our pleasure," Logan said. "It's actually lots of fun making this happen."

"Good night, everyone," Banny said quickly and turned Bristol toward the parking lot.

The group stood and watched them leave. As soon as they were out of sight, they all turned to Melody.

"Okay, Mel, so what's goin' on?" Logan asked.

Melody looked up at him as tears formed in her eyes and she quickly wiped them away. "He came on to me in the chapel."

"Banny?" young Eric asked.

Melody nodded. "I had to do a throat chop to make him let me go. He said I was pretty and Bristol was ugly and there was no reason why he and I shouldn't get to know each other better and he wasn't talkin' about some polite conversation."

Logan turned toward the parking lot as if he was about to go after him, but Melody put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't. Not yet, anyway. There's more to it."

He turned back to her. "Go on."

She sniffed. "I think we need a meeting with, like, your dad, and I guess your Uncle Joey."

She went on to try to tell him what she'd overheard. She finished with, "and so, I was thinking, you probably want him to think that I didn't hear it, and Ameritech probably wants to, like, set a trap for him or something. Or the police. Or someone. I mean, he sounded like he's planning to murder Bristol."

Young Eric pulled out his phone, placed a call and put it on speaker.

"What's up, kiddo?" his Uncle Joey said.

"You guys wired this place up, right?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Do we have audio too?"

"Not outside."

"How about in the chapel?"

"Yes. Legal approved it and we posted the notices at every entrance stating that the church's common areas are under audio-and-video surveillance. Why?"

"Can you access it now?"

"Yes, why, Eric?"

He quickly filled him in on what Melody told them.

"Okay. I'm on it," Joey said. "We'll need to act quickly. Put things in place. Looks like I won't be getting any sleep tonight. Do you know what kind of car he drives or where he lives?"

"Don't know an address but I know he drives a red Kia Soul."

"Okay, that'll help. I'll pick up the plate on the parking-lot cam. I don't want Mel alone tonight."

"Her whole family will be with her."

"No. I want her where Banoy can't find her."

"Logan can take her to his house."

"Yes. That's better. And I'm gonna give her father a call right now, tell him what's goin' on and make sure they're locked up tight. If Banny suspects for one second that she actually heard him, he'll try to silence her. I'm gonna put a man to watch over her family tonight, just in case."

"Thanks, Uncle Joey."

"Yep. Tell Logan to go straight home and tell his dad and let him know that I'll be in touch shortly with the video footage."

"You're on speaker so he heard you."

Joey sighed. "Eric, always tell me that up front. What I said might have scared Melody."

"Sorry."

Logan had his arm around Melody and squeezed her tighter. "It's gonna be okay," he whispered.

Young Eric ended the call and nodded at everyone. "So then, let's get outta here."

"I'm sorry, everyone," Melody said.

JoJo smiled at her. "Melody, our entire family has come together to work on this amazing project. We wanted to do it and we all know that when we do something like this, when we try to do something good on a large scale, the enemy is gonna try to stop us. We didn't expect we'd just step in, renovate a church, help out the community and no one would stand in our way. It doesn't go smoothly because the dark forces move in. The same thing happened in Pine Forest a few weeks ago at Thanksgiving. But don't worry, because we're stronger than them. And don't apologize for God using you to bring about changes for all of these people. Think about it, Mel. God used you to save Bristol's

life and to help these old folks. To help the people in those apartments, all those people who came to help decorate a Christmas tree tonight. He's using you. Don't apologize."

She sighed and smiled. "Thanks, JoJo."

"He'd make a good preacher, wouldn't he?" Logan said with a smile.

"He would," young Eric agreed.

"You guys stay here with Mel while I go get the car," Logan said.

He turned and ran to his car, scanning the parking lot to make sure Banny had left. Then drove to the front of the church and picked up Melody.

Young Eric put her in the car and closed the door.

"Thanks, Eric. Jordan, see you later. JoJo, see you at home."

They waved and he took off, glancing over at Melody. She seemed to be shivering, so he reached over and turned on the heat. "I'm uh, I'm sorry such a nice evening was ruined and I'm sorry you're not feeling well."

"Me too," she said softly.

"Call Aunt Jeffy," Logan said.

Jeffy answered on the first ring. "Hey, sweetie."

"Hey, Aunt Jeffy. I hate to bother you, but can you do one of those remote things where you can tell what's wrong with Melody?"

"I can and I was expecting your call." She was quiet a few seconds. "Melody, are you having trouble breathing?"

Melody drew a deep breath. "Maybe. My chest feels a little tight."

"Have you been coughing?"

"No, ma'am. I mean, not really. Every once in a while."

"Headache?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Body aches?"

"Yes, ma'am. I ache all over right now."

"Okay. No sniffles?"

"No, ma'am."

Jeffy sighed. "I need to come and examine you tomorrow. You need to stay home tomorrow. Stay in bed."

"What are you thinking it is, Aunt Jeffy?" Logan asked.

"My probing tells me that your breathing and oxygen levels are safe right now, but Bella will need to monitor you tonight. If the tightness worsens at all, I want to examine you. For now, it appears to be the flu. I'll call your mom and tell her what to give you tonight. She has some of my special stuff. You need to rest, Melody. It's important. My initial probing is telling me that your body is worn out."

"Tell me about it," Melody murmured. "Am I contagious?"

"Yes."

"So, Logan kissed me today. I mean, like, several times."

"Of course he did. Don't worry. We'll take care of him too."

"But, I'm not coughing or sneezing," Melody said. "Don't you usually cough and sneeze with the flu?"

"Usually, but not always."

Melody sighed.

They made it to the Adams home. Logan helped Melody into the house and his mom took over.

"Hello, Melody, poor thing. Come with me upstairs. I'm gonna put you in the guest room. I have some pajamas for you and I'm making some tea for you and there are some capsules to take."

Logan smiled at her and gave a small wave. "Goodnight, Mel. I'll come in and check on you later."

She frowned. "Good night."

"Now, I've spoken with your mom, Melody. Don't worry about your family, they are being watched over," Bella said.

Logan watched them go and was standing there as JoJo came in the house.

"How's she doing?"

"Aunt Jeffy thinks it could be the flu and Mom is taking care of her right now."

"Boys," Mark Adams said from the back hall. "Come into the office a minute."

Logan and JoJo followed their father into his office.

"First, I guess you're gonna want to see the video footage of what took place in the chapel."

They took a seat and looked up at the large monitor. They watched Melody enter the chapel, take a seat and sit quietly. After about five minutes, she lay down. Then Mark fast-forwarded about ten minutes. They watched as a guy in a brown sweater that they didn't know entered the chapel, followed closely by Banoy. He showed Banoy a gray pouch, pulled out a stack of money and laughed about how much it was. Banoy smacked the guy upside the head and yelled at him. They watched the rest of the exchange. When Mark turned the video off, they sat in silence for a few moments.

"I guess he doesn't know that the canary boyfriend could take him out in a few seconds," JoJo said.

Logan nodded. "I have a feeling he's gonna find that out."

"Here's the thing," Mark said. "There's more than these two. This Banoy character said 'you'll get us all caught.' So, I wonder just how many there are."

"Okay, then, what's the plan of action?" JoJo asked.

"The police are taking the lead. They'll seek authorization to track, search or intercept communications. Ameritech will provide the recording and technical assistance and of course, protection. Ameritech will also put cameras at the Palma home, both inside and out and may work out a sting operation with the police. With us working together, it shouldn't take long to bring this little group down."

"He spends a lot of time at the Palma house," Logan offered.

Mark nodded. "That's why we'll get cameras in there asap. These guys don't rank real high in intelligence. I mean, if he wanted to remain incognito, why would he come on to Melody like that?"

"I think he was pushing to see if she heard anything," Logan said.

Mark nodded. "I think so too, but it was not a very bright way to find out, because he showed not all but a part of his hand. Anyway, Joey's on it. They'll collect evidence and let the cops make the arrests. Hopefully, they'll get them all."

"Bristol will have to be told and it's gonna crush her," Logan said.

Mark nodded. "Yep, it's gonna hurt the poor girl, but we gotta rip that bandage off. And then she's got to be a good enough actress to go along with it for a while."

"Who's gonna tell her?"

"Your granddad has an appointment with Bristol early in the morning. He's volunteered to be the one."

"Why does he have an appointment with Bristol?"

"He was going to talk to her about possibly becoming the secretary and accountant for the church. They're gonna pay for her schooling to become a CPA and pay her to do the job at the church. She won't have to work two jobs anymore and her income will double."

Logan nodded. "That's really gonna help her out."

Mark nodded. "Yes, and if anyone can help her through what she's facing, it's Eric. Okay. So, you guys need to get some sleep. Don't forget Em in the morning."

"Dad, how could we forget Em?" JoJo said.

"Well, just wanna make sure you get up to help with the decorating. Your mom is running around taking care of business and she is four months pregnant."

"That means she's healthy and feeling good, right?" Logan asked.

Mark smiled. "That means she's wearing herself out. Please do whatever you can to ease her burden."

"You got it, Dad."

"Good. So, goodnight, boys."

"'Night," they said as they turned.

"And guys, way to act quickly on this thing. You guys know I love you, right?"

"We don't feel left out," JoJo said quickly with a grin.

Mark smiled. "Good night."

Logan chuckled and he and JoJo headed upstairs. Their mom was just coming out of the guest bedroom.

"How's she doing?" Logan asked.

"I've given her something for her fever and some tea that will help her sleep."

"What was her temp?"

"102.9."

"That's pretty high."

Bella nodded. "It should start coming down soon. She's spoken to her mother because she was worried about her family, and she assured her mother that she was fine. I think she's feeling alone, or afraid."

"She must know she's safe here," JoJo said.

Bella smiled and looked at Logan. "Still, she's in a strange home, in a strange bed. Why don't you go in and spend a few minutes with her?"

"Oh, I intended to do that."

Bella put her hand on her abdomen and sighed.

"Mom," JoJo said quickly. "You go to bed."

Bella frowned. "I will. I just wanted to get the decorations up for Emily's birthday breakfast first."

"Logan and I are gonna take care of that. We absolutely promise. We'll have it done. We won't forget. You can depend on us. Now go to bed. Please, Mom."

She sighed and nodded.

JoJo ushered her into her room and turned to Logan. "'Night, Logan."

"'Night, Jo."

Logan quietly eased into the guest room where Melody had been installed and walked softly to the bed. He looked down at the sleeping girl. Her cheeks and lips were pink from the fever. He touched his hand to her forehead. It was still very warm. Her eyes blinked open and he smiled at her. "Hey, Mel."

"Hi."

"How ya feelin', baby?"

She smiled at the endearment. "Not great right now. I'm so sorry I got sick."

"Well, you should be and don't ever let it happen again."

She sighed.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

She thought a moment and then smiled. "Well, there is only one thing, but I feel silly asking you."

"Ask. Whatever you need, whatever can bring you comfort, I'll do it, I'll get it, I'll run to the store. Just name it."

"Will you—sing to me?"

He smiled. She'd surprised him. "Will that really help you?"

"When you sing, it makes me relax. It makes me feel warm and all fuzzy. I could listen to you sing forever."

"That's good to hear."

"Yes, it is," she said with a giggle.

He gave a soft laugh. "So, what would you like to hear?"

"You choose."

He thought for a minute. "Well, before I sing to you, I thought we might want to talk about something that happened today."

She frowned. "Okay."

He smiled. "Earlier today, I just blurted out that I was totally in love with you."

She smiled. "I know. I'll never forget that you said that."

"Good. But what I'm trying to say is that's not how I expected to finally say those words to you."

"How did you expect to say them?"

"Something a little more romantic. Like over a candlelit dinner or something. Today, I couldn't contain myself. It just slipped out. And anyway, you said you feel the same way, so, I just wanted to confirm it."

"You want to confirm that I feel the same way?"

"Yeah. I mean, like, tell me you didn't just say that because I caught you off guard, right?"

"Right. I said it because I do feel the same way. I'm in love with you, Logan. I'm totally in love with you. I was thinking that it's just me being young and naive, falling for a cute guy who sings like an angel and is strong and powerful. But Logan, everything

you do, everything you say, I fall more in love with you every day. Even you coming in here tonight to check on me. I can't believe I'm so lucky as to have someone as awesome as you be interested in little old me."

"Little old you? Melody, you are so beautiful, so kind, so smart, quick-witted, faithful, easy-going, good with children, fun to be around. You are everything I could ever want in a girl and never thought I'd find. And here you are, right in front of me. Right here, and I'm so grateful to God that you came into my life. So grateful. And I meant what I said. I love you, Melody. I know we haven't been together very long, but it just seems right to me."

"To me too," she said. "I keep thinking that it's too soon to feel this way, but then I see young Eric and Jordan. They say, when it's right it's right. When you know, you know. And I think I know."

"And I do too," Logan said.

She smiled. "Well then, isn't this nice? If only I weren't sick, you could seal this with a kiss."

He stroked his hand over her hair. "Instead, I'll grant your request. Close your eyes, relax, get well."

She closed her eyes and he began to sing a song he'd written about them. About singing a 'melody' and loving the tune.

She opened her eyes. "That's about us? You wrote that?"

He smiled. "Yes. And it's gonna be a big hit one day. Now, close your eyes and sleep, baby."

She closed her eyes and listened to him sing. It was so lovely. So comforting.

Logan watched her as she drifted off. When he was sure she was sleeping, he stopped singing and tucked the blanket up under her chin. Then he placed his hand on her head and began to pray. He thanked God for her, he pled the blood of Jesus over her, he commanded her body to heal in Jesus' name, and he asked God to protect her and her family.

He didn't know that Melody was not asleep and she could hear all that he said. His words touched her more than any 'I love yous' could. They were the words of a young man deeply in love, words spoken over her, and the tears ran down her cheeks.

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December 11th, 7:00 AM PST, Wednesday Morning

Mark Adams Home, Newport Beach, California

Melody woke when a soft hand touched her cheek. She opened her eyes and stared into the blue eyes of a little girl. Blinking to focus, Melody smiled. "Well, hello there, Emily," she whispered.

"Hi, Melody. Why did you sleep here?"

"Umm, I had to have a long talk with Logan. But also, sweetie, I'm sick, so maybe you need to go find your mommy and not be near me."

"I won't get sick. I never get sick. My brother is your boyfriend, right?"

Melody smiled. "Yes, he is."

"He told me. Do you like him?"

"Yes, very much. So, Miss Emily, may I tell you happy birthday?"

She grinned but then frowned. “I’m not gonna have a party today. We too busy. So, I have to wait for Sunday when we can have a party at Grandma’s house.”

“Oh, I see.”

“How many days to Sunday?” she asked with a little pout.

“Sunday is four days away.”

Emily frowned.

“So, I heard that you’re now four years old. Is that true?”

Emily nodded her head.

“It just can’t be true. I thought you were only two.”

Emily giggled. “No, I’m not two. But Angelina is. And Noah is. And Nate and Manny and Abe. Oh and Ledger used to be two but he had a birthday and now he’s three. And Iris used to be two but she had a birthday party yesterday, but I couldn’t go.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry that you didn’t get to go.”

“Yeah, she lives really far away, in Georgia. But me and Phia and Kel and Ledger FaceTimed her yesterday.”

“I’m so glad you did that. It probably made her feel really special that you took time to call her.”

Emily thought about that and nodded her head. “I think so cuz she said ‘thank you’ about a hundred times.”

Melody smiled. Of course she did. “So, Emily, whatcha got there under your arm?”

“It’s my new book. I love it. Sophia and Aunt Breez made the pictures.”

“Oh! May I see it?”

Emily nodded and handed the book to her.

Melody smiled at the beautiful cover art, a little girl in a pretty dress holding a gift bag in her hand as she walked down the sidewalk. In the background were houses, with flowers and trees and a dog and a cat and people waving. All done in lovely colors, bright and beautiful. “This is so nice,” Melody said as she ran her fingers over the glossy cover.

“Will you read it to me?”

“Oh, well, sweetie, I’d really like to but I don’t think you should stay in here with me, because I’m sick.”

“What’s wrong? You don’t act sick. You don’t talk sick.”

Melody thought about that. She also didn’t feel sick. No headache. No fever or chills. No coughing or runny nose. No aches or pains. “Well, actually, nothing is wrong right now. But I was feeling pretty sick last night and I don’t want you to get sick from me.”

Emily giggled. “That’s funny. How can I get sick from you when you aren’t even sick?”

Melody laughed. “Good question. So, where’s your mommy?”

“I think she’s making breakfast ‘cause I can smell it.”

Melody sighed. The breakfast party for Emily was supposed to be a surprise and they probably don’t realize that she’s awake.

“Will you read the book with me?”

“Hmm, hold on.”

Melody quickly sent Logan’s mom a text. Bella replied that Jeffy had already

checked on her remotely that morning. Her fever was gone, and Jeffy said she was no longer contagious.

"Okay, sweetie, you talked me into it."

Emily climbed up in the bed. Melody sat up with her back against the headboard and Emily immediately crawled into her lap. Melody opened the book and read, "Once upon a time there was a little girl who was almost always such a sweet little girl..."

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While JoJo waited downstairs, Mark and Bella came upstairs to wake their sweet girl and Logan came upstairs to check on his girl. Logan motioned to his parents with a finger to his lips and pointed into the guest bedroom. The three stood at the doorway listening to Melody read to Emily. Logan pulled out his phone and recorded them.

".... Jesus was the greatest gift of all," Melody finished and sighed. "That was a wonderful story. Did you like it?"

Emily nodded her head. "I love it. I read it a lot of times with Mommy and Daddy and Logan and JoJo and it's okay that this story is about Iris because soon there is gonna be another book about two little girls named Emily and Kelstyn and that's really about me and my cousin, Kelstyn because we are the same age and Kel is gonna be four in five more days so I am older than her but not very much older than her and she's my best friend even though we are cousins and our mommies are sisters and our fathers are brothers and we are a very close family."

Logan couldn't stop the laugh and Melody and Emily looked over at the door.

"Heeey, you guys," Emily said. "You snuck up on us," she said in her sweet munchkin voice.

Logan, Mark and Bella came into the room.

"Yes," Bella said. "I came up to wake you and didn't find you in your bed."

"Did you think I was lost?" Emily asked as if she hoped it was true.

"No, I thought you'd gone into my room."

"I came to see Melody."

"I see that," Logan said. His eyes shifted to the girl spoken of. "Hey, Mel, how you feelin' this morning?"

She smiled. "I actually feel really good. Not sick at all."

He smiled. "Good. People say that Aunt Jeffy's meds seem to get rid of most anything within twenty-four hours."

"She's amazing. I am beginning to understand why the Big Pharma people tried to shut her up."

"Well," Mark began. "Let's get you dressed, Emily, and have some breakfast."

She nodded and ran off with her parents.

Logan smiled. "Mel, you're invited too. But you don't have to get dressed. You can wear those cute sweatpants and my old t-shirt all day if you want."

"This is your shirt?"

"Yeah. It's too small for me and my mom likes to wear my old t-shirts to bed cuz she thinks they're comfortable."

Melody nodded and ran her hand over the front of the shirt. "It is. It's soft."

"Yep, I wear them down pretty good. So, hurry and get up, so you can be down there

before Emily."

"I guess I'll just wear this because I don't think there's time for me to get all dressed. Get out of here so I can go use the bathroom."

"Yes, ma'am."

A few minutes later Bella, Logan, Melody and JoJo sat at the kitchen table, waiting and watching for Emily to come downstairs with her daddy. Balloons and streamers were everywhere, a pretty white lace tablecloth covered the table with a huge happy birthday centerpiece in the middle and colorful plates and napkins. There was a birthday cake with candles on the table but they weren't going to cut it this morning. There were also chocolate breakfast muffins, one with four candles—one for each year of her life—and a fifth candle to grow on.

Logan volunteered to video and JoJo was doing a group FaceTime with the rest of the family. He had Ricky, Bree, young Eric and Taylor, Grandma Shelley and all five of her little ones, Aunt Breez, Sophia, Kelstyn, Ledger, Lizzy, Gabe and finally Iris.

Everyone watched as Emily headed into the kitchen. She was talking a mile a minute with her daddy and looking up at him. He stopped walking and Em turned slowly, her eyes opening wide, a huge smile spreading across her face and she started clapping her hands and jumping up and down.

"Happy birthday, Emily!" everyone shouted together.

She laughed and clapped and then stopped and her expression completely changed. She put her hands to her face and covered it, and next thing everyone knew, she was wailing.

Mark knelt down to her. "What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"Nothing is the matter, Daddy. I'm just so happy it made me cry."

"Oh, sweetie," Bella said, stretching out her arms.

Little Em ran to her mommy and snuggled against her.

Logan looked down at Melody. She was crying too. He laughed.

"Em," JoJo said. "Your cousins and Grandma and Aunt Breez and Uncle Ricky and Aunt Bree and young Eric and Taylor and Gabe and Iris are all on FaceTime." Emily looked up at JoJo's phone and grinned. "Um, thank you, everyone." And then she remembered her book. "Thank you all so much for surprising me. It's making me really, really happy. And look at all the good stuff," she said pointing at the table and the balloons. "Thank you, Mommy, thank you, Daddy." She ran to hug each of them. "Thank you, Logan. Thank you, JoJo. Thank you, Melody."

She looked up after hugging them all. "Thank you all so much. I think this is gonna be a very happy day!"

They laughed.

"Let's eat some breakfast," Logan said. "I have a class this morning."

"Well, before we eat," Mark said. "There are a few more things we need to do."

Emily turned her big eyes up to her father.

He pointed to the far corner. "See that big thing in the corner over there with the blue blanket over it?"

Emily nodded.

"Go pull the blanket off," he said.

Emily jumped up and down as she moved over to the corner of the breakfast room near the back door, grabbed the edge of the blanket and pulled it off the object by backing up several steps.

Her eyes opened wide. She took huge gasps of breath. “Oh, oh, look, a dollhouse! For me?”

“No, it’s for me,” JoJo said. “But I’m gonna let you play with it.”

Emily giggled. She was used to her brothers teasing her.

She moved toward it reverently and touched the large wooden house that was taller than her. She slowly looked it over, softly touching a chair, and a bed, and a table. She turned around, her eyes aglow. “I love it so much. I love it so much. Thank you so much.”

She looked at JoJo’s phone. “Kebble, are you still there?” she asked, using her version of Kelstyn’s nickname, which was Kel-Bell.

JoJo nodded. “She is.”

“I hope you will come over and play with me!”

It was Aunt Breez who answered. “We’ll be over later.”

Emily clapped her hands.

“I wish I could come,” Iris said loudly.

“Me too,” Gabe said softly.

“And now,” Bella began. “We just need to light these muffin candles and sing happy birthday and bless the food.”

Mark lit the candles, and everyone sang. Emily said the blessing, and then everyone gobbled up the delicious breakfast. It was a beautiful beginning to a very happy day. At least for some.

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December 11th, 8:00 AM PST, Wednesday Morning

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

“Good morning, Grandmaster Kino,” Bristol said with a smile as she entered the office of the Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ.

Eric smiled kindly at her. He felt immense compassion for her and he knew her smile would be gone very soon. “Good morning, Bristol. Thank you so much for coming in for this meeting.”

“Well, I have to say, I’m really curious about what this is all about.”

He nodded. “Well, I’ll tell you what the meeting was originally about while we wait for Reverend Clark and your grandmother to arrive.”

“What? Grandma is coming?”

He nodded. “Yes. I have someone picking her up. But until they get here, I’ll tell you what this meeting *was* about.” He smiled and gestured toward the big chair. “Please have a seat.”

She sat down nervously.

“Bristol, I understand you want to go to school and get an accounting degree. Is that true?”

“Yes, and to become a CPA.”

“And Melody tells me that you have a very efficient mind and a knack for

organization."

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, sir. Clutter bothers me. It's a thing I have."

He smiled and gestured around the office. "And so, this office must be a nightmare to you."

She giggled. "It is, but it's also like a giant game I want to play. It wouldn't take much to get this place cleaned up and organized. Put in a system to handle everything properly. I don't know how Reverend Clark gets anything done in here."

"Well, he shouldn't have to do any of that. He needs to concentrate on ministering to his flock and not on writing checks or keeping the power on." He nodded at her. "I was going to, well, I still am going to, make you an offer."

She frowned. "What can I do to help? I'd be happy to help."

"That's good, but you can help and we can also help you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I would like to pay for your college education, help you get the degree you want, but I also would like to hire you to be the church secretary/accountant. It really won't be any more complicated than running a household. Once you have everything here set up and in order, you wouldn't have to work here full time, so you could attend classes and work on that degree."

Her eyes opened wide. "Grandmaster Kino, that sounds wonderful, but I have a job that I need to keep because I help pay the bills for my grandmother."

He nodded. "I understand that and I commend you for taking care of the woman who took care of you. But, I'll pay you a decent salary for the work you do here for the church. I promise, it will be more than you're making at the firm where you currently work."

"More per hour?"

He smiled at her, appreciating her mind that immediately went to the details to evaluate the offer. "No, not more per hour. More period. Whatever you're making at the firm to help pay bills, it will double."

"Double?"

"Yes. And it will be worth paying you the extra money to have someone I trust helping to run this place."

"You don't trust Reverend Clark?"

"Yes, of course I do, but he can't handle it all. And Bristol, this church has taken in a lot more money than it has in its coffers."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, that's the next subject I'm getting to, and why I'm waiting for the Reverend and Mrs. Palma." He smiled. "And I think I hear them coming in now." He stood and opened the office door. "Hello, Ronny, and good morning, and thank you for coming on such late notice. Good morning, Christina. I hope you're doing well this morning."

She nodded. "Eric, it's so nice to see you again."

"Please come in," Eric said. "Go ahead and take that seat, Christina, and I'll grab another chair for Bristol. Ronny, please take the chair behind the desk."

"What about you?"

"I'll stand." Eric went down the hall to a classroom and grabbed a folding chair and

quickly brought it back to the office and motioned for Bristol to sit.

He stood in front of the door as they all looked up at him, obviously curious as to why he had called them together. He sighed and silently said another prayer and smiled. "I won't beat around the bush. I called you in because we have a serious problem, though part of the problem will be solved if Bristol agrees to the offer I just made her."

Eyes turned to the young girl.

Eric went on to explain the offer he made to Bristol. "And so, if she agrees to do it, that will be part of the problem solved."

"So, Bristol, are you going to do it?" Christina asked.

Bristol nodded. "I'd be stupid to turn that down."

Eric smiled and then frowned as he faced the next very unpleasant part of the discussion. "Now, I'm afraid the next part of the conversation is not so pleasant. I called Christina in to be support for Bristol, and I called Ronny in because, well, it's his church and..."

"It's the Lord's church," Ronny put in quickly.

Eric nodded. "Yes. And also Ronny is gonna want to be here for you and also be in on what the plan is to help the situation." He looked at the older man. "Ronny, your church is bringing in more money than you have. My stepson, Mark Adams, and my best friend, Justin Lee, are attorneys at Lee and Adams Law Firm, and they asked some of their financial auditors to initiate some preliminary investigations into the church finances and they have discovered that there have been a lot of cash offerings that have disappeared. In other words, you are being robbed blind."

Ronny frowned. "Do you know who the culprit is?"

"We know who one of them is. There is more than one. It's a group. I'm not sure if the others are members of your congregation. I do know that one, the leader I believe, has recently started going to church here. We have plans in place to find them all. But just stealing money from the church is only part of what is happening. There is a much worse plan in place that has to do with robbing homes, committing fraud against the elderly of the congregation, exploitation, and— murder."

All of their eyes widened.

Eric sighed as he grabbed the remote. "I'm going to play a video for you. It's of something that took place in the chapel yesterday evening. Bristol, this affects you the most which is why I asked Christina to be here with you. It will be upsetting for you to hear this, but we are here for you. Melody was very distraught about telling you about this, but we assured her you would want to know, that you had to know. It will be painful, so brace yourself."

She blinked and looked up at the screen on the wall. Eric hit the button and remained still and quiet as the video played.

Bristol's mouth opened. Her eyes got wide and then filled with tears. Ronny shook his head, feeling immediately guilty that he had so easily trusted the young man. Christina looked fiercely angry.

Eric turned it off, picked up a box of tissues and offered them to Bristol.

The room was quiet. Eric drew a breath. "I know it's hard and hurtful. There are probably waves of different emotions hitting you all at the same time. Shock.

Disappointment. Heartache. Fear. I'll help you through them, Bristol."

She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "It's so hard to believe. He, he said he has plans to murder me. How could he?"

"There is evil in this world, sweetie. But God knew what was going on, He prompted Ronny to be adamant about inviting young people here, He prompted you to invite Melody, He prompted Logan to come along. Now we see that we were not only supposed to help Ronny, but also we are here to save your life."

"Does he know that we know?" Christina asked.

Eric nodded in approval of her question. "Good question, Christina. That means you realize that having this disclosure meeting is only the beginning. The answer to your question is, 'no.' He doesn't know and he can't know. Not yet. We need him to continue on so that we can gather evidence against him, find out how many others are working with him, and then turn it over to the police and they'll make the arrests."

"How will you gather evidence?" Ronny asked.

"We would like your permission to put surveillance equipment in your home, Christina. We are working with the police to put together a sting operation. We would plant some money somewhere he hasn't looked yet in your home and maybe some here in the church if necessary. Do you know the other guy he was talking to in the video, Bristol?"

She nodded. "His name is Deuce Perry. I don't know if that's his real first name. He went to the same high school I did. He graduated a year before me and Melody. I don't know him that well, and I didn't even know that Banny knew him because Banny is older."

"How old is Banny?" Eric asked.

"He's twenty-three." She shrugged. "Unless he's lying about that too."

She sniffed back another round of tears. "So, Grandmaster Kino, you need me to pretend that I don't know this, right? You need me to act normal with Banny."

"It's a hard ask, I realize that, Bristol, but it won't be for long. Do you think you can do it?"

"I'm not sure. Right now, I feel like I'm gonna pass out. Like I'm in some nightmare and can't wake up. I mean, I thought he loved me. I thought we were gonna get married." She broke into sobs.

Eric put his arms around her. "It seems hard right now, sweetie," Eric said. "But you will eventually heal from this, and we won't let this man's cruel actions ruin your future. You will have a happy life."

She shook her head. "No, I won't. Because, like he said, I'm ugly."

"You are not ugly," Christina said quickly.

She sniffed. "You're my grandma. Of course you're gonna say that."

"You are not ugly," Grandmaster Kino said. "You are a beautiful daughter of God and there is someone waiting out there to meet you. Someone who will love you and appreciate you. Bristol, you'll get through this and you and I will do some work together, some therapy sessions, and you'll see just how worthy you are. Please, trust me. And trust God. He sees you. He sent us to rescue YOU. You are His daughter. Trust Him."

Bristol wiped her tears.

"I'm sorry, Bristol. I'm sorry, Christina. I've been so unaware. I trusted this young man," Ronny said, his already weak voice shaking.

"Well, he's a good actor. Forgive yourself," Christina said. "But I have to say, I never felt good about him."

Eric smiled. "So, Jason and Joey, at Ameritech, are coming up with a detailed plan to catch these guys. We'll work it out, and then bring you in on it to execute. It probably won't take longer than a week. Two at the most. Can you hang in there that long, Bristol?"

"I'll try."

"If you let him know that you know, he could hurt you now, or your grandmother. We already have an agent protecting Melody, because if he suspects she heard him, he'll try to take her out of the picture."

"Poor Melody," Bristol said. "She was probably very upset, not sure whether to tell me or not."

"She was distraught. She's worried about you."

Bristol sighed. "Well, you tell her that I'm okay and I'm glad she told."

Eric smiled. "I'm proud of you for that. So, it will make sense that Melody knows Banny came on to her and she would tell you. He may even try to bring up the subject with you and discredit her before she can tell you. You can act like you know that she believes he tried to come on to her, but he can't know that Melody heard the other things he said to his friend. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Bristol nodded. "Yes, sir. I understand. He'll try to explain why he came on to Melody, but I have to be very careful that I don't let on that I know he's stealing and plans to marry me and kill me." She shook her head. "Saying it out loud like that, it sounds like a ridiculous plan."

Eric smiled. "Yes it does. And yet those kinds of plans are carried out every day. The devil is a deceiver, and he gets in these people's heads and makes it sound like a viable plan. To us in our right minds, we can see just how crazy it is."

"When is the next time you'll see Banoy?" Ronny asked.

"I'm supposed to see him tonight, after I get off work. He's supposed to come to the house for dinner." She looked up at the clock. "Oh, no, I'm gonna be late to work!" She stood up and shook her head. "I really don't feel like I can go into work. I won't be able to concentrate."

"Can you call in sick?" Eric asked.

"Well, I don't want to lie."

"And I don't want you to lie. But I am a doctor and you may not be physically sick, but you are definitely emotionally ill right now. They don't have to be told what kind of sickness. If you need me to vouch for you, I will. Besides that, when do you think you'll give your notice?"

"When do you want me to start here?"

He smiled. "Tomorrow would be good."

"Oh! Well, I will see if I can do that. I'll go straight in and talk to my boss. Though they may want me to work out a notice."

"I understand. I wasn't serious. It was just wishful thinking." He turned to Mrs.

Palma. “Christina, we would like to have Agent Reyes, the one who just picked you up, stay with you. He can pretend to be a yard guy or a plumber, or something like that. Just for a while until we work out a good plan of action.”

“That would be fine,” she said. “Always nice to have a good-looking young man hanging around the house.”

Eric chuckled. “Okay then, ladies, and Reverend, as soon as Jason lets us know an exact plan of action, I or one of the Ameritech agents will be in touch. Until then, I’ll leave you to get ready for this Sunday.”

“Do you think there will be a lot of people here?” Bristol asked.

Eric nodded. “The place will be packed and there will be a livestream. Ronny, you’re about to be back in business. By the way, later today, there will be a company here called VidSolutions who will install monitors in the chapel so that everyone will be able to read the words to popular Christian songs and sing along. We’ll also obtain the church copyright license that allows us to project the lyrics legally. It’s the thing nowadays, instead of hymnals. It makes it so you can do songs that may not be in the hymnal, and with things changing so quickly from week to week, it’s the best way to keep up.”

Ronny nodded. “You don’t have to explain. I trust you, Eric.”

Eric nodded. “Thank you. So, I’m gonna head home to check on my wife. She has the kids all alone today because Melody was ill.”

“Oh yeah, she was running a fever last night. Is she okay?” Bristol asked.

“She says she’s much better this morning, but Shelley told her to take the day off and relax.”

“Well, I think that’s a good idea. Everyone has been working so hard the past two days,” Ronny said.

“They have indeed,” Eric said. “And they’re happy to do it. They were all very excited when Logan told them what he wanted to do.”

“That’s a fine young man there,” Christina put in.

Eric nodded. “I’m very proud of that young man.”

“And his brother, JoJo,” Ronny said. “He wants to be a youth minister. I was watching him last night as he interacted with those boys and girls from the apartments. He has a way with them. He’s gonna be a good one. I’ve asked him to help me with the sermon this Sunday.”

“Really? That’s interesting, and it’s a wonderful idea,” Eric said. He then turned to Bristol and handed her a card. “This is Joey’s number. Put it in your phone. And that’s my number on the back. Put it in your phone too. So, how are you feeling?”

She shrugged. “I’m in shock, I think. My world has just changed in almost every way. I’m nervous, but still, for some reason, I don’t feel like falling apart.”

Eric nodded. “Good. Though you might have a delayed reaction and feel like it later. How about we have a prayer before I leave? A prayer of protection and to give you peace in your aching heart.”

She smiled sweetly. “That would be great.”

“Ronny?” Eric asked.

“You pray, Eric. Please.”

He nodded, took Bristol's hands in his, bowed his head and prayed.

✝✝✝

Psalm 46:1

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

Chapter Fourteen

December 11th, Wednesday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jeffy had been sitting in the living room, nursing Elijah and talking to God at the same time. She looked up when her father came in the front door. He shook out the umbrella, closed it, and placed it in the holder in the corner behind the door. He smiled at her. "It's pouring out there."

"Hey, Daddy," she said softly.

He smiled at what used to be his youngest child. "Hello, baby girl." He took off his thick sweater and placed it on the banister of the staircase. He got the impression that his sweet daughter needed to talk, so he came in and sat next to her on the sofa and nodded at her son. "I'll take him," he said.

Jeffy handed the one-month-old baby to her father. Eric placed him against his chest and patted his back to burp him.

"So, how are you feelin', sweetheart?" Eric asked. "I mean, postpartum."

Jeffy nodded with a smile. "Feel almost back to normal. Strong. Energized."

"Are you getting enough to eat? Because I think you're looking a little slim."

"I eat like a horse. I just need to get back to working out."

"Are you feeling a little left out, sweetheart, because of the attention I've had to give the little ones?"

"Of course not, Daddy. I understand. But it's nice every once in a while to just sit next to you and talk for a minute."

He nodded. "At this time three years ago, you were in Africa and I couldn't wait for you to be able to come home and sit and talk to me."

She smiled. "I still remember the longing I had to be near you. Gosh, that seems like forever ago."

"Yes, since then, a whole lot has happened," he said.

"Especially this year. Can you believe everything that's happened this year?"

Eric smiled. "Well, it really did happen. There are millions of people witnessing about it. And here I am, alive, sitting here, talking to you."

She nodded. "So much has happened and the year isn't even over."

He looked at his daughter. She was so beautiful. Her turned-up nose. Her big brown eyes. Her long, slightly curly, dark brown hair. People said she looked like a Polynesian princess, and she did. Her face glowed with the light of Jesus, and her heart was filled with compassion. "So, do you have anything to report? Any premonitions that need to be addressed?"

She pressed her lips together. "Maybe a few. Those two little kids that Ricky and Bree have taken a liking to, they have some pretty dark energy surrounding them, but you

don't have to be psychic to see that. Reverend Clark is filled with a bright light, but he feels a lot of guilt. Young Eric's movie is gonna be record-breaking. I think he and Jordan are gonna have some smooth sailing for a while."

"Good," Eric answered.

She sighed. "I feel like Taylor is still in danger."

Eric frowned. "Gabe says he sees her being hit in the face by a man's fist and she is lying in the street, her eyes open. Is that what you see?"

Jeffy shook her head. "No. I see her hurt, her face bleeding, she's crying."

"How about Gabe? Is he around?"

"I'm not sure. But Dad, what Gabe saw, *he* thought she was dead. I see something different. Maybe that's because he saw it and they're taking action and keeping her protected, maybe that has changed the outcome. I mean, God gives us these visions sometimes as a warning, right? So to me, that means we can change the outcome."

Eric nodded. "Yes. We need to pray extensively on this and get some answers."

"Yes, sir. And there's one more thing I see. It's a recent thing. But I'm actually kind of afraid to say it out loud."

"Tell me."

"I think—Bree is sick."

He sighed. "Any other information?"

"Not yet."

"Was this a dream or vision?"

"No. Just a feeling."

He nodded. "Okay. Let's not say anything yet. If you get any more impressions, let me know. And I might ask Rick if she's been to the doctor lately."

She nodded. "You know, Dad, after all the things we've been through, especially when you and Mom were taken, and then, what you and Gabe went through this year, and then Jesus actually healing people using me, I feel like all of those hard things made me so much stronger. I feel almost powerful. I'm reading people so much easier. And remotely. From far away. Especially when it has to do with Gabe."

"Well, you told me that you felt God asked you to take care of Gabe, to keep him healthy and safe."

She nodded. "Yes. When I held the Tanners' new twins that day, God's presence was so strong. That's when Jesus healed Gabe from the bruising on his chest, right there in front of everyone's eyes, and I was told I'm supposed to watch after Gabe. But I wish we knew God's plan so we could make sense of what we're doing and prepare a little better."

"Well, that wouldn't require any faith, would it? I think we're on a 'need-to-know' basis."

Jeffy nodded. "Yeah, you're right. Oh, Daddy," she sighed. "I'm so glad and grateful that I have this opportunity to sit with you and speak with you and learn from you. Four months ago, I was devastated when I thought I'd lost you. Now, I'm so grateful. So grateful."

He smiled at her. "Me too, sweetheart. I love you, June Flower." He took Eli down off his shoulder and looked into his sweet face. "I remember when you were this little.

And now, here you are, grown up, and you and your husband have created this precious new little human. How cool is that?"

"It's so cool, Daddy. And I love Elijah so much, which is making me realize how much you must love us. There is so much ugliness and horror in this world. So much evil. But then I look at this special little boy and realize that the power of good and light is so much stronger than the evil. I pray that we are able to continue to battle it and win."

"Remember, we know who wins in the end."

She smiled.

"Cam is gone on a mission?" Eric asked.

"Yes, sir. He said he'll only be away two days. He'll be back in time for young Eric's premiere."

"Good. We have a very busy weekend. There's the red carpet for Eric, *and* the after-party, Eric's twenty-first birthday on Saturday, and Taylor's Christmas dance at school that she has to perform at, oh, and Saturday morning, Rick, Mark, young Eric, JoJo, and Logan are gonna give a little martial arts demo class at the apartments next to the church. And then Sunday is the big church service that will be livestreamed and put Ronny back in business."

Jeffy nodded with a smile. "It is a busy weekend. But we'll make it through." She wanted to broach a particular subject with her father but wanted to tread softly. "So, the tree decorating party last night was a huge success, huh?"

Eric nodded. "It was indeed. Thank goodness it didn't rain last night like it is right now. But really, I think Ricky was following the Spirit when he made the impromptu invitation. The kids, even the teens, seemed to have a really good time. And Logan thinking of the drums, that too was inspired."

Jeffy nodded. "Have you been on any of the social media sites today?"

He shook his head. "I really don't have time for that nonsense, unless it's Gabe or one of us being affected."

She sighed. "Well, we're being affected."

"What's goin' on?"

"There is this fundamentalist Christian group that has decided to call us out. Actually, more like call YOU out."

Eric pressed his lips together. "Hmm, Christians coming against each other. It's so sad and I'm sure Jesus is not very happy about it. So, what exactly are they accusing me of?"

"They're referring to the tree decorating last night. They say that you are leading Christians astray because Christmas trees are pagan. They are saying that our family is a bunch of false teachers leading the flock astray and that we will burn in hell. They also say that we have earned millions of dollars from our followers and that we do everything for the money."

"Wow. That couldn't be further from the truth," Eric whispered sadly.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't want to burden you with this, but it hurts me deeply for them to sully your name. *Our* name."

Eric looked at his daughter. He nodded his head. "I normally wouldn't care what they say or give any energy or credence to it, but, if it hurts you deeply, I must stand up

and do something about it."

"What do you mean, Daddy, that if it hurts *me* you have to do something about it?"

"I protect my family. I will protect you. I'll take care of it."

"What will you do?"

"First and foremost, I'll pray about it and ask God what lesson He'd like me to teach and how He'd like me to go about teaching that lesson. Whatever He places in my head or in front of me, that's what I'll do. And you, too, sweetheart—you pray too and if you get anything, any dreams or visions, or messages, you let me know."

Jeffy nodded. "Daddy, are you okay?"

"Yes, of course I am."

"Are you upset?"

"No, not at all. There's a reason for everything, sweetie. It's just another battle to face. I have my armor on, do you?"

She smiled. "I think my emotions are a little too involved."

"Well, you are a new mother who is breastfeeding and probably a little tired and I think you have a bit of the postpartum hormones working on you. It's okay, baby girl. Satan is a liar and he loves to stir up trouble. I will snuff this little flame out before it can get big."

Jeffy sighed and smiled. Already, she felt so much better. Her father was so strong and she had every confidence that he would listen to God and God would take care of the little matter in a perfect way. She could tell, because he wasn't angry. He wasn't going off the rails. He simply took it in stride and added it to his list of things to do for God.

Her phone buzzed and she picked it up. She smiled at the pictures she'd just been sent, then turned the phone so her father could see. "Aren't they beautiful?"

Eric studied the picture. It was Bree and Taylor and Jordan at their fitting for their red carpet dresses. Bree wore a sparkly, dark-blue floor-length dress with see-through sleeves. Beside her, Taylor wore a bright fuchsia dress that came to mid-thigh. It hugged her tiny waist and had small cap sleeves. And beside her was Jordan in a stunning red high-low dress with lace bodice and tulle skirt. The front came to just below her knee, while the back touched the floor. All three were breathtaking.

Eric nodded. "That's quite a treat for the eyes." He smiled at Jeffy. "Do you already have your dress?"

She nodded. "Yes. It's just classic black velvet. Floor-length. It's no big deal."

"You, my daughter, are always a big deal."

She smiled. "Aww, thank you, Daddy."

"Daddy!" the children screamed as they came into the living room after eating their lunch. They ran to him and he quickly handed Eli off to his mother so he could spend some quality time with his children.

They climbed up on him, and he hugged them. Shelley followed.

"Hi, hon," she said softly.

"Hey, my Shelley girl," he said. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Yes. Just a little tired. I guess Melody helps more than I realized because I sure miss her."

"Mom, what dress are you wearing on Friday?" Jeffy asked.

She smiled. “The shiny gold one with the flowy full skirt. The last time I wore it was maybe three years ago, so no one will remember.”

“You didn’t want something new?” Eric asked.

She shrugged. “This isn’t about me. It’s about young Eric. I don’t need a new dress.” She smiled. “And Melody is going to wear the white one with lace sleeves.”

Eric smiled. His wife was so young, slim, and beautiful. He was a lucky man to be able to walk beside her.

Jeffy watched her father as he smiled at her mother. The lovelight in his eyes made her feel so happy. “Dad, does all this talk about dresses bore you?”

“Do I seem bored?”

“No. I was just wondering. Most men are not very interested in what dress a woman is wearing.”

“Well, we may not be very interested in the selection process, but we are very interested in the final result,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

“Jeffy,” Shelley said. “Did I ever tell you that one of the first gifts your father ever bought me was a fancy dress?”

“No. Tell me about it.”

“We were at my very first tournament after we met. It was in Daytona. We were going to a fancy restaurant to meet with some potential sponsors and I was nervous about it. Your dad offered to take me shopping for a new dress, I think probably to distract me from my nerves.”

Eric smiled. “It took her all of fifteen minutes to choose the dress because, as you know, she hates to shop.”

“What did it look like?”

Eric sighed. “It was a beige or cream-colored, floor-length dress with sparkles and she looked so beautiful in it. It was backless, and she didn’t wear a bra.”

Shelley’s mouth dropped open. “Of all things, you remember that?”

He shrugged. “I *am* a man.”

Jeffy giggled. “Do you still have it?”

Shelley frowned. “No. It was destroyed by James Crane.”

“When he broke into your house that Christmas?”

Eric nodded. “Let’s not talk about that in front of the kiddos. Hey, boys and girl, guess what? It’s nap time. Who wants to help me read you the new book that Uncle Keegan wrote?”

“I do, I do,” they all chanted except for Nate.

Eric stood, lifting the two kids who’d been on his lap with him. He set them on the floor. “Okay then. Let’s head upstairs. Did everyone tell Mommy ‘thank you’ for the good lunch?”

“Tank you, Mommy,” Angelina said quickly.

“I alweady did,” Nate said.

“Me too, but I said it again,” Angelina defended.

They continued arguing as they all scurried upstairs to hear the story and nap.

Shelley smiled at Jeffy. “Give me my grandbaby.”

Jeffy handed her the baby. “Mom, does it still bother you to talk about what that

man did to you?"

Shelley shook her head. "Not really. Why?"

Jeffy sighed. "Sometimes I dream about his brother pulling me away from you and throwing me into his truck when I was seven. Or about him cutting my arm open." She ran her hand over the thin, white scar. "And that makes me think about Beth. It will be so awesome to see her again."

Shelley nuzzled Eli's soft cheek before she looked up at her daughter and nodded. "I miss her too and I'm gonna hug her so hard. But sweetie, if you're struggling with these things, I think you should tell your dad."

"I'm not really struggling. Just sometimes I dream about it."

"Think of it this way, sweetie pie. The enemy tried to get you again and again and they failed. They didn't win. Here you are, a wife and mother and doctor who is working miracles. Thank God they didn't win."

Jeffy nodded. "Thank God."

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December 11th, 6:00 PM, Wednesday Evening
Palma Home, Huntington Beach, California

"Banoy, there you are," Christina Palma said jovially as she opened the front door for him.

He smiled warmly. "Hello, Mrs. Palma. It's nice to see you. You seem to be in a happy mood."

"Of course I am. I went down to the church this morning and it just looks so wonderful! Isn't it exciting?"

Banny smiled and nodded. "It's really exciting."

"Well, come in, come in. Dinner is almost ready. Bristol is in the kitchen. We're always so glad when you can come by and join us for dinner."

"It smells really good."

"Oh, it's just the normal rice, this time with some seared pork and veggies."

"Always good."

"I'm just going to sit down and rest for a bit, but you can certainly go join Bristol in the kitchen."

Banny turned and headed toward the kitchen. Bristol took a deep breath and put a smile on her face, praying that she would remember everything Mr. Adams told her. Tell him about the new job and how excited she is about it. When he asks if she's spoken to Melody today, tell him she has not because Melody is sick. Ask him why he asks. She drew a deep breath.

"Hello, bebot," he said.

Bristol smiled. "Hey, Banny! Are you hungry?"

"Sure. So, how're you doin' today?"

"I'm great. Guess what? I have some news."

His eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

"I got a new job today."

He nodded. "Really? Why?"

"Grandmaster Kino called me in to the church office and offered to pay for my

schooling to become an accountant, and in exchange, I will work as the church secretary. Isn't it wonderful!"

"You gonna work for free?"

"Oh, no, they're gonna pay me."

He frowned. "So, how does Grandmaster Kino have the authority to hire you to work at the church? I mean, wouldn't that fall under Reverend Clark?"

"Yes, but he's helping Reverend Clark get all set up and organized. Reverend Clark was also at the meeting."

Banny frowned. "So, what will you have to do at the church? What will you be authorized to take care of?"

She smiled sweetly. "Pretty much everything. I'll answer the phones, change the sign out front, pay all the bills, make all the deposits from tithes and donations."

"Really? I mean, that sounds like a lot."

"Well, at first it will be, because everything is such a mess."

"Maybe I can come in and help you get things set up and organized."

"Oh, that's sweet. Why would you do that?"

He shrugged. "You're my girl. I have some free time. I'd be happy to help."

"Awesome!" she said, because she didn't know what else to say.

He put his arms around her and pulled her close. "You haven't even given me a kiss today."

She swallowed hard and had to actually fight back the tears that threatened. She allowed the kiss and then rushed to check the simmering veggies.

He watched her. "So, how's your friend?"

"My friend? Which one?"

"The one at the church last night."

"Melody?"

"Yeah."

Bristol shrugged casually. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, her boyfriend said she was running a fever."

"Oh, yeah, well, I guess she's okay. I mean, I haven't spoken to her today and she didn't come by the church when I was there. I guess I should give her a call and make sure she's okay."

"That guy, he's pretty arrogant."

"You mean Logan?"

"Yeah. He thinks he's something big. He said they wouldn't need me to help look after things and lock up anymore. Don't know where he gets off."

Bristol swallowed. "Well, I guess since they're investing so much money into the place, they have a say in how the place is run. I know Reverend Clark is very happy about their help. I am too. Aren't you?"

"Sure, sure," he mumbled. "So, when do you start your new job?"

"Well, I thought I was gonna have to work out a notice at Eglan, but once I told them I'd be leaving, they wanted me to leave immediately. They don't want anyone trying to sabotage them or steal their clients." She shook her head. "Grandmaster Kino says that is a terrible way to run a business."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, all paranoid and stuff. He says it's negative energy."

"He acts all high and mighty," Banny said bitterly. "I guess he's never had anyone steal from him."

She shrugged, not sure how to answer. "Um, I guess not. I wouldn't know. I don't have that kind of criminal mindset."

He moved close. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Her eyes opened wide as she realized what she'd said. "I, uh, I just mean, it would never occur to me to steal clients or sabotage Eglan before I leave. What a silly thought, don't you think?"

He nodded. He had no choice but to agree.

She smiled nervously. "Well, dinner is ready. Go sit down and I'll bring it to the table."

He nodded and went to sit in the dining room with Mrs. Palma. Bristol blew out a breath of relief. She felt like running to the bathroom and puking up her guts. She had to take several deep breaths. She held her hands out in front of her and had to concentrate to make them stop shaking.

In a car nearby, Agent Brown shook his head as he watched the video screen. He decided to call his boss and fill him in on what he was seeing.

Division Chief Jeff Davis picked up. "Whatcha got, Agent Brown?"

"Sir, this poor girl is about to fall apart. I don't think she'll be able to hold it together for too many days. We're gonna have to work fast."

"Okay. I'll work out the details with Deputy Chief Adams tonight and hopefully have things in place by tomorrow. Has Mrs. Palma spoken to Banny about the safe yet?"

"Not yet. They're just sitting down to dinner."

"Okay. Let me know how that goes."

"Yes, sir. Watch Bristol on the video, sir, she's not gonna last."

"Understood. Keep up the good work, Agent Brown."

"Yes, sir." His eyes returned to monitor the situation. As the Palmas and Banoy Cruz ate dinner, the small talk mostly revolved around doing some Christmas shopping and how much Bristol's life was about to change with going to school next semester and her new job. It took some time, but finally Mrs. Palma worked her way around to what she needed to say.

"Oh, Banny," she said brightly. "I almost forgot to ask you. Do you have any friends you could recruit to help move something for me?"

"What do you need moved? I can probably do it myself."

"Oh, no, not this. It's very heavy. It took my husband and three friends to get it up to the attic all those years ago."

"The attic? What is it?" he asked again.

"It's a safe. It's way in the back corner of the attic."

"A safe? Why would he move a big, heavy safe way up to the attic?"

"To keep it safe, of course," she said with a giggle.

Banoy forced a smile at her little pun. "Then why move it now?"

"Well, I'm getting too old to go up into the attic. I need it where I can get my hands

on it easily and I was hoping to get you to move it into my bedroom or possibly into the den."

"Does it have anything in it?"

"Oh, my, yes. It has some old jewelry, but that's probably not worth too much. But it does have cash. My husband didn't trust banks and he put all of his savings in that safe. I've only been into it a few times in the twenty years or so since he passed. Once, when we bought the new kitchen appliances and once when we got Bristol that computer."

"If you had money stashed away, why didn't you use it to pay for Bristol to go to college?" he asked.

"Well, dear, you see, I promised my Ethan that I would save it to give to Bristol when I passed. I didn't want to spend it and then have nothing for her."

He shook his head. "How much cash do you have in the safe?"

She shrugged. "Well, I haven't counted it, but somewhere around two hundred thousand dollars, I think." She smiled. "Now don't go telling anyone that I have that much cash in my house or someone will rob us for sure."

"I won't say a word," he promised.

Bristol's heart was beating so hard she thought it was gonna give out. She shook her head and took a drink from her water glass.

"How heavy is it? Are you sure I can't move it on my own?"

"Oh, I'm sure. It's almost three hundred pounds. Do you have at least three or four friends who can come help you?"

"I have three friends I know will come help. We'll have to get it done with just the four of us."

"Oh, wonderful. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. Anything to help you, Mrs. Palma. After all you're the grandmother of the girl I just might end up marrying one day."

Bristol gasped.

Banny smiled at her. "Oh, come on now, Bristol. That can't come as too much of a surprise to you."

Bristol smiled and blushed. "No, it's just that you've never actually said the words out loud."

He smiled. "Well, things are changing. Hey, why don't you come for a walk with me after dinner?"

"A walk? It's—raining."

He nodded. "Oh yeah, I forgot. Well, let's you and me make some time soon."

She nodded.

He smiled at her. He was thinking he needed to get her alone. Claim her as his own by consummating their relationship. Then, with her old-fashioned beliefs, there would be no way out for her. She'll have to marry him. Especially if he can get her pregnant. Still, he needed to have a private word with her tonight. "Mrs. Palma, thank you so much for having me over for dinner. It was delicious."

"Oh, you're welcome. Bristol did most of the cooking."

He turned and smiled at her. "That's my girl. Tell ya what. I'll do the dishes for you."

"Nonsense," Bristol said.

"I insist. At least let me help you. Mrs. Palma, you just relax." He stood and started clearing dishes. Once he and Bristol were in the kitchen together he chatted with her at first about the food and then about Christmas. Then, he cornered her. "I want to talk to you about something important," he said softly to Bristol.

She looked at him. "Okay."

"What's wrong? You seem different."

"Different?"

"Nervous or something."

She put a hand to her head. "I don't know. Maybe I'm coming down with whatever Melody has."

"And you haven't spoken to her all day?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, it's like, she said something weird to me yesterday, when I found her in the chapel."

Bristol clenched her fists. "Wh-what did she say?"

"So, like, I saw her asleep on the bench in the chapel. I spoke to her but she didn't wake up so I touched her leg. She like, jerked and sat up all scared and stuff. I told her I didn't mean to scare her. I was just waking her up to tell her we were gonna be locking up the church. And she acted all weird, like acting like I was coming on to her. It was kind of insulting, ya know? And I guess I said something rude to her."

"What did you say?"

"I told her, no offense, but compared to you she just wasn't my type of girl and she thought way too much about herself to think I was making a pass at her. I mean, why would I do that when I have you, right?"

Bristol smiled and nodded.

"So, like, I just wanted to tell you about it in case she comes running to you to tell you I came on to her, because I would never do that."

Bristol nodded. "I believe you."

He took her hand, pressed her against the refrigerator and kissed her.

Agent Brown watched from his car, ready to run inside the house if necessary. Bristol had a panic button concealed in her pocket, and Brown would enter immediately if Banny ignored a refusal, blocked an exit, or attempted to take her anywhere alone. His heart hurt for the young girl trying to hold it together. They were gonna have to work very fast. She couldn't hold out much longer.

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December 11th, Wednesday Evening

Tanner Home → Kino Estate

Eric glanced at his phone before he answered it. "Well, hello there, Gabriel Tanner, young sir."

"Hey, Grandmaster Kino," Gabe said respectfully. "I hope you're doing well, sir."

"I am. Why? Did you have another vision?"

"Oh, uh, no, sir. Um, so, sir, but there's some stuff goin' on, like, on social media."

"Are you talking about the Fundamentalist Christian group that says I am a false

teacher?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please don't let that kind of stuff bother you, Gabe. The enemy is not going to simply allow us to go unhindered."

"Right, sir, but like, this enemy is coming from within. I know Jesus must hate to see people who say they believe in Him come against one another."

"You are correct about that," Grandmaster Kino said softly.

"So, sir, I would like to ask you to help me, or I guess, for *me* to help *you* fight this battle. Because, like, what affects your family affects me."

"Okay. It sounds like you have some sort of battle plan."

"Well, yes, sir. I didn't really put it together. Isla did. She is friends with Cedric May. Do you know who he is?"

"I believe he's a famous podcaster, right?"

"Yes, sir, he has one of the biggest podcasts in the world. He has millions of viewers. So, Isla was simply having a conversation with him and he asked her about the buzz about you and Christmas, and she told him that the Fundamentalist group is the one speaking lies. She told him she was friends with the family and that you guys have never made ANY money whatsoever off of speaking about our Christian beliefs, and he asked her what your thoughts are on the Christmas tree thing and she suggested that he ask you himself. He thought that would be a wonderful idea and wanted her to see if you would consider coming on his podcast and allow him to interview you."

"So, why did she call you instead of calling me herself?"

"Well, she was a little nervous about approaching you and wanted to get advice from me as to how to do that, and I told her I would simply call you myself and see if you were interested, and put you in touch with each other. I would either tell her you said it was okay to give you a call, or even better, tell her to have Cedric May give you a call."

"Do you listen to his podcast?" Eric asked.

"I have a few times. I don't have a lot of time, but the few times I've heard it, he seems to have integrity and manners and is fair with his guests."

"Well, like I said, I've heard of Cedric May, but I've never listened to a podcast. I'm usually too busy," Eric said. "But I imagine he likes to interview people over highly controversial subjects."

"Yes, sir, he does. He talks about things a lot of people are uncomfortable discussing. But I didn't think that would be any problem for you."

"No, you're right, it won't be."

"Um, so, that sounds like a 'yes,'" Gabe said.

"Well, young sir, Jeffy and I spoke about this controversy earlier today. She is distraught over it and I told her I would do something to push back. This podcast may be just what God had in mind. Give me time to pray on this and I'll get back to Isla. Shoot me her phone number, or I can just get it from Bree."

"I'll send it to you."

"Where is the podcast held?"

"Phoenix, Arizona."

"That's doable. I'll get back to you soon, Gabe."

"Looking forward to it, sir. Thanks."

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December 12th, Thursday Afternoon

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Bristol Palma wiped at her tears. Ronny offered her a box of tissues. She pulled out three of them. "Thank you," she whispered.

"It's all going to work out, young lady," Ronny said. "Don't be afraid. God is watching over you."

She gave a soft smile. "Ya know, everyone always says that, but really, how do you know?"

"Well, let's just think about it a moment. I prayed very hard for God to show me how I can keep this church going. He put it in my mind very clearly that we need young people. Invite the young people. The words were loud. Invite the young people. So, that's what I asked you all to do. I stood at the pulpit and asked you to invite all the young people you could invite. And what happened?"

She shrugged.

"It was through you, Bristol, that miracles began to happen. Through YOU. Do you not think that God knew that would happen?"

Bristol's look of confusion prompted Ronny to continue all the way. "Bristol, God knew that YOU would invite Melody. He knew that Melody would invite Logan and He knew that Logan would get his very powerful family involved. God knows the Kino and Adams families, yes, but He also knows YOU. He was and IS aware of you, Bristol. He sees you. You are important to Him. You are a part of the miracle that is taking place. God even prompted Grandmaster Kino to see you as the answer to helping me run this church. Do you think God would let anything happen to you? He's brought all these people here, He would not abandon you now. The enemy has been right next to you these past six months. God has shone a light on him so that we can see him for what he is. He's not going to let him hurt you. You are protected."

Bristol looked up into the kind, old eyes of her pastor and then turned and looked into the warm, loving eyes of Grandmaster Kino.

Eric smiled and nodded at her. "He's absolutely right, Bristol. You are protected. And so is your grandmother. We are not going to let anything happen to either of you, nor to any other member of this congregation. Outside this room right now is an agent who is dedicated to your safety. With your grandmother right now is another agent, pretending to be prepping the interior of your home to be painted. These agents are very skilled and they will not let anything happen to you. And just look at what you've already done here," Eric continued as they looked around the office. "It's like night and day what you've already accomplished in one morning."

She sniffed and smiled through her tears. "Well, I told you it wouldn't take much to get everything organized and set up. Now, Reverend Clark just needs to tell me what he needs to accomplish each day and I can get us down to a routine where I won't be underfoot when he wants to be here in the office."

Eric smiled. "Well, Ronny won't need to be here in this office anymore. This office is yours to run however you see fit. We are turning the classroom next door into a very

nice space for Ronny to come, study, pray, read, relax, and just pastor his flock."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Bristol said.

Eric nodded.

"They've just thought of everything, haven't they?" Ronny asked. "And they have a study set up in my home with internet, a computer, and church phone lines, so that I can accomplish things over there too."

Bristol smiled. "And so now, all we have to do is catch Banny and his friends."

"And that IS going to happen, Bristol," Eric said. "Trust me. More importantly, trust God. He's got this. He's got you."

They all looked up at the knock on the door. Logan poked his head in. "Hey, everyone! Just wanted to say that I just got here and the piano and organ are gonna be arriving any minute. And I have some music-major friends with me I brought from school and we're gonna do a little sound check soon to make sure everything is ready for Sunday."

"Well, now, this is exciting," Ronny said.

Logan smiled. "Yes, it is. So, um, where is everybody?"

Eric smiled. *"Melody* and your grandmother and the kids are downstairs working on either cleaning, painting and decorating classrooms or finishing touches on the kitchen and community room, with everyone else."

"Cool. So, who is 'everyone else'?"

"Mrs. Brooks, your mom and the two Aunt Bs and their kiddos, Jeff Davis, and Justin and Lori. And then up here, just down the hall, are Jeffy and Eli, and Mickey and Scarlett. They are looking into turning a room into a nursery-type area with monitors that receive a feed from the chapel, so that new mothers can nurse their babies and still watch the sermon."

"Awesome! Well, if you guys get a chance, come into the chapel and meet my friends. They've been working hard to make this Sunday a spectacle."

"We'll be out in just a moment."

Logan grinned. "Okay, thanks!"

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December 12th, 5:40 PM EST, Thursday

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily peeked into her parents' bedroom at the sound of her brother's voice. Gabe was having a conversation with two tiny babies. He lay on his stomach on the bed with the babies wrapped in blankets in front of him. She stood there listening.

"So, that means today you are two weeks and three days old. Whaddya think so far? Earth life is a trip, huh? But don't worry, I promise you that your mom and dad and your sisters are gonna take really good care of you. I wanna do that too, but I'm gonna have to leave for a while, in about three weeks. I'm really gonna miss you, but I got stuff I have to do. But I'll come back as often as I can to see you, because you two, you are special. I feel your spirits so strong."

He offered an index finger to the hand of each infant and they immediately closed their tiny fists around his fingers.

"See that? We have a connection, don't we? And you have a connection to God

right now that is so strong." He stopped when the babies seemed to squeeze his fingers harder. His eyes moistened. "I wish that I could marry Taylor and bring her back here to live and we could be near you every day. And Taylor and I could have babies and you'll be their aunt and uncle. Hmm, I hadn't even thought about that. You two will be a very young aunt and uncle to someone, probably lots of someones, since your older sisters are probably gonna get married and have babies soon. And that means that I'll be an uncle too. Wow. That's gonna be so cool. Anyway, just promise me, my little precious Gentian and Issa, that you'll stay close to God. If you do that, I won't have to worry about you at all."

"Issa?" Lily said from the doorway.

Gabe turned to look at his sister with a smile. "It just slipped out. It's not bad, as nicknames go. But I'll probably come up with a better one."

"Hmm, Isaiah, Issa, yeah, it's not bad. It's kinda cute. But I think you can do better." Lily came in and sat on the side of the bed. "Ya know, little brother, I feel about you the way you feel about them. I mean, YOU have a connection to God that is so strong and as long as you stay close to God, I won't worry about you a bit. But I do wish you didn't have to leave, because I'm gonna miss you and I, too, wish you and Taylor would move here and have babies and I'll be their favorite aunt."

Gabe grinned. "Why will *you* be their favorite aunt?"

She shrugged. "The other aunts will be married and have their own lives but I'll have plenty of time for my nieces and nephews. Plus, I cook. Hmm, baking cookies with Aunt Lily, doesn't that sound awesome?"

Gabe frowned. "Yes, baking cookies with Aunt Lily sounds great, but Aunt Lily is gonna be busy baking cookies for her own family."

She sighed. "Am I?"

Gabe rose from the bed, picked up Gentian, kissed her cheek and placed her carefully in her bassinet. "I know I don't have to tell you that God's timing is perfect," he said, raising his eyebrows at Lily.

She frowned and shrugged. "Well, I'm getting the feeling that maybe I'll walk a different path than everyone else in my family."

Gabe scooped up Isaiah and nuzzled his cheek and placed him in his own bassinet and turned to Lily. "Of course you will. You'll walk a different path because you have your own path to walk. We all do. And each of our paths is different. You're a chef, but that's not all you are. Like, I'm a warrior, but that's not all I am. I'm already working with kids, ministering, actually, and I'm gonna be learning about a lot of other things. Should I put myself into a box and only do one thing? No. And neither should you. Lily, you are a catch. You have to know that. Look, I know you're my sister and all, but I know how guys see you. A hot blonde who can cook. I just can't see that you will go through this life alone, or just as somebody's aunt. So, whatever funk you're in, get out of it. I don't like it one bit. You're listening to the enemy. He's a liar. Don't get discouraged. Please, Lily."

She sighed as she looked up into the impassioned face of her not-so-little brother, then smiled and touched the bit of hair that fell onto his forehead. "You are so cute when you get all intense."

He rolled his eyes.

"I just love you so much, Gabriel. I'm sure gonna miss you."

He sighed. "Me too. I mean, I'm gonna miss you."

She giggled. "So, come on already. I was sent up here to tell you that dinner is ready."

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December 12th, 7:00 PM PST, Thursday Evening

Keith Home, Huntington Beach, California

Melody and Logan sat in the enclosed sunroom in the back part of the Keiths' house. They wanted some alone time. Logan had been invited to dinner, which he thoroughly enjoyed, and now he wanted to spend a little time with his girl before he headed home.

"Are you tired?" Melody asked.

"A little. It's been a busy day. I had back-to-back classes this morning. Then the piano and organ arrived at the church and you know everything after that."

"Yes, and Logan, the sound check slash concert was a-maz-ing. Sunday is gonna be so good."

He nodded. "I'm excited about it."

"I can tell you are. I can tell you are in your element. I love how enthusiastic you are about music."

He sighed. "It's just that I can feel it, ya know? I can feel it so deep in my heart and when I feel it like that, it's as if I'm standing in the presence of Jesus." He moved his hand out in front of him. "It's like He's right here. Right in front of me. Smiling. Listening. And it seems like everyone who is listening or singing together at that moment, it's like they're all in His presence and I know He's touching them, touching their hearts, letting them know that He is real. He's real, Mel. He's shown Himself so many times. I want to share this feeling with the world. I want to share it with my family. I want a wife and children to share it with. I want them to feel it every bit as strongly as I do."

"When you're singing, Logan, or playing, I feel it. I guess that's why I can't get enough of you singing and why I am always asking you to sing to me."

"And that's another thing," Logan said. "When I'm singing and I look into your eyes, the love that I feel, the emotion that wells up, I could drown in that."

She smiled and leaned against his shoulder. "So tell me, when did you first realize that you liked to sing? Like, when you were little, did you sing a lot?"

He shook his head. "No. When I was little there was nothing to sing about. Life was a nightmare, though I have to say, my mother tried her very best to shield me. When my bio-father wasn't around, she played with me and spent time with me and made me laugh. Though sometimes it was hard to laugh when I could see the bruises on her arms, or the swollen eyes, or a cut on her lip." He looked up. "Whoa, that took a dive, didn't it? Um, when did I start singing? Well, after my mom and dad got married..."

"Do you mean your real dad?"

"I mean the man I knew as Master Mark."

"That's who I'm talking about. He's your REAL dad."

Logan smiled. “Yeah, you’re right. So, after they got married, I was spending a lot of time with my brothers. They asked me about the music I listened to. I told them just the regular stuff. They asked me if I really liked it and I said, ‘I like the music but not the words,’ because, ya know, most secular songs nowadays have some pretty ugly stuff in them and if it’s not ugly stuff about deviant sex stuff or violence, then it’s shallow or superficial. So, they turned me on to Christian music. It changed my life. I started learning and studying all Christian music, from the very old composers to hymns, to Gospel, and finally to contemporary Christian music. I started having my own feelings and opinions as I started learning about Jesus—what it means to know Him. What it feels like when He changes you.”

“So, before your mom and dad got together, you weren’t like, religious?”

He shook his head. “No. I didn’t really know anything about God. I did know that there was something beyond our earthly lives because of an experience my brothers and I had up in the canyon one Saturday.”

“What happened?”

“Well, we were up in the canyon riding bikes.”

“How old were you?”

“I was eleven. We went up with young Eric’s family. The three of us went up to the edge of a cliff and young Eric and JoJo talked about how they do these prayer/meditation things where they talk to God. They said they’d never tell anyone else about it, but they felt I was one of them. So, young Eric led us in this prayer and we sat quietly listening, and it was like, we could see or hear or maybe feel the presence of family members who’d passed. Young Eric saw his great-grandfather, Grandmaster Kino’s dad, and he saw his grandmother too, whom he’d never met, who was Uncle Ricky’s mom.”

“Oh wow!”

“Right? And JoJo saw his own mother, who died right after he was born. And I saw my grandparents. My mom’s parents, who died in a car accident when I was a baby. The weird thing is, even though I’d never met them, I knew who they were. I mean, I guess it was because I’d seen pictures of them, but they were older in the pictures and yet, I saw them as a young couple.”

“So, do you think you really saw members of your family?”

“I’m not sure. Some people say it’s not possible. It wasn’t like ghosts. You know, spooky or dark. Right before Granddad saw the angel in that cave, a member of his family showed up and told him to reach out to God. Granddad said he was told that we have eternal family members. So, anyway, the three of us brothers, we felt so close to God at that time. We still always talked about that feeling and how much we wanted to feel that again.”

“And did you?”

“Well, lots of times now. But it took a while and it was the music that did it for me. Remember I said that I didn’t like the words to the songs. So young Eric dared me to write my own words to the songs. And I found I had a knack for it. Then JoJo challenged me to stop writing new words for existing music and write new music to go with the words. The very first time I played a song I’d written for the guys, they went crazy. They cried. They said I had to pursue this course. And I felt it too. They were touched by the

words and music and so was I. Finally, I felt that feeling again like we'd felt at the canyon. We got together and made an album to sell, all proceeds to go to Aunt Jeffy's foundation. We couldn't produce it fast enough. We made thousands of dollars in a week. It was fun—lots of fun—and that made me know that I would pursue this course in my life."

"So, young Eric and JoJo can sing too?"

"Well, actually, they do sing and they sing well. And young Eric can play the guitar. And JoJo can tear it up on the drums, when he has two hands."

Melody sighed. "This is a beautiful story. I guess I understand why you guys are so close."

Logan smiled. "What keeps us close is God. Because they know I will always pursue my relationship with Jesus, and I know they will too, so we can help each other, support each other and even call each other out if we have to."

Melody smiled. "Your relationship with them, it's so special."

"It is, but my relationship with you is even more special. So, tell me, are you feeling all better? No more sickness?"

"Yes, all better. I don't know what was wrong with me Tuesday night. By the next morning I was fine and today, no problems at all. It's as if I was never sick."

"Maybe just some twelve-hour bug."

"Maybe. Miss Jeffy says that I'm fine. So, that's good enough for me. And you never got sick, right?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I feel great." He pulled her off the sofa and into his lap and kissed her. When he pulled away he looked into her eyes and shook his head. "I'm so blessed to have you in my life."

She smiled. "Actually, it's the reverse. I'm blessed. You are so amazing. There's nothing special about me."

"Yeah, not too much, other than you are the most beautiful, the kindest, the sweetest girl I've ever known. You love God. You understand me. You are emotionally intelligent, good with children, wise, hard-working. I can't look at you without my heart skipping a beat. Melody, I realize we don't know each other completely. I wanna know everything about you: what you like, what you don't like, what you get excited about. What are your dreams and desires? What's your favorite color? Do you like to read? Do you like sports? Do you wanna get married and have a dozen children?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Was that a proposal?"

He smiled. "No. When I propose you won't have to ask. It wouldn't be fair to propose to you right now, before you've seen me at my worst. But Melody, I mean, so far, so good."

She giggled. "How romantic."

He laughed and shrugged. "Just the fact that I didn't just piss you off is a really good sign."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean another girl could be offended that I mentioned marriage and then said no, that's not a proposal."

"Well, I don't get offended very easily."

"I realize that. It's another thing I really love about you."

"Seriously, though, Logan. Do you really think that I would fit into your lifestyle?"

"What's my lifestyle? A college student? A wannabe singer? A minister?"

"A celebrity. An amazing artist."

"A celeb? Not me."

"I know you say that, but when you cut your album it's gonna go viral. You're going to be very famous. And I'm just a plain girl. Only a high school graduate. I'm actually, 'the help,' if ya know what I mean."

His face darkened. "The help? Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm not kidding. That's actually what I am. I work for your grandparents."

"Mel, you are not the help. You are a member of the family. My grandparents trust you to help them with the most precious things they have, their children. They interviewed a million people. They were about to give up, but when they finally met you at that restaurant, God spoke to them and told them, this girl—she's the one. She's special. She's a part of the family. To me, that means you passed all the requirements, because the girl I fall in love with should be able to intelligently and lovingly take care of those children. I'm in love with you, Mel. So in love with you. And you fit in just fine. You are perfect for me."

"So far."

"Okay. So far. We'll take it slow. Like I said. You haven't seen me at my worst." He looked at her closely. "But wait, I think I see a flaw on you right now."

"What?"

He smiled and rubbed his thumb over her cheek. "You have some paint right here on your cheek."

"Oh," she said as she reached up to her cheek.

"I'll get it," he said as he used his thumbnail to scrape the tiny dot of paint away. "There. Flaw's gone." He kissed her again. "So, are you excited to walk the red carpet tomorrow?"

"Hmm, maybe more like nervous. It's the world's first glance of you since you've become a big social media phenom."

"Yep, I guess that's right. And I'll be proud to have you on my arm."

"What if people say, who is that plain girl he's with?"

He shook his head. "Where did you get the idea that you're plain?"

She shrugged and sighed.

"What color is your dress?"

"Miss Shelley and I decided on a white one. It's classic and modest."

"My grandmother has good taste. Where did you two go to buy your dresses?"

She giggled. "We went to her closet."

"Oh. When you told me Grandma helped you I thought you went shopping."

"Well, I didn't want to spend the money and Miss Shelley tried to get me to let her buy me a new dress, but when we were going through her closet to see what kind of dresses I like, we came upon the white one. It fits me perfectly. It's really pretty. So, I thought, why buy a dress when I can wear this perfectly good one?"

He sighed. "Okay, but from now on, I'll do better."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll make sure you have a new dress for every event."

"I don't mind hand-me-downs."

"And I love that about you, but Mel, I can buy you a dress. Any dress. Any price. And Grandma could buy the whole store. So, please, don't go without. And ya know what? I'm pretty surprised that Jordan, Aunt Bree and Taylor didn't invite you to go with them to get a dress from the designers."

"They did. I told them I already had one."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. I should've been more thoughtful." He hit the side of his head. "Stupid."

"Logan, stop. It's all good. Don't ruin this exciting time for your brother. I'm fine. I'm good. And when you see me in the dress, you'll see why I didn't want to go shopping."

He drew a deep breath. "Okay. But from here on out, I promise to be a lot more attentive and considerate of your needs."

"Logan Adams, you are not responsible for my shopping needs. At least not yet," she said with a grin.

He chuckled. They sat silently for a few minutes, Logan still cuddling her on his lap. It was Logan who finally broke the silence.

"So, I saw you talking to Bristol today. How did that go?"

Melody sighed. "I feel so bad for her, Logan. She's terrified. Banny went over to her house for dinner yesterday and she had to pretend that she didn't know he had plans to murder her. He kissed her a few times and she said she almost threw up."

"I feel for her. I heard Dad and Uncle Joey talking and they're speeding everything up because Agent Brown says she's barely holding it together."

"Good. I mean, good that they're speeding it up. She told me that Banny asked her if she'd talked to me about anything and then went on to tell her that when he woke me up in the chapel on Tuesday that I got the wrong impression and acted all crazy like he was coming on to me but he was completely innocent."

Logan shook his head. "I'm surprised he's not smart enough to know that we put security cameras all over that church."

"Yeah, but I guess it's a good thing he doesn't know so that we can gather evidence on him. Anyway, today Agent Brown told Bristol that Banny will ask her again if she's spoken to me and she's supposed to say 'yes' and that I told her that he tried to come on to me and that she told me that I was misinterpreting the whole thing. That way he'll think she's on his side."

Logan nodded. "Don't worry, Melody, Agent Brown won't let anything happen to Bristol or Christina."

Melody smiled. "Isn't it just so sweet that Mrs. Palma told you to call her by her first name?"

Logan smiled and shrugged. "Yeah. She likes me."

"Who doesn't?" Melody said as she put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You're such a likable guy."

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Luke 12:2-3
"There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed,
or hidden that will not be made known.
What you have said in the dark will be
heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered
in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs."

Chapter Fifteen

December 12th, 7:00 PM, Thursday Evening
Palma Home, Huntington Beach, California

Bristol drew a deep breath and answered the door. She smiled. “Hey, guys, come on in.”

Four young men entered the home. Bristol nodded politely at them all. Christina Palma came out of the first-floor bedroom, her cane thumping on the hardwood floors. “Well, hello there, Banny. I see you’ve brought your friends. I can’t thank you enough that you would all come and help an old lady.”

“No problem, Mrs. Palma,” Banny said. “We’re happy to help.”

“Wonderful. So, introduce me,” she said sweetly.

“Uh, well, this is Deuce Perry.”

“Deuce? Goodness, what a different name! How lovely. Is it a nickname or your real name?”

Agent Brown smiled as he watched the action from his car. This lady was good. Street smart. They needed to hire her to come work at Ameritech.

“No, ma’am, my real name is Albert. I’ve always hated my name, but my mother named me after her father.”

“Oh, I see. I guess Albert is a bit old-fashioned for young men these days. And how about you?” she asked, looking at a boy with red hair.

He smiled. “Well, they call me ‘Red.’”

Christina laughed merrily. “Oh my, and I bet that’s not your real name either.”

“No, ma’am. My real name is Collin.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely name. I used to know a Collin. Collin Simpson. That’s not your last name, is it?”

He smiled patiently at the old woman. “No, my last name is Thornton.”

She frowned. “Hmm, I don’t know any Thorntons.” She looked at the other boy and smiled. “And you, young man. What’s your name?”

He looked at her impatiently. “I’m Dax Williams.”

“Oh, my, Dax. That is a hip name, isn’t it? Is it short for something?”

“No. Just Dax. I can’t stay long, so I hear you have something heavy you need us to move for you.”

“Oh, yes, I do. And I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it. As a matter of fact, I’ve baked you all some cookies as a ‘thank you.’”

“Thanks, Mrs. Palma, you didn’t have to do that. We’re just happy to help,” Banny said. “So, the safe is up in the attic?”

“Yes, dear. Bristol can show you much easier than me. Bristol, would you take them up to the attic? You know where it is.”

"Sure," she said. "Follow me." She led them up to the attic. She wasn't quite as afraid today as she'd been yesterday. It was the second time she'd been up to the attic today. The first time was with two Ameritech agents who wanted to make sure everything was set and ready. When Ameritech and the police had developed the plan to have Banny call his friends after Christina told them she had an old safe in the attic that would require several people to help move, they'd decided it was a perfect setup. These thieves would not be able to resist getting in on the robbery of this safe. Of course, it didn't have as much money in it as Christina told Banny. As a matter of fact, it didn't have any money in it on Wednesday. But it now had a stash of inventoried cash. Soon, Banny, either alone or with his accomplices, would rob this safe.

They were only up in the attic about five minutes when one of the young men, the one called Red, came running back down and opened the front door.

"Leaving already?" Christina asked, making him stop at the door.

"No, I uh, just gotta get an appliance dolly out of my car. It's heavier than I thought," he explained.

"Oh, yes, dear, it's very heavy. What's an appliance dolly?"

"It's a heavy-duty hand truck," he said impatiently.

"Oh yes, a hand truck would be excellent," she said loudly.

Outside, Agent Brown, who'd been placing the court-authorized trackers on the vehicles, quickly slipped behind the neighbors' fence.

Red came back inside with the hand truck a minute later and headed back up the stairs to the second floor and then up the smaller set of stairs to the attic.

Bristol came down then. "I had to get out of their way," she explained.

A few minutes later the guys all came bumping down the stairs, slowly, one step at a time.

"I've decided to put it in my bedroom, so follow me," Christina said as she hurried into her bedroom in the back of the first floor of the old house. She watched as they carefully set the safe in the corner of her bedroom.

"Dear, it really is dusty," she complained. "I guess I'll need to clean it up, maybe even paint it a pretty color."

"And you know how to open it, right?" Banny asked.

"Oh, yes, dear. I believe I have the combination somewhere around here. It's been a while since I've opened it though. I'll dig through my papers in my old file and find the combination, and Banny, if I can't open it, maybe I can get you to come and help me?"

"That would be fine. Just let me know," he said.

"You don't wanna try right now?" Dax asked.

"Oh, it might take me a few days to find the combination. But you boys have been so sweet to help out an old lady. Will you stay and have some cookies?"

"Well, I really have to go," Dax said.

"Oh dear, then please let me put some cookies in a bag for you all. Please. It will just take a minute."

They waited patiently, graciously accepted the bags of cookies and three of them took their leave. Banny stayed behind. He took Bristol's hand.

"Whaddya say you and I snuggle up on the couch and watch a movie?"

Bristol turned her head away and pretended to sneeze. “Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry. I’ve been sneezing all day.”

“Bless you, dear,” Christina said. “I hope you’re not getting sick with what your friend Melody had. Are you running a fever yet?” Christina asked.

“I’m not sure,” Bristol answered.

“Oh my, you are warm,” her grandmother said.

Bristol sniffed loudly and pretended to sneeze again.

Banny frowned and backed away. “Well, I guess you need to go to bed and take care of that.”

Bristol nodded. “Probably.”

“So, uh, your friend, is she still sick?”

Bristol swallowed, not sure what to say.

“She was at the church today, doing some work,” Christina said. “But she really should stay home because now she’s getting other people sick.” Christina smiled. “Well, I’m gonna go in the kitchen and make you some nice tea, Bristol. Would you like some, Banoy?”

He sighed. “No, thank you. I guess I’ll be heading home.” He waited for Mrs. Palma to go into the kitchen. “So, get well, Bristol. We need to spend some time together. I’m missing you.”

She nodded.

“By the way, did your friend ever say anything to you about what we talked about yesterday?”

Bristol nodded. “Yeah, she told me she thought you came on to her and I assured her that she had completely misread the situation. I explained to her that you and I were very close and had been together a long time and maybe she was so sick that she was slightly delusional.”

Banny smiled. “Good girl.” He kissed his fingers and pressed them against her cheek and took his leave.

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December 13th, Friday, Early Evening

Regent Theater at West End Village, Los Angeles, California

“The much-anticipated appearance of the stars of *The Resurrection of Elijah Beck* will be happening very soon!” the celebrity interviewer chirped for her unseen audience. “Still, we have a treat coming down the red carpet right now. I believe I see the grandparents of Eric Kino. Grandmaster Eric Kino and his beautiful wife, Shelley Adams Kino.”

The Kino family members were entering intermittently between other invited celebrities and cast and crew members. The elder Kinos were the first of young Eric’s family to do so. They approached and smiled at the interviewer. “Hello, Grandmaster Kino and Shelley Kino! Such a pleasure to see you.”

“You as well, Gena,” Eric replied kindly.

“So, how excited are you to see your grandson’s first movie?”

“We are delighted and grateful for the opportunity to enjoy Eric’s endeavors,” Eric said.

"Shelley, you look wonderful. Why do you never age?"

Shelley laughed. "Oh, I do. But following my daughter's protocols really helps me to stay young and strong."

"What a joy to have her, I'm sure. As a matter of fact, I see her coming down the carpet now."

"We'll move on and let you speak to her."

"So nice to see you. Enjoy your evening," Gena said.

"That was easy and quick," Shelley whispered as they moved on.

"Dr. Kino! Dr. Kino!" someone called from the other side of the blockade on the street.

Jeffy lifted her arm and waved. Gena looked her over as she approached. She looked like a little island girl. Long, dark hair. Her gorgeous body was tight, athletic, and strong. She wore a simple black velvet gown, with a slit up to mid-thigh. It had one-inch straps at the shoulders. The neckline plunged deep but had a lace insert to keep her modest. She looked no older than sixteen, but Gena knew she was in her late twenties and had recently given birth, though one would never have guessed it. She was on the arm of her handsome, heartthrob husband, who was wearing the simple black tuxedo very well.

Meanwhile, Eric and Shelley smiled as they approached another interviewer.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kino, hello," Isla August said.

Shelley grinned. "Isla. How nice to see *you*!"

"Isn't this just the bomb!" Isla said.

"Is this Bree's doing?" Shelley asked.

"Yes. Can you believe it? She told the network that I had more followers than anyone and that if I interviewed on the red carpet, it would guarantee twenty million views. So, here I am!"

"Do you have your questions all ready?" Shelley asked.

"Of course!"

"Do you have one for us?"

"Yes, ma'am. But first, let me just say that you look absolutely stunning in that beautiful gold gown."

"Yes, she does, doesn't she?" Eric said.

"So, give me an inside scoop. Does young Eric have plans to make another movie soon?"

Eric nodded at the question. "Well done. Yes, if the storyline is in agreement with his principles."

"What was his favorite part of making this movie?"

Shelley answered quickly. "Well, that's a question to ask him, but he did tell us that he really enjoyed working with his father on this. You know Ricky did the fight choreography. He also told me that he loved working with the other actors and the director had a good eye, and that bringing the story to life was very rewarding."

"Thank you so much, Kinos."

"You're welcome, Isla. Have a good night."

They proceeded to make their way into the theater.

When Logan and Melody finally made their way down the red carpet, there were

screams from the crowd on the street. “Logan! Logan Adams, we love you!”

He smiled and waved. Melody gripped his arm tighter. “I feel so out of place,” she said softly.

“Well, you’re not out of place. You’re right where you belong. By my side. And Mel, that dress, I mean, wow. You look amazing.”

“You’ve already said that about ten times.”

He shrugged. “Every time I look at you I’m overwhelmed.” He looked down at her. The white dress was skin-tight. It had long, see-through lace sleeves. The front had a row of tiny pearl buttons, and the first five were left open. There was a slit in the dress to mid-thigh, showing off one gorgeous, shapely, tanned leg. “You all in white, you almost look like my bride.”

She giggled. “Oh no. When I get married it’s gonna be a big, fluffy, full skirt with petticoats and all.”

He smiled. “I can picture it.”

“Logan! Logan, when is your album coming out? Logan, I love your music!”

Logan waved again. As he and Melody neared the first interviewer they heard the crowd start chanting. “JoJo— JoJo— JoJo...” Logan and Melody both smiled, because they knew that meant the much-beloved USC quarterback had entered the red carpet.

After several other cast members came by, including the young co-star whom young Eric was sure would be a breakout star, two of the Kino Challenge Champions finally came down the red carpet as a foursome. Mark and Bella Adams and Joey and Breez Adams, all four looking stunning. A few minutes after them there was a huge buzz as a beautiful, smiling girl with long dark hair, wearing a bright pink dress came down the carpet alone. However, being alone didn’t seem to affect Taylor at all. The crowd cheered and chanted her name, and she jumped up and down in her heels, waving and laughing and smiling. “Hey, everyone,” she yelled back. “I love you too!”

Right behind her were a couple of people causing a big buzz, Taylor’s parents, Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams Kino. Bree was stunning as usual. Tonight she wore a very sparkly, midnight-blue evening gown and her husband wore a matching tuxedo. The Kino women always kept their clothing classy and modest, but that didn’t mean that they didn’t look beautiful and very sexy in their evening dresses. As a matter of fact, Breanna Adams had recently been in a large magazine spread as the most elegant actress.

As they neared the first interviewer, Bree drew a deep breath and put her hand to her head.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Ricky asked. He stopped walking and stood face to face with his wife and put his hand on her cheek.

She looked up into his dark eyes and shook her head. “Does it feel hot to you?”

“Hot? No. Not really.” He put the back of his hand on her forehead. “Are you getting sick?”

“I don’t know. I suddenly felt so hot, and a little dizzy.”

“You wanna skip the red carpet?”

She sighed and shook her head. “No, because it will be all over the news tomorrow that the parents of Eric Kino III skipped out.”

“They would understand if you’re ill.”

She shook her head. “Let’s just tough it out.”

He nodded. “Okay, babe, but I got you. Say the word and I’ll scoop you up and carry you out.”

She giggled. “Uh, no thanks.”

“And here they are, the much-anticipated mother and father of our star! Don’t you two look scrumptious,” Gena said.

“Almost as scrumptious as you,” Ricky returned quickly, making the woman giggle.

Bree smiled at her “player” husband.

After Gena asked the always important questions about dress designers, she asked them how they felt about Eric’s choice to go into acting.

Bree nodded. “Ricky had a long talk with him to make sure Eric was making the choice for the right reasons. Other than that, we support him in any endeavor.”

Gena pushed the mic toward Ricky. “And what were the right reasons?”

Ricky smiled. “I think it would be easier to say what the *wrong* reasons would have been: which are money and fame. Those things simply cannot be your motivation. My son, however, was interested in bringing a good message to the world, and in the creative process of bringing that message.”

“As always, Kinos, you are inspirational. So, Ricky, how was it doing the fight choreography for your own son?”

“Easy. Because we’ve been doing that since young Eric was old enough to walk.”

She laughed. “I guess so.”

Bree smiled. “Ricky said over and over during the filming of the movie that young Eric’s skills continued to impress him, but what he didn’t acknowledge was that he was the one who taught him those skills.”

Ricky laughed. “My sweet wife, always good for the ego.”

“Well, it was so wonderful to see you two and get to speak with you.”

“You too, Gena,” Bree said as they moved along to the next interviewer.

Coming next was Mitch Madden, the forty-five-year-old co-star who played young Eric’s nemesis in the movie. The seasoned actor received huge accolades as he made his way down the red carpet. He walked with his wife and ten-year-old daughter. After Mitch was the film’s director, Jemes Jackson. He was walking with his new girlfriend.

The next to come down the red carpet was Lucie Bardot. The crowd went wild for her. She was on the arm of her current boyfriend, who also happened to be a starting guard for the LA Lakers. She was dressed in a barely-there red gown that had no back, no shoulders, no midriff, and a plunging neckline. Her interviews centered mostly around her gown designer, jewelry designer, her shoes and bag. It was Isla August who asked her the best question.

“Lucie Bardot, I am so excited to get to speak with you. You are stunning!”

“Aww, thank you so much. And welcome to the red carpet, Isla, it’s nice to see you here.”

“Isn’t it just wonderful! It’s fabulous talking to so many amazing people, Lucie, and you’re one of them.”

Lucie’s eyes sparkled.

“I’ve followed your career closely, and you are so amazing. *The Girl with No Shoes*

makes me bawl my eyes out every time, and *Angel of Mercy* terrified me. I've actually seen everything you've done and I'm amazed every time I see you on screen and I can't wait to see this one."

Lucie laughed. "I loved making all of those movies, but I have to say, this one has been a highlight."

"So, tell us, Lucie, you're such a seasoned pro, what was it like working with a newbie like young Eric Kino?"

Lucie smiled sweetly. "First, I'd hardly call him a newbie. His family is full of pros. But I have to say, I think working with Eric has been the best. He works so hard. He never stops. He's kind and considerate, and he's humble. He treated me like a queen. And, well, the guy can kiss."

Isla smiled. "He's a hunk for sure. Well, I know I'm hogging you and other people want to speak with you. Thanks so much for sharing with us today, Lucie. I can't wait to see this movie. I'm on pins and needles."

"Thank you, Isla."

Isla smiled as Lucie and her date moved along to speak to other interviewers.

There was a murmur in the crowd out on the street, and then some cheering and yelling and applause and whistles.

Jordan smoothed her dress, tugged on an errant curl, and turned to her handsome fiancé. "Do I look okay?"

He smiled. "No. You don't look 'okay.' You look beautiful," he said reverently.

She smiled at him. He always said those words so softly and reverently as if he really meant it. "I mean, my dress isn't tucked into my underwear or something?"

He chuckled, walked around her and stopped by her side. "Everything is looking good." He took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. "Okay, Two-three, are you ready?"

"Yes. Let's do this," she said brightly.

They started down the walk.

"Eric Kino!" someone yelled.

He waved his arm and a cheer went up. Camera flashes were almost blinding. Everyone could see why this young man was gonna be a star. His tall, muscular build looked amazing in the simple black tuxedo. His black tie had a red accent, to coordinate with Jordan's dress. His handsome face looked so youthful now, though it had looked so fierce in the Kino Challenge last month and had been so battered in a photo from the false arrest. Everyone knew what he'd been through over the past few months and what he'd had to do. Combined with how young and strong he looked at this moment, it was a recipe for extreme popularity.

Beside the attractive young man walked a beautiful girl. What some would consider right now as the luckiest girl in the world. She was tall, and slim, and athletic and had a beautiful face and the sweetest smile. The public had seen many photos of her, and usually she had her long blond locks in a ponytail, or a messy bun, or a braid or clip. Tonight, however, her hair fell around her shoulders and down her back in long ringlets. She held tight to her man's arm, a look of wonder on her face. Obviously, this type of thing was new to her, which always intrigued the public. They loved Cinderella stories.

There was power emanating from the couple as they walked. Eric Kino III had an aura of power and control about him. Anyone watching him as he escorted his lady down the red carpet would feel almost intimidated. It was an amazing thing to see and experience.

They neared the first interviewer.

Gena was beaming. “Hello, hello, Eric. You look amazing!”

He smiled at her. “Hi, Gena. What? This old thing?”

She laughed and then directed her gaze to Jordan. “Hello, Jordan, you are stunning tonight.”

She smiled sweetly. “Thank you so much.”

“Let’s just get this straight right away. Eric, Jordan is your fiancée, correct?”

“Yes, she is,” he said reverently. “I proposed to her on Thanksgiving and she said ‘yes’ and I won’t let her back out.”

Gena laughed. “Tell us who you’re wearing, Jordan?”

Jordan took a minute to give her all the information she had memorized.

“So, how are you feeling, Eric, with this being your first film?”

“I feel great. It was an amazing experience making this film. The director is an artist. The cast was amazing. Such pros. They were all very helpful and kind as I figured out this new endeavor.”

“Nobody gave you a hard time?”

He laughed. “Only my father.”

“So, how was it working with your father?”

“Well, he’s a pro. He demands perfection. But I’m used to him because he’s been my instructor since I was old enough to walk. He’s the best and I’m really grateful to have this first filmmaking experience be with him. The stunt choreography he put together, well, it’s the best I’ve ever seen.”

“So, would you work with him again?”

“Of course. I’d be so honored to have him agree to work with me again.”

“Thank you so much, Eric and Jordan. Have a wonderful night.”

“Thank you, Gena,” Eric said as he escorted Jordan away.

She gripped his arm tighter. “Well, that was nerve-wracking.”

He patted her hand and smiled at her. “You did great, babe. I’m so proud to have you with me. I’m so grateful that you’re with me.” He suddenly came to a halt, turned her and looked into her eyes. “I am so grateful. It just hit me, how terrible this night would be without the girl I love by my side. Jordan, together, you and I, we’re gonna do such great things.” He suddenly lifted her up and spun her around a few times as she gave a slight squeal, then threw back her head and laughed.

He set her down. “Sorry. I got carried away.” He fixed her hair, took her hand, tucked it back into the crook of his arm and continued down the red carpet.

They got to Isla who was beaming at them. “Hello, you two,” she said brightly as they neared.

“Hey, Isla!” young Eric said.

“You know, that’s gonna be all over the news tomorrow,” Isla said.

Eric nodded and shrugged. “Oh, well. I guess that doesn’t bother me. Does it bother

you, Jordan?"

She giggled. "Nope. Unless they superimpose someone else's face over yours."

Isla laughed. "It's so nice to see you, Jordan, and you—look—amazing!"

"Thank you!"

Isla smiled at young Eric. "So, here we are. You've come through a lot to get to this moment. How do you feel?"

"I feel blessed. So many things happened this year. So many close calls. But we're all here, and I'm so blessed. And, by the way, thank you and all of your followers who prayed for our family this year. For that I am truly grateful. Prayer warriors are powerful."

"They are, and we were so blessed for being able to pray for you and your family." She sighed as her eyes moistened. "So, I have a question that my followers wanted me to ask you. Are you ready?"

He nodded. "Bring it."

"Many actors don't like watching themselves on the screen. They don't watch their own movies. At a lot of movie premieres, the actors walk the red carpet and then go somewhere else for the actual screening. What do you think about this, and what will you do tonight? And also, young Eric, do you think it's egotistical to watch your own movie?"

He gave a short laugh. "I have no problem watching myself on screen and I will sit and watch the movie with my family. Do I think it's egotistical? Not at all. My ego is not involved in watching myself onscreen. For example, if a painter like my Aunt Breez is creating her artwork, she routinely steps back and looks the painting over and adds a brush stroke here and there until she's satisfied with her work. She has to see her work in order to do that. Or, like, my brother JoJo, I mean my cousin, we think of ourselves as brothers," he explained. "One of the big things they do after a game is watch films. That's how they improve. They look at what they did right, and they see what they did wrong and how they can improve.

"So, I will watch, and see ways I can improve. I will watch and learn. My parents will also watch with me and learn and help me to improve. No ego involved. Actually, the not wanting to watch oneself might have a little bit of ego involved."

"How so?" Isla asked quickly.

"Well, it's hard to simply judge everyone, but if someone is uncomfortable seeing themselves on screen, it could be an ego problem, either too much, or not enough. If they have an enlarged ego, then when they see themselves on screen the actuality might not measure up to their own inflated ego and so that makes them uncomfortable. Or if they have a small ego, it could be they have feelings of insecurity, so they might feel vulnerable, like, exposing themselves to the world. That too might be a little bit of an ego issue." He shrugged. "Just my off-the-cuff response. Not meaning to judge anyone. Everyone has different reasons and different issues to deal with. I sure do. But bottom line, I'll watch the movie and I'll learn how to improve. But working with the director and cast of this film, it was an amazing experience. They are real pros and I think they created an awesome piece of art."

"Eric Kino III, I am completely fascinated by you. I would love to sit and listen to

you answer a million questions. Thank you so much for speaking to us. And you too, Jordan. You guys are such a lovely couple."

"Thank you, Isla," both Jordan and Eric said at the same time.

They moved on to take the small stage. When their faces filled the large monitors, the waiting crowd cheered and began chanting, "Kino, Kino, Kino."

They were so loud and chanted so long that young Eric came to attention, and bowed deeply. Not like a performer takes a bow, but as a martial artist bowing to his teacher to show respect and humility. When he bowed, the crowd cheered even louder. Eric rose and tapped his hand against his chest, then smiled and waved.

Turning to the MC, they answered a few questions and then stepped down off the stage, went to sign a few autographs and chat with a few of the people who'd been waiting for hours to see the cast of the movie.

Finally, they entered the theater and found their family and their seats. Young Eric started to get up and get some water for Jordan, but someone brought them some cold bottled water then asked if they wanted anything to eat.

Young Eric glanced at Jordan with a smile. "As much popcorn as you want," he prompted.

She giggled. "Yes, I'll have some!"

Eric nodded. "A big bucket of popcorn," he said.

The young man asked if anyone else in their party needed anything and went to retrieve it.

Logan and Melody sat beside Jordan. JoJo and Taylor sat beside young Eric. Parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, along with the Lee and Davis families occupied three center rows behind them. Just in front of young Eric was Lucie Bardot and her family and friends, which included Ella Penn, though thankfully, she was all the way at the end of that row of seats.

Young Eric glanced at JoJo. "You okay with that?"

JoJo nodded and even smiled. "Sure. I mean, who can blame her for trying to get some of this," he joked, motioning toward himself.

Young Eric smiled. His brother had a good attitude about it. Ella had pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor. She was fined and made to do community service, which was ongoing. She'd had to have a meeting with JoJo and had apologized profusely. JoJo said she was pretty humble and sincere and even shed tears. Young Eric also found out that Ella's father was furious with her. He scolded her severely for trying to put him up against the Kinos. She'd thought that her father was a powerful man and he would come out on top in any situation, and he'd had to open her eyes. Yes, money talks. But his hundred million dollar fortune was nothing in comparison to the Kinos' assets. He explained to her that the evidence was against her and the Kinos' resources meant they could and would defend themselves against any attempt to manipulate the truth and he had no desire to cross them. Once he'd set her straight and opened her eyes, she'd found her humility.

The theater lights blinked dim, and young Eric rose from his seat. He leaned down to whisper to Jordan. "Be back in a few. They've asked us to take the stage for a minute."

Jordan watched young Eric scoot past everyone to the aisle. In the next row, Lucie

stood and made her way to the aisle. Young Eric waited on her and escorted her down to the front of the theater. A man with a microphone introduced himself as one of the film's producers. He was applauded. He then introduced the director, handed him the microphone and stood aside.

The director spoke a few words about how great it was to work with this fine group of actors and the fine crew. Next to him was Mitch Madden, the seasoned pro who played the villain. The director asked Mitch to say a few words. Mitch nodded and was handed a mic.

"He said a 'few words' and so I'll keep it short. I am so glad I have the opportunity to say to these amazing people, the actors standing on stage with me right now, and the actors and crew in the audience: I have never worked with a finer group of people and I'm grateful for the opportunity."

He nodded and gave a slight bow at the applause.

Next to Mitch was the young child actor whose character befriends young Eric's character. The mic was passed to him. The child was not shy.

He smiled. "Hi, everyone. I'm Trevor Ross, I'm ten years old and I am totally stoked about making this movie." He waited a minute while everyone laughed. "It's my first big break, and it was so much fun, and yeah, there were times that I was a little nervous, but Eric always made me feel okay. He even prayed with me a few times to help me calm down. It's been the best experience of my whole life." He stood there beaming. Everyone laughed at that since his life hasn't been very long yet. He handed off his mic and bowed and was applauded.

Lucie was handed a microphone. "Well now, that is hard to follow. But I have to agree with young Trevor. It's been the best time making this movie. There's been such a spirit of camaraderie on the set. It's like, everyone, even me, left their egos at home. We worked together so perfectly. The crew was amazing. Making a movie has never been so much fun—and I've made a lot of them, so I can say that." She turned to Mitch. "Right, Mitch?"

He nodded. "Absolutely."

She passed her mic to young Eric as the audience applauded her.

The theater became ultra-quiet. You could've heard a pin drop. Young Eric smiled his gorgeous smile and nodded at everyone. "Well, I'm in the same boat with Trevor," he said softly. "It's my first big break." He stopped while everyone laughed. "I was excited and intrigued to do this project. The writer's message was beautiful." He stopped, asked the man to stand and everyone applauded the screenwriter.

Young Eric smiled and went on. "And the rest of you, the director, camera crew, the cast, and everyone behind the scenes, just the best. Real pros. The fight choreographer, I have to say, was also the best." He smiled. "No, really, I *have* to say that." The audience laughed. "Truly though, I'm grateful for this opportunity. I've learned so much and I promise I will continue to learn and grow." He looked up. "Thank you, Father, for this beautiful chance to do Your work." He looked back at the audience. "And thank you all for your hard work and your kindness to me. Let's watch this!"

The audience stood and applauded. The four actors on stage and the director all took a bow and headed back to their seats.

Young Eric saw Lucie to her row, then went to his own seat. Before he sat down he leaned over to the row behind him and shook his father's hand and blew a kiss to his mother. He took his seat, the theater darkened and Jordan squeezed Eric's hand. "Here we go, Three. I'm so excited."

He patted her hand and smiled at her. "Okay, listen, Two-three, afterward, you have to be honest with me."

She smiled. "I promise." Her eyes got wide as the first scene began and young Eric ran through a wooded area, in the dark, breathing hard. He stumbled and fell face down. An arrow flew into the ground right next to him; he rolled, got up and ran away. Breathing hard herself, she pressed herself against the seat, biting her lip.

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December 13th, 9:30 PM, Friday Evening

Regent Theater at West End Village, Los Angeles, California

The entire Kino contingent of family and friends stood in a circle, chattering excitedly about what they'd just seen. Everyone was congratulating young Eric on a job well done. Ricky and Bree hugged their son for a long time. Bree cried and said he was phenomenal. Taylor cried too.

The rest of the crowd in the theater dispersed, many of them headed to the after party which was at the ballroom of the hotel just across the street. Young Eric and Jordan, Logan and Melody, JoJo and Taylor, and Ricky and Bree said goodbye to the rest of the family as they too were headed to the after party. The rest of the family and friends went home to relieve babysitters.

At the party, there was a huge spread of food. Anything and everything. The young ones chowed down. Ricky too. Bree wasn't feeling well, so she merely nibbled. The crowd at the party was raucous, celebrating their accomplishment and each other. Young Eric followed his brother's lead and pulled his girl onto the dance floor and held her close.

"So, Two-three, what do you think, I mean honestly?" he whispered as they swayed back and forth to the music.

She sighed. "I think you were amazing. I mean, really, I tried to find something to pick apart so you'd know I was being honest, and you'd know that I noticed everything, but I couldn't find anything. Your acting skills are good, Three. I mean, one would never know it was your first movie."

He nodded. "Great direction."

"Whatever. And the whole movie, it was so well done. It held my interest the entire time. There was no, like, boring scene. It was all so good. The only part I didn't like was, well, you know."

He smiled. "That kiss didn't mean a thing."

"I know. It's just that, she knows what it feels like to have your lips on hers. And that kind of bothers me."

"I'm sorry. How can I make it up to you?"

"By kissing me a million times a day."

He chuckled. "Challenge accepted." He stopped moving, held her still, lowered his head and kissed her a long time. He stopped only because a hand was placed on his

shoulder. Eric looked up to see actor Keanu Reeves smiling at him. “You’re making me jealous.”

Young Eric chuckled and turned to shake his hand.

“You did a fantastic job, Eric.”

Eric sighed. “Thank you so much, sir. It means a lot.”

“Sir?” Keanu laughed.

Young Eric shrugged. “Just showing respect.”

“Well, you have my respect. Keep up the good work. Maybe we’ll work together one day.”

“I would *love* that.”

Keanu smiled at Jordan whose eyes were wide. He nodded. “So, this is your beautiful fiancée?”

“Yes, sir,” he said proudly. “This is Jordan Brooks.”

Keanu took her hand. “So nice to meet you.”

“You too,” she said softly.

They chatted a few seconds and he took his leave.

Eric smiled at her. “Are you a little starstruck?”

She giggled. “Maybe. He’s so nice and like, down to earth.”

“I think that’s what you said about my parents.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, that’s right. I did!”

“And yet now you think about them just like they’re ordinary people.”

“Well, not exactly ordinary. More like extraordinary.”

“You’re extraordinary,” he said softly.

Close to midnight, Ricky and Bree approached. “Well, son, we’re gonna wait until midnight and then we’re gonna head home.”

Young Eric nodded. “Why wait until midnight? Is it so you can say you partied until the next day?”

“Yeah, that’s why,” Ricky replied.

Jordan smiled. Because she knew why.

“So, son, after midnight, you two might wanna head home. We have a big day tomorrow, what with a martial arts demo first thing in the morning at the apartments, and finishing some things at the church and then Taylor’s dance.”

Young Eric nodded. “We are gonna head home pretty soon.”

“Good.”

“Attention, everyone,” the film director said, speaking into a microphone. “Can I get everyone’s attention? We have an announcement to make.”

The room quieted. “And I’m gonna let one of our local sports stars make the announcement. JoJo Adams. In case some of you don’t know, he was USC’s quarterback for the past three years, a Heisman candidate for two of those years and he is also the cousin of Eric Kino. Let’s give him a hand.”

JoJo stepped forward and took the microphone. He aimed a smile at young Eric. “So, Cuz, we waited until after midnight to make this announcement for a reason. Everyone, it is now December 14th, which means it’s now Eric’s birthday. Even more importantly, it’s his 21st birthday. He made it to manhood,” he said as everyone laughed.

"Though I have to say, there were a few times this year when we thought he wouldn't make it." He stopped. Shook his head. Got his emotions under control. "Eric is like my brother. We're only a few months apart and we've grown up together and this year, when I thought we'd lost him, well, it was a real test of my faith. But my bro didn't let the bad guys win, thank God, and he came back, won the Kino Challenge like a pro, got engaged to a gorgeous girl and is here tonight to celebrate with you all and I'm so grateful for that.

"Now, today might be his birthday, but he didn't think he was gonna have a chance to celebrate because he's got a martial arts demonstration to help with in the morning, and then he's supposed to help work on a little church we've been helping to renovate, and then his sister, Taylor, wanted him to come see her perform at a school Christmas dance. He thought he was gonna get to squeeze in a little birthday dinner with his fiancée and that would be it, but I was thinking, maybe you would all like to help him celebrate and join me in singing happy birthday to Eric."

Everyone oohed and awwed over the giant cake that was wheeled in, lit up with twenty-one candles.

"Bro, come forward so we can all see you as we sing happy birthday to you, because, Eric, we're all so grateful to have you in our lives. What a gift you are to us. What a gift to your mom and dad, to our family, to your friends and to this world. Happy birthday, brother."

Young Eric stepped forward and JoJo hugged him. JoJo then turned to the crowd and led them in singing "Happy Birthday."

Eric blew out the candles and a giant cheer went up. People stepped forward to congratulate him, and he thanked them all profusely. The cake was cut and enjoyed. Eric was hugged and kissed a thousand times.

It wasn't much longer after that when Ricky, Bree, Taylor, and the rest of the Kinos took their leave. Shortly thereafter, young Eric and Jordan made their escape. It was done. The premiere was over, his birthday celebrated, and the film was lookin' good. He was alive, Jordan was alive. He was so blessed.

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Psalm 65:11

"You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance."

Chapter Sixteen

December 14th, 8:30 AM, Saturday Morning
The Village Garden Apartments, Huntington Beach, California

They all pulled up at the same time. JoJo drove his truck and Logan rode with him. The truck was loaded with mats from the local Kino studio. Pulling up next to him was Mark, then Ricky and Taylor, then young Eric and Jordan. Melody drove in a few minutes later. They all wore their uniforms.

The men immediately began unloading mats while the girls walked around the grassy area making sure there were no toys or trash or rocks.

A moment later, the Garcias came out of their apartment with Caleb, who was really the one who'd wanted the demonstration so badly. Ricky shook hands with Leonard Garcia, and then smiled at Caleb. "Why don't you go help the guys get the mats out of the truck and laid out here across the grass?"

"Okay," Caleb said and trotted off.

One by one more kids came out of their apartments and gathered around. There were four small rectangular buildings, each containing twelve total apartments—six units on one side, and six on the other.

Ricky smiled at the Garcias. "Well, make yourselves comfortable. You are welcome to participate or just watch. I have to get to work."

Taylor smiled as some of the teens came to speak with her. She'd decided to come because a few of the teen boys had asked her to come and "show what she's got." She had a feeling they were about to be very surprised.

Once the mats were set, covering most of the green area, Ricky told his crew to go around, shaking hands and inviting anyone who wanted to participate to sit around the edge of the mats. He kept looking for Amari and Brittney but they hadn't shown yet. Some adults began coming out to see the event, bringing lawn chairs and stools and even five-gallon paint buckets to sit on so they could watch.

Finally they were pretty much set for the demo. Logan had a speaker with some music ready for the choreographed part. Young Eric had boxes of boards sitting nearby, as well as nunchukas, bo staffs and blunted broadswords, which were all laid out near the mats. They all wore their gold uniforms, just for added flair. Each uniform had a Kino Martial Arts embroidered insignia on the left breast. Melody and Jordan each wore white belts with a yellow stripe. Taylor wore her black belt. JoJo wore a black belt with two gold stripes, width-wise at one end of the belt. Logan had three gold stripes. Young Eric had four. Ricky had ten gold stripes and eight red stripes. They all removed their shoes to stand on the edge of the mats.

Ricky started to go speak with the Garcias about Amari and Brittney but stopped when their door opened and the two kids walked out. Ricky went to greet them and found

his blood pressure rising. He knelt down to the children. Taylor moved forward too.

"Hello, Amari," Ricky greeted.

"Hi," he said shyly.

"Good morning, Brittney," Ricky said.

She smiled brightly. "Good morning."

He looked her over closely. She seemed fine. His eyes went back to Amari. "Amari, what happened to your cheek?"

The boy's hand went up instinctively to cover the large, reddened welt under his left eye. His eyes opened wide. "Oh, that ain't nothin'."

"How did it happen?" Ricky asked softly.

The boy swallowed, but didn't say anything.

"Amari, you can tell me anything. Remember the principal at your school told you that you can talk to me?"

"Yes."

"So, tell me, son, what happened to your face?"

Amari rubbed his cheek and looked around to see if anyone was listening. Ricky looked around too. Logan had turned on music and they were doing some stretches and warm-ups and it looked like everyone was watching them. He turned back to Amari.

"You're not in trouble, Amari. I promise. I just need to know how that happened."

"Mr. T-bone hit him," Brittney suddenly said.

Ricky smiled at her. "Who is Mr. T-bone?"

"Mama's friend."

Amari frowned. "He ain't no friend. He's her boss."

Ricky drew a deep breath. "Why did he hit you?"

"Cuz Mari asked Mom to stay wif us," Brittney supplied.

"Is that right, Amari?" Ricky asked.

He nodded. "Whenever she goes out with him, she don't come home for days. I told her to not go and T-bone told me to shut up and I told him he ain't my daddy and he hit me."

"Yeah, and I thought Mr. T-bone killed Mari cuz he wouldn't wake up and then Mama and him left and Amari waked up and I cried."

Taylor gave a little whimper and held her arms out and Brittney immediately went to her and allowed Taylor to hold and comfort her.

"Is your mother home now?"

"Yeah," Amari answered. "They came home a little while ago."

"They? Did Mr. T-bone come back with her?"

Amari nodded.

"Does he do that a lot? I mean, does he hit you a lot?"

"No. Just sometimes."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I don't like it. He spanked Brittney once and he hits me all the time and I wish he would go away."

"Why did he spank Brittney?"

"Cuz she was cryin'."

"I see. And why does he hit you?"

Amari rubbed his hand over his cheek. "He don't like me to talk. He always tells me to keep my mouth shut."

Ricky rose. "Well, I'm gonna go talk to them for a minute."

Amari's eyes opened wide in terror. "Please, Mr. Ricky Kino, please don't. She gonna be real mad at me. Please. And she's sleepin' and when she's sleepin' cain't nobody wake her up."

Ricky nodded and drew a calming breath. He would do the demo, talk to Mark, and then do what he had to do to protect these children. They weren't gonna live in this dangerous situation one more day if he could help it.

He smiled at Amari. "Okay. I won't right now. Come on, kiddo, you guys have a seat on the edge of the mat."

He got the kids situated then stood back and spoke to the crowd that had gathered. "Well now, good morning, everyone. We'll start in about five minutes."

He immediately went over to talk to Mark, explained the situation and asked Mark to make a few calls to get the ball rolling. Mark stepped aside to get on the phone to one of their family attorneys at the firm.

Ricky looked up to see some kids from down the street walking down toward them and he smiled and welcomed them. He then went back to his group. They stood in a circle, each with a hand on the shoulder of the person beside them. They bowed their heads and had a prayer. Finally, Ricky headed over to stand next to the speaker and took the microphone that Logan handed him.

"Good morning, everyone. I'm Ricky Kino and we're happy to be here to show you a little of what we do at *Kino Martial Arts*. Let me introduce you to our little group here who were so gracious to help me. These two young ladies you see in the white belts with a yellow stripe are just beginning. This is Melody," he said as she bowed. "And this is Jordan." She also bowed.

"Next up," Ricky continued, "we have my daughter, Taylor. She's a black belt, as you can see."

Taylor bowed.

"Next to Taylor is my nephew, JoJo Adams. You might have heard of him because he's been the USC quarterback for the past three years. JoJo is a 2nd degree black belt. Next to him is his brother, and so of course that also makes him my nephew, Logan Adams. Logan is a 3rd degree black belt. And next to Logan is my son, Eric Kino III, who is a 4th degree black belt and is also the current Kino Challenge Champion. Beside me is Master Mark Adams. He's my brother, my stepbrother to be exact, and the father of JoJo and Logan. Master Adams is a 7th degree black belt and a Kino Challenge Champion."

Mark said something to Ricky and held out his hand. Ricky handed him the mic.

Mark gestured toward Ricky. "And just in case you didn't know, Ricky here is a Grandmaster. He's a 10th degree black belt in two forms of martial arts, an 8th degree in two others and he has several other belts that we won't go into. He's a Wing Chun Master. He was the original Kino Challenge Champion and won the Kino Challenge for eight years running. Okay, here's your mic back, Grandmaster Kino."

Ricky took the microphone. "Thank you, Master Adams. As you can see we believe

in being very respectful to each other and to our students and our students are very respectful to us. Okay, so that you can see what this group can do, we have a little demonstration of their skills. A little performance, so to speak, which we have put to music. We'll perform that first, and then, we'll give a lesson for anyone who wants to participate."

Ricky handed off the mic and stood in the exact center of the mat and bowed deeply. The music began and it was the opening notes of "Eye of the Tiger." Ricky's moves were choreographed perfectly to the music. Of course, he'd done this demonstration hundreds of times over the years.

The music changed and as he was "attacked" by young Eric and Logan, the girls jumped in to help Ricky fight to the song "Kung Fu Fighting." Poor JoJo had to watch from the edge of the mats, keeping his right arm secure in its sling. The demo went on as the music changed with each new feat. Ricky, Mark and young Eric held boards high in the air and Taylor and Logan smashed them with their amazing high kicks. Then Jordan and Melody held boards low, while Taylor and Logan bashed them with knife hands and elbows. Ricky and young Eric gave a super impressive demonstration of their nunchukas skills, Mark and Logan gave a demonstration of working with bo staffs and then Ricky, Mark, young Eric and Logan had the crowd gasping in amazement as they performed with the broadswords.

When the demonstration ended, the audience applauded, yelled, whistled and hooted for a long time. Ricky drank some water and went to the middle of the mat. "Okay, now, who would like to join us on the mat and have a little lesson? Kino Martial Arts 101."

Almost thirty kids and teens rose and came to the mats. Mark quickly had them form six lines of five people each, youngest to oldest.

Ricky spoke next. "Taylor, Jordan, and Mel, you help the first two lines. Logan, you help the next line. Young Eric, you help the next line. Mark, you get the fifth line and I'll get the last line. JoJo, you stand there and look pretty." Everyone laughed, especially when JoJo did the Heisman pose.

Ricky instructed. He taught them to bow. He taught them high block, low block, double strike, back stance and some kicks. He would teach one movement and then help the teens in his back line, then start on the next.

The kids seemed to really concentrate and try their hardest and Ricky was pleased with their effort. Of course, when you put on a demonstration like they just did, it earns respect very quickly. Once they'd demonstrated how a class might be, young Eric and Logan were asked to spar. Mark refereed and Ricky explained what was happening. It was obvious that the spectators were totally engrossed and totally impressed. They applauded long and hard for the two fighters. An hour after they'd begun, the lesson came to an end. Ricky had the whole class line up in front of him. They bowed to their class instructors and then to Ricky.

About that time, though it was a little later than expected, Bree drove up. Taylor, Melody, Jordan, young Eric and Logan immediately went to help her unload the goodies she'd brought.

Ricky, along with Mark and JoJo, addressed their audience. "If, after this, any of you are interested in pursuing this, let me know. I'll work with you on a personal basis

to help you get the instruction you desire."

"Why?" one of the adult men asked from where he leaned against the building.

"Why?" Ricky asked.

"Why you deciding to do all of this? I mean, like, what makes our little corner of the world so special, ya know?"

Ricky smiled. "You'd have to ask God that second question. But I'll tell you the answer to the first question. We were working on the church next door. My wife and I saw these two little ones miss the bus," he said, gesturing to Amari and Brittney. "My wife and I took them to school. So, they got my attention. They introduced us to the other kids, and another young man asked for a demonstration when he found out who we were. But why would we agree to do that? Because every single day our family asks God to place in front of us those He wishes us to serve. And we serve God first, always. Why He thinks your little corner of the world is so special? You'll have to ask Him. I don't need Him to tell me the answer to that question. I trust Him. I may not see His reasons right away, but many times, I do see eventually. And watching Jesus make a way, it's the best thing in the world."

He smiled at everyone. "We've really enjoyed coming to meet you all today. My wife has brought some coffee and juices and milk and doughnuts because we never do a demo without providing some goodies. So, we'll get our shoes on and if some of you young guys will help us fold the mats up and load them into the truck, that would be great. And please don't walk on the mats with your shoes on. Thank you. Before we do, JoJo, will you give a quick blessing on the food?"

JoJo bowed his head and gave a short, sweet blessing on the food and on the people in the crowd. The mats were folded and loaded and everyone moved toward the table Bree had brought, where she arranged canisters of fresh hot coffee, and cups for the milk and juices and dozens and dozens of boxes of different kinds of doughnuts.

Taylor made sure she had Amari and Brittney with her and helped them get their beverages and fill their little plates with goodies.

Ricky stood and watched. Leonard Garcia came to him and offered his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Kino, this was so much fun and Caleb is in heaven."

"It's our pleasure. Really. And please call me Ricky." He glanced around. Bree had the back hatch open on the SUV and both Amari and Brittney sitting on the edge, their feet dangling. His eyes moved to Taylor, who was chatting with and entertaining a group of about eight teens, six of them boys, two girls. He caught young Eric's eye, pointed to his own eyes and then to Taylor, meaning for young Eric to protect his sister if necessary. Young Eric nodded.

"Leonard, do you know this Mr. T-bone the kids are talking about?"

Leonard nodded. "Well, not personally. He comes to stay with Tish every once in a while. He orders the kids around or sends them out of the house while he and Tish do their thing. I think he's her pimp. He also always has a supply and I think he has some of these kids pushin' for him."

"Well, that is coming to an end today," Ricky said softly.

"He's always armed."

Ricky nodded. "So am I."

Leonard looked down at Ricky's waist.

Ricky chuckled and patted his black belt. "I'm talking about the Word of God. Don't worry about me. I'm good."

"I guess I'm not worried about you as much as these people here."

Ricky nodded. "Understood." He looked down as his phone went off. He nodded at Leonard. "Sorry, it's my other stepbrother. I gotta take this." He walked away. "Whatcha got, Joey?"

"You and Bree are still officially foster parents, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay then. We're gonna start working on having the two kids removed from the home and placed with you."

"How long will it take? Because I don't want them here even one more day. I think they're in danger."

"We might be able to get it done today. The cops and CPS are gonna have to come out and assess the situation, and decide why the kids are in danger and I'm not sure if a swollen cheek is gonna be enough."

"Well, it should be enough."

"What the hell? Mari!" a man's voice boomed.

"Hold on, things are about to get interesting." Ricky looked up as a large, bare-chested man in baggy pants, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, stood in the doorway of Amari's apartment.

Amari jumped from Bree's vehicle and came running before she could stop him. He approached the man Ricky assumed was T-bone. Ricky told Joey to send police and a few Ameritech agents if there were any nearby and went to join Amari.

"What's goin' on out here? Why you out here? Where's yo sister?"

"She's having doughnuts," Amari answered as he pointed to where Brittney sat on the car.

"You get her and come on, you comin' with me."

"I ain't goin' nowhere wit you."

"You think you can talk to me like that, boy?" He raised his hand and Amari backed up.

T-bone looked up to see Ricky step forward. Ricky put a hand on Amari's shoulder. "It's okay, Amari, go back to Brittney right now. And stay there."

Amari looked up with his big brown eyes, full of fear, but also full of hope.

Ricky nodded. "Go on."

The Garcias were quickly trying to get the people milling around eating doughnuts and chatting to leave the area or at least take cover.

"I don't know who you think you talkin' to, but he ain't yo kid and he better damn well do what I say or I'll show him..."

"You won't show him anything. He's not your kid either and he's not going anywhere with you. Why do you want him to go with you? Where's his mom?"

T-bone's eyes narrowed. "That ain't none uh ya business."

Mark came down to stand beside Ricky, while the others were moving to protect the group of children.

"She's inside, right?" Ricky pressed.

Ricky stepped forward, because he immediately knew something was very wrong. The man blocked him, reached behind his back, and pulled out a gun from the waistband of his pants.

People standing around all immediately ran for cover.

T-bone pointed the gun at Ricky's forehead. Ricky put his hands up, but stepped forward instead of backward and moved so blindingly fast it was hard to tell what happened. It ended with Ricky ejecting the magazine and racking the slide to clear the chamber, and handing the gun to young Eric who'd come to help.

T-bone roared and lunged. Ricky sidestepped the wild punch.

"It's easy to hit a kid," Ricky said loudly. "You wanna punch somebody, punch me. Or, try to punch me. But I suggest you give it up and settle yourself down."

The man's face announced his intentions to charge again, and Ricky merely caught his arm, and slung him to the ground.

T-bone looked around at everyone watching. He was furious. "I'm gonna kill you. You messed with the wrong person."

Ricky chuckled. "That last part is exactly what I was just about to say to you."

Ricky held his ground. T-bone charged. Ricky took him out with one punch. The large man dropped, unconscious.

At the same moment, the cops pulled up, lights flashing. They ran from their cars, guns drawn. Ricky threw his hands up, but for once, they went straight for the guy on the ground.

Ricky spoke to one of the cops. "You probably need to go check on the woman inside that apartment. She might need help. He was trying to take her kids and leave with them."

The officer nodded, motioned at his partner and they headed in. Ricky heard yelling, followed by an officer calling for Narcan. Ricky shook his head and went up to speak with his wife. "Hey, hon." He motioned at her.

She smiled at her husband, glancing at the children. "Taylor, y'all stay with Amari and Brittney while I speak with your dad."

"We got this, Mom," both Taylor and young Eric said.

"That was a very nice demonstration," Bree said.

Ricky only nodded. "Bree, I think their mom has overdosed and I'm not sure how bad it is yet."

Bree grimaced. "What's gonna happen to the children?"

"I'm not sure. I'm hoping, if you're with me on this, to be able to foster them. Right now, we need to see if their mom is gonna be taken to a hospital, or to rehab, or to jail, or a morgue. Right now, I think those are pretty much the only options."

Bree sighed. Ricky looked at her pale face. "Are you okay?"

"I think so. Sorry I was late. I wasn't feelin' so well this morning."

"Bree, babe, I think you need to see a doctor."

She didn't argue. She simply nodded, and that bothered him.

"I have an appointment on Monday morning."

He frowned. "Well, that kinda worries me."

"Why?"

"Because you feel bad enough that you've already made a doctor's appointment. What time is the appointment?"

"It's at 9:45, why?"

"Because I'm going with you."

"Ricky, I'm okay. You don't have to tag along."

Ricky scowled. "My wife, who means life to me, is not feeling well and I'm gonna take her to the doctor on Monday. Period. There is no discussion. We're in this life together, correct?"

She smiled. "Yes, of course. I'm just saying it's probably not a big deal. It's probably a menopause or perimenopause-type thing, and not important enough for you to spend your morning with me."

He dramatically placed his hand over his heart. "What in the world are you saying to me? *You* are important, Bree. And if this little illness is not a big deal, then fine, we'll go out to brunch."

"Don't you have a few promotional appearances this next week for the movie?"

"I do. Tuesday and Thursday."

She nodded. "Okay. Then, I guess we have a doctor date."

He smiled as the ambulance approached. "I'd better go see what's goin' down. Don't let the kids come near the apartment."

Ricky joined the Garcias where they stood outside the apartment. They were being questioned about all they knew about the Meeks. Other police were getting statements from witnesses, then an officer approached Ricky.

"Mr. Kino, may I speak with you please?"

Ricky nodded and walked to join the man. He was asked about and explained his involvement with the children. He told them he'd already decided, after meeting Tisha Meeks, that he was gonna look into having the children removed from their mother's custody and getting her into rehab. When asked why he was so concerned with this little family, he sighed and explained. "God showed me this family. The kids were in need of parenting. The mother was in need of help. What was I supposed to do? Turn a blind eye?"

"Many people do," the officer said.

"I'm not gonna condemn others or defend them. We all know that situations like this exist. I could spend all of my time and resources throwing money at the problem but that's not how we operate. We serve God. He shows us who we need to focus on and when He does, then we take action. God has focused our attention on this little street. The church, and the people who live on this same street. So, right now, that's where we will focus."

The officer nodded. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what are your intentions for the people who live on this street?"

"We intend to help anyone who needs help getting on their feet where they can support themselves. Not through handouts, though we'll certainly meet immediate needs. We don't just throw money at a problem. We give people the education or tools they need to build stable lives. We don't do handouts. But we might help someone go to

school, or learn a trade, or get their car fixed, or get medical care. We intend on cleaning up the area so that they'll feel pride in their surroundings. We intend on turning the motel on the corner into a youth ministry where the kids can go to safely occupy their time, build friendships, and learn about Jesus. After this morning, my brother and I were tossing around the idea of providing a bus to take any kids who want to learn, over to the Huntington *Kino Martial Arts* facility twice a week. There is so much that can be done, and it may take a while, but once we start a project, we won't stop until we succeed." Ricky smiled. "And of course, if the friendly local law enforcement would like to get involved in this project, we will be more than happy to have you work with us."

The officer nodded. "I'm Sergeant John Nelson. Let me give you my personal number. If you think you have something that we can help with, please give me a call." He took out a card, wrote his personal number on it and handed it to Ricky with a smile. "I heard you Kinos were the real deal, but I usually don't put too much stock in what I hear from the media. I'm thinking you really are good guys."

"Thanks. Like I said, we serve God. We don't do it for fame or publicity. We've been blessed. And to those who have been given much, much is expected. That's Luke 12:48 in the Bible. We live by that."

"It seems you really do. I mean, I know you were at your son's movie premiere last night, and here you are first thing this morning, teaching martial arts to a bunch of kids."

He shrugged. "They asked for a demo. We gave them one. No biggie."

The officer nodded. "That's such a good example. Mr. Kino, meeting you today has been a pleasure." He offered his hand. Ricky shook it.

"So, do you know how bad she is? I mean, Tisha Meeks," Ricky asked.

"I don't know, but let me see if I can find out."

Sergeant Nelson went inside the apartment. He wasn't in long and came back to Ricky's side. He shook his head. "Well, she's alive. They're gonna transport her to the Community Hospital soon."

Ricky nodded. "What about her kids?"

"Does anybody know if there are any relatives?" the officer asked.

Ricky shook his head. "I already asked the neighbors, the Garcias, because they usually watch out for the children, who, in my opinion, are neglected. The Garcias say they've never seen any relatives. No grandma. No aunts or uncles. So, Sergeant Nelson, like I said, I was already looking into having the kids removed from the home. My wife and I are registered foster parents and we'd like to step in and take care of them until Ms. Meeks gets better."

"You know, she'll go from the hospital, and possibly to jail."

"What would the charges be?" Ricky asked.

It was Mark standing nearby who answered. "Well, the overdose doesn't automatically erase every possible drug charge. The Good Samaritan protection is limited. It may protect her from being charged merely for being under the influence or drug possession for personal use because emergency care was requested, but it won't protect her from child endangerment, child neglect, child abuse, trafficking, or anything else the officers uncover."

Ricky nodded. "So, Sergeant Nelson, how do I go about being allowed to take the

kids home with me?"

"We've already put in a call to CPS, and they'll be arriving soon."

"Good. Mark, do you have some time to spare?"

"Absolutely, Grandmaster Kino," Mark said.

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An hour later, only Bree, Ricky and Taylor were still at the apartments.

Logan and Melody, JoJo, young Eric and Jordan headed up to the church to meet Bristol who'd informed them—or rather, warned them—that Banny and Deuce said they were also coming to help.

There were AMT agents on the premises, including the one assigned to Bristol, so they didn't feel like they were in any danger. They only had to make sure they didn't accidentally let on that they knew what the group Logan had nicknamed "the Bang Gang" was plotting. They kept a close eye on them, making sure their sudden interest in helping wasn't to actually sabotage.

Melody's family also came to help, and also the Davis boys, Daniel and Jeremy and their mom, Mickey, with Scarlett in tow. Jeff had to work. A few members of the congregation pitched in with the cleaning and Christmas decorations too.

Mark Adams, too, had gone up to the church after leaving Em's booster seat with the Kinos, in hopes they would have to use it.

There wasn't much more to do at the church that needed to be done before Sunday's service. There was a lot to do later, in the spring, when real renovations would begin, like repairing the roof, replacing the HVAC system, and enlarging the bathrooms and making them accessible. Today there was only some last-minute cleaning, adding a few Christmas decorations, checking out the sound system and the monitors and the new control booth. Fresh flowers would be delivered late this afternoon. Mostly they worked on finishing touches on Ronny's new office. Laying down the carpet. Moving in the desk and the large leather chair. Moving his books from the old office into the new bookcases. Setting up his new laptop. Hanging pictures.

Down in the parking lot of the apartments, Taylor sat in her mom's car with Amari and Brittney watching Gabe's livestream of the *Gabe Tanner Community Center Christmas Pageant*. As they watched, Taylor realized that Amari and Brittney didn't know anything about the birth of Jesus. They asked questions and she began to tell them the real, true meaning of Christmas. What totally blew her away was that they were listening. They were totally intrigued. Their big brown eyes blinked up at her as though they couldn't get the beautiful information into their heads fast enough.

"But if God lives in heaven, why did he want to send his baby down to live in this world? Why didn't he keep him in heaven?"

"Wow, Amari, that's a great question," Taylor said. "You see, God has a lot of children. You are also God's children."

"I am?" Brittney asked.

"Yes. Your earthly mom and dad created your body, but God created your spirit and your spirit entered your body and grew inside your mommy and then you were born. But you are still God's child. But Jesus is a little different. He had an earthly mother, but God Himself was the dad. God and Jesus had a plan. Ya see, the people on the earth, God's

children who are the people on the earth, in this world, they keep doing bad things. And if you do bad things, then when you die, you don't get to go home to God and be with all the people you love and who love you. So, God the Father decided to let his Son come to the world with a regular mother, a human mother."

She stopped and sighed. She didn't know exactly how to explain it to the children without talking about how babies are made.

She smiled. "Anyway, so Jesus grew inside Mary's tummy and when he was born, the angels appeared in the sky and they sang because they were so happy that God's Son came into the world. They named Him Jesus and He would teach the world all about God. And He came to um, well, to pay for our sins. But He also taught the world about changing your life to live in a good way. He taught them that love was the most important thing. To love God and to love your family and to love everyone. But He also told them to stop sinning."

"What's sinning?" Amari asked.

"Uh, well, it's doing bad things, like lying, or stealing. Jesus wants us to be happy and He knows that the happiest thing is to be with God, the Father in Heaven, but no bad things can live there, and we all do bad things. Jesus took the punishment for us. And He also asked us to just try to stop sinning and change our ways, or, like, our attitudes. And we can all live together with Him."

She frowned. She didn't think she was doing a very good job of explaining, but maybe it was at least a good start. She sighed. "So, anyway, Christmas is a happy time because it's like a giant birthday party for Jesus, the Son of God."

"It ain't a happy time for me," Amari said.

Taylor leaned her head over and rubbed it against his head. "I know, and that's sad. There's a lot of sadness in this world, Amari, but Jesus wants us each to do everything we can to teach about Him and help everyone to be happy. So, we're gonna help you and Brittney."

"Is my mommy dead?" Brittney asked.

"No, sweetie, but she's real sick. They took her to the hospital to help her to get better."

Amari frowned. His mother wasn't sick, he thought. She took too many pills. He knew that. He looked up at Taylor. "She ain't sick. She took pills."

Taylor nodded. "She's sick, um, like, inside her head, in her brain, ya know? And that makes her think that she needs to take the pills. She has to heal inside her head first, and then she'll stop taking the pills and then she'll be happy."

The kids were silent. Taylor pointed to her phone as the children at the center sang a Christmas song.

They listened in silence. Then Amari broke that silence when he asked, "What's gonna happen to us?"

Taylor sighed. "I think that's what they're talking about." She pointed to her parents and the police officers and the lady with the notebook. "Do you have any relatives? I mean, like, a cousin, or a grandma?"

"We used to have a grandma. But she died when I was little. I don't know if we got a cousin."

"Well, that lady out there will find a place for you to stay."

Amari turned his head and looked silently out the window. He tried to stop the tears that formed in his eyes, but when he tried to blink them away, instead they flowed down his cheeks. He sniffed.

Taylor put her arm around him and hugged him. "It's gonna be okay, 'Mari. I promise." She didn't dare tell him that he was gonna live with them until she knew for sure.

They watched as the woman finally got off her phone and nodded at the Kinos. She smiled. Taylor's heart beat faster when it looked like her mother and father both smiled too and shook the lady's hand. It looked like the woman had verified that her mom and dad were still legal and approved as authorized foster parents.

Her father pointed to the Meeks' apartment and said something to the officer and the guy nodded.

Outside of the car, Ricky then spoke to Mrs. Garcia. "Since you know their household pretty well, could you possibly help my wife gather some things together for the children?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

Bree and Mrs. Garcia went inside the apartment.

Ricky headed to the car and opened the door. "Hey, kiddos. Come on out here for a minute. I want to talk to you."

The kids were quiet and climbed out of the car. He smiled at them to put them at ease. They looked up at him with such sad eyes. He so wanted to change that. He knelt down so he could be at eye level. "So, Amari and Brittney, you know that your mom had to go to the hospital."

"Yes, she's sick in the head," Brittney said.

Ricky smiled and glanced at Taylor. She shrugged.

"Yes, she has some problems inside her head and that made her take too many pills and that made her very ill, but she's gonna be okay. Still, she might have to stay away for quite a while while she gets better." He smiled kindly. "So, my wife and I, we were wondering if you would like to come and stay with us while we wait for your mother to get better."

Amari blinked. "We can come stay at your house?"

"Yes. We promise to take very good care of you. You can be like, my little boy. And you, Brittney, you can be like my little girl. And Taylor, she can be like your big sister. And Bree, my wife, she can be like your other mother. Just for a while. We'll take very good care of you. Whaddya say? Will you come stay with us?"

"What happens if we don't come stay with you?"

Ricky smiled at the boy's hesitation. Life had been a struggle for him and he wasn't ready to trust anyone. "Well, if you don't want to stay with us, then that lady over there will find another family for you to stay with."

He frowned, then looked down at his sister. She was smiling at him.

"I wanna stay with Mr. Kino," she said loudly.

Taylor smiled.

Amari looked back up at Mr. Ricky Kino and nodded. "Yes, sir, we'll stay with you.

Do you live far away?"

Ricky nodded. "Well, it's about a twenty-minute drive, so that's not too bad."

Bree and the Garcias, including Caleb, came up to the car carrying several plastic trash bags filled with stuff. Ricky took them from his wife and loaded them into his car. They thanked the Garcias for their help.

Ricky shook Mr. Garcia's hand. "Again, if there's anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate to call. I mean it. Anything."

Leonard smiled. "You can call my boss and explain to him why I'm gonna be late to work today."

Ricky nodded. "I'd be happy to do that." He straightaway took out his phone and asked for the number. He took care of the business immediately and had a very friendly chat with Garcia's boss. He hung up and smiled. "You're good to go."

They shook hands again. "You are somethin' else, Ricky Kino."

Ricky shrugged. "No big deal. Always happy to help."

"I believe you."

Ricky looked around. "So, I can't tell you exactly what's up right now, but let me just say, your life around here is about to improve. I promise you."

Leonard smiled. "I'll look forward to it."

"Come to church tomorrow if you can. And one more thing. If you and your sweet wife can come up with a list of people in this apartment community who might need a helping hand to celebrate Christmas, that would be awesome."

Leonard's eyes moistened. "We will easily do that. My very sweet wife knows every single family in this place. She's like a mother hen to most of the kids."

"Your wife seems like an angel."

"Oh, she is. And apparently so is yours."

Ricky smiled. "Aren't we some lucky men?"

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December 14th, 11:30 AM PST, Saturday Morning

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

While Mark, young Eric and Logan finished off Ronny's office, most everyone else worked on the vestibule to make it the most fresh and welcoming it could be. And "Christmassy." Very "Christmassy," as ordered by the women. It would help if the stained glass window was in, but that wouldn't happen for at least another week, maybe longer. JoJo and Ronny were doing a walkthrough of the entire structure beginning downstairs in the community room. JoJo used his phone to dictate notes and take pictures.

Banny, Deuce, Bristol and Melody worked in the chapel. They dusted, mopped the hardwood floor, polished benches and planned where the fresh flowers would be placed when they arrived.

Several times Deuce maneuvered his way close to Melody and tried to strike up a conversation with her. Melody did her best to respond politely and pretend that he was just a normal, friendly guy.

Banny was in a bad mood. When he'd volunteered to help put the office together he'd been turned down. He was fuming at the moment as he thought about the

conversation. Those Adams guys, and Eric Kino too, they all thought they were better than him. He'd had access to the other office with no problem until they showed up. Suddenly, the door was kept locked and no entrance allowed except Reverend Clark, the Kinos and Bristol, who was the new office manager. Who the hell did they think they were? And now, they've created a second office for Reverend Clark. Banny had needed to know which one would contain the cabinet that held the offering money, and if they'd changed the lock to that cabinet.

He sat fuming as he thought about the conversation that happened a few minutes ago. "Why don't I help you move the stuff from the old office and get things organized?" he'd asked.

"Thanks, Banny, but we got this," young Eric said.

"Well, you know, Reverend Clark trusted me and I know the ins and outs of how things are supposed to be," Banny replied.

Mark Adams had turned and smiled from where he was working on something underneath the desk. "Well, Banny, things are gonna be run a little bit differently than they used to be."

Banny frowned. "Well, like, there's a trick to opening the money cabinet. The key is worn down and has to be turned just right. I can show you."

"I really appreciate your willingness to help, Banny," Mark Adams said. "But the money will no longer be kept in a cabinet. All the rules of how things are done are changing."

"Does Reverend Clark know that you are changing the way he does things? Because he's kinda set in his ways."

"Well, Reverend Clark has given us free rein to set things up for him in the most secure and efficient way. Think of it as the church now having completely new security and accounting procedures. But hey, the girls could use some help in the chapel."

It had taken Banny everything he had to not punch the guy in the mouth. He'd pretty much said that Banny himself is not allowed in the office anymore, yet Mark Adams and his kids had free access. It looked like he wasn't gonna be able to skim money from the church anymore. It'd been so easy. Like taking candy from a baby. The only silver lining was he still had all the old folks eating out of his hands. And soon, he'd have access to Mrs. Palma's safe, then he'd start working on offing her and marrying Bristol.

He looked up at Bristol as she worked polishing the new baby grand piano. She was obviously Filipino, like himself. In his opinion, her one and only beauty feature was her hair. It was thick and dark and slightly wavy and very long, almost to her waist. His eyes shifted over to her friend. Melody. Melody was hot. She was slim, feminine, with a tiny nose, beautiful smile, and pink lips. Her eyes weren't quite brown. They were, like, green or something. They seemed to change colors. Pretty little white girl—she got to him. He'd scared her the other day. He knew that, and he found that he liked her trembling and looking all scared. He liked that a lot. But he needed to keep that tamped down for now. Maybe after things calm down around here, he'd catch little Miss Melody alone.

He sighed and headed to speak to Bristol. He wanted to spend some alone time with her and work on seducing her so he could ensure that she agreed to marry him. He pasted a smile on his face and approached her. "Hey, babe," he said sweetly as he ran a finger

down her arm.

She turned and forced a smile. “Oh, hi, Banny. Looks like we’re almost finished.”

He nodded. “Whaddya say you and me go grab some lunch and spend the afternoon together. We haven’t had a chance to be alone for days now.”

Bristol tried to keep the smile on her face. She couldn’t help that her hands began to shake. “I, uh, I mean, um, I need to use the bathroom.” She turned and ran out of the chapel.

Melody watched her go and looked back at Banny. He came toward her immediately. She frowned at him. “Don’t talk to me,” she said and turned to leave, but he grabbed her wrist and jerked her around.

“You told her, didn’t you?”

Melody narrowed her eyes in anger. “Yes, I told her, but she doesn’t believe me. She’s totally in love with you and doesn’t think you can do anything wrong.”

Banny smiled. “Good. But something’s wrong. She’s been acting strange, and she just ran out of here like the place was on fire.”

Melody tried to jerk her hand free. When he wouldn’t let her go, she had to think fast. “I-I’ll go check on her. She’s probably just embarrassed to tell you that it’s that time of month.”

Logan came into the chapel. “Hey,” was all he said.

Banny let Melody go.

Melody ran toward Logan, her relief evident on her face. “I’m gonna go check on Bristol. She’s not feeling well.”

Logan nodded and watched her go. He drew a calming breath and moved toward Banny, his jaw set. “I don’t know what kind of game you’re playin’, buddy, but I’m only gonna tell you this one time. Don’t touch my girl. Don’t lay one finger on her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about. You tryin’ to pick a fight with me?”

“No. I’m not trying to fight, but I will. I come in here and I can see you holding onto her arm and I see her trying to pull away. Don’t touch her. Ever.”

“You jealous or something?”

“Hardly. Look, Bristol is Melody’s friend and you’re Bristol’s friend, and I’d like us all to get along, but I don’t tolerate anyone putting their hands on my girl. That’s just the way it is. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it, *buddy,”* he emphasized. His eyes narrowed. “But just so you know, I’m not afraid of you.”

Logan smiled and nodded. “Yeah, and you need to figure out that I’m not afraid of you either.” Logan turned and went to check on the girls.

Deuce watched him go and went down the aisle to talk to Banny. “That guy is not just the canary you said he is, Ban.”

Banny shrugged. “What? He sings and plays piano. He’s nothing.”

“You’re underestimating him, man. He’s a member of the Kino family, right? You think he doesn’t know how to fight?”

“He won’t be able to fight with a knife in his back, now will he?”

“You plannin’ on takin’ him out?”

“Naw, it’s just a fantasy.”

Deuce shook his head. “You need to steer clear of these Kino people.”

“Why? I’m not afraid of them. They act all high and mighty. It would be really fun to take them down a peg or two.”

“You’re talkin’ suicide. My advice is to follow the advice you gave to me. Stick to your original plan. You’ll walk away with a cool million. Don’t get greedy, and don’t get cocky.”

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December 14th, 12:30 PM PST, Saturday Afternoon

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Both Amari’s and Brittney’s eyes opened wide as the gate swung open and Mrs. Kino drove through the gate.

“Mom,” Taylor said. “Drive slow.”

Bree nodded.

“So,” Taylor began, “this is where we live and this is where you’re gonna live for a little while.” She pointed across the expanse of green. “This is the front yard, so there’s plenty of room to play ball or run races and play chase and stuff like that.”

“What’s chase?” Brittney asked.

Taylor sighed. “It’s a game where you try to catch each other. You’ll see. It’s fun. And see the big circular driveway? There’s plenty of room on it to do giant chalk drawings, or roller-skate or ride scooters.” She smiled as their eyes lit up. “And that’s the house.”

Amari’s eyes were like saucers. “It’s really big,” he mumbled.

She nodded. “It’s big but you’ll get used to it.”

The car came to a halt. Bree turned and smiled at the children. “Well, it might seem like a big house, but it’s a home where you are always completely welcome and loved and we want you to feel at home. Okay?”

Brittney smiled and Amari nodded.

“Brittney, can you undo your seatbelt?”

She nodded and fumbled with the button but finally got it. They got out of the car just as Ricky drove up. He got out and approached the children with a kind smile. “Hey there, guys.”

“Hi,” Brittney said.

Amari nodded.

Ricky knelt down in front of them. “Okay. Before we go in, let’s talk a minute. I want to do that so you know, you can always talk to us and tell us how you feel. I know—” He stopped and gestured to Bree and Taylor. “We know that this is a hard time for you two. Your mom is in the hospital trying to get well and here you are being taken care of by people you barely know in a big ol’ house that looks giant, but it’s gonna be okay. I promise.”

“How many people live here?” Brittney asked.

“Well, it’s me and Bree, and Taylor and our son Eric. And lots of times we have company, like Taylor’s boyfriend, Gabe spends the night sometimes, and Eric’s girlfriend Jordan spends the night sometimes, and Jordan has a little brother about your age and he spends the night sometimes. So, it won’t be lonely. There will be lots of people to play

with or just talk to."

"We gonna go to school?" Amari asked.

Ricky nodded. "Yes. You're gonna keep going to your same school, unless you want to go to a new school."

Amari shook his head. "I wanna go to my same school."

Ricky and Bree both nodded. "Then that's what you'll do. We'll drive you to school and pick you up each day," Ricky said.

"So, are you ready to go inside?" Bree asked.

They both nodded.

"Okay, let's go!" Taylor said excitedly.

They went inside and the children were fairly quiet as they took them on a tour of the home. Deciding to not overwhelm them, they didn't go downstairs yet. Upstairs in the hall, Bree opened the door just across the hall from the room where Gabe usually stayed. They went inside and walked slowly around the room.

"So, let me ask you a question," Bree said as she sat down on the queen-size bed. She patted the bed. "Come sit up here."

Amari sat down and Ricky lifted Brittney up onto the bed and sat her next to her brother.

Bree smiled at them. "I saw at your house that you two usually sleep together in the same room and in the same bed."

Brittney nodded her head. Amari didn't say anything.

"So, do you want to do that here too? Do you want to share this room and this bed? Or do you want to have your own rooms?"

Amari blinked. Ricky could easily read his facial expressions. It had never dawned on him that he might be able to have his own room. He smiled at the thought. He wanted his own room but he was torn between that and Brittney being alone.

"Have you ever had your own room before?" Ricky asked.

Both children shook their heads.

"Have you ever dreamed about or thought about having your own room with your own bed and a special place to put your own private things?" he asked.

Amari slowly nodded his head. Brittney smiled. "I thought about having a princess bed!"

Amari smiled at that and then rolled his eyes.

"Tell you what," Bree began. "You two share a room for a few days and we'll go on the computer and look at what kind of room you want, and you can decide later if you want to have your own room and what you want it to look like."

They both nodded.

"For now," Ricky said, "you both can sleep in this room, and the bathroom is right in there," he said as he walked to a door and opened it and left it open. "So, Miss Bree and Mrs. Garcia went into your apartment and gathered as many of your things as they could and put them into bags," he explained. "Amari, you come with me and help me carry your stuff in here and we'll all go through it together and see what else you might need, and we'll make a list. And while we carry it all in, maybe the ladies will make up something good to eat for lunch."

"We would be happy to do that," Bree said sweetly.

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Mark 10:14

"But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them,
'Let the children come to me; do not hinder them,
for to such belongs the kingdom of God.'"

Chapter Seventeen

December 14th, Saturday Afternoon
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

A few hours later, young Eric and Jordan arrived home and headed through the door to a very quiet house.

"I wonder where everyone is," Jordan said.

"Me too. Are you hungry?"

"Maybe a little, but I don't want to eat and get full and then I won't have room for our birthday reservation at *The Bayside Grill.* It's an early dinner time."

He smiled. "Ya know, that is a very sweet and thoughtful birthday present. Thank you so much, Two-three."

She shrugged. "You're so welcome, but that's not your present."

"Oh really? Hmm, what did you get me?"

"I'll give it to you at dinner." Her expression fell. When she'd bought his gift, she'd been pretty excited about it. But the more she thought about it, it was just a dumb gift. But really, what do you get a guy who has everything, or could buy anything? Literally anything. He could buy his own island if he wanted to. She sighed. Well, he'll understand the sentiment behind it.

"What's wrong?" young Eric said with a smile.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Are you tired?"

"A little."

He nodded. "We were out late last night. Got up early this morning. Did a demo. Worked hard at the church. Why don't you go up and take a nap? We have a few hours before we have to be at the *Grill*."

She yawned. "I think I will do that. Just a quick power nap would probably help a lot." She shook her head. "I don't know how you people do this every day."

"We don't. We're not always this busy. But we'll get through it. I'm gonna have a cookie and a glass of raw milk, check in with my parents wherever they are, and I might join you for that little power nap."

She smiled. "Okay." She came to him, put her arms around his neck. "Three, have I told you how much I love you today?"

He smiled. "Several times."

"I'm sorry if I'm being too mushy, but sometimes it feels like my heart might explode."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Yes, because I feel the same way about you." He put his hands on her waist and

pulled her forward and lowered his head and softly pressed his lips to hers. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. “At this moment, I’m so happy. This amazing feeling, this human experience of being with the girl I love, of having her return those feelings, I mean...” He shook his head. “All I can do is say, thank You, dear Lord. I’m so grateful for this gift that is Jordan Brooks, soon to be Jordan Kino. So completely grateful.” He kissed her again, pulled away, and smiled. “Now, go rest. I’ll be there soon.”

Sighing, she turned, grabbed the dress bag they’d brought in from the car and hurried up the stairs.

Smiling, he watched her go, grabbed a cookie, drank down the milk, went down the hall and knocked on his parents’ door. There was no answer, so he opened the door and peeked in. They were not sleeping. Hmm, this was a puzzle. He pulled out his phone and texted his dad.

~~Hey dad where r u?

~ Beach

Young Eric headed out. He stood on the deck and scanned the beach. His father was pointing to something out in the water with one hand, his other hand on the shoulder of young Amari. Eric smiled. Amari and Brittney didn’t realize it yet, but their lives were going to improve a thousandfold. They were going to know what it feels like to be loved unconditionally. To have enough to eat. To have clean clothes to wear. To not live in fear of some man smacking them around, or of coming home and trying to figure out if your mother is sleeping, passed out, overdosed or dead.

Young Eric headed down to join them. Amari looked up as he approached.

“Hey, Dad,” young Eric said and then turned and smiled at Amari. “Hey, ‘Mari! You remember me?”

Amari nodded.

Young Eric held out his hand. Amari timidly offered his and Eric shook it heartily. “Wow, good job. That’s how a man shakes hands. Good and strong.”

Amari smiled.

“Amari,” Ricky began. “Remember, young Eric is my eldest son, so while you’re here, he’ll be like your big brother.”

Eric nodded. “That’s right, and if you need anything or just wanna talk or play, or go somewhere, you come see me. Okay?”

Amari nodded.

Eric knelt down so he didn’t look so intimidating. He looked into the boy’s eyes. “Hey, I know it’s been a hard day, but I promise, everything is gonna be okay. My mom and dad, they’re the best. And we’re gonna have so much fun.”

Young Eric stood and looked at his father. “Got your work cut out for you,” he said in Mandarin.

Ricky nodded. “Ni shì duì de.” *You’re right about that.*

“Well, anything you need from me. Let me know.”

“Thanks, son. You and Jordan heading out soon?”

“In a few hours. Gonna go take a power nap. Where’s Mom?”

“She’s with Brittney in the bedroom across from Gabe’s.”

“Okay, well, I’ll go check on her.”

"Thank you. We'll be in soon."

Young Eric nodded and smiled at Amari. "See you later, Amari."

Amari smiled. He watched the guy run quickly up the long stairs that led from the beach to the house.

Upstairs, young Eric poked his head into Brittney's room and had to smile. Both the little girl and his mother were fast asleep. Brittney was under the covers. Bree lay next to her on top of the covers, her arm draped across the little girl, Taylor's old *Charlotte's Web* book lying on the bed. He doubted that Brittney's own mother had ever taken the time to cuddle with her for a nap on a Saturday afternoon. He quietly walked into the room, lifted the warm fuzzy blanket from the chair by the window and gently covered his mother.

Bree glanced up at him when she felt the weight of the blanket. She smiled. "Thank you, sweetie."

Eric bent down and kissed her cheek. "Love you, Mom," he whispered, then quickly left the room.

Next stop, he peeked into Taylor's room. She, too, was sound asleep. He started to head into Jordan's room, but realized he probably didn't smell very good. He'd sweated a lot during the demo, then worked hard at the church. Quickly, he went into his own room, took a quick shower, pulled on some comfy sweats and headed in to see his girl.

Jordan was not asleep. She was blow-drying her long, blond hair. He stood in the door of the bathroom and watched. She smiled at him in the mirror. His eyes wandered over her. Her hair had grown quite a bit since he'd met her almost four months ago. When he first met her, her hair had fallen over her shoulders. Now, it pretty much reached the middle of her back. It was not all the same length. It was not all the same color. It was all blond, but lighter on the ends, darker underneath, shiny and beautiful. She bent over to dry the underside, her hair hanging down toward the floor. He shook his head. Everything she did made him ache for her.

She wore a yellow T-shirt and some gray sweat pants that said UCLA on the leg. Her mouth was in a pout as she tried to run her hand through her hair to make sure it was dry. Finally, she turned off the dryer, laid it on the counter and picked up her brush.

"Let me," he said softly.

"Nope. No one messes with my hair. I'm very tender-headed."

"I'll be gentle," he said softly and held out his hand.

She sighed, placed the brush in his hand.

He took her by the shoulders and turned her straight to face the mirror. Being very careful and very gentle, he slowly pulled the brush through the long tresses. When he came to a tangle, he very gently worked his way through it, holding the hair in his hand above the tangle so if he tugged, she wouldn't feel it. It didn't take long before he was fanning the sleek hair all out around her shoulders, almost playing with it. His eyes met hers in the mirror.

"Ever thought about a career as a hairstylist?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Never."

"Well, Three, if your movie bombs, you would be very much in demand as a hairstylist. Girls would line up for miles just to get you to brush their hair."

"Please don't say stuff like that."

"That girls would line up to have you do their hair?"

"No. *If the movie bombs*. There is power in words."

"Oops. My bad. Cancel, cancel," she said.

He chuckled, set the brush down, and picked her up, carried her to the bed, juggled her over to one hip as he pulled down the covers, laid her down and snuggled in beside her. He pulled the covers up over them both, then whispered in her ear, "How much time do you need to dress?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Hey Siri, set a timer for forty-five minutes," he said.

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her in close. "Sleep," he whispered in her ear. "I got you."

She sighed and contentedly closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax in his embrace. This was heaven.

✝✝✝

December 14th, 5:00 PM PST, Saturday Evening

Bayside Grill, Newport Beach, California

Jordan turned into the parking lot, swung into a space and braked abruptly.

Young Eric blew out a breath. "Now, that was an adventure."

She giggled. "Thanks for letting me drive your fancy car. It has so much more power and pickup than my old, slow car. Your car is really fun to drive."

He smiled. "Ya know, Two-three, you were going twenty miles per hour over the speed limit out on the highway."

She shrugged. "Well, I was trying to keep up with traffic. And there were still people who were flying past us."

He shook his head. "Whatever. Well, I only let you drive because you insisted that *you* were taking *me* out to dinner. But fair warning, sweet cheeks, *I'm* taking *you* home. Hand me the keys."

She reluctantly handed the keys to him.

He smiled. "And stay right there because *I'm* gonna come around and open your door."

She smiled. "I'll just stay right here."

He got out of the car, went around and pulled her from the car. They headed into the restaurant. Eric opened the door for Jordan and looked up in surprise as he came into the restaurant. A giant banner was draped across the bar area. Happy 21st Birthday Eric Kino III.

The entire restaurant—staff and patrons alike—stopped what they were doing and applauded, some of them even stood.

Eric turned to look at all the faces. Most of them were strangers. He smiled and shook his head in disbelief. He then put his hands together and bowed slightly, then tapped his heart, acknowledging their kindness and how it touched him.

Jordan giggled and looked up at him. "Surprise!"

"Did you plan all of this?"

"No. When I made the reservation the Vaughns insisted they be able to do it up big."

"Well, this is amazing. Thank you, babe."

Cal and Ellie Vaughn, the owners of *Bayside Grill,* came forward and hugged Eric and shook his hand.

"Eric, we were so delighted when Jordan called and made the reservation. She said she wanted to celebrate your birthday here because it was the first place you ever took her for dinner, and because at that time we invited you to come celebrate your coming of age here," Ellie gushed.

Cal smiled. "Welcome, Eric. We're so proud of you and all you've accomplished. And by the way, we prayed very hard for you back in October when you'd been abducted. Then you came back and won the challenge in a big way, and now you're a big movie star."

"Well, not yet. We'll see how it does. It releases this coming Friday."

"Believe me, it's gonna be a blockbuster. Everyone I know is talking about going to the movies this next weekend."

"Well, now, come on back, you two," Ellie said. "We have a lovely table for you back in the party room."

They walked through the large restaurant. Several people stood and shook his hand as they passed, patted him on the back and congratulated him on making it to twenty-one.

Eric's eyes widened as they got to the back room. JoJo, Logan, and Melody stood around the table.

"Happy birthday, brother," JoJo and Logan said.

"Happy birthday, young Eric," Melody said.

Young Eric stopped, shook his head and sniffed. "Guys," was all he could get out.

He looked down at Jordan who was smiling up at him so sweetly.

"Come on, you two. Sit down," Logan said.

Eric seated Jordan and then Logan seated Eric.

"This is amazing," Eric said softly. "Thank you guys for being here. Thank you, Jordan. This is an amazing gesture."

Jordan smiled and took his hand. "Well, it really wasn't just me. I mean, I was having a therapy session with Grandmaster Kino and I mentioned to him that I wished I could do something really nice, like take you out to a nice dinner. But I couldn't even afford to do that. And he said he would like to make that happen for me. So, all of this is already paid for by your grandfather. The only thing I did was call JoJo to get him and Logan and Mel here and then I drove you here."

He chuckled. "Yes, you did," he said softly. "Thank you so much, babe. This is an amazing gift."

"The only problem is we have to be at Taylor's dance by 8:15," Jordan said.

"That's plenty of time," JoJo put in. "We'll have dinner and celebrate here for a couple of hours and then go see TayTay, and then you two can finally be alone."

Logan smiled. "Yeah, but ya still have to get some sleep because don't forget, we have a very important church service to attend in the morning."

"How could we forget that?" young Eric said. "I'm really looking forward to seeing who actually shows up, and to listen to the sermon you guys have prepared with Reverend Clark and hear you sing, Logan."

"It's gonna be awesome," Melody added. "Bristol said she can't thank you enough. She's very grateful. And, by the way, she's also grateful for the protection."

They all nodded.

"Did you get the video of what Banny said to you earlier today before Logan came into the chapel?" Jordan asked.

"Yes, we did," JoJo answered. "And also what he and Deuce said after Logan left the chapel. He's really a very bad guy, and almost every word he says is incriminating. He's a real piece of work."

"He's goin' down," young Eric added. He smiled. "But let's not talk about that. Let's talk about how nice it would be if JoJo had a girl too."

JoJo shrugged. "Don't want one until I can get my arm working."

"When do you start on the PT?" Jordan asked.

"On Monday I can start taking the sling off four times a day and practice swinging my arm, passively. Then it will probably be after Christmas that I can begin range-of-motion exercises."

"Does it still hurt?" young Eric asked.

JoJo nodded. "Yeah. Aunt Jeffy gave me some of her meds and also a tea she makes for the pain and it works pretty good, but it makes me sleepy, so I haven't taken any today."

"So, are you in pain right now?" Melody asked.

He nodded. "A little. No biggie."

A server arrived with a tray of shot glasses. "Hello, everyone. These are from the Vaughns." He lifted the two shot glasses on the left side. "These are the real deal, a luxury Scotch whiskey, and they are only for Eric and JoJo." He set them down in front of the two guys. He smiled as he passed out the others. "The rest of you, I was told to tell you to pretend. Your glasses have ginger ale."

Jordan giggled. "Thank you."

He smiled. "My pleasure. Happy birthday, Eric, and have a good night, everyone."

They thanked him as he took his leave.

JoJo immediately lifted his glass. "To you, Eric Kino III, my cousin, my brother, my first friend—may you continue to overcome the darkness, may you continue to bring your light to the world, may you and Jordan continue to be blessed, and may your movie make all kinds of records and bless people the way it blessed us last night."

"Hear, hear, and amen," Logan said loudly.

"Amen," the girls repeated and they all emptied their glasses.

Melody giggled. "Remember at Alec and Desi's wedding when someone spiked the punch?"

"Oh, yes, I remember it very well," Logan said.

"Was I just terrible?" Melody asked.

"No, you weren't terrible at all. I remember it so well because it was the first night I kissed you."

"She also asked you to take her to your bed," Jordan said.

"Jordan! Why did you bring that up?" Melody whined.

Jordan giggled. "My bad." She smiled and looked around at the three very macho

guys sitting at the table. Who wouldn't want to be kissed by one of these guys? They were amazing. Handsome, yes. Sexy, yes. Strong, yes. Confident, yes. But mainly it was their light. They were so filled with light. She loved being around them. She glanced over at Melody who was looking at her.

Melody leaned over and whispered. "We are so lucky."

Jordan nodded. "Blessed," she whispered back.

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December 14th, 6:30 PM PST, Saturday Evening
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

An Ameritech SUV pulled up to the house and two handsome boys climbed out. Lyle and Phillip Keith, Taylor's dates for the Christmas dance, headed up the large, circular front steps, but didn't have a chance to knock before the door opened. They were still trying to get over the fact that a beautiful movie star was now part of their circle of friends, and here she was, opening the door to invite them in.

"Hello, boys!" she said brightly. "Don't you look so handsome!"

"Thank you, ma'am," Phillip said.

Lyle smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. Kino!"

"Let me see your hat," Bree asked Phillip as she leaned forward and peered closely at the red knit cap.

He stood still for her. "It's, uh, it's a *Rose Bowl* hat."

"Oh, that's perfect. And how are you feeling?"

"Pretty much back to normal. It'll be a few more weeks before they do another CT scan, and then I might be okay to be a little more active."

"And do you think they'll let you play football again next year?"

"I hope so. I don't see why not. I also play baseball, so, that starts up in February. I hope I'll be cleared to play."

"Me too," Bree said. "Come on in and I'll tell Taylor you're here. She should be ready any minute." Bree led them to the den.

Ricky looked up from the tablet he was looking at with Amari and Brittney, where they'd been looking at different movies the kids had always wanted to see. Some of them were not acceptable. A few of them were, but they'd been having a discussion as to why some were not acceptable.

Ricky stood. "Hey, guys!"

"Hello, Mr. Kino," the boys said at the same time.

"So, you might remember these two kiddos from Tuesday night, but this is Amari and this is Brittney. They're gonna be staying with us for a while."

Lyle smiled. "Hey, Amari. Hey, Brittney. Wow, you know, you guys sure got lucky."

"Why?" Amari asked.

"Uh, because everyone in the world would love a chance to spend time living with the Kinos."

Ricky chuckled. "Thanks for that, but I'm sure that's not true. However, we're really glad to have these two staying with us." His hand rested on Amari's shoulder.

"Hey, guys!"

They all turned as Taylor appeared in the doorway of the den.

The boys stood motionless, staring at the beautiful girl.

The dress was a deep crimson red, almost on the verge of maroon. It was short, coming to about mid-thigh, with a full skirt. The shoulder straps were scalloped lace with sparkles and the midriff was the same sparkly material. The bodice and the skirt were several layers of a flowy red sheer material.

"Wow, honey, you look beautiful," Ricky said.

"Thanks, Daddy." Taylor smiled at Brittney. "Whaddy think, Britt? Do you like my dress?"

Brittney smiled. "You are beautiful like a princess!"

Taylor knelt down beside her. "Oohh, thank you, sweet girl. Tell ya what, next week, let's sit together and see if we can find *you* a princess dress that you like and we'll get it and you can wear it on Christmas Day to honor Jesus."

Brittney's eyes lit up.

Taylor stood up and smiled at her dates. "You guys look awesome."

"Uh, you do too," Phillip said. He shook his head. "That Gabe is a lucky guy."

Taylor giggled. "That reminds me. He wanted a picture of the three of us before we go." She reached inside her tiny red purse that was only big enough to carry a small wallet, cell phone, lip gloss, and tissues. Handing her phone to her mother, she smiled. "Here, Mom, will you take a picture?"

Bree smiled. "Or two. Yeah."

Bree took several pics, sent a few to the family chat and handed the phone back to Taylor. "Okay, kiddos. Have a great time. We'll be there to see you dance at 8:15 as promised."

"Okay," Taylor said. "Let's go!" She went to grab the dress bag that had her costume and dance shoes in it.

"I'll carry that," Lyle said.

"Thanks," Taylor answered.

Phillip nodded at Ricky. "Nice to see you, sir," he said.

"You too. You guys take good care of my baby girl."

Taylor rolled her eyes.

Both Lyle and Phillip nodded. "Yes, sir."

Phillip held out his arm and Taylor hooked her hand in the crook of his arm and they headed to the door. Phillip opened the door for Taylor.

Ricky and Bree watched the three as they went down the front steps and got in the car. They smiled. These were the moments that you cherish as your kids grow up. Bree snapped off a few pics on her own phone. It was hard to watch one's children grow up.

At the school, the SUV pulled up and the boys helped Taylor from the car. Taylor had a quick flash of her and Gabe standing there in that spot as he explained to her how the bad guys wheeled her out of the school in a wheelchair and loaded her into the van right there, right in the spot she was now standing. She smiled. She and Gabe had done some therapy, some "bathroom therapy," they'd called it, so that Taylor could get past the trauma of what had happened last August.

Inside the gym, the place looked amazing. Taylor had a lot to do with that, because

she'd described in detail how *Pine Forest High School's* prom committee had worked magic to create an elegant space. The seniors who were in charge of the Christmas Dance decided that they could do even better, given their superior resources. Taylor looked around and had to say, they did a great job.

Several of the girls she'd be dancing with came rushing to greet her as she came in, including Amber, the cheer captain.

"Taylor, you look amazing," the girls all twittered.

"Thanks, you do too. Everyone looks so festive and pretty."

"Except it looks like we all got the same idea to wear red," one of the girls complained.

Taylor shrugged. "So? That's not a big deal. I mean, it's the holiday season and red is a natural choice of color to be festive. So, we all have good taste. Each dress is different and I think we all killed it."

"Well, I wouldn't be caught dead wearing all the same color as everyone else."

They all turned to see Alexandra's frowning face. She was beautiful in a very sparkly silver floor-length gown. Alexandra liked to be known as the richest girl in the school. She wore only designer clothes, designer shoes, designer jewelry and carried only designer handbags. She was always immaculately groomed. Taylor wasn't impressed by her wealth and was sure the girl had no idea how much the Kinos were worth. Not that Taylor would ever play that game. As far as Taylor was concerned, money meant nothing, especially if it means everything to someone. Alexandra had never tried to speak to Taylor at all during the four years of high school. She wondered why Alexandra chose tonight to do it.

Taylor smiled kindly. "Why?" she asked her.

"Why? Isn't it obvious?" Alexandra asked. The girl rolled her eyes like she couldn't believe Taylor would even question her.

"Yes, it is obvious to me," Taylor said. "I just wanted to see if you knew why you think that. So, tell me, Alexandra, why wouldn't you be caught dead wearing the same color as anyone else?"

Phillip and Lyle looked at each other, their eyebrows raised. Was the feisty Taylor Kino about to go off on this girl?

"Because I don't want to follow the crowd. I'm above all that. I want to stand out from the crowd."

Taylor nodded. "That much was understood. But why? Why do you need to stand out from the crowd?"

"I just told you why. If you have some ridiculous point you'd like to make, by all means, please try to make it."

"Okay," Taylor said. "The reason you wanna stand out is so that you can get attention. You need the attention. You thrive on the attention. And that kind of thinking is so much like the crowd. Like the norm. Everyone wants to stand out, and so, that makes you one of the crowd. Or sheep as my father likes to call it. Most people want to stand out and get all the attention. People want to be famous.

"And then there are people like us girls," she said, gesturing to the other girls in red. She frowned. "Or, well, that's not fair for me to speak for them, so I'll just use myself

as an example. I don't care that I don't stand out in the color of my dress. What matters is me as an individual. What matters is what I think inside my own head. You feel like you have to stand on things that are trivial. Dress color. The car you drive. The people you befriend. I just think that you wanting to stand out from the crowd is so very much doing what you say you don't want to do; you're being like the crowd, like the majority."

Taylor glanced up at the girl and saw that she'd hit home. She felt immediately contrite. She had no idea why she decided to go off on her. She sighed. "Look, Alexandra, let's not ruin an awesome night that's just barely started. I have to say, in all honesty, you look amazing, beautiful and fantastic. And you do stand out, and that's cool. Can we forget this silly conversation and just have a good time?"

Alexandra turned up her nose. Then sighed. "You do look very pretty too, Taylor. Yes, let's have a good time."

"Good. Let me introduce my dates to everyone. This is Phillip and this guy is his younger brother, Lyle. They are good friends of our family and they were so kind to escort me tonight."

Phillip and Lyle offered their hands to the girls all standing there. While they did, some guys walked up including Lance. They were introduced again and they shook hands with the guys.

Lance asked Phillip and Lyle what school they went to, got talking about football, and that got them talking and laughing and bonding.

Finally, Phillip asked Taylor to dance. One of the cheerleaders asked Lyle to dance with her and the ice was broken.

Several dances later they were having a great time until one of the chaperones approached to speak with Taylor and Phillip. She wasn't smiling, but Taylor smiled at her anyway.

"I'm sorry, but you are breaking the dress code, young man."

Phillip frowned. "I am?"

"Yes, *you* are. Did you not read the dress code?"

"Um, no, because I don't go to this school."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"We were allowed to invite people from other schools. I invited him."

"What is your name, young lady?"

"Taylor."

The woman turned back to Phillip. "Well, Taylor should have told you that there are no hats allowed."

Taylor rolled her eyes. "I didn't tell him because I saw that rule printed up in the program and I got special permission for Phillip to wear his hat."

"Special permission for a hat? How silly. I'm sorry. No one made me aware of any such exception."

"Well, I spoke with Mr. Jenkins, the assistant principal. He said it would be fine for Phillip to wear his hat, ya see, because he just recently had brain surgery."

"Is that so?"

"I don't lie," Taylor said quickly.

"Prove it."

"What? Are you kidding me?" Taylor said, not very respectfully.

"If you don't prove it, I will have to ask you to leave."

"I can show you the scar," Phillip offered.

The lady nodded.

"No," Taylor stopped him. She glared at the woman. "He doesn't have to show you the scar. I already got permission from Mr. Jenkins. You have no authority over me or him."

"You don't want him to show it, so, I'm thinking you must be lying."

"I don't lie," Taylor insisted. "But he doesn't have to prove it to you or to anyone, and asking him to show the scar he's wearing the hat to cover is a violation of his privacy. I already have permission for him to wear the hat. Period."

"Taylor, I'll just show her. It's no big deal."

"I understand, Phil, but it's become a matter of principle now," Taylor said loudly. "I don't even know who this lady is. She has no right to come over here and demand to see your scar. She should take my word for it. The fact that she has no idea who she's dealing with, when everyone at this school knows who I am, that tells me that she might just be someone who snuck into the dance to cause trouble."

The woman gasped. "You, young lady, are very rude."

Taylor's eyes narrowed. "*You* are the one being rude, and when the school officials realize that you approached one of their students to simply harass them, they are not gonna be very happy with you. And just so you know, my father and mother and brother will be here soon to see me dance in a floorshow, and when I tell them what you tried to do, that you tried to throw me out of the dance, well, I don't even know what's gonna happen. But I do know it won't be too good for you."

The woman blinked several times. "We'll just see about that." She turned and rushed away.

Taylor blinked up at Phillip. "I am so sorry. I'm so ashamed that happened." She blinked at the tears that threatened. "Please forgive me."

"Hey, Taylor, it's okay. Karens are everywhere. It appears even here at your fancy school."

Taylor gave a soft laugh. "Yeah, at my fancy school that I am currently so very ashamed of that I could just, ugh, I don't know what."

"It's okay. Really. My feelings aren't hurt. And I think it's very cool of you to be so thoughtful that you got permission for my hat ahead of time. You are waay cool, Taylor Kino."

"Yeah you really are," Lyle said from behind. "And BTW, I got that all on video."

"You did?" Taylor asked with a giant smile.

"Yes, I did."

"Lyle, you are also waay cool," Phillip said.

He grinned. "I know, right?"

"Will you send that to me?" Taylor asked.

He looked down at his phone. "Yep."

Taylor watched her phone, waited for it to come in and immediately sent it to Gabe, along with the message. "Was I wrong?"

Amber came running toward Taylor. “There you are!”

Taylor smiled. “Is it time to go get ready?”

“Yes. And I still can’t find Madison.”

Taylor smiled calmly. “Okay, well, she’s a pro. I’m sure she’ll be back there in a minute. It’s okay, Amber. Take a deep breath. Your dance is gonna be fabulous. I’ll be right there.”

“Okay.” She hurried off.

Taylor handed her phone to Lyle. “Thanks for agreeing to live-stream for me. If you want, if you don’t mind, you can do a little personal live-stream in about fifteen minutes and tell them who you are and that you’ll be live-streaming our dance and for them to be looking for it in fifteen minutes. Actually, please do that for sure, so that you can be sure you get on the air correctly.”

Lyle smiled. “I got this, Taylor. Go get ready.”

She grinned. “Okay. Fingers crossed that Lance doesn’t drop me,” she said as she turned and motioned over to Agent Ward. He moved forward. “I need to go get ready for the dance.”

He nodded. “I’ll be outside the locker room doors.”

Taylor smiled sweetly. “Thank you.” She scurried away and the agent followed at a discreet distance. Almost as soon as Taylor left them, a couple of younger guys, maybe closer to Lyle’s age, approached the two Keith boys.

“Whazzup,” one of them said.

Phillip nodded and smiled. “Not much.”

“So, like, you don’t go to this school, right?”

“Right,” Lyle replied.

The boys smiled at each other.

“Nice hat,” the other boy said. “But like, does it have a flower on it?”

Phillip nodded. “Actually, yes, it does have a flower on it. It’s a rose, because it’s a *Rose Bowl* hat.”

The boy moved closer to examine the hat and before Phil realized what he was doing, he grabbed the hat and took off.

“Hey!” Phil yelled and took off after him with Lyle right behind. However, the second guy rammed into Phillip and sent him down.

He tumbled over. Lyle threw himself down next to Phil. “Phil! Are you okay?”

Phillip rolled to his back and put his hand up to check his head. “Yeah, I think so.”

Lyle grabbed his arm and started to help him up, but two strong hands lifted him under his arms and stood him up.

“There ya go, buddy. You okay?” Lance asked.

Phillip and Lyle looked up at him. Phillip nodded. “I think so.”

“Did ya hit your head?”

“No. I’m okay. Except that kid stole my hat.”

“It’ll be back in just a minute. I sent Jackson after the little freak.”

“Jackson?”

“My running back.”

They both looked up to see Jackson walking calmly back, brushing dirt off the hat

in his hand. He smiled and handed it to Phillip.

Phillip nodded. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem.”

“So, we were on our way to go get changed for the dance when we saw those punks mess with you. Sorry about that. I think they’re freshmen.”

Jackson laughed. “Yep, and the one is gonna have some fresh— bruises.”

Phil smiled then shook his head. “I really don’t understand how one little hat can cause so much trouble.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Some chaperone tried to throw us out of the dance earlier because the hat is against dress code. Taylor tried to explain to the lady that she got special permission for the hat, because I just had brain surgery. The lady wasn’t buying it and walked away all in a huff.”

Lance snorted. “Can’t believe someone would actually try to throw a Kino out of the school dance. Who was the chaperone?” Lance asked.

He looked around. “Umm, that lady over there with the blue sweater on and the scowl on her face looking like her life must suck.”

Lance chuckled. “Don’t know her. Do you, Jack?”

He shook his head. “Nope, and I know everyone, so, she’s probably a parent of a freshman.”

“Whaddya bet her kid is the one who took your hat?” Lance asked.

“Well, that would just be stupid,” Jackson said.

Lance nodded. “Yeah it is. But I’ve done some stupid things in my life too, so, whatever. Hey, Jackson, we’d better get going before Amber has a heart attack. See you guys.”

“Thanks for the assist.”

“No problem.”

Lyle looked at the time and smiled. “I’m about to go live for a minute. Watch and see how I do.”

Phillip watched his little brother. The two brothers were very different. Phillip was quieter, more serious. Lyle was outgoing and not shy one bit.

Lyle smiled at the camera. “Hey, everyone! So, my name is Lyle Keith. I’m a friend of Taylor’s and I’m gonna be handling the livestream of her dance in about fifteen minutes, so I just wanted to make sure I can get on with no problem. And wow, there are a lot of people on here already. Sorry, I’m not Taylor.” He chuckled. “But she will be on here in about fifteen minutes so be on the lookout for the notification. Oh, and...” He reversed the camera. “That’s my brother, Phillip. Say hi, Phil.”

Phillip waved at the camera. Lyle turned the phone back. “Okay, so see you in a few.”

He ended the livestream and smiled at his brother. “That was fun.”

Phillip only shook his head.

“There were, like, forty thousand people on the livestream in about two minutes. That is freakin’ amazing!”

Phillip shrugged. “I bet they were looking forward to seeing Taylor’s dance and

instead, they got you."

Lyle laughed.

A few minutes later they looked up to see the Kinos enter the gym. Mrs. Kino was holding Brittney's hand and Amari walked right beside her. Ricky was right behind. And right behind him were young Eric, Jordan, JoJo, Logan, and Melody. There was a huge murmur as they came in and found Phil and Lyle.

"Hey, guys," Ricky said. "How's it going?"

"Well, it hasn't been boring," Phillip replied.

Lyle went on to quickly explain everything that had taken place.

Bree was ready to do battle and Ricky had to calm her down. "If you want to confront her, wait until after Taylor's dance."

Bree drew a deep breath and nodded. "That's a good idea because I need to pray away this anger for a minute."

Jordan and Melody giggled. They knew that Breanna Adams was a force to be reckoned with.

Ricky glanced at Phil. "So, kiddo, are you sure you're okay?"

"I think so."

"Any dizziness? Headache?"

"No, sir."

Ricky frowned and made a quick call. "Hey, Jeffy, do you think you can do a remote for Phil, make sure he's okay? He, uh, took a tumble."

Phillip watched and listened to the conversation, intrigued by what was taking place.

Ricky ended the call and smiled at Phil. "Jeffy says you're good to go. Blood pressure is steady. No trauma. No dizziness."

Phillip smiled. "Wow. I mean, that's amazing."

Ricky smiled. "I agree."

"Well, I'm supposed to go video from that stepladder over there, so, I'll see ya afterward," Lyle said.

Several people approached to greet the Kinos. Amazingly, the chaperone from hell also approached. She waited her turn and then smiled sweetly at the Kinos.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," Bree answered, her eyebrows raised.

Ricky whispered in her ear. "Deep breath, baby."

Bree drew a deep breath.

The woman smiled a condescending fake smile. "I just need to inform you that I'm afraid there are no children allowed in the dance."

Bree almost choked and stepped forward.

Ricky immediately intervened. "Hello. What's your name?"

"My name is Jessica Rowe and I was asked to help chaperone this event."

"It's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Rowe. My name is Ricky Kino. This is my wife, Breanna Adams Kino."

Her expression changed and Ricky knew she finally realized who she was dealing with. Ricky smiled. "Since you were asked to help chaperone the event, I'm assuming there are other chaperones here too?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"And I'm thinking, at least one of the school administrators is also here?"

"Yes. Mr. Strider is here."

"And since I haven't ever met you before then I'm thinking you are a parent of a new student?"

"Well, yes, I mean he's a freshman. But he's not just any freshman."

Ricky nodded. "I certainly understand that because my daughter is a senior, but she's not just any senior." He smiled again. "I'm asking about other chaperones and school admins because I'm thinking you don't have sole authority over this event. Actually I know you don't. In other words, what you say doesn't necessarily go."

She gasped and drew her shoulders up in surprise.

He smiled. "It's okay. Calm down. I have another question. You were *asked* to chaperone or you volunteered to chaperone?"

"Well, yes, I volunteered."

"Why?"

"Why? What a silly question. Of course because I want to be active in my son's school and help any way I can."

"So, how do you think accusing my daughter of lying, and then trying to kick my daughter out of a Christmas dance, the last Christmas dance she'll be involved in since she's a senior, and then harassing the young man who is a good friend of our family, how do you think that is being helpful?"

She stammered a bit. "Oh, that was your daughter. Well, uh, well, I mean, Mr. Kino, there are rules and we were told to enforce the rules."

"What are the reasons for the rules?"

"Well, to keep the children safe of course. And to teach them good manners."

"Well then, their safety was not threatened by a hat and since their safety was not in jeopardy, I'm going to assume you were attempting to teach them good manners. But you see, Mrs. Rowe, in order to teach good manners you have to *have* good manners. Coming out and accusing a perfect stranger of lying to you is extremely rude, don't ya think?"

"Well, I mean..."

"You had no idea who she was, that much is evident. She could've been a lowlife scumbag or a pillar of the community, but you assumed she was lying."

"I assumed because she was breaking the rules."

"She told you she had permission for the hat. Did you even think that maybe she was telling the truth and that truth could be easily verified? Did you ever give her the benefit of the doubt, especially considering that you and your son were new to this school? No. You did not. Why? Because you want to be in charge, you want to feel important. Being a chaperone makes you feel big and you wanted to establish your authority. But you have no authority to override the school's permission, Mrs. Rowe. None whatsoever. Now, I'm going to give YOU the benefit of the doubt that you simply got carried away for a few moments. I know you want to win this battle, but I'm telling you right now, you will not win.

"Now, about my little ones here, the children you say are not allowed. Just because

they don't fit into the age limits of freshmen to seniors, thirteen to eighteen, doesn't mean they're not allowed. I've already spoken with the principal, the *head* principal, and also to Mr. Strider, and explained that these children were abandoned this morning and we took them in, but we had promised our daughter we would come and see her dance in the floor show tonight and we also promised the principal that our family would be a part of this show tonight. We couldn't leave the children with a babysitter in their current emotionally distressed state of mind. He understands that we won't be here very long and they will stay right by our sides. We were given not only his permission but his blessing. Now, you seemed to have tried your very best to ruin this evening for our family, but don't worry, we don't let little things like this get to us, and we don't hold grudges, which is a very good thing for you."

"That sounds like a threat," she said quickly.

Ricky shook his head. "If by 'threat' you mean I'm telling you that there will be consequences if you continue to harass my family, you are correct. You need to cut your losses and go away. The show will be starting soon and I'd better not have to miss one second of it."

"Mr. Kino, let me just tell you this...."

Bree couldn't take it another minute and stepped forward. "Go away, Mrs. Rowe. Now," Bree said between clenched teeth. "You lost the battle. Go away. Don't say another word. Go away. Go complain to Mr. Strider, or to someone who cares what you have to say. If you think you're helping your son by making enemies of our family, you are wrong. And when he finds out who it is his own mother was harassing, I don't think he'll be very happy. You're not doing him any favors."

"How dare you..."

"You've been dismissed," Ricky said, cutting her off.

"Attention, everyone! For those who don't know, my name is Mr. Strider and I'm the vice-principal of *Brookside High*. Welcome to our Christmas formal dance. We have a few people to thank before we introduce to you tonight's entertainment. First, thank you to our senior class president, Shania Little, and her committee who worked so hard to make this gym look like a palace. I think they did a great job and let's give them a round of applause."

He waited for a few seconds. "They asked me to thank the Freilands and the Kinos who donated the decorations *and* provided the amazing hors d'oeuvres. We understand those were made by a good friend of the Kinos, Jewell Brooks, who is an incredible chef, and will be opening her own restaurant in January. I don't know about you, but I'm gonna be in line when the doors open. The name of the restaurant is called *The Tasting Table*, so be on the lookout."

Bree glanced over at Mrs. Rowe, who was perhaps looking a little sheepish.

Brittney tugged on Bree's hand and Bree leaned down and picked her up so she could see. Ricky looked over and took Brittney into his arms. "There. Now you're even higher," he whispered.

Mr. Strider went on. "We also want to thank all the seniors for making this wonderful night happen. They have a beautiful dance to perform. After that, don't go anywhere because we have a special presentation to make that Mr., uh, no, Grandmaster

Ricky Kino is gonna help us with. So stay tuned for that. Okay, everyone, I need you to move way out and make a space here in front of the stage and stand behind the ropes that are being placed."

He waited a minute while several boys ran out and ushered the crowd away from the center of the floor and placed stanchions and ropes in a large oval in front of the stage. Finally he nodded. "Good job, guys. And now, presented by your *Brookside High Cheerleaders*, whom I'm not going to name, but you all know who they are. Joining them surprisingly are a few of our football players, Quincy Llot, Jackson Pitts and Lance White, and two invited dancers from our student body, Madison Walker and Taylor Kino. So, without further ado, presenting, '*Holiday Fantasy,*' let's give them a hand." He turned off the microphone and stepped aside.

"Watch up there, Brittney," Ricky whispered.

"Can you see?" young Eric asked Amari.

Amari only shrugged, so young Eric whisked him up onto his shoulders.

"How about now?"

Amari grinned.

The dance began with an instrumental only version of '*Sleigh Ride*' and the "elves" running around. The cheerleaders were very cute in their green outfits and red and white striped tights and red circles on their cheeks and noses, their hair in little pig tails. The elves were being called to order by the "Santa Girls," who were actually stunning in their full red skirts that stood straight out whenever they spun. The sides of their hair were braided back into a bun and the rest of their hair fell down their backs. The *Santa Girls* were leaving the *Elves* who had to stay and work. The *Santa Girls* came down off the stage and chose a "Reindeer guy" to take them for a ride. The music had changed to "*It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*," and included several of the lifts Taylor had told her family about. That part morphed into an even slower, "*All I Want for Christmas is You*," which had a lot of lifts and some pretty romantic dancing.

The *Santa Girls* and *Reindeer* then went up to join the elves, who were happy to see them. That portion began with "*Santa Claus is Coming to Town*", the rock version, and then ended with a rousing celebration of "*Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree*." In all it was about ten minutes of cuteness and it had indeed been very entertaining because of the football players messing up a little. Lance actually did almost drop Taylor, but caught her before her head hit the floor. They were heavily applauded.

Mr. Strider came back to the microphone. "Well, that was phenomenal, wasn't it? Now, before we continue our dance, as I said earlier, I'm going to turn the microphone over to one of our favorite celebrities whose son graduated from *Brookside*, and whose daughter is a senior here, Grandmaster Ricky Kino is gonna come up and say a few words and he has a surprise for you." He nodded at Ricky, who set Brittney on the floor and came forward.

Everyone applauded as Ricky stepped forward and took the microphone. He turned and offered his brilliant smile as he waited for the applause to end. "Hello, everyone," Ricky said, his masculine voice reverberating throughout the large gym. "Thank you. Your principal and Mr. Strider and I were having a conversation the other day and I remarked to him that I'm glad they were still calling this dance a *Christmas Dance*. There

are so many attempts these days to distance ourselves from anything to do with religion or morals, integrity and goodness and love. I'm really grateful for this time of year, and for Christmas. I realize not all of you believe the same things that we believe, but having a time of year when we can reflect on our lives, on our beliefs, on those we love, on family and on doing things for others, that can't be a bad thing. It's simply a time of year when family becomes a focus.

"So, as I said, your principal and Mr. Strider and I spoke, and they asked me to take advantage of my son's presence here tonight because he's an alumnus of this high school and today is his twenty-first birthday, *and* he has a movie coming out next weekend. He's recently been very busy, helping to renovate an old broken down church and he had a red carpet movie premiere event last night, barely got any sleep, then he had a martial arts demo for an entire neighborhood this morning and he's here tonight to see his sister perform. He went into this week thinking that we wouldn't be celebrating his birthday and he never said a word about it. He understood that the things we were working on, being in service to others, that is what's important. There would be no time to celebrate his birthday and he had no problem with that. Still, I'm hoping you will help us to celebrate.

"Me standing up here laying props on my own son was not my intention. I'm only doing this because your principal mentioned to me that he wished he could give you, the students of *Brookside High* a special Christmas gift. And since tonight is my son's birthday, and he's an alumnus, Eric thought of a gift. Actually he thought of two gifts. So, Eric, please, come on up and take the mic and explain the gifts."

Young Eric set Amari down, walked up and took the mic while the kids applauded. Bree looked over to see if the chaperone woman was still nearby, but she was gone. Bree began to feel silly for having such feelings of animosity toward her. Lately, it seemed her emotions were way out of whack. And she hadn't been feeling well. She had a feeling when she got to the doctor on Monday he would tell her that she was perimenopausal.

Young Eric smiled as he spoke into the microphone. "Hello, everyone. It's always fun to be back in my old high school gym where I spent so many hours. Good times."

"Happy birthday, Eric," someone yelled out.

Eric grinned. "Thanks, man."

Taylor watched her brother with pride. The *Santa Girls* standing next to her leaned over to whisper. "Good grief, Taylor, your brother is totally hot."

Taylor smiled. "He is cute, isn't he?"

"Yeah, cute. That's what I was thinking," Amber said with a giggle.

Jackson raised his eyebrows and put his arm around his girlfriend. "Hey Amber, I'm standing right here."

She giggled. Taylor smiled.

Young Eric put the microphone to his lips. "So, my father mentioned that I had a movie premiere last night. It was my very first premiere and my very first movie. It was a real blast making the movie. The movie is '*The Resurrection of Elijah Beck,*' and it's about a guy who messed up totally, and he goes about remaking himself, fixing what he can fix, turning everything around, and of course, finding love in the process. So, because

this school is my alma mater and because it's my birthday, I wanted to invite you all to see the movie next weekend when it comes out. All you have to do is show up at either the Midway or the Plaza theaters in Newport and show your *Brookside High School* Student ID and you'll get in and you can have all the concessions you want— my gift to you."

He waited for the applause and cheering to end. "Now, my father said I had two gifts. The second one is a special performance from my cousin whom I think of as my brother. Many of you on social media have heard my cousin Logan sing..."

There was a giant whoop as people all cheered.

"Logan is working on writing his first album and he sang live on *America Can Dance* a few weeks ago. I asked him if he would do a song for us tonight and he agreed. He even brought his guitar and a friend to play the drums. He wouldn't tell me what song he's gonna do, so I'll get him to tell you. Logan Adams, come on up."

Everyone cheered as Logan came up to the mic. He motioned at his friend from UCLA who was plugging in his electric drums on stage and then bending a microphone toward his mouth. Logan hugged young Eric and took the mic from him, then went up on stage, put the mic in a mic stand, went to the side of the stage, picked up his guitar, checked the amps and went back to stand in front of the mic.

"Hey, everyone. I'm Logan Adams. And this guy about to rock it on the drums is Steven Tyler, and yeah, that's his real name."

The kids all laughed.

"So, I agreed to do this song as Eric's gift to you, but it is also my gift to Eric. The song I'm gonna do is *Birthday*, the one by the Beatles. And I want all of you to sing it with me. You'll know it when you hear it. Get ready, cuz, we're about to rock this house and blow the roof off."

[*Note: play this song real quick before you read this so you can understand the energy!]

He nodded at Steven who started with a hard beat. Logan came in with the guitar and the kids did indeed recognize the song immediately. They started clapping and jumping. Logan finally started to sing. "Ya say it's your birthday..."

Logan encouraged everyone to sing with him and in only a few seconds the entire gym had kids jumping up and down and goin' crazy. When they got to the part where the lyrics state, "I would like you to dance...," the kids went wild.

Young Eric grinned and hugged Jordan to him. He couldn't speak to her because the music and kids were too loud. He just laughed. JoJo put his hand on Eric's shoulder and Eric turned and hugged him too.

Lyle Keith was still on the ladder livestreaming. A lot of other kids had their phones out and were videoing. Amari and Brittney were laughing and dancing. The entire thing was a riot, a huge success. At the end of the song, Logan spoke over the crowd. "You guys were freaky fantastic! I'm turning the dance back over to your DJ. 'Night everybody!"

The kids screamed and cheered and applauded as Logan and Steve packed up their gear and left the stage. The DJ took over.

Logan hugged Eric. Taylor joined her family. "You guys are the best!"

Ricky hugged his daughter. "You were so good, Taylor. I'm so proud of you."

"You were awesome, TayTay," young Eric said.

Logan and JoJo hugged her. "You really were."

"I didn't realize you'd gotten so good," Logan said.

"Well, I knew *you* were," she returned. "Logan, you are a star."

Logan shook his head as Jordan and Melody forced their way next to Taylor and hugged her and praised her.

Finally, Phillip found his way to her. "You rocked it, Taylor. But Lance almost dropped you."

"Actually, that was my fault. I shifted my body weight too soon."

Bree stroked her hand over Taylor's hair. "You were so good, Taylor and I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom," Taylor said. She turned to Lyle as he approached. "Did you get everything?"

He nodded with a grin as he handed the phone to her. "Yeah, and there were like, over a million people watching. I think you broke the internet."

Taylor smiled but shook her head. "That's not even close to the records. But it will still generate a bunch of money for Gabe's foundation. He's helping so many people. God is so good."

At that moment Madison came over to greet the Kinos. They complimented her on her dancing. She thanked them and then put her hand on Phillip's shoulder and leaned over to Taylor. "Mind if I steal your date for a dance?"

Taylor smiled. "No, of course not. Have fun."

Phillip shrugged and smiled and headed out onto the floor. At the same time, a young girl came over and asked Lyle to dance. Right behind her, Lance White approached.

"Hello, Kinos," he said brightly. He held his hand out to Ricky.

They shook hands.

"You did a great job," young Eric said.

"Thanks, I uh, almost dropped her."

"But you didn't, so, good catch," JoJo said with a chuckle.

Lance grinned at the guy who'd been his idol for years. He turned to Taylor. "So, Taylor," Lance began. "I was wondering if I could have a dance, I mean, a regular dance."

She hesitated only briefly, then nodded. "Let's dance, but only one, because I want to go change out of this costume." She smiled up at her family. "Well, if you guys are leaving, I'll see you about eleven." She hugged them quickly, including Amari and Brittney.

Lance smiled at her family. "Nice to see you."

They nodded at Lance. "Behave," Ricky said.

"Yes, sir."

The family watched them dance for a few seconds. Agent Ward stepped up. Ricky shook his hand. "You got this?"

"I got it," Agent Ward answered.

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1 Timothy 5:13
"At the same time, they also learn how
to be lazy while going from house to house.
Not only this, but they even become gossips
and keep busy by interfering in other
people's lives, saying things they should not say."

Chapter Eighteen

December 14th 11:45 PM Saturday Night
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor sniffed and wiped her tears away.

"Don't cry, Tay," Gabe said softly.

"I just miss you so much."

"I miss you too, baby. But didn't you have fun dancing tonight? It looked like you were having fun."

"Yes, it was okay. And the dance was okay. But it was like, the one I care about the most wasn't there to share it with me."

"Well, I saw the video of the dance and of Logan singing and everyone going crazy. I loved seeing it. So, in a way I shared it with you. Yeah, I was feelin' a little, like, left out I guess. Then I thought you probably felt left out of Iris' birthday party the other day, so I need to just enjoy your fun."

She was silent.

"Tay?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Just feelin' a little ashamed. You are a thousand times more mature than me."

He chuckled. "Uh, no I'm not. Well, maybe about some things, but like, we're both young and it's all gonna even out eventually." He decided to change the subject. "By the way, you weren't wrong."

"About what?"

"About what you said to that lady, that chaperone lady. I can't believe she tried to throw you out of the dance."

Taylor giggled. "Yeah. Mom and Dad watched that video and said the only thing I could have done differently was watch my tone of voice. Like, say what I said, but with no anger or sarcasm. My mom, and mostly my dad had it out with her a little later. Young Eric got it on video too."

"Cool. I'd like to see how they handled it."

"It was mostly my dad goin' off on her. Well, actually, that's not true. He didn't go off. He just asked her a bunch of questions, then pretty much told her she had no authority to toss us out of the dance and then provided a little psychology therapy session of I guess what he'd call 'tough love,' and then he dismissed her."

"Dismissed her?"

"Yeah, like, told her to 'go away.'"

Gabe chuckled. He could imagine being "dismissed" by the Kinos. "Will you send me that video?"

"Sure." She sighed. "Well, Gabe, thanks for talking me down from my little

emotional pity party. I'm sorry I woke you at like, three in the morning."

"It's okay, Taylor. Really. I'm always happy to talk to the girl I love. Call me anytime. You know that, right?"

She giggled. "Obviously."

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While Taylor and Gabe talked, Jordan left young Eric on the sofa in the den and ran to grab her purse that she'd left on the breakfast counter. She hurried back to sit next to her fiancé.

He smiled so kindly at her. She sat next to him, dug through her purse and pulled out a small gift box, but didn't hand it to him yet.

"Three, I, um, I got this for you. I couldn't find any alone time to give it to you and it's almost midnight, so it's now or never. But, well, now that I do have that time, I mean, I'm thinkin', it's such a nothing little gift, I mean, well, it's not nothing because that would be talking bad about Jesus, but, I mean, anyway, it's really not that big a deal and ..."

Young Eric's brow furrowed, and she stopped talking.

"Why are you frowning?" Jordan asked nervously.

"I'm trying to figure out what's goin' through your head."

Jordan laughed. "Good luck with that."

"I don't need luck. I think I've got it."

"You do, do ya? Okay, fill me in."

He sighed. "You got me a birthday gift. You're having second thoughts about actually giving it to me, and I think it's because you think it doesn't have enough monetary value to be worth giving it to me. How am I doing?"

She sighed. "Wow. Pretty good there, Three."

He nodded. "Well first, Two-three, a gift is never nothing. And second, have you ever heard the expression, 'it's the thought that counts?'"

"Yes. Everyone has heard that."

"That's because it's true. It really is the thought behind the gift that counts. That's what makes it a gift. Someone cares enough about someone else to think about giving them a gift. You wanted to give me a birthday gift and it doesn't matter what it is, or how much it costs, I will treasure it always, because, well, it came from the girl I love, the girl who would be my wife, and it's the first gift you've given me, other than your presence in my life and your love. Actually, every day that I get to see you or speak with you is a gift." He smiled, raised his eyebrows. "Soooo, like, are you gonna give it to me?"

Smiling, she placed the small gift box in his hand. He smiled at her and examined the box closely. It was a small white cardboard box tied with a gold cord. On the underside of the box was a little sticker that said, "Angel Gifts." He smiled and held the box against his heart. "It's lovely. I'll treasure it always."

Jordan giggled. "Haha, Three. Open it."

His eyes went wide. "There's more?"

She smacked the top of his head. He was always imitating movies.

"Ow," he chuckled and rubbed his head. Carefully, he pulled the cord off the box. He opened the lid to find a little square piece of soft white foam. He lifted the foam and

found a simple gold cross on a rope chain on a square bed of soft cotton. He smiled and picked up the cross.

"It's engraved on the back," Jordan offered quickly.

He turned it over and read aloud, "Jesus loves you and so do I." He grinned and looked into her eyes. "Jordan, I love this. I love it so much."

She smiled. "It's not really gold. It's stainless steel. The chain too. I got a rope chain, so it won't break. Steel is good because it's strong, like you and it won't tarnish. I didn't have enough money to get real gold, but..."

"Stop, baby. Please. I love it. I love that it's steel. I love that you think I'm strong like steel. I really love that you recognize my relationship with you is intertwined with my relationship with Jesus. I love this in so many ways."

He didn't wait for an answer, but simply pulled her forward and kissed her a long time. When he finally pulled away, he immediately put the necklace on and looked down, patting the cross on his chest. "I love it, Two-three. Thank you so much for such a wonderful gift. I'm gonna have to step up my game next July 18th."

Jordan rolled her eyes. "Now *you* stop. Besides, you've already given me so much. I mean, really *nice* water bottles," she said with a smile, making him laugh. "But really, you gave martial arts lessons for my brother and sister, good friends for my mother who are helping her to achieve her dream, you just bought my family a bunch of clothes and I know you bought them all Christmas gifts and you fixed my car all up and you gave me this ring, and you asked me to be your wife. You can't possibly outdo all of that. You're good for life."

"Yeah, I am," he said. "And I thank God every day that I am. I'm good for life because I have you. And now, because what's mine is yours, together, you and I can work together to help others."

Jordan nodded. "It has been really fun helping to fix up the church."

"Yeah, it really has and we have a lot to do there tomorrow."

She sighed. "I guess we'd better get some sleep."

He nodded. "We've been goin' strong for two days straight. Really, all week. Tomorrow, we'll power through the church service, have dinner with the grands and you'll head back to your apartment and I'll come home and sleep for ten hours. Just enough time to hit the beach refreshed at 6:00 AM Monday morning."

Jordan sighed. "It's been an awesome weekend. I love seeing your face first thing in the morning. I wish we could just stay together."

He nodded because he wanted that too. Badly. "Soon, baby, we won't have to say goodbye. Hold on. We can do this."

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December 15th, Sunday Morning

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

The Mark Adams family was the first to arrive. The whole family came in one car to save parking spaces for others. They were all dressed nicely. Em had on her favorite Sunday dress. The guys wore slacks, dress shirts and ties. Bella had on a simple red and white dress. As they walked from the parking lot to the church they saw Ronny crossing the street from his house.

Ronny greeted them brightly. “Hello, Adams family!”

“Good morning, Reverend Clark,” both Logan and JoJo said at the same time.

Ronny smiled. “Mrs. Adams, nice to see you.”

“You too,” she said sweetly.

“Good morning, Ronny,” Mark said as he shook Ronny’s hand. “You ready for this awesome morning?”

Ronny nodded. “Yes. A little nervous, but mostly excited. It’s been a long time since I felt the nerves and excitement of preaching. But I gotta say, it’s your two sons here who are making it exciting. Have they shared with you what we’re gonna be presenting?”

Bella laughed. “No, they haven’t, though we’ve tried to get them to tell us what you have planned.”

Ronny looked at the boys, who both grinned.

“We want to see their reactions,” Logan explained.

Three more cars pulled into the parking lot. All three filled with musicians and singers from UCLA who today would be playing guitar, piano, drums, manning the production booth and singing in the newly formed *Hopewood Chapel Choir*.

Logan turned and greeted them, introduced them to his family and to Reverend Clark and the whole group headed into the church.

Only a few minutes later, many more people started to file in. The Keith family arrived and Logan rushed to greet them and kiss his girl. Bristol and Christina Palma arrived. They were extra early because Christina said she wanted to make sure that she got a good seat.

The Davis family, and the Ricky Kino family arrived at the same time. Amari and Brittney proudly walked in with new clothes. Everyone in the family came over to speak to them. A few minutes later, Eric and Shelley and their five kids pulled up.

Meanwhile, Bristol brought reserved signs and she and Melody laid them out in the usual seats for the elderly that regularly attended the church. They would escort them to their reserved seats as they arrived. Next, a few videographers arrived and began setting up in the back of the church and in one of the side aisles.

Jeffy and Cam and Kimmie and Jensen came in and found their seats each couple with their tiny babies. Shortly thereafter, Justin and Jason Lee and their wives entered.

Ronny, JoJo, Logan, the band and choir and others in the program gathered together outside of Ronny’s office to have a word of prayer together. When they started back to the chapel, so many people were arriving early that Logan went ahead and took a seat at the piano and began playing some Christmas hymns.

To get warmed up, a few of the other musicians played with him.

JoJo was walking around talking to the people who had been assigned parts in the program, making sure they knew where to stand and what to say.

Joey and Breez and their three little ones finally arrived. Joey had been having to work a case for a few minutes this morning and so they were later than they wanted to be. Seven-year-old Sophia went immediately to visit with Brittney and Amari. At the same time, Jewell Brooks, with Jamie and Josie arrived and the kids were immediately introduced to Brittney and Amari, since Jamie and Amari were close in age.

The Garcias arrived, and then several more families from the apartments and from

down the street. The elderly patrons began arriving. And then, the real miracle began to occur. Teenagers and young men and women in their early twenties arrived. The place was filling up fast. Finally, about ten minutes before they were supposed to start the program, there was standing room only.

Ronny did his best to try to greet as many people as possible. He eventually made his way to a seat behind the pulpit. JoJo too walked around shaking hands with as many as possible. His charming good looks and powerful personality were hard for anyone to resist. Some of that came from the confidence he'd learned from years of leading teams, which he'd done most of his life. Logan's personality was a little different. He was bright and warm and outgoing and jovial. But when he sang, he became just as powerful as his brother.

Banny and Deuce arrived. Banny went to sit with Bristol, who was sitting right in front of Melody and her family. Banny turned and greeted the Keith family. Melody was fuming. He was so arrogant. He smiled at her and then his eyes shifted to Taylor Kino who was sitting with Phillip and Lyle. "Well, hello there. Aren't you a cute one. You're a Kino, right?"

"Yes, I am," she said, her eyebrows raised, haughtily.

Melody smiled. She knew what Taylor was thinking. She was thinking, *yeah I am and if you mess with me you will be dead and buried.*

Banny frowned at her and turned and took his seat.

Melody couldn't wait for them to have enough on him to arrest him and see that smug look wiped off his face. Then, she caught herself. She was in church. They were gonna talk about the birth of her Savior. She needed to get ugly thoughts out of her mind.

Bristol reached over, took her hand and squeezed it.

The music stopped and Ronny approached the pulpit with a giant smile. "Good morning, everyone. So, we're gonna do things a little differently this morning. We're gonna sing some songs, we're gonna pray and then we have a special program just for you, led by a new assistant minister, JoJo Adams. The words to the songs will be on the new monitors you see up here." He looked up at the large screens and smiled. "Isn't that just too cool?"

His attempt at being hip got a large laugh. He grinned. "My older church family won't know some of these songs, but I know they and I will have fun trying to sing along. After the first two songs, a prayer will be given by Joey Adams, who is the uncle of the two young men who are helping me today. So, I'm gonna turn the time over to my new minister of music, Logan Adams, who has brought some friends from college to help with our program this morning. Let's give them a hand."

Banny was fuming. The canary was now the Minister of Music? He couldn't wait to put a knife in his gut.

The applause was so loud, Logan had to wait before he could speak. He rose from his seat at the piano, his smile bright. He picked up his mic. "Hey, everyone, good morning, fellow believers in Christ! If you were here to help decorate the trees out front last Tuesday, you'll know that I love to sing and praise the Lord and that's what we're about to do. We, you all and I, we're gonna worship through song for a few minutes. The choir is here for you to sing along with, so sing at the top of your lungs. Everyone that

can, stand up and let us hear you. Okay, try to keep up!"

Logan sat down and nodded at his band, his choir of eight stood up in front of the pulpit, and they went into *This Is Amazing Grace* by Phil Wickham. He wanted to open with a modern Christian song, but wanted it to have words that would ring familiar with the elderly. Logan's voice rang out clear and strong and beautiful. Once they got to the rousing chorus, the congregation was literally jumping up and down. Logan looked out over the crowd and even some of the older people were on their feet and waving their arms. When the song ended there was a lot of applause and cheers and amens and hallelujahs.

Logan looked over at Ronny who was wiping tears from his eyes. Logan went right into a joyful version of *Joy to the World.* That's what Jesus does, He brings joy to all who know him. Logan could feel the Holy Spirit build and fill the entire church. It was already an amazing service.

Joey rose and went to the mic at the end of the song and prayed fervently over the service about to be presented, over the congregation, over those searching for solace or healing, and over the church as a whole.

JoJo immediately stood and went to the pulpit. "Good morning, everyone. My name is JoJo Adams. And let's just get this out of the way right now. Yes, I'm the same JoJo that was the USC quarterback for the past three years. And yes, I love football. But I love Jesus more. I love serving God. I love helping others to feel the same happiness that I feel whenever the Holy Spirit touches me, whenever Jesus whispers to me, whenever God acknowledges me. It would be so awesome for everyone in the world to feel that. And they will, if they'll just open their hearts."

Banny rolled his eyes. This guy was so full of it.

JoJo smiled. "So, it's Christmastime. Reverend Clark and my brother Logan and I wanted to really bring this time into focus. But what could someone say about Christmas that hasn't already been said a million times, right? Then we talked about the fact that sometimes we forget what all the decorating and the parties and the gift buying is really all about and maybe we need to go back to the basics. And that reminded me of a street preacher I once saw. He was trying to teach about the birth of our Savior to a bunch of people standing around who weren't very receptive, and man oh man were they giving him a hard time, but he held his own. He was impressive. So, I thought we might reenact what I saw that day, because he really was good."

JoJo drew a deep breath. "That street preacher began by explaining to people that Christmas was in essence a birthday party, but it was more special because the birth we are celebrating is the birth of the actual Son of God, and..."

"But aren't we all children of God?" Ronny called out suddenly.

Everyone was surprised until they realized it was scripted.

JoJo nodded. "Well, yes, except for those children of darkness, but we won't talk about that right now. Yes, we are all God's children, but we have *two* earthly parents. But Mary, she was overcome by the spirit and conceived without having physical relations with a man, so her child was human and also the only begotten Son of God."

"So, you're saying God raped Mary," Logan called out.

There was a murmuring from the congregation.

"No, I'm not saying that at all. An angel appeared to Mary and told her what God's plan was and she gave her consent. So, Mary carried God's child. It was so important because that child, who was Jesus, would come into the world and make it possible for all of our sins and wrongdoings to be paid for, so that we can eventually be together with our loved ones. In essence, what Jesus did was take away the sting of death."

"Well, my cousin died and it stung. It hurt real bad. It still does," a choir member called out.

"Yes, and that is because you don't yet know that Jesus was the Son of the Living God, and so you don't believe that you'll ever see your cousin again. Listen, losing someone we love hurts. Even when we believe, we miss them and it hurts. But when we open our hearts and learn about the teachings of Jesus, learn about his resurrection, and pray and read His word, then we begin to feel the whisperings of the Spirit and we will begin to believe and understand and even know, that we will see our loved one again. You WILL see your cousin again. And when you know that, you feel hopeful instead of sad. You feel joy instead of grief. The sting eases. That hope doesn't mean you won't miss your cousin. It means your grief doesn't have to be hopeless. Jesus can bring you peace and joy even while you miss someone you love."

"And you really believe that a man was killed on the cross and actually came back to life? I mean, dude..." young Eric called out from where he sat.

The congregation chuckled. Jordan, Bree and Ricky turned, surprised to hear him. He smiled and winked at them.

JoJo smiled at his cousin. "There are many eye-witnesses from that time that attest to the fact that Jesus came back to life. Over five hundred of them. And those witnesses never recanted their statements, even when they were threatened with death. Ten of the original twelve apostles, along with the apostle Paul, are reported to have died violent deaths because they proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even people who weren't actual believers have testified that Jesus was resurrected. They don't try to explain it. They just know. So, He overcame death. And we will have that too. We only have to accept His gift. He gave His life for us to obtain eternity with Him and our loved ones. And so, we celebrate His birth, because it was an amazing event, God's Son was brought into this world and filled us with His light. Jesus is the light of the world and during this Christmas season, we need to remember why we are celebrating his birth. We give gifts to each other, especially to the children, not because some magical elf made a round-the-world trip in a sleigh, but in remembrance of the wise men who traveled a long way to give gifts to the prophesied King."

"Well, I think Christmas was invented by businesses because they just want you to go crazy spending your hard-earned money on buying presents," another member of the choir called out.

JoJo nodded. "Well, they didn't invent it, but they certainly have turned it to their advantage. But we can't blame the businesses. We have to make sure that *we* don't get all caught up in the commercial aspects of Christmas. That's up to us. Jesus, as far as we know, received one gift from each wise man. To commemorate that giving of a gift, we could buy each child in our family, or each loved one a single gift, instead of twenty. We don't have to buy into what everyone else is doing. We can make this time special and

focus on what's really important, love, family, charity, helping and serving others. Jesus was all about being in service to others. We can read His word together, and pray together with our families and get in tune with Him so that we can hear Him."

"Why does he expect us to do all of that?" Banny yelled out.

JoJo turned, surprised at the unscripted interruption. He smiled, but Banny went on before he could answer.

"I mean, we're all out here trying to make a living. We got no time to spend reading the Bible or praying or learning all about this Jesus. If God is so smart, He should just be able to know that we're struggling and help us instead of making us do all that stuff."

JoJo nodded. "God knows what you're struggling with, He knows what you're doing," he said pointedly. "Do you think that you shouldn't have to show any effort? That you shouldn't show Him that you want to know Him or believe in Him? Learning the things that Jesus taught is important. You learn how He wants you to live, you know, the basics, like no lying, no stealing, no sexual immorality, honesty, etcetera. You have to make an effort to align yourself with Him and reach out to Him in prayer and fasting and yes, reading His Word. All He wants you to do is take a small step toward Him. One tiny step in humility, and He will change your life. But what good will it do us, what will we learn, if we just expect God to step in and fix everything in our lives? We're not here on this earth to have things fixed for us. We're here to grow and learn and evolve and also to serve others. The gift Jesus offers IS free, but if you don't know Him, how can you receive His gift? Give your heart to Jesus."

"Yeah, well, I thought Jesus was supposed to love everyone, just the way they are," Banny countered.

JoJo smiled. "He loves everyone, even you. He loved the thief on the cross next to him. He'll love us all the way to the door of hell. He loves us, but he also told people to 'go and sin no more.' He loves you. I love you. Reverend Clark loves you. Now, go, and sin no more."

Someone from the back of the church shouted, "Hallelujah," and the congregation applauded and shouted "Amen."

JoJo paused a moment and looked out over the congregation. "My brothers and sisters in Christ, during this Christmas season, where we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let's do what He said we should do. Love one another. Be kind. Change our attitude of frantically rushing around to get things done, to, I am happy to be getting these things done. And be in service. You don't have to wash somebody's feet, but maybe open a door, or help someone carry a package, or let someone merge into your lane, or stop and change someone's tire." He looked out at young Eric and Jordan with a smile and then went on. "Or even just smile at someone or speak a kind word. For the young ones, draw someone a picture, help your mom or dad with the dishes, stop to play a game with your little brother or sister, include the outcast in your group.

"The possibilities are endless. This attitude of giving or serving will change your vibration, and put you in sync with God's vibration and when you are in sync with God, you will hear His voice clearer than ever. I pray you will make it so you can hear God's voice because that is what brings you real joy. It just makes you happy. As always, I say these things in Jesus' mighty name, amen. Logan? Is there anything you want to say

before I turn the time back over to Reverend Clark?"

Logan stood and picked up his mic and smiled at the congregation. "My heart is full, listening to my brother speak. I know that he is completely sincere. He loves the Lord. And I do too. I love the Lord and I love to worship and praise with music. And I hope you do too. So, anyone who has musical abilities or who loves to sing, please go to the Hopewood Chapel's new website, at Hopewoodchapel.org. There are links to join the choir or join the band or give a performance. Run the booth if you know electronics. There are so many opportunities to serve. So, go there. It doesn't matter how young or old you are. Let's praise the Lord together in song. I hope to hear from you. I also just want to say publicly, how grateful I am for the music department at UCLA to volunteer to come out here and help us today. They were great and I hope they'll keep coming just because they had so much fun today. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, peace be unto you. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," the congregation said loudly.

Ronny stood and went to the pulpit. "Well done, Mr. Adams and Mr. Adams," he said sincerely. He looked over the congregation. "While young Logan Adams and his musicians and choir sing for us, we will have some fine young men pass the communion around for all who wish to receive it. Do so with a pure heart, with the love of Jesus in your soul, and with dedication and only if you feel led to do so. After that, we'll have some more music for you to sing, and then the lovely Breanna Adams Kino will give us a prayer. Before I say the communion scripture, let me just tell you all real quick, that next Sunday is the Sunday before Christmas and we will have a special Christmas program, so please come and worship with us."

Ronny smiled and nodded his head. "Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it. Then, before giving it to His disciples, He said, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' He then took a cup of wine, blessed it and gave it to His disciples, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.' Let it be so today. In Jesus' name, amen."

Logan immediately started playing the piano, the band joined in and the choir began a beautiful rendition of *Silent Night*, as the communion was distributed. Then the choir sang *O Holy Night* and *Away in a Manger* until communion was finished. They sang softly and reverently and it was a beautiful moment. As soon as communion was finished, Logan stood up and smiled. "This next song is exactly what today is, a *Glorious Day* by Passion. Stand if you want, sing, clap, worship, praise!"

It took only a few seconds before the congregation was again singing out with all they had. It was an amazing thing. They did one more song, *House of the Lord,* another one by Phil Wickham.

Bree made her way up to the front before the song ended. JoJo escorted her up the stairs and ushered her to the pulpit.

Bree smiled at her nephew and kissed his cheek, then bowed her head and prayed eloquently.

The service was over, but people didn't want to go home yet. Everyone was milling around talking, gushing over what a wonderful time they'd just had. The Holy Spirit had indeed blessed them. Everyone tried to shake Ronny's and JoJo's and Logan's hands and

also the band and choir. Ronny, JoJo and Logan did their best to speak with each person. They also made their way out to chat with some of the elder original members of the church and get their reaction.

"That was awesome," Taylor said to Phillip and Lyle.

Lyle nodded his head. "It really was. I haven't had such a good time at church, in like, forever."

"And I'm so glad I didn't have to hold my phone up, thanks to Logan's buddy," Taylor added. But her eyes landed on Banny and Bristol who sat in front of her. Banny had his hand on Bristol's upper arm. He pulled her up and jerked on her. Bristol tried to make him let go, but it was obvious he was hurting her arm. Taylor picked up her phone and quickly texted her brother.

Young Eric pulled out his phone and glanced at the text. He immediately showed it to his father and the two of them came over to where Taylor sat.

"So, Tay," Ricky said loudly. "Did you enjoy the service?"

Banny turned at the loud male voice. He let go of Bristol.

Ricky and Eric looked at him. "Hey, Banny, those were some good questions," young Eric said. "I'm sure JoJo is glad for your participation."

Banny made a face. "They just popped into my head." He turned to Bristol. "I'm gonna head out. I have some things to do for Mrs. Everly."

Bristol nodded. "Okay. See ya later."

Ricky and young Eric also nodded at him. "Have a good day, Banny."

"Yeah, you too."

Ricky then smiled at Mrs. Palma. "Mrs. Palma, did you enjoy the service?"

She smiled. "I did indeed. Young and refreshing and a lot of good information. It's always good to get back to the basics."

"I agree. Mrs. Palma, may I escort you out to your car?"

Christina smiled. "Yes you may, young man, if you will call me Christina."

Bristol and Melody both smiled.

Ricky leaned over to young Eric and spoke quietly. "Text Jeff Davis and ask him if they have surveillance on a Mrs. Everly. I'm thinkin' she is probably another mark of Banny's."

Young Eric nodded. "Got it."

Ricky walked out with Christina Palma on his arm. Young Eric stepped away to take care of business. Jordan chatted with Bristol and Melody. The Keiths rose and went to speak with some friends they'd invited who'd been having trouble with their teenaged daughter. Taylor, Phillip and Lyle walked up the aisle together. The crowd was finally starting to thin and JoJo and Logan and his friends were making their way up the aisle.

Young Eric grinned at them as he put his phone away. "You guys rocked it. I mean totally."

"You really think so?" JoJo asked. "Was it uplifting enough?"

"It was amazing. I'm proud of you."

They all moved out to exit the church. Young Eric immediately noticed the Garcias speaking to Amari and Brittney. Bree stood nearby, and young Eric thought his mom looked a little pale, a little thin. He knew they were going to the doctor tomorrow. He

hoped it was nothing serious. He thought about his father who had lost his mother when he was just a kid. He shook his head. No negative thinking. He immediately offered a prayer and blessing for his mom.

Standing outside at the top of the steps, they noticed a few large groups of teenagers standing around talking. They wanted feedback from them, so JoJo headed to one group and Logan headed to another.

They shook hands with the teens and chatted with them, asking what they thought and answering a few questions. There were a lot of promises that they were coming back and would be bringing their friends or parents or siblings.

Both JoJo and Logan got a joint text from Gabe.

~~ Hey bros u were awesome. Loved every minute. So blessed to know you and be included in your circle.

Logan texted back.

~~ Backatcha lil bro

JoJo simply 'hearted' each comment. They tucked their phones away with smiles on their faces. Always, whenever Gabe communicated, there was a spirit that moved through them. He'd texted simple words, just a quick message. They knew he probably didn't even realize that he had some kind of power oozing from him.

Logan smiled at JoJo. "The force is strong in this one," he quoted.

JoJo gave a soft laugh. "My thoughts exactly."

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December 15th Sunday Late Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

The whole west coast family was at the Kinos' home. Eric, Shelley, Angelina, Noah, Abe, Manny and Nate. Ricky, Bree, Amari, Brittney, Taylor, young Eric and Jordan. Mark, Bella, JoJo, Logan and Emily. Joey, Breez, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. Jewell, Josie and Jamie. Jeffy, Cam and Elijah. Kimmie, Jensen and baby Jay. Jeff, Mickey, Dan, Jeremy and Scarlett. David, Carol, Phillip, Lyle and Melody. Alec and Destiny. Justin and Lori. Jason and Angel. It should have been a madhouse, but it was mostly peaceful and calm.

The house was large and could easily accommodate fifty people. Add in the giant deck out back where the older kids usually ended up assembling, and there was more than enough space. Almost fifteen of the people present were children, not including the three infants, Elijah, Scarlett and Jay, all of whom were currently being nursed.

Taylor, Lyle, Dan and Jeremy currently were engaging the younger ones in a giant game of duck, duck goose in the giant playroom downstairs.

Shelley, Eric, Carol, Lori and Angel were busy cleaning up the kitchen and doing dishes after the scrumptious meal everyone had just enjoyed. Jewell was kicked out of the kitchen for the cleanup because she did most of the cooking and Bree was excused because she wasn't feeling well. Destiny and Bella were working on arranging the giant birthday cake and other desserts and plates and utensils in the dining room.

Breez, Melody, Jordan, Logan and young Eric were arranging stacks of gifts in the living room. There were three stacks. One stack was for Emily whose fourth birthday had been the past Wednesday, one was for Kelstyn, whose fourth birthday would be

tomorrow, and one for young Eric who turned twenty-one yesterday.

JoJo jokingly volunteered to supervise. "Young Eric, it looks like you're gonna make out pretty well here today."

Young Eric smiled and eyed his stack of gifts. "One of these from you?"

JoJo shook his head. "Nope. You got me, what else do you need?"

Eric nodded. "You're right, bro. You're all I need."

"I heard that," Jordan said as she brought in the last of the gifts.

JoJo chuckled. "He meant that's all he needs from me. From you, he needs, well, um, you."

Everyone turned to look at JoJo whose face had reddened. "Get your minds out of the gutter," he said.

It wasn't long before the family was called and asked to gather together in the living room.

Eric senior took charge of the gathering. He smiled warmly at the group.

"I know I just said it at dinner, but I am looking at a group of God's warriors that brings such joy to my heart. Every single one of you is so precious. I hope I get to spend some one-on-one time with each of you sometime soon. You are all so interesting, so intriguing and I would absolutely love to know the marvelous things you are thinking."

Ricky, sitting next to his wife, smiled up at his father. At one time it had only been the two of them. Now, his father has a huge family to nurture, and he wasn't shirking from the duty. Rather, he was relishing the interaction. Ricky himself would help take some of the load. But it felt so good to know his father was still here, with his power and strength.

Young Eric was thinking almost the same thing as he squeezed Jordan's hand.

Eric went on. "Today, however, we're gonna focus on the three people in our family, Emily, whose birthday was last Wednesday. Kelstyn whose birthday is tomorrow, and young Eric, whose birthday was yesterday. We want to let them know how much we love them and how grateful we are that they were born into our circle. And just a reminder, in case anyone forgot, this coming Thursday, the 19th, is Lily and Daisy Tanner's birthday."

Taylor smiled up at her grandfather.

"But, right now," Eric said, "for Em, Kel and young Eric, we're gonna watch them open their gifts first and then sing happy birthday and have some cake and ice cream and there are a few other desserts in there too if you'd rather have something else. I know all of the children have read the new book, *The Birthday Girl*, published by Mickey, written by Keegan and illustrated by Breez and Sophia and I have to say, they all did a brilliant job on that. So, let's see if they can keep those lessons in mind as we have them open their birthday presents. Shelley?"

"Thanks, Eric. Okay, honey bunnies, we're gonna go one gift at a time. So let's do Em, then Kelbell, and then young Eric." She smiled. "I've asked Jamie and Amari to hand out gifts. So, Jamie, get a gift from Em's stack and hand it to her."

Jamie grabbed a gift bag and handed it to Em.

"Who is dis from?" Em asked.

"That one is from our family," Jewell said. "So, it's from me and Jamie and Josie

and Jordan. Happy birthday, sweetie."

Emily glowed. "Fank you."

She pulled out a large rectangular bucket of snap/pop beads to make an array of necklaces and bracelets and other arts and crafts. She took a deep breath as her eyes lit up as she studied the picture on front of all the things she could make.

"Wow, Em," Melody said. "We could make some cool stuff!"

Emily squeezed the bucket to her chest and then quickly ran to Miss Jewell. "Fank you so much."

"You are so welcome, sweet girl," Jewell said.

Em then delivered the same to Josie and Jamie and finally Jordan.

Amari carefully chose a gift from Kelstyn's stack and handed it to her.

She smiled at him. "Tank you, 'Mari."

He nodded with a smile.

"Dis is uh vewy pwetty bow," Kelstyn said softly. "I can't wead yet. Whose name is dis?"

"That's from our family," Bree answered.

Kel grinned and pulled out a doctor's kit complete with carrying case and a stuffed dog to operate on. "How did you know I wove to be a doctor?"

Taylor laughed. "You told me and I told Mom you would like it. So, do you?"

"I WOVE it," she said and went to hug the family. She hugged her Uncle Ricky, her Aunt Bree and Taylor and headed back to her seat.

"Hey, how about me?" young Eric asked.

"Oh, I fo-got 'bout you."

Everyone laughed.

She quickly ran to hug her next to the eldest cousin. He squeezed her hard. "You know I love you, right, Kelbell?"

"Uh huh. And I wove you too!"

Next Jamie handed a gift to young Eric with a sly smile. "We all helped," he said quietly.

"Oh, so this is from your family, Jamie?"

He nodded.

Young Eric tore away the paper from a bakery box. Inside was an assortment of eighteen of Jewell's Famous Cookies. His eyes opened wide. "Wow! This is awesome!"

"What is it?" Sophia asked.

"It's a whole box of Miss Jewell's cookies. It's an awesome gift because their family knows I really love these cookies! You guys, thank you so much." He rose and kissed Josie's cheek and Jewell's cheek and hugged Jamie and sat back down.

"Hey, what about me?" Jordan said.

"I'll thank you later," he said softly, making everyone chuckle and Jordan's cheeks turn pink.

It took over an hour to open everyone's gifts. Before they adjourned there was a marvelous display of simple, yet well-thought-out gifts. The gifts included writing tablets, glow-in-the-dark blankets, pink walkie-talkies, a Matching Card game, a ballerina jewelry box, because "every little girl needs a ballerina jewelry box some time in their

lives," a whole set of tutus and ballet slippers, a karaoke machine, a camera, a sewing kit, an easel and paints, a watch, men's cologne, funny t-shirts, socks, a leather journal and a survival kit. There were also numerous heartfelt cards and notes. It was a lovely display of love.

In the dining room, Taylor video called with the Tanners. Iris was so happy to be able to sing Happy Birthday to Em and Kelbell. It was adorable how much love she was exuding toward the two girls who were one year older than her. Gabe gave a special birthday greeting to the girls and then told young Eric how proud he was of him and to know him.

The candles were lit, the song was sung, prayer wishes made, candles blown out, cake cut, and sugar consumed in large amounts by everyone.

Melody and Logan stood by the dining room doors, eating their cake and looking over the crowd. Taylor was holding Scarlett, gently bouncing the Davis baby in her arms and cooing at her. Miss Shelley was playing with Nate, making him laugh as she touched a dot of icing on his nose. Seeing Nate laugh was always awesome because he was very serious. Several of the other children were pretending to sword fight with their plastic forks. In another family that may have been halted, but in this family, the men were approving the beginning of weapons skills. The adults were chatting quietly. Young Eric and Jordan stood along the side wall as they ate, and JoJo, unable to hold his plate and eat at the same time, had a seat near the end of the table.

It was very nice to see Jamie and Josie and Amari, along with Daniel and Jeremy Davis, all talking and laughing together, and also very nice to see Sophia talking to Brittney, making her feel welcomed to the family.

Melody started pointing and counting.

"Whatcha counting, Mel?" Logan asked.

She smiled. "There are ten kids under the age of eight and five of them are two-year-olds, and Ledger just turned three. When all of these kids get to be, let's say, teenagers, I mean, think about having five fifteen-year-olds and a sixteen-year-old sitting around the table."

Logan nodded with a grin. "And of those six, only one is a girl. And then that means there would be two seventeen-year-old girls, Em and Kel, and Sophia would be, um, my age. Wow."

Melody giggled. "And you'll be thirty-three."

Logan chuckled. "And you'll be thirty-one."

"If I'm still around."

"Oh, you'll be around. If I have a say in it, you'll be right next to me."

She smiled up at him. "That sounds like a proposal."

He grinned. "And yet again, it's not. Not yet anyway. Because I'm gonna do it better than that when the time comes. But let's call it a pre-proposal. Just so you know I'm thinking along those lines and let you get used to the idea."

She giggled. "Logan, we already talked about the fact that the reason we're dating is to be able to find our mate and not just to hook up."

Logan laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You saying those words. Hook up. Just sounded so funny coming out of your sweet mouth."

JoJo turned his head and looked up at them. "It did sound funny, Mel. But I gotta say, having you as a sister-in-law would be very cool."

Melody smiled. Her life had changed so much in the past few months. Her own family dynamic had been impacted and changed by the powerful people standing around in this room. What a blessing to be included in such an amazing family.

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December 15th 8 PM Sunday Evening
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"And Father, we just want You to know how grateful we are to have Amari and Brittney staying with us. We already love them so much and we hope You will fill them with Your love and peace and help them to know that everything is gonna be okay. Send Your angels to watch over them, we pray, in Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," Ricky, Amari and Brittney repeated.

Bree opened her eyes and smiled at the children. "Okay, sweet Britt, let's hop up into bed."

Brittney pulled out the little stool they'd bought for her and stepped up on it so she could climb onto the bed. Amari walked around the other side and got into bed with her.

"Amari," Ricky said kindly. "I really like the way you take care of your little sister. That's what a real man does. He takes care of the ladies in his family."

Amari smiled. "Are you taking us to school in the morning?"

"Yes, we both are. We have to take some paperwork into the school and talk to the principal."

"We gonna eat breakfast at school?" Amari asked.

"If you want to, yes. If you'd rather eat breakfast here, that would be good too."

"Do you want us to eat breakfast at school?"

Bree smiled. "Honestly, we hope you'll learn to like eating with us."

"I like eating with you," Brittney said. "It's yummy."

"You got any more of those muffins?" Amari asked.

Ricky smiled. "It's do you *have* any more muffins, and yes we do. Do you like them? They are some of my favorite things to eat."

"Yeah, they're really good," Amari said.

"Tell ya what," Bree said. "If you want, you guys can eat breakfast with us AND at school for a while, until you decide."

"Two breakfasts?" Amari asked, his eyes wide.

"Two breakfasts," Ricky affirmed with a nod and a smile. "That way you'll grow big and strong." Ricky sighed. "And remember, if you have any questions, or any problems, or are just feeling sad or scared or anything like that, you can come and talk to us. To me, or Bree or young Eric or Taylor. Okay?"

"I'm not scared," Brittney said quickly with a smile.

"Me neither," Amari said firmly.

"I'm glad you're not scared," Bree said, "because we're gonna take such good care of you."

"Are you gonna do my hair again in the morning?" Brittney asked.

"Yes, I am. But it'll be better in the morning because I spoke with a friend of mine who is a hair stylist and she told me how to fix your hair in the morning, and then you and I are gonna pick out a new style and go in on Wednesday after school and have your hair done, and she's gonna teach me how to do it."

Amari smiled. Him trying to do his sister's hair was always a hard thing for him. She always cried and he always got mad. Only every once in a while did their mom ever get up and do her hair. He was glad that weight was off his shoulders.

"Okay, kiddos," Ricky said. "Sleep well. And remember, if you need anything, even in the middle of the night, you can come knock on our door, or young Eric's or Taylor's too."

"We gonna go down to beach in the morning to like, do karate stuff again?" Amari asked.

Ricky smiled. "To do martial arts and exercise, yes we are. Do you still want to come?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, yes. Miss Bree has laid your uniforms out on the chair over there. I'll wake you up early and you'll get dressed and we'll go down to the beach. Then you'll take a quick shower or bath, get dressed and come down for breakfast. We'll have family prayer and Bree and I will drive you to school and come in to talk to your principal. Then Bree and I have a doctor's appointment, and we'll be back to pick you up at the end of school." He went through the whole routine because his father told him the kids knowing what to expect each day was important.

"Good night, Britt, good night, 'Mari," Bree said softly as she pulled the covers up under their chins and bent to softly kiss their foreheads.

"Good night," they mumbled.

"Night, guys," Ricky said and briefly placed his hand on each child's head.

"Night," they repeated.

Ricky escorted Bree downstairs to their room. He watched her undress, noting the slight frown on her face. "You okay, baby?"

She nodded. "Just thinking about those babies. They're so sweet and they've been through so much."

Ricky nodded. "Well, they've hit the jackpot and they won't suffer anymore." He eyed his wife. He was worried about her. She seemed thinner. She seemed frail. She hadn't been eating well. He pushed the negative thoughts away.

"I'm gonna take a quick shower," she said and headed into the bathroom.

When she came out she stopped as she saw her husband wearing pajama bottoms and an old Kino Martial Arts t-shirt. He stood out on the deck looking out over the ocean, something their family did on a regular basis, but especially when they were troubled.

Dressed in some new Christmas pajamas, she went to him and wrapped her arms around him from behind and leaned her head against his back.

"Ricky? Are you okay?"

He sighed as he patted her hands and then held them. "I'm okay, Bree." He pulled her around so he could see her. He looked deeply into her beautiful gray eyes. "I love

you, baby. I love you with my entire soul and I feel so blessed to have you in my life."

She put her hand on his cheek. "But?"

He smiled. "There is no 'but'."

"Okay, then, what were you out here thinking so hard about?"

He sighed. "I was thinking about my mother."

"Oh."

"I was thinking about when she got ill, and everything she went through, how much she suffered and how hard it was, and..." He stopped.

"And?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me, Ricky. I can tell something's bothering you. Talk to me."

He drew a deep breath. "Okay, well, I was begging God please do not allow that to happen again. Baby, I know you're not well. I see how you're losing weight. And I guess, I'm scared, Bree. I don't want to lose you. But Bree, as I was just talking to Him, I had a feeling of peace come over me, and I think it's gonna be okay. So, you hold on."

"Oh, Ricky, I had no idea you were thinking along those lines. Oh, sweetheart, I love you so much."

"Are you scared, Bree? Are you worried what the doctor is gonna find tomorrow?"

She smiled. "No." She drew a deep breath. "Baby, I am sorry. I found out tonight what my problem is, and I was gonna wait to let the doctor tell you tomorrow at the appointment, but I had no idea you were thinking along those lines like that and suffering."

"What did you find out?"

"Well, Jeffy came to me earlier this evening and told me she knew I wasn't feeling well and she wanted to read me. So, she simply leaned forward and gave me a hug and then she jumped back, all surprised."

"What did she see?"

Bree sighed.

"Tell me before I go crazy."

"Ricky, I'm pregnant."

"Wh, what? Really?" His smile lit up his face.

"That's what Jeffy says. I reminded her that I'm forty-nine years old and she just shrugged like that was nothing. She said because I follow her protocols so well, my body is more like a thirty-year-old. She says I'm healthy and strong and simply experiencing some first trimester morning sickness and symptoms, like the dizziness, and fatigue and backache. That's what's been wrong with me."

Ricky's eyes filled. "We're gonna have a baby?" He grabbed her and pulled her close and held her a long time.

Finally, she pulled back and looked up at him. "Isn't it amazing? I was wishing and wanting another baby, but knew I was too old. A few times I said a little something, really, just expressing my regret, just telling the Lord how I wish I hadn't waited so long to marry you and how I wish I hadn't put off having babies after Taylor was born just so I could honor those movie contracts and now it was too late and I was so sorry. I finally realized the importance of my role as your wife and the mother of our children, but I was

too late. I wasn't asking for this blessing. I was just really lamenting to the Lord and asking for comfort because I had so many regrets. I would look at the Tanner family, and the Stewart family, and now, even my own mother's family, and all the babies being born, and the yearning for another child was so deep. So deep. But really, I had no right to yearn. I can't believe God would bless me in this way. Bless us in this way. I am so not worthy."

"Baby, apparently He has deemed you worthy, so don't second guess Him. Let's just be ultra-grateful. Right now, I'm so relieved that I'm not gonna lose you to some horrible disease. So grateful. Let's just vow to do the very best we can do in raising this child. But, Bree, I mean, because you're older, do you think there might be complications?"

"Jeffy says the baby is a very healthy embryo and she knows the sex."

"Did she tell you?"

"No, I told her I didn't want to know yet. I wanted to talk to you first."

Ricky smiled and shook his head in disbelief. "Man, oh man, Bree, we're gonna have another baby!"

"Are you happy?"

"What a silly question. I am ecstatic. I am elated. I am so freakin' relieved that you aren't dying of cancer."

"Wow," Bree said with a giggle.

He picked her up and spun her around. "Thank You, Jesus, thank You so much." He carried her inside, shut the door, laid her on the bed and snuggled in beside her. "I'm so happy that I'm not sure I can sleep."

"Well I can. I'm very tired."

"Okay, baby, you sleep and I'll just lie here and watch you."

Bree laughed. "I love you, Ricky Kino."

"Oh, Bree, I freakin' love you too."

She turned over, he pulled her close and whispered in her ear. "I'll do everything I can to help you. Tell me what you need, cuz sometimes I don't realize it. I am your servant."

"Right now, I just want to sleep."

"Right. Okay. Good night, sweetheart. We're having a baby. Wow. Wow. Okay. Good night."

Bree smiled and closed her eyes.

✝✝✝

Hebrews 11:11

"And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age,
was enabled to bear children because she considered
him faithful who had made the promise."

Chapter Nineteen

December 16th 9:00 AM Monday Morning
USC Campus, Los Angeles, California

JoJo smiled as he parked outside of *Tandry Hall* to head to his English Class. It had rained overnight, but the sun was shining and the sky was blue. The weekend had been an absolute blast. It began with a red carpet movie premiere event, then a rewarding martial arts demo, and the rescue of two awesome kids, a birthday dinner at *Bayside*, a dance performance at *Brookside High*, then a hugely successful church service at *Hopewood Chapel* that had already taken in over ten thousand dollars from the live-stream and online donations.

Though the money would help Reverend Clark, the real success was the youth who'd been touched, who'd reached out either in person to him or Logan or had gone to the website and contacted them. It was a large and diverse group, both boys and girls. Several wanted to join the choir. A few wanted to be part of the band every Sunday. A few said they'd never even thought about God or attending a church, but they felt something inside their minds and hearts and knew they wanted to turn their lives around. A couple of others wanted to know if there would be Sunday School classes or youth classes available.

This thing was taking off faster than they expected. JoJo knew a lot of that had to do with his brother and the way he used music and a good drum beat to raise vibrations and that allowed the Holy Spirit to touch them. Reverend Clark was already talking about at least beginning with an all-teen group meeting on Wednesdays and maybe even a couple of Sunday School classes before the Church service for the younger children to learn about Jesus.

The weekend had ended with a wonderful family birthday celebration at the Grands' house. They'd accomplished a lot in a short amount of time and it made JoJo feel like he could take on the world.

"What are you grinning about?"

JoJo glanced over at two of his teammates from football who were both in his English class. "Hey, guys," he said with a smile. "Because it's a beautiful day, don't ya think?"

They looked up and shrugged. "Yeah, Preacher, it ain't bad," one said.

JoJo smiled at the nickname. The whole team called him that just because he would accidentally spew some scripture or word of wisdom. Most of the time he didn't even think much about it. It just happened automatically. After yesterday's sermon, maybe the nickname actually fit him. Maybe it was his path.

"Did you get your paper finished?" the other asked him.

JoJo nodded. "Yeah, I mean, it's not like I can do anything else, so, I don't have an

excuse."

"Right. So, you comin' to practice today?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm supposed to give a little motivational speech, since again, I can't do anything else."

They nodded. "Well, Preach, if anyone can motivate, it would be you," one said as they headed toward the building.

JoJo suddenly stopped. "Man, I forgot my bag."

"You want me to go get it for you?"

"No, I got it. My legs work, but thanks. See you guys in class," he said as he turned around and headed back to his car. He'd forgotten it because it was in his trunk and not in the seat beside him. He grabbed it out of the trunk and headed back across the parking lot. He stopped when he thought he heard yelling, and maybe even someone scream. Standing very still and looking around he didn't see anyone except a few kids walking down the sidewalk.

He started again, and again heard something. It was definitely someone yelling. Someone angry. He looked around again, and realized it was coming from a car parked up at the front of the parking lot. He only realized it because the car was rocking back and forth.

As JoJo approached, he clearly heard what one person said. It was a guy and he was in the driver's seat. "I told you to shut the hell up." And then he swung his right arm across and smacked the person in the passenger seat in the face.

JoJo stopped. The person he hit was a girl. She screamed, "Stop!" and covered her face and lowered her head.

He hit her again. JoJo took ten seconds to send a one-word text to the two friends who'd just gone ahead to class.

~~Help

JoJo then ran to the car and slammed his hand on the window. "Hey!"

The guy stopped hitting the girl and looked up at JoJo. He immediately opened his door as if he was gonna get out and fight.

JoJo backed up, because he wanted the guy to get out. He wanted the guy to come at him. That would give the girl some time to get out of the car, but it didn't look like she was doing it.

The guy glared at JoJo. "You might wanna mind your own business," he said.

"It became my business the moment you hit a girl in my presence."

"She deserved everything she got and you're about to get some of the same."

JoJo smiled. "You don't know who you're messin' with."

"I know whoever you are, you only got one arm workin'."

JoJo nodded. "Truth." He instinctively used his left hand to hold his right arm in the sling steady.

The guy pulled back and swung. JoJo merely moved slightly to the right and the guy hit nothing but air. He swung again. JoJo, still bracing his right arm with his left hand, turned slightly and swept the leg and the guy went down. Now the dude was really mad. He got up and let go a string of curses and charged at JoJo, who simply and precisely connected with a spinning heel kick right to his head. The guy went down again, out cold.

JoJo's two friends came running down the walkway from the building, but stopped as they neared and saw him kick the guy in the head. Preach didn't appear to need any help.

JoJo nodded at them. "Call campus police please and keep this guy right there if he wakes up." He ran to the car, hit the unlock button and ran to the passenger side. The girl was trying to undo her seatbelt.

"Let me help you," JoJo said softly.

She blinked up at him. There was blood all over her face. It looked like her nose was bleeding and her teeth were coated in blood and blood ran from a cut on her forehead. "I, I, can't get it unbuckled."

"Let me do it," he said kindly. He leaned in and unlatched the seat belt. Slowly, he pulled her from the car. She swayed and he sat her down on the curb and knelt down in front of her, but looked up when he heard one of his friends say, "Oh, no, buddy. You not goin' anywhere."

JoJo watched his friend push the bad guy back down and put his foot on him.

JoJo looked back at the girl. "Stay right here, I'm gonna go grab my bag."

She nodded and he ran over to where he'd dropped his bag and scooped it up. At that moment the campus police arrived in two different cars.

JoJo ran back to the girl and pulled out a package of body wipes and began wiping the blood from her face.

In only a few minutes, one of the cops made his way over. "He says you assaulted him," the cop said.

JoJo stood, holding the bloody cloth. "No, sir, I defended myself. He was beating up this girl and I told him to stop, so he came after me and I kicked him in the head."

The cop nodded and looked closer at JoJo. "Hey, you JoJo Adams?"

"Yes, sir."

The cop took one look at the girl and immediately called for paramedics.

JoJo pointed up toward the street lights. "There are cameras up there and there, and over there on the corner of the building. If they're operational, you could probably see what happened?"

The cop nodded and went to speak with the other officer.

JoJo knelt back down. "How ya doin'? Are you in pain?"

She slowly nodded her head.

"I'm JoJo, what's your name?"

"Kaylee Quinn."

"Hi, Kaylee. Listen, paramedics are on the way and they're gonna fix you up."

She nodded her head again. Then her lips started to tremble. "He was tired. He didn't get much sleep. And I smarted off because I was mad that he made me late to class."

JoJo shook his head, his eyes narrowed. "So, are you trying to make excuses for him? Are you trying to tell me that this was your fault? Because you have to know that no matter what, he shouldn't hit you."

She shrugged. "No, I mean, you're right, he shouldn't have hit me."

"Is this the first time he's ever hit you?"

She slowly shook her head as tears ran from her eyes.

"It won't stop ya know. It'll just get worse until he finally kills you. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not. But I don't know what to do about it."

"Leave him."

"It's not that easy."

"I know that, but it has to be done."

"You don't know anything about it."

"I know a lot more about it than you think. Listen, I know someone, her name is Angel Lee. She runs the *Angel Network Foundation*. She can help you and counsel you on what's the best course of action. May I give her your number?"

The girl sighed and nodded. She gave him her number and cops came back over to get her side of the story. JoJo was asked to step back and they would speak to him separately. A few minutes later, the paramedics arrived.

JoJo went over to speak to his buddies. "Thanks, guys."

"Well, Preach, we didn't do anything. You had it all taken care of by the time we got to you."

"Yeah, well, sorry I called you for nothing. I wasn't sure if I was gonna be able to handle him without the use of my arm, but as it turns out, he was dumb."

His teammate shook his head. "The dude busted that little girl up pretty bad."

JoJo nodded. "Yeah he did. And she pretty much is making excuses for him and she's afraid of him."

"Looks like she has good reason to be afraid."

"Yep, and it is frustrating. So, guys, what did the Professor say when you told him you had to leave class?"

They laughed. "We didn't tell him. We both just jumped up and ran out."

JoJo grimaced. "You know that's a bad grade coming."

"No worries. We can spin it. Ya know, had to go play hero kinda stuff."

JoJo looked over to see the medics pulling a gurney from the ambulance. He went over to check on her. "How's she doing?"

"She's pretty out of it. She says he pounded on her head with his fist, so she's concussed. And she'll need stitches on her forehead where he hit her with his ring. I'm guessing ER will admit her, at least for a night to observe."

JoJo nodded. "Thanks, guys."

"You bet. Hey, uh, sorry about the game loss."

JoJo shrugged. "Yep, me too. Thanks."

The medic eyed JoJo's arm. "You gonna be back before the *Rose Bowl*?"

JoJo shook his head. "Nope. I'm done. It was a career-ending injury."

"Wow, sorry, man."

"Thanks. We'll just see what God has in store for me."

"JoJo?"

He went to Kaylee where she lay on the gurney. "Hey, yeah, I'm right here."

She held out her hand and he took it. "I just wanted to say thanks. I mean, for helping me."

"No problem. I'm glad I was here."

She nodded. "If you hadn't been, well, I guess I could be dead."

He smiled kindly. "It was a possibility. So, like, is there anyone I could call for you? Anything you need me to do?"

"Oh. Yes. I'm so out of it. I, uh, I don't even know where my phone is. It might be in the floor of the car. And my backpack. I need to call my sister."

"Would you like me to do that for you?"

"Yes. Will you get my phone and I'll unlock it?"

He retrieved her phone and her pack and she unlocked the phone.

"Her name is Raylynn."

JoJo smiled and nodded. "Got it. So, *Ray*lynn and *Kay*lee? Does that, by any chance, get cut down to Kay and Ray?"

She tried to smile. "Yes."

"Who's older?"

"Ray is."

He dialed the number and Raylynn answered quickly. "Hey, Squirt, I'm at work. What's up?"

"Hello, is this Raylynn?"

"Yes it is and who are you and why do you have my sister's phone?"

He smiled. "My name is JoJo Adams and..."

She laughed. "Oh, yeah, right. Tell Kay, good one. Listen I have a patient so I gotta go but tell her I will get her back." She ended the call.

JoJo looked at the phone to see if she really hung up. He chuckled.

"What did she say?" Kaylee asked softly.

"She asked me who I was and why I was on your phone and she didn't believe me when I told her who I was and said you pulled a good one and she's with a patient and she'll get you back."

Instead of laughing, Kaylee began to cry again.

He leaned over her. "Hey now, it's gonna be okay. I'll text her to let her know what hospital you're at and I'll call her myself from my phone."

She sniffed. "Okay."

The paramedic got off the phone and came back. "Okay, honey, sorry for the delay. We were gonna take you to Keck but we've been rerouted so we're gonna take you to LA General."

She nodded, but her lips were trembling as if she were cold. He took her blood pressure again. "Pressure's dropping. We need to transport," he said to his partner.

She reached out to JoJo. "It's okay," he said. "I, uh, I'll come stay with you at the hospital until your sister arrives." He patted her hand as the medic fastened the restraints. He took her phone, quickly transferred Raylynn's number to himself, put her phone back in her backpack, and handed it to the paramedics. "This is hers. Please let her know that I'm coming right behind you guys and I'll be there in just a few minutes."

He blew out a breath as he watched the ambulance pull away and his friends moved up next to him. "So, will you still be at practice?"

JoJo looked at his phone. "Yeah, I have plenty of time. I'll go make sure she's okay,

her sister will come up to the hospital and I'll be back by two, no problem."

"You sure are goin' above and beyond."

JoJo shrugged. "I feel sorry for her. She's scared. Have some compassion, guys. In Ephesians it says, 'Be kind and compassionate to one another.'"

"Preach," they both said together with a laugh and patted him on the back. "By the way, that's one heck of a kick you got there."

He grinned and nodded. "Heel kick. I got skills."

"So, like, some of the guys say you're a black belt. True or false?"

JoJo smiled. "Well, I'm actually a second degree black belt in Zendo Ryu, which is like having a black belt in Karate, Taekwondo, Chun Kuk, Tang Soo Do, and Jiu-jitsu. I also practice Wing Chun, and Muay Thai, but those skills aren't measured by belts."

"Cool. So, your brother, does he do all that stuff too?"

"Yeah, my brother Logan is higher than me. He's a 3rd degree in Zendo Ryu. He passed me while I concentrated on football."

They nodded.

"Well, guys, I gotta go. You go explain to the Professor why I texted you. And hey, thanks for coming. Good to know I can depend on you."

They bumped fists and left.

JoJo immediately sent a text:

~~ This really is JoJo Adams. Your sister was assaulted at school this morning. She's been beaten badly. She is being transported to LA General on State Street. I'll be there with her until you get there. Call me if you want more information.

He hit send.

✞✞✞

Raylynn Quinn nodded sweetly at the teen girl. "Good job, Lexi! See? You did it! You're gonna be back dancing on that foot in no time. Okay, now, very slowly, circle your foot in the other direction. Go slow, that's right. Does it hurt?"

The girl nodded.

"Well, don't worry. Physical therapy can hurt a little bit, but you're gonna get your range of motion back sooner than you think. I'm so proud of you." She looked at the mother. "So, keep up the exercises every day slow, as if she's moving in slow motion. We don't want to tweak that ankle. I can tell you've been working hard."

"Well, if she doesn't get back up on her foot by next month, she won't be able to compete in the *Winter Ballet Extravaganza*," the mother explained.

Raylynn sighed. "Well, let's not put a time frame on it. Let's do it right so she doesn't permanently hurt that ankle."

The mother scowled. She didn't look too happy about those words.

Raylynn frowned when her phone pinged. Sighing, she took it from her pocket and read the text. She looked up, panicked. "Uh, Lexi, Mrs. Cofer, you're doing great. Looks like I have an emergency to attend to. I have to go, but we were about done anyway. I'll see you in three days. Be careful."

Mrs. Cofer scowled again as she and her daughter watched Raylynn run toward the desk.

Ray quickly spoke to her supervisor, gathered her things, grabbed her keys and

headed out the door. Once she was in her car she hit the call back button.

JoJo answered right away. “This is JoJo. Really.”

“I’m so sorry. I thought she was playing a joke on me.”

“Yeah, I gathered that.”

“What happened to Kaylee? And why are you involved?”

“I was on my way into class and saw a guy in a car beating the crap out of a girl. I intervened. The guy was arrested. Your sister was beaten pretty badly. She was really out of it, and asked me to call you for her.”

“I’m so sorry. So sorry.”

“It’s okay. Really. I’m almost to the hospital. Are you coming?”

“Yes, I’m already in my car. My GPS says I’m fifteen minutes out.”

“Okay. I know she’ll be happy to see you. Come in through emergency and call me when you’re there and I’ll come find you.”

“Got it. And thank you.”

“No worries. It’s my pleasure. Your sister seems like a very sweet girl.”

“She is. She’s also a handful.”

“Sounds like a story. Concentrate on your driving. See you there.”

“Okay. Bye.”

JoJo pulled into a parking space and headed in. Once he told them who he was there to see, he was ushered back to a small room divided into three patient areas by curtains. He peeked in to make sure she was covered. When he saw she was, he edged into the room and Kaylee smiled.

“JoJo,” she said softly. “This is the guy who saved me,” she explained to the doctor who was examining her.

The doctor looked up from shining a light in Kaylee’s eyes and nodded with a smile. “I heard it was you who helped out this young lady. Good job, Mr. Adams.”

JoJo nodded. “Call me JoJo. How is she?” he asked as he peered over at the girl. Her face was now very swollen. One cheek was huge.

“She has a concussion. We’re gonna put a few stitches in her forehead. Her blood pressure is low and we’re gonna do a scan to see if there is injury to the brain. Did you see the whole thing? Do you know how many times he hit her?”

“I’m not sure if I saw the whole thing, but I saw him hit her at least, I’d say, six times, maybe eight. All in the head, face or neck area. I swear it was like he was trying to kill her. And I think he would have if I hadn’t intervened.”

The doctor nodded. A nurse came in with a suture kit. The doctor immediately shot something into the skin around the wound. It was pretty wide, but not too deep, though really, a wound on the forehead is pretty close to the bone. The nurse started cleaning the area.

“Can he hold my hand?” Kaylee asked as she winced.

“Of course,” the doctor said.

JoJo stepped forward, took her hand and squeezed it. “You’re okay. They numbed you up, Kaylee, so you’re not gonna feel this.” He stood by and watched as they put seven stitches in her head. It must’ve been deeper than he thought, because he’d thought it would only take about three stitches, but what did he know.

The doctor looked up as the nurse cleaned up the kit. “I’m Dr. Noles. They’re gonna take her for the scan. You can wait here if you’d like.”

JoJo nodded. “Yes, sir, I’ll wait here, but, um, her sister is on the way, so when she gets here, is it okay if I change places with her? I’m sure Kaylee would rather have a family member with her.”

The doctor nodded. “Of course. What about parents?”

JoJo shook his head. “They haven’t mentioned anything about parents.”

“So, you don’t know this young lady at all?”

He shook his head. “Not before today.”

The doctor smiled. “You’re a good man, JoJo Adams. I’ve heard that about you, I’ve read that about you, but now, I see it personally.”

“Oh, well, thank you, sir.” He looked down, not quite sure what to say.

“I’ll be back soon,” the doctor said and headed into the next curtained off area.

A second later a tech arrived to take Kaylee for the scan. JoJo scrolled through his phone as he waited. He had an email from his English Professor who’d been filled in on why he didn’t go to class today and gave him the notes for the semester final. JoJo smiled. His friends must have laid it on thick. A few minutes later he got a text from Raylynn.

~~ I’m here in the waiting room.

~Be right out.

He headed out. The waiting room was full. As he scanned the room, a pretty girl with long black hair back in a low ponytail, and wearing pink scrubs smiled and came to meet him.

“JoJo,” she said.

He almost fell at her feet. Her beauty almost took his breath away. She was average height, maybe about 5'6", athletic build, and had long, thick, black hair that came to her waist. Her skin was flawless, and very tan, making him think she might be Latino, except, her eyes were like emeralds. Bright, clear, and the greenest green, very similar to the Stewart women, Miss Lisa and Laynah, except, Laynah was not a Stewart woman anymore. She was an Appel, he reminded himself.

Raylynn smiled up at him, showing dimples in her cheeks.

He smiled at her and took the hand she offered. “Raylynn, I presume?”

“Yes. And again, I am so sorry that I hung up on you.”

“It’s not a problem. Really.”

“How’s my sister? Can I see her?”

“She’s been taken to have a scan of her brain. He beat her up pretty bad. She’s been a little shaky and scared and weepy, but I’m sure she’ll feel much better when she sees you.”

“Thank you.”

“Follow me,” he said as he went to the door and had them buzz him in.

She followed him back to the little room. There was only one chair and he motioned for her to sit.

“So, since we have some time,” Raylynn said, “will you fill me in on exactly what happened?”

He described what he'd heard, what he'd seen and what actions he took.

Her eyes moistened as he spoke, but she stayed in control.

"And when he got out of the car and came at you, and there you are with your arm in a sling, what did you think?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I was grateful that he got out of the car and came at me, because what I was afraid of was him starting the car and driving away with her, sooo when he got out, it was a big relief."

She looked into his eyes and nodded. "Spoken like a true warrior."

His mind went blank for a minute. He shook his head. "Uh, well, thanks for the compliment." He pulled out his phone and checked the time. "I, um, I have to be at football practice today. So, when Kaylee gets back I'll just say goodbye. But listen, if you ladies need anything, you have my number."

"Thank you, JoJo."

He nodded. "So, like, are your parents around?"

She shook her head. "They are back in Oklahoma."

"Oh, you're from Oklahoma?"

"Yes."

"What part?"

She sighed. "Quapaw."

"Kwapaw?" he repeated.

"Yes, with a 'Q'."

"I've never heard of it."

She smiled. "Most people haven't. It's a tiny little town. It was originally a part of the Quapaw Nation."

The light went on. "Quapaw Nation as in a Native American Nation?"

She giggled. "An American Indian Nation, yes. And yes, I am Quapaw."

"That is very interesting."

She shrugged. "We're just people, like everyone else."

"Yeah, I'm not so sure about that."

She didn't ask him what he meant by that.

"So, you corrected me. Do you prefer the term American Indian?"

She nodded. "Yes. Most of us don't like the Native American term. But like, it's not a consensus. Some do. Some prefer to be called by their actual tribe name. We were called Indians for hundreds of years, and it doesn't bother us. Most of us prefer that."

"Again, really interesting and please forgive my ignorance."

She smiled. "No prob, I am not easily offended."

"And are you a doctor or nurse?" he asked, motioning toward her outfit. "I mean, because of the scrubs."

"I'm a physical therapist at a clinic just west of here. Tell me you don't think I look old enough to have gone through medical school."

He smiled. "Didn't mean to offend and really, no you don't look very old at all. You barely look old enough to be out of high school. So, would it be really rude of me to ask you how old you are?"

She shook her head. "No. I just turned twenty-one on December 1st."

"Oh, wow. And you already have your DPT?"

"I graduated high school early at fifteen, got a couple of academic scholarships and got my bachelor's, then started at seventeen and went through USC's three-year DPT program."

He smiled. "You're a real go-getter, huh?"

"I do what I have to do."

He nodded. "I get that," he said as they pushed the gurney back into the room.

Raylynn jumped up and gasped as she laid eyes on her sister.

"Ray," Kaylee whispered.

"Oh, Kaybaby," Ray cried softly. "Oh honey, look what he did to you. I'm gonna hunt him down," she threatened.

Kaylee whimpered. "I can't handle this right now, Ray."

"Sorry, baby, I'll stop. I just hate seeing what he did to you."

"Well, Raylynn, I'll give you ladies your privacy," JoJo put in quickly. "Listen, I'm putting a woman named Angel Lee in touch with your sister. She runs the *Angel Foundation* or you might have heard of the *Angel Network*. She specifically helps situations like this, domestic violence and such. Maybe I should give her your number too. She's a pro, and she has a nationwide network of professionals to help people like this."

Raylynn nodded. "That would be great, JoJo, if you'll give her my number I would very much appreciate it."

He agreed and turned to lean over Kaylee. "Hey kiddo. So, I'm gonna go ahead and get out of the way. You get better. This might seem like a hard time, but it will pass, and you'll heal, both physically and emotionally."

"Thanks again, JoJo," she whispered and then moaned.

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes. And I'm dizzy and nauseated."

He sighed. "Okay, well, Kaylee, may I pray for you?"

Both sisters smiled. "Yes," Kaylee said.

JoJo immediately put his hand on the top of her head. "Father, I know you see this beautiful girl, this child of yours. I'm grateful you put her in front of me today so that I could help her. I ask now, Father that You take away her pain, take away her fear, heal her quickly Father. I plead the blood of Jesus over her and I ask you to give her comfort and clarity of mind to see her way out of this situation. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," both sisters said.

"Amen," Dr. Noles said as he came back in the room.

"Dr. Noles, this is Kaylee's sister, Raylynn Quinn."

"Hello, Miss Quinn. Are your parents available?"

She shook her head. "No, sir. They live in Oklahoma and they can't travel. They're elderly and my father is handicapped, so, I'm her guardian for now."

He nodded. "That's fine. So, let me share with you her condition."

"I'll get out of here," JoJo jumped in.

"Um, JoJo," Raylynn said quickly. "Will you stay for just a minute so I don't have to explain to you later when you call me to ask me what the doctor said?"

He smiled. “Okay.” He hadn’t said he would call her, but she assumed he would and she was absolutely correct.

Dr. Noles nodded. “She has a grade one concussion, which is the lowest grade but all concussions are serious. There are obvious contusions on her forehead, eye and cheek. The CT scan showed no bleeding in the brain, but it did show a zygoma fracture. In other words, her left cheekbone is fractured.”

“What? He broke her cheek?” Raylynn said.

JoJo sighed. “He had on a ring, like, a class ring. The paramedic said that’s what busted open her head.”

The doctor nodded. “Well, add the blunt ring to the force of a man’s punch, it can easily produce this type of injury. We’d like to admit her and keep an eye on her for at least a twenty-four-hour period. When she goes home, she’ll need to keep her head slightly elevated and she’ll need to be watched closely or checked on for another twenty-four hours.”

Kay sniffed. “It’s the end of the semester. I have two finals I have to take.”

Dr. Noles shook his head. “I don’t think you’ll be well enough to go to school anytime soon. Perhaps you can speak with your Professors.”

Raylynn nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, then, they will be taking her to a room soon and I’ll speak with you again later.” He shook Ray’s hand, then turned to JoJo. “It’s a pleasure meeting you, JoJo. Take care.”

“Thank you, sir. You too,” JoJo said as he shook the doctor’s hand.

The doctor touched Kaylee’s leg. “Take care, young lady. I’ll see you soon.”

JoJo smiled. “Okay, well, I have a meeting I have to get to. If you need anything, you have my number. You ladies take care.”

“Thank you, JoJo,” Kaylee said softly. “Thanks for saving my life.”

He smiled and nodded. “Just glad I was there. You get well.” He turned to Raylynn and offered his hand.

She took it and smiled. “Really. Thank you so much, JoJo Adams. I actually can’t thank you enough.”

He shrugged. “You don’t have to thank me. So, I’ll send you the case number and when they pull the video from the cameras, you’ll be able to see pretty much what went down. I’ll get that for you too. And again, if you need me, please don’t hesitate to call.”

She smiled.

“Okay, well, bye for now.” He turned immediately and made his way out.

Once in his car his phone rang. “Accept. Hey, Dad.”

“Hello, son. You got into an altercation at school?”

“Did the school call you or was it on the news?”

“On the news. So, it’s true?”

“Yes, sir.” He went on to explain and told him he had to get to his meeting and would his father call Angel and put her in touch with Raylynn and he would send her number in a minute.

“So, were you hurt at all?”

JoJo smiled. “No, Dad. Not at all. When they release the video you’ll see.”

Mark nodded. “Do you know the guy’s name?”

JoJo frowned. “Actually, no. I didn’t even think to get his name. But I have a case number. I’ll send that to you when I park, along with Raylynn Quinn’s phone number and you can do your thing.”

“Raylynn is the victim?”

“No, sir, she’s the sister of the victim, but I think she’ll be more helpful in explaining Kaylee’s situation to Angel, because Kaylee is like, a reluctant victim, I guess you could say.”

“Oh, I see. So, the victim is in a place like your mother was once with her first husband, meaning, not ready to see that there is a way out?”

“Exactly. And she actually started trying to make excuses for the guy.”

“Sounds like an interesting case. God served up a big one for us today, huh?”

JoJo smiled. “Yes, sir, it looks like it.”

“Okay, well, did ya ever figure out what you want to say to your team today?”

“Sorta kinda. I’m trying to let God guide me. I’m not real clear yet.”

“Well, I’m sure whatever you say, it will be just the thing.”

“Thanks, Dad. Talk to ya later.”

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December 16th 2:00 PM Monday Afternoon

Cedric May Estate, Phoenix, AZ

Grandmaster Eric Kino opened his eyes as the Ameritech SUV pulled up to a lovely gated home. Senior Agent in Charge, SAC, Hart Akins based in Dallas, Texas, was in charge of the southwest territory and had assigned one of his top agents to pick Eric up at the Phoenix airport and escort him during his stay in Arizona. Hart had been one of three agents assigned as Jeffy’s bodyguards during her stay at a monastery and then in Uganda and had a great love for the Kinos.

Agent Martinez lowered his window and spoke into the intercom. A moment later the gate swung open and they pulled around a short drive lined with well-manicured hedges. They pulled to the front of the home. Agent Martinez immediately got out of the car and went to open the passenger side rear door, but Grandmaster Kino was already stepping out.

“May I take your bag, sir?” the agent asked, reaching for Eric’s soft leather briefcase.

Eric smiled. “It’s okay, I’ve got it.”

The front door opened and a man stepped out. “Grandmaster Kino, welcome. I’m Mr. May’s assistant. My name is Henderson. Mr. May is in his studio with the other guests. I’ll escort you back. Would you like to freshen up?”

Eric smiled. “That would be great.” He nodded at Agent Martinez. “This is Agent Martinez, he’ll be accompanying me today.”

The man merely nodded at the agent. He escorted Eric through a giant foyer with crystal chandeliers and a very noticeable Egyptian mummy case, complete with two large dogs, live dogs, sitting on either side of the case. They came to a room that could hardly be called a restroom. More like a lounge. He used the restroom, washed his hands and face, went to the front where there was a white chaise lounge, a gray sofa, coffee table

and side tables with lamps and floral arrangements. He dropped to his knees in front of the sofa.

"Father, I came here because I felt you were urging me to do so. I came here because my daughter felt a need for me to defend our beliefs, which I realize are simply, our relationship with you. Father, you once told me to teach the world, and I've tried to do so, and I'm going to try today. You've told me many times that you are not happy with the Christians, meaning those who believe in Jesus, you're not happy with them fighting or arguing amongst themselves. I thought I would merely come here, set them straight, and that would be that. But I feel, Father, as I entered this home, I feel a darkness here. I'm not sure if it's the home, the owner, or the other people he's invited onto the podcast to debate me."

"*Not debate.*"

Eric stopped as he heard the words in his mind. "Okay, so, they're not here to debate. Then what?"

"*Accuse."*

"Accuse. Okay. I get it. So, I ask, Father, for your protection against this darkness." He stopped again, as his heart and mind were flooded with God's power and strength and calmness, as the Holy Spirit bore witness to him so that he was confident in what he had to do and say. His eyes filled. "I trust you, Father."

"*Remain in love. In love. No judgment, but no lies. No anger, but be strong.*"

Eric nodded. "Thank you, Lord," he whispered.

When he emerged, Agent Martinez moved forward from where he'd stood in the luxurious corridor. Both the agent and Eric turned abruptly as the two dogs came running madly at them. Henderson angrily called them down, but they didn't listen. The dogs charged right at Eric. He calmly knelt down in front of them. They both stopped when they got to him, wagging their tails and sniffing his hands. Eric scratched both dogs under their chins.

"I am so sorry sir. They've never done this before. They've never disobeyed and they most certainly have never been friendly toward a stranger."

Eric smiled at that information and rose. "Well, they certainly are beautiful creatures. What breed are they?"

"These sir, are German short-haired Pointers, and they are usually extremely well-behaved and would never run at someone unless directed to do so."

"No worries," Eric said, smiling. He gave each dog a final rub. This was a sign, a small miracle, showing him that God was in control of this podcast. Eric relaxed.

Both Eric and Agent Martinez were escorted to the outer room of the podcast studio. There was a table filled with refreshments. Drinks, coffee, water, pastries, fruits and bagels.

"May I get you something to eat or drink?" Henderson asked.

Eric nodded. "How about some spring water?"

"Very well, sir." He pulled a bottle of water from a refrigerator and offered it to Eric.

"Thanks," Eric said as he quickly uncapped the bottle and drank half of it down. "Agent?" Eric said. "Would you like something to eat or drink?"

Agent Martinez' eyes went wide. "No, sir, I'm fine, thank you."

Eric smiled. Henderson frowned and then addressed the agent. "You may have a seat if you wish. Grandmaster Kino will be in there," he said as he pointed toward a large glass, soundproof window. He could see three people in there sitting around a table. Across the room on the other side was a door and another large window and another man sat in there.

"If you'd like to listen to the podcast, we can turn it on right here," Henderson said as he turned a black knob on the wall and they could hear the people inside the other room speaking. "Just turn the knob if you need it louder."

Agent Martinez nodded. He would be doing that for sure because he would need to know if things got heated.

Henderson walked across the room and opened the studio door. "Mr. May, Grandmaster Kino has arrived."

"Wonderful, send him in," Cedric May said as he glanced up at the window and smiled.

Eric moved through the open door. Cedric moved forward, a giant smile on his face. "Grandmaster Kino, it's a pleasure to finally meet you! We're so excited to be able to make this happen."

Eric smiled warmly and shook his hand. "Thank you, Mr. May. It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with your listeners."

"Oh, please, call me Cedric."

Eric nodded. "Cedric. And please call me Eric."

"Wonderful. Now let me introduce you to the panel we invited. First, this is Pastor Sharon Mack. She's the Pastor of the *Bible Only Church* over in Arkansas. She's the one, I guess we could say, who started this whole big controversy."

Eric didn't offer his hand, but not because he was being rude. It was because she was a woman and didn't offer her hand to him, so, he simply nodded. "Nice to meet you, Pastor Mack."

"You as well," she said without smiling.

Eric quickly looked her over. She was maybe about thirty-five to forty years old. Her hair was blonde, though not naturally, and cut into a short, neat, modern bob. She wore a red skirt with a white blouse and a wide red belt with gold decorations on it and red, open-toed high heels. Power dressing, he thought. She was of medium height, and medium weight.

"And this is Reverend Larkin from the *Church of Christ* in Big Spring, Texas."

Eric smiled and nodded and shook hands with the Reverend, a heavyset man with salt-and-pepper hair and neatly trimmed beard and a giant smile. He wore gray suit pants and a maroon-colored short-sleeve button-down shirt. No tie. And the suit jacket was hung over the back of a chair.

Eric's eyes shifted to Cedric. He was dressed casually in cargo shorts and a red t-shirt that had on the front, the words, Joy, Love, Peace, Believe and Christmas in the shape of a Christmas tree. Eric smiled at the obvious effort to cause a little contention and he wondered how Pastor Sharon Mack felt about the t-shirt.

Meanwhile, May, Mack and Larkin were looking over Eric. He too was dressed

casually. He wore khaki slacks, and a cream-colored soft knit, short sleeved shirt, which showed off the amazing physique of a much younger man.

"Well, let's get to this," Cedric said. "Does anyone need anything? Drinks? Food? Tequila?" he prodded.

The Reverend chuckled. "I'd better keep a clear head."

"Grandmaster Kino?"

He smiled. "I don't drink, but thank you for your hospitality."

"Sharon?"

She frowned. "I do drink— wine, but no thank you."

At that moment, the door on the far side opened and a young man came energetically into the room.

"Okay, let me introduce you to our manager, coordinator, director, sound guy and webmaster, all in one—this is Jimmy Wilson."

Jimmy smiled and shook each person's hand then directed them to have a seat, put on headphones, test their mics, and drink water. He then laid an agenda down in front of each participant. "I know you've been emailed a copy of this, but here it is in hard copy. Don't worry if you mess up or need a break. This is not live. We will edit and upload the podcast by Wednesday evening at 7:00 EST."

Eric nodded sharply. "And in the editing process, as I've been promised, you will not take out statements that change the meaning of what I or anyone says."

"No, as we promised, all will be on the up and up," Cedric replied. "The contract was clear, your attorney was thorough, and I have no desire to lose my business with a lawsuit."

Eric smiled and nodded. The participants chatted another few minutes as they got settled. Finally, they quieted and Cedric waited for the director to point at him and then began speaking. "This is Cedric May coming to you from Phoenix, Arizona and do we have a great show for you today. Since we're getting close to Christmas, we have some people here today who are gonna set us straight on the best Christian way to celebrate this holiday season. With us today are Pastor Sharon Mack from the *Bible Only Church* in Little Rock, Arkansas, and Reverend Larkin from the *Church of Christ* in Big Spring, Texas. And we are very excited to have with us today, the legendary black belt hall-of-famer, four time MART champion, the instructor of nine different Kino Challenge Champions, the founder of *Kino Martial Arts*, he is a doctor of psychology, a renowned philanthropist, who says he loves doing God's work and God's will each and every day, the legend himself, Grandmaster Eric Kino."

Eric sighed and prayed silently, *Make me strong.*

"*Today you are the rock of David*," he heard. *"You are Daniel in the lion's den."*

Cedric went on to fill his audience in on the recent social media storm produced over Pastor Sharon Mack's denouncement of the Kinos because they were decorating Christmas trees at the newly renovated Hopewood Chapel. He read several excerpts of what Sharon Mack had to say, and then looked at her. "Pastor Sharon, do you still stand by your words, that the Kinos are not really Christians and that they use their fake personas to make money?"

"I absolutely do," she said vehemently. "Long before Jesus was born, evergreen

trees, that is trees that stay green all year long, they had a special meaning for people. Pagan people. In many countries it was believed that plants that were green during the winter protected against evil witches, spirits and diseases. This is sorcery. We don't need trees to protect against evil. We only need our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," she said adamantly.

"Grandmaster Kino?"

Eric smiled. "No need to be formal. Call me Eric."

"Okay, Eric, so tell us, what do you have to say about what Pastor Mack just said?"

"About what she *just* said, I have nothing to say, except I agree. We certainly don't need trees to protect us. We only need Jesus. I'm all in with that. However, she didn't really address the accusations she'd made, that I and my family are not real Christians and I believe she didn't address it because she knows that I would take great exception to that. Our family believes that Jesus is the Son of God, that He was the only begotten Son of the Father, that He came to this earth through the virgin Mary, that He was a perfect sacrificial lamb, that He allowed Himself to be crucified on the cross to pay for our sins, that He rose from the grave and was resurrected and then ascended to heaven to be with His Father. I know Him. I know Him to be real and not just a story in a book. My entire family, both blood related and friends whom I call my family, we believe in Him, we know Him and we have a close relationship with Him. If that is the definition of a real Christian, then that is what I am, and what we are."

Eric glanced up at the woman who looked as if she would pass out. He smiled at her to try to ease her fear because he felt compassion. "But, I have no ill will for Pastor Sharon at all. She is simply trying to do what she feels is right. I believe she wants to be a true and honest example of a real Christian, and she simply chose the wrong battle."

He knew immediately those last words got to her. He was being a bit passive aggressive, and he was doing it on purpose. Those last words were fighting words. The fire in the woman's eyes ignited immediately.

She drew a deep breath. "If you're a real Christian then you wouldn't celebrate Christmas at all. Not the way this country celebrates Christmas. Christmas trees and Santa, which is just an anagram for Satan. You have elves, and children demanding gifts and parties and mistletoe and yule logs, and candles, with hardly a thought about the birth of Jesus. It's purely disgusting."

Cedric turned to his other guest. "Reverend Larkin? What do you think about what Pastor Sharon just said?"

"Well, I think she might be pushing a whole huge circle of people into a square hole. There is no question that there is no mention of Christmas trees and Santa Claus and little elves that make toys for children in the Bible."

"Exactly," Sharon said.

"And yet," the Reverend went on. "There is no mention of the word 'Bible' in the Bible either. Does that mean that we shouldn't pay attention to this collection of Scripture?"

"Well, of course it doesn't mean that," she said quickly.

He nodded. "So, I would like to hear what Grandmaster Kino has to say to what Pastor Mack said. I feel like he needs a chance to speak and let us know what he's

actually thinking and what he believes."

"And I don't think we should be made to listen to his lies," Sharon spat.

Eric's eyebrow shot up.

Cedric smiled. "So, you think you should be able to come in here and make all of these accusations and then not even give him a chance to defend himself?"

She sneered. "You too, are in the wrong, for giving him a platform to speak and I think he should be silenced, so that he can't sway Christians to do evil."

"Like they silenced Jesus?" the Reverend asked. "Because the Jewish chief priest and the Pharisees didn't want Jesus to sway other Jews to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. They wanted to silence Him."

"Well, I hardly think this man is equivalent to Jesus."

The Reverend shook his head. "I never said he was, but I do think if *you* are going to make public accusations, then *he* should be allowed to defend his beliefs publicly. Really, isn't that the whole reason we're here?"

"Well obviously," she returned, rolling her eyes, as if she hadn't just proposed that Eric be silenced.

Reverend Larkin went on. "Honestly, I have to say, when Grandmaster Kino spoke a moment ago, about how he and his family have a relationship with the Lord, I felt the Holy Spirit move through me." He looked over at Cedric. "I came here with an open mind, but also ready to promote my own Christian beliefs and I feel what Eric said was truth, because I too work very hard to develop a relationship with the Lord. I would like to hear all that Grandmaster Kino has to say."

Cedric turned to Eric. "Well, I hate to sound like I'm jumping on the bandwagon, something I almost never do, Eric, but I kinda have to agree with the Reverend. When you spoke a moment ago, I felt something. You didn't speak in anger or hatred and that made me more inclined to hear you. And you haven't jumped in or spoken, even when Pastor Sharon called you a liar to your face. So, tell us, what do you think about all of these things?"

Eric smiled. "Most of the things she mentioned have no place being the focus of the celebration of Jesus' birth. So, let's look a little closer at what we do, what my family does. First, let's be honest; as Christians and Bible scholars, none of us knows the date of our Lord's birth. Many think they've narrowed it down. Some say January 6th. Some say April 6th. Some say spring, because that's when the shepherds would be out tending the sheep and not in the middle of the winter. Others say it was September because of the tax season and others say it was spring, also because of the tax season. Some dates are based on when the star may have appeared. No one knows for sure. And to me, it doesn't matter. December 25 became the traditional day for many Christians to celebrate our Savior's birth.

"That decision may or may not have roots in a Roman festival held in honor of one of their false gods, namely Saturn, which was celebrated on December 17th to the 23rd, very near the same time so some make that connection. Like I said, it may or may not have those roots. By AD 336, the church in Rome was observing the Nativity of Christ, meaning Christmas Day, on December 25th. Why that date emerged is still debated. Some historians connect it with Roman midwinter customs or the celebration of Sol

Invictus, while others believe the date came from early Christian calculations concerning the conception and death of Jesus. None of this speculation is important. The important thing is, Christmas is like a birthday party *for* and *about* Jesus. It's a party, a festival, and God has no problem with celebrations and festivals, we can assume since they are throughout the scriptures. Though I don't know when Jesus' real birthday is, He knows my heart. He knows how grateful I am that He was born. He knows when you, the Christians in this world, celebrate His birth.

"The Santa thing is controversial. *My* family has never focused on Santa. My children and their children know that Santa is simply a children's fairy tale someone made up, and a pretend, make-believe kind of game that some parents play with their children. Some parents focus solely on 'Santa's visit,' and barely think at all about the birth of Jesus. Many non-Christians celebrate Christmas like that, and sadly many who profess to be Christians do the same. I don't condemn these people, but certainly try all throughout the year to teach people that Jesus is real.

"And yes, some parents go to great lengths to make their children believe that Santa is real. I don't condemn them, but I personally don't think that's a healthy thing for children, for several reasons. The children will feel disappointed when they find out the truth. They will also feel lied to and if we lie to them about Santa, they may wonder if we are also lying to them about God. And if we focus on this Santa character, then we are only instilling in them a greed or need to have gifts given to them as a reward for good behavior. At my home, good behavior is expected at all times, and children are not bribed. They want to be good so that they can be present with the family.

"So, my own family does not focus so much on gifts, and we don't focus at all on gifts from Santa. Though, we do love to give gifts to each other out of love. And giving gifts, teaching my children how it feels to give a gift or to be in service is a wonderful lesson. But neither my family nor I believe in giving in to children's demands for gifts or for anything really, for that is how they learn to feel entitled, another subject we could delve into, but that could be saved for another podcast.

"Back on this subject, I don't condemn people who celebrate Christmas because it is a time of year when people remember to be kinder, to help the homeless or the widows, or the needy children. They try harder to do good. They do better. Their hearts open. Those are all good things.

"Still, Christmas can also be a time of too much hustle and bustle and forgetting what is important, and what's important is the birth of our Savior. Therefore, my family and I are very careful to not get all caught up in the commercialism of Christmas and the parties and the shopping. We focus on the children and the Savior.

"Now, evergreen trees in particular may have a pagan origin. They worshiped trees, they worshiped the sun and the stars and evergreens were used in ancient winter customs. The decorated Christmas tree as we know it emerged much later among Christians in German-speaking Europe. I don't worship trees. I have found ways to link evergreen trees instead to the everlasting life the birth of Jesus gives us. I don't see looking down upon a beautiful evergreen tree because it was once used in pagan rituals. I won't allow evergreen trees to be hijacked, just as I won't allow the beautiful rainbow—God's sign of covenant—to be hijacked."

"Oh, Lord," Cedric said suddenly, and then chuckled.

Eric smiled at him. "Sorry. I guess that opened another can of worms. You can edit that out if you'd like. But let me try to stick to the subject. Then there are the Christmas lights. I can link them to Jesus being the light of the world. I don't blame Pastor Sharon. She's merely trying to be as authentic and true as she can be. I myself have struggled with the very things she's talking about, with feeling people were being very disingenuous about Christmas. However, instead of lashing out at others, I took my questions to the Father. I asked the Lord how I could reconcile these things, for my children's sake, for my family's sake and for the world. This Santa thing, and Christmas trees covered in lights and the giving of gifts, how can I reconcile them to something good? I was surprised when He answered me the way He did. It wasn't the usual words whispered in my ear or felt in my heart.

"Instead, He gave me a vision, a very clear vision and a very clear knowing and understanding as to what the vision meant. I know I've been allowed to speak uninterrupted for a long time now, but would you like to hear what I was shown?"

"I do," Reverend Larkin said.

"As do I," Cedric said.

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James 1:5-6
"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God,
who gives generously to all without reproach,
and it will be given him.
But let him ask in faith, with no doubting,
for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea
that is driven and tossed by the wind."

Chapter Twenty

December 16th, Monday Afternoon
Cedric May Estate, Phoenix, Arizona

Eric nodded with a smile at the two men, Cedric May and Reverend Larkin, who'd said they would like to hear what the Lord showed Eric about Christmas.

"You said it was a vision, Eric," Cedric said. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means the Lord actually shows me a scene, like in a movie. Sometimes it is while my eyes are open. Most times, I feel a vibration move through me, and I know the Lord is about to show me something, and I close my eyes and I can see the vision as if it was a movie being shown on the inside of my forehead."

"Wow. That in itself is amazing."

Eric nodded. "It is a gift for which I am grateful. Sometimes the images are very clear. Sometimes they are very fast, like in time-lapse. Sometimes I'm immediately given a knowing about what I'm being shown. Some of that depends on how in tune I am."

"Okay, so how do you stay—*in tune*?" Cedric asked, putting the words in air quotes.

Eric smiled. "That is a beautiful question and could be another whole podcast, but in a nutshell: let go of anger, remain in prayer, read the Word, and trust God."

Reverend Larkin nodded. "Well said."

They all looked at Pastor Sharon Mack.

She frowned. "Every good Christian knows that formula. However, not all visions are from the Lord."

"True," Larkin said. "Eric, have you ever received a vision that you didn't feel was from the Lord?"

Eric nodded. "Oh, yes. The enemy is hard at work trying to deceive all of us. I know when it is the enemy because I don't feel the overwhelming love, power, or knowing that accompanies something from God. I know God's voice. I know it well."

"Well," Cedric began. "Let's hear this Christmas vision."

Eric nodded. "In the first part of the vision, I could see Jesus hugging a child. It was beautiful and sweet. And then that morphed into a picture of the lovable though *entirely fictional figure* of jolly St. Nick hugging a child. The knowing that came with it was not that He was telling me Santa was Jesus. He was telling me that Santa is a loving and happy fictional figure who is portrayed as loving children. Similarly, Jesus loves the little children. And one good thing I might point out about the Santa story is that it encourages children to choose the right. Still, he is a *fictional* character. Simple. Easy. No worries. No problem, as long as this Santa character is not the main focus of the holiday. But Pastor Mack is correct, this Santa thing could and does get out of hand as a substitute for Jesus which would be worshiping a false god. I encourage families to focus and center their celebration on the birth of Jesus, and not work so hard to try to convince a child that

Santa is real. He's just a fun fictional story people use to play make-believe with their children.

"The next thing God showed me was a forest of pine trees at night with the stars shining overhead. It was winter and the snow was falling softly onto the pines. And then suddenly, the stars gently came down and settled onto the branches of the trees. It was beautiful. And the knowing was that He made the stars, He made the trees, and He is the light of the world, and we can appreciate these things as long as we don't worship the trees or the stars. They are simply lovely decorations—works of art made by God that we can surely appreciate.

"The last thing I saw in my vision was the wise men who came to worship the child Jesus placing gifts they brought for Him down on a rough wooden floor. Then, that morphed into parents setting gifts down on the floor beneath a Christmas tree. It was so simple. I mean, the logic was simple. Wise men bringing gifts to a child. Parents giving gifts to a child. The knowing I received was that our tradition of giving gifts echoes the gifts brought to Jesus.

"So, in honor of the gifts that were given to Jesus when He was a child, we give gifts to our own children. Our children, as we all know, are not truly ours, but God's. Bottom line, everything on this earth was made by God. Those things can be used for evil or for good. It's how we use them that makes a difference. I like to think the same thing about our Christian beliefs. There are so many different Christian denominations and sects, but we all believe in Jesus. We all believe Him to be the Son of God. That is the important thing.

"Do I think there is one Christian denomination that is the one and only true church? No. My family and I attend many different churches. Some of those churches are filled with the spirit, some spew judgement and hatred, while others tell lies that sin is okay. Are we to be discerning? Yes. Are we to tolerate evil? No. Do we say things to tickle the ears of listeners? No. We tell them the truth. We love them by telling them the truth. We teach them what Jesus says and what the Bible says. We share the gospel. We don't lie to them but we also don't condemn them. That is not our place.

"I know one thing for sure that the Lord has placed in my heart many times. Jesus did not want his apostles to argue amongst themselves. After He washed their feet at the Last Supper, He instructed them to 'Love one another as I have loved you.' And I know now, in this modern day, He does not want His disciples—His church—to fight among themselves. Especially not in the public eye, for when outsiders see that, they think, 'I don't want to be a part of this Christian religion where they argue, condemn, and fight among themselves.'

"If Pastor Mack doesn't want to celebrate Christmas, I have no problem with that. What she decides is between her and the Lord. I do have a problem with her disparaging my family publicly. Ya see, I think if she really and truly wanted to do some good and she thought I was sinning, she could have approached me privately. However, I believe I'm seeing that her public approach seemed less intended to correct a wrong, than to make herself appear knowledgeable and important. And before I stop talking, I have one more thing to say, unless you'd rather me not go on," he said quickly, "because I realize I've been talking a long time."

Cedric shook his head. “No, go on. Please. I could actually listen to you speak for hours.”

“I agree,” Reverend Larkin said.

Eric smiled. He glanced at Sharon Mack who seemed to be fuming. “Thank you for your kindness,” Eric said to the men. “It’s about the money, which we haven’t even addressed yet. I’ll just say powerfully right here and now, that I have never personally profited by one dime—not one cent—from anything connected with my faith, and therefore that is a baseless and evil accusation.”

“What about speaking fees?” Sharon jumped in quickly.

“I’ve never charged even one dime to speak at any event, ever. Not in all my seventy years.”

“Except today,” she said.

“No,” Cedric said quickly. “No, he refused payment to appear on this podcast today.”

“Well, I know for sure that both you and I are being paid,” Larkin put in, nodding his head at Sharon. “So, Eric, you’ve never made money from anything to do with your faith, not ever?”

“Not ever. All of the money I have is from my martial arts schools, tournaments, businesses I’ve backed, and personal investments.”

“Have you forgotten to mention your memoirs, your *Messages from God*, the sales of your book?”

He smiled. “All proceeds from the sale of that book have gone to either my daughter’s *Heal the World Foundation* or my friends’ *Angel Network Foundation* that helps female victims of domestic violence and pregnant teenagers.”

“Well, I still believe that a *true* Christian needs to practice only what’s in the Bible,” Sharon Mack said. “And I believe Mr. Kino’s words are twisted and deceiving. I believe he is a false prophet, a false teacher. It says in the Bible that nothing should be added unto it.”

Eric frowned and then sighed wearily. “So, then, what do you think I’m trying to add to the Bible?”

“Maybe if you ever read it you’d know.”

“I’ve read the Bible many times. Cover to cover. I am in the Word every single day. I’ve participated in many Bible studies—some brilliant and others, in my opinion, taught by the false teachers you are referring to. However, I myself do not teach Bible classes or pastor a church, though I have been called upon many times to bear my testimony that Jesus is real. I do that whenever the opportunity arises. So again, Mrs. Mack, what do you think I’m trying to add to the Bible?”

“Your ridiculous statements—your so-called vision about celebrating Christmas.”

“I see. Well, that was an answer to *my* prayer. What I received—the vision and the accompanying knowing—was personal revelation. I’m not suggesting it be added to the Bible. That personal revelation comes with my relationship with Jesus. I only shared it here because I was asked why my family and I celebrate Christmas.”

“And you believe you actually have heard God’s voice? You believe you are hearing from Him and communicating with Him?”

Eric smiled. “Perhaps you should read your Bible.”

“I do, every single day.”

“Then maybe you forgot about the part in Joel 2:28 where it says, ‘And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions:’ Or in Acts 2:17, where it says almost the same thing, and I quote, ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;’ It says ALL flesh. That means ALL of us, His children. Do you not believe the Word of God? Look, I also know that there will be many false teachers and people claiming to be the Messiah. I am not one of those. I merely try to live my faith as honorably as I can.

“A Word I received a few years ago told me to be very careful whom we call out as a false teacher, for they did the same to Jesus Himself. Instead, we should support one another as fellow believers in Christ—as His disciples. Jesus said in Matthew 12:25, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation.’ I find it interesting that the reference for that scripture contains the same numbers as the date of Christmas Day.” He waited just a moment or two to let that sink in, then smiled and went on.

“Can we not simply come together? I realize most of us interpret the Bible in different ways, or emphasize different things. I don’t tell you how to worship Jesus, and perhaps you shouldn’t tell me unless, of course, I do something that goes against His Word. Then you can call me out. But there is nothing in His Word about the date of Christmas, about giving gifts or decorating trees for a celebration.”

She sneered at him. “Your words are so calming and charismatic. You are like the serpent that seduced Eve.”

Eric’s eyebrows rose at her words, though he kept his silence as she went on.

“I still say that if it’s not in the Bible, then you shouldn’t be so bold as to make it a part of your faith.”

Reverend Larkin could feel his anger rising. It seemed obvious that she was not going to humble herself and admit that she was wrong and her attitude was really bothering him. “But if it IS in the Bible, it’s good, right?” he suddenly asked.

“Correct,” she said, her eyebrows raised haughtily.

“So, tell me then, Pastor Mack,” Reverend Larkin began. “Tell me what about 1 Timothy 2:12? Huh?”

She gasped at him.

Cedric was puzzled. “What’s that?”

“It’s a scripture,” Eric informed him.

“Okay, sooo, what does that scripture say?” Cedric asked.

Eric smiled. “It says, ‘But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.’”

“I can’t believe you said that,” Sharon cried.

“Why?” Reverend Larkin asked. “It’s in the Bible. Yet you interpret that passage in a way that allows you to serve as a pastor—and I’m not challenging your calling. Though I will say I have strong feelings about that and about the roles of women and men

and that women should not be in leadership roles over men. Now, I'm not saying there aren't female leaders in the Bible. Look at Deborah and Esther and many others. The only reason I bring up that scripture is because of your hypocrisy. I'm pointing out that you expect understanding and context when a verse touches your own life, while refusing Eric that same grace concerning a tradition the Bible neither commands nor forbids. That is inconsistent. Why are you still attacking this man after he has shared his testimony and demonstrated a Christlike demeanor in everything he has said? It reminds me of the vehemency coming toward Jesus from the Pharisees. Perhaps you should consider Luke 6:37 or James 4:11–12."

"Okay," Cedric said with a laugh. "Let's hear what *those* scriptures have to say."

Eric spoke. "Well, Luke 6:37 is 'Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven,' and I can't remember the James one."

"James 4:11-12," Reverend Larkin began, "is 'Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?'" He shook his head. "I find no fault with this man, Pastor Mack, and I'm trying very hard to not judge you either. So maybe you should take a deep breath. If you still don't agree with what this man is saying, you should take it to the Lord and have Him help you to stop condemning others."

Eric sighed. "Pastor Sharon, there is no shame, like I said earlier, to try as hard as you can to live your faith as you see fit. I think that's all you were trying to do. I have no ill will toward you. My only advice to anyone listening to this is: Don't have a religion. Have a relationship. A relationship with Jesus. He is real. When you develop a relationship with our Lord, then you can easily see through the lies or the hatred to the light of truth."

"Are you saying that's what you've done?" Cedric asked.

Eric nodded. "Yes. You see, I absolutely know and am sure of my relationship with Jesus. I know His voice. I hear Him, I feel Him, and I know, for example, the vision I was given about Christmas, I know that came from Him and not from an evil source, because I know His voice. I also know when I'm in the presence of evil. When Pastor Mack called me out on social media last week, I knew immediately that what she said was wrong. I knew that because I already knew what Jesus had shown me personally about Christmas, so the accusation she made against me was not something she received from Him. Not in that moment, anyway. I'm not condemning her. I'm only asking her to take what we've said here to the Lord. Don't believe a word I've said. Take it to Him in prayer and fasting. Ask Him, in complete humility, to tell you the truth. I think she'll learn that what matters is her relationship with Jesus—not publicly condemning other believers."

"By their fruits you will know them," Reverend Larkin quoted. "I see the fruits, meaning, the works of the Kino family and see only God working through them. I didn't know that before today. I've never paid that much attention to them because Grandmaster Kino is a martial artist, not a pastor. But I can see, today, that he is so much more than that. He has taught millions of people through his example and his faith. He is a man of

God. He is doing God's work and His will. I have felt the Holy Spirit in this man's presence more than I have in my entire life. God is bearing witness to me right here on your show, Cedric, that this man—whom many know only as a martial artist—is one of God's people. A warrior for God, I guess I should say, since he's a martial artist. I'm honored to know him."

Eric smiled as his eyes moistened and he had to clear his throat. "Well, thank you, Reverend Larkin."

Sharon rose suddenly, jerked off her headphones and stormed out of the room.

"Well then," Cedric said as he watched her go. "That has never happened before in all my years of broadcasting. I sure didn't see things going like this. I'm guessing I'll receive some pretty bad publicity for us men ganging up on a woman like that."

"I hadn't meant to," Reverend Larkin said. "I actually came prepared, fully intending to take her side. But I cannot deny what the Holy Spirit impressed upon me."

"Still," Cedric said. "She was the only woman and I'm sure that's how everyone will see it."

Eric shrugged. "Well, what I have to say may make some people angry, and you can edit it out if you want because it may make some people mad. But she entered a public arena, singled out a man, and accused him without doing her homework. Once you step into the ring, you don't get protection from a hard answer because you're a woman. You jump in with the big dogs, you'd better come prepared. You come unprepared in the martial arts world, you're gonna get hurt. She obviously knew nothing about me. She came unprepared and made a mistake. She's young. She'll learn."

Cedric laughed. "Oh, wow, Grandmaster Kino. I'm not cutting that out. The testosterone in the room just surged tenfold. That'll make a whole bunch of follow-up shows. I'll have feminists paying *me* to let them come on the show."

Eric smiled. "If you need me to come back and defend my position, just let me know. I'll try to squeeze you in."

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December 16th, 2:00 PM, Monday Afternoon
USC, Los Angeles, California

JoJo looked around the locker room filled with young guys, some who were—and will continue to be—his lifelong buddies. Some who shared the faith with him. Some who were now Christians who didn't start that way. They had been lost but now are found. He smiled at the young man who'd been his backup QB for two years now. In a way, JoJo felt happy for him now that he was getting his chance and he truly wanted him to do well and lead the team to victory in the Rose Bowl in two weeks and two days.

The coach had asked JoJo to give the team a motivational speech. He could be insulted by this request. Other quarterbacks would be insulted by it. He was, in effect, asking him to give his "football eulogy." JoJo's football career was over. It ended abruptly, like someone killed in a car accident. Unexpected tragedy. It was over. No going back. He'd worked on football every day, almost since he was old enough to walk. His grandmother and grandfather, who'd raised him until he was four, had made sure he was exposed to football when he was little, because the main thing JoJo had known about his father at the time was that he played college football.

Whenever he'd been able to spend time with his father, they'd always tossed the ball around. His father was a natural, a Heisman candidate, and JoJo too was a natural. Everyone spoke as though his professional career was inevitable. He'd done it. Only lately, deep down inside, he'd had thoughts that he'd never let anyone else know. Thoughts about not playing pro football, or maybe play, but then do an early retirement. He knew he wasn't supposed to think that way. Football was all or nothing. Give it your all or get out.

But before JoJo had to make that decision, it was made for him. Yet he wasn't that broken up about it. He was okay. Football was not life. Only Jesus was life. His priorities were straight, and that's why it didn't hurt as much as everyone thought it did. He smiled at the young men who were currently looking up at him. They were probably wondering what he could say to help them. Or maybe they were wishing they still had what they thought of as their "sure thing" quarterback back at the helm. He nodded. They were gonna have to let go of that thought.

"Hey, guys, coaches," he began. "When Coach asked me to say a few words, I wasn't sure what to say at first. What could I say? I'll tell ya this: I love you guys. I do." He shook his head as emotions reared up. "I love you and I'll miss you, but I don't want you to worry about me or feel sorry for me, not one little bit. Because, I'm okay. Really. I'm not just sayin' that. Yesterday, I gave a sermon at a little old church in Huntington Beach. Some of you might have seen it because it was livestreamed, and if you haven't you can watch it at *hopewoodchapel.org.* I knew as I spoke those words to those people yesterday, that I was supposed to be doing that. I mean, literally, what do you guys call me?"

"Preach, Preacher, Preach," they all called out.

JoJo nodded. "It's no secret in this locker room that I love the Lord. So, I'm gonna be workin' for Him, serving His children for the time being. But you guys, I'm so jealous. You have the *Rose Bowl* coming up. It's a big deal. So, I got down on my knees and I asked God, what can I do for you? You've been so good to me. What can I do for YOU? What can I do to motivate you guys, to inspire you guys and He actually answered me. Here's what He told me. He said, 'No one believes you, JoJo.' I'm like, what? Huh? I don't understand. And then He whispered to me to quiet my mind and it would come.

"So, I sat out on the beach for hours at night. I didn't even have any stars to stare at, because it's been so cloudy. I thought hard about 'no one believes me,' and it finally came to me. What did I say after every game when people were complimenting me on what a great game I had when I was doing postgame interviews? What did I *always* say?"

He looked around. "Anyone?"

"You said it was the team. The receiver. The running back. The O-line. You said it was them that made you look good."

JoJo nodded. "That's right. Exactly right. But God told me that no one believed me. Not even you guys. Is that true? Do you guys really think it's all me?"

When no one answered, he shook his head. "You gotta be kidding me. That kinda makes me mad. We played together as a team. We win together as a team and we lose together as a team. It wasn't all me. Look, I know I'm good, okay? I know I led this team. I know it. But does that mean you're not even gonna give Trenton a chance? Man, I've

watched him running scout. I've watched him working hard, working and waiting for his chance. He's been patient. Eager, but patient. Even though he wasn't at the helm, he's given his all and he's given his heart to the team and cheered just as hard as everyone when we won, and he cried with everyone else when we lost. So, in your minds you're not gonna give him a chance? It's over? You've written off this game because you don't believe you can win without me?"

JoJo shook his head. "Well, I gotta say, that attitude just sucks. I'm tellin' ya right now, *stop sucking*. This is your chance to prove that what I've been saying this whole year is true. It's all you. Ya know, the bookies, the other teams, the fans, the coaches of other teams, they don't think you can win without me either. Our odds of winning, the last I looked, are like, forty-five percent. Sounds not so bad, but to me, those are sucky odds and I gotta say that I absolutely don't believe it. Those people don't believe in you, but I know how good you all are. Yeah, we are now the underdog. So what? Are you gonna accept that you can't win without me or are you gonna go out there and prove them all wrong?

"And yeah, you do have something to prove, because there are only a few seniors. You got almost the whole team coming back. You wanna start out high in the rankings next year, right? So, you gotta go out there and show everyone that it was *you*. I didn't catch those balls. I didn't run through those holes. I didn't open up those holes. I didn't intercept those balls, or rush those quarterbacks, field those punts, or as your QB—feel unprotected. It was all you. All—of—you.

"Trenton is good. He's gonna do his job, and I'm gonna need every single one of you to let him know you got his back. Let him know you're there for him and that you believe in him. Because I do. Now, he might start out a little bit nervous. Calm him down and let him know that you guys got this. You got this. YOU got this. Not me. YOU!"

He stopped. "Am I gettin' through your ugly thick skulls?"

"No need to get personal, Preach. Just cuz we can't all be pretty like you."

"How'd ya know I was talkin' 'bout you, Jaz?"

Everyone laughed.

JoJo looked heavenward for a moment and then back at the guys. He took a moment to let his eyes scan every single member of the team. He shook his head. "Jesus knows I love each and every one of you guys."

"We love you too, Preacher," his center said.

JoJo nodded. "Then prove it. Go out there and play your butts off. I'd say to do it for me, but I'd rather you do it for yourselves, for these coaches who work so hard for you every day, and mostly to prove all those people wrong who say you're nothing without me. You are everything. Do this!"

"We got it, Preach!" a few yelled out.

"We got it," they all called.

Jaz led them in a cheer.

JoJo cheered with them, but when it was over, they all got quiet again.

"So, Preach, we like, I mean, if you would like, do your thing one more time. That would be cool."

JoJo smiled. He knew what he was asking, but wanted him to say the words. "What

is it you want from me?" JoJo asked.

They all chuckled. "Pray, Preacher," another guy yelled. "You know we want you to pray with us once more."

"Okay, well, this won't be the last time. I'll be at the game, but huddle up."

They all gathered together, hands on each other's shoulders, while JoJo pronounced a blessing over the team. He prayed for their safety, for strength, for quickness of mind and body. He prayed for confidence and clarity. He prayed for wisdom and endurance. He prayed a long time. When they broke, the locker room felt lighter and more jovial. There were laughter and smiles. JoJo watched as they each made their way over to Trenton and spoke words of encouragement to him. The guy had been in JoJo's shadow, and JoJo sincerely hoped he was about to shine brightly.

Coach made his way over to JoJo. "Well, kid, it's been a hard year for you. Your grandfather, your cousin, and then you."

"Yes, sir, but we're all good. So, I'm not thinkin' about how hard it's been. I'm just bein' grateful because things could be a lot worse." He sighed. "I gotta say this; I'm sorry, coach. I'm sorry I couldn't pull it off. I just knew we were goin' to the CFP. I'm sorry."

The coach held out his hand. "You have nothing to apologize for, young man. Knowing you has been the highlight of my college coaching career. Go out there, kiddo, and do great things."

JoJo nodded. "I totally intend to do that."

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December 16th, 2:00 PM, Monday Afternoon
Palma Home, Huntington Beach, California

Agent Brown sat out in his vehicle a few doors down from the Palma home. He was alert and ready. Currently, Mrs. Palma was in her kitchen, baking cookies. She was a little fireplug. Short and strong. She walked with a cane, but he wasn't sure why she needed it. She wasn't using it as she moved around the kitchen. Her long, gray hair was up in its usual bun. She was Filipino, and he imagined she had long, beautiful dark tresses when she'd been young. The length of her hair was probably important to her; maybe that is why she kept it long. Her cheeks were smooth but she had wrinkles around her eyes. Those eyes twinkled when she was amused. They weren't twinkling now.

He'd listened earlier as Christina Palma called Banoy Cruz. She was a real pro. Smart. A force to be reckoned with, and it made him wonder if most old people are actually this smart and just fooling us all. He wondered how often younger people mistook age and physical frailty for helplessness. First, it seems they're innocent, just doddering old fools. Then, they surprise you with their wit or their strength. They're smart enough to play dumb.

Mrs. Palma had appeared to be just a frail, elderly woman. But this woman was bright. Cunning. Don't ever cross her, he'd thought several times now. A little while ago, she'd calmly invited a confessed criminal— an aspiring murderer, if he hadn't murdered already—like it were nothing.

"Hello, Mrs. Palma," Banny had answered his phone brightly.

"Why, Banny, how did you know it was me?" she'd asked, though Agent Brown

knew the woman was not that unaware.

"I have you in my phone, so it shows me that it's you calling," he patiently explained.

Agent Brown shook his head. Two people, both acting, both playing a very dangerous game.

"Well, aren't you just so smart," Mrs. Palma had chirped at the man. "So, Banny dear, I hope I'm not bothering you, and I'll completely understand if you can't come over this afternoon, what with this being such short notice, but I was wondering if I could take you up on your offer to help me get this old safe open. I finally found where I'd written the combination down. It was on a tiny little piece of paper in my jewelry box. Isn't that silly? I knew I had it somewhere and there it was in plain sight. I don't know how I've made it to be this old."

Agent Brown had laughed at that, because he knew exactly how she'd made it. She was a sly old fox, and once, she'd been a sly young fox. She then went on to tell the man to please come around 2:00 PM before all the traffic gets bad. He'd acted like it was a hard thing to do.

"Well, it is short notice, but for you, Mrs. Palma, I'd go to the ends of the world. I'll see you this afternoon."

Agent Brown glanced at the current time. It was 1:58, and sure enough, Banny drove up in his very dirty red Kia Soul. He jumped out of the car, walked to the front porch of the old two-story home and knocked on the door.

"Come in, come in, dear," Christina called.

Banny came inside and smiled at her. She stood in the kitchen doorway. "I was just baking you some cookies since you took time out of your busy day to come over here on such short notice."

He smiled. "You didn't have to do that. I'm happy to come and help you anytime. You know that, Mrs. Palma."

"Yes, I suppose I do. Still, let an old woman have her fun." She looked into his eyes. "How are you doing, Banny?"

"I'm fine, why do you ask?"

She sighed. "Just wondering. I haven't seen you as much lately. I guess that's because Bristol hasn't been feeling very well."

"Yeah, what's up with that?"

"Well, dear, she just changed jobs you know. And that sometimes makes a person anxious. I think it's wreaking havoc with her nerves."

Agent Brown shook his head in wonder. She was purposely giving Banny legitimate reasons that Bristol may not be acting quite herself. She was amazing.

"Well," Mrs. Palma went on, "let's not waste any more of your time. Come on back to my bedroom. I've tried and tried, but the numbers aren't working."

"Which way are you turning the dial first?" he asked.

"Oh, well, I'm not sure. Let's see," she said as she took time to put her glasses on and then bent slightly to look at the dial. "Hmm, let me just try and you tell me what I'm doing wrong."

He breathed a sigh of impatience, but nodded his head.

Mrs. Palma bent and turned the dial to the first number, then reversed it toward the second before turning it back again.

Banny smiled. “Well, I think you might be going in the wrong direction. Most safes’ three-number combinations go counterclockwise first. So that would be left, right, left.”

“Oh my goodness, are you kidding me? That’s the only thing I’m doing wrong?”

“Well, and the first time you need to spin it a few times to prime it for taking the combination. I mean to like, clear the lock before entering the combination.”

“Prime it? I’ve never heard of that.”

He nodded. “Would you like me to do it for you?”

“Oh, please, would you?” She handed him the little paper.

He looked carefully at the paper, committed the numbers to memory and quickly opened the safe.

“You did it!” she exclaimed.

He opened the door wide, trying to take in its contents. There were stacks of cash, most of it seemingly in hundred-dollar bills. There were a few bundles of twenties. It looked like it was completely full and his mouth went dry. He cleared his throat. “Is there something you wanted to put in the safe today?”

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot. I wanted to put some of my gold jewelry away. Someone told me the other day that it was worth a lot more money now than when my husband bought it for me, so I thought I’d put it away for Bristol, you know? I certainly don’t go anywhere anymore where I would wear fancy jewelry. Perhaps though, I’ll give it to the church. I’m sure they can use it.”

“Um, well, you know the Kinos have taken care of anything the church needs,” he said quickly.

“Yes, yes, I suppose that’s right. Still, I need to do my fair share. But I do think I’ll save it for Bristol.”

He rolled his eyes. “So, do you have the jewelry ready to put into the safe? We can just put it in this little top area where it won’t get lost in this big old safe.”

“Yes, that would be perfect. How cute, it’s like a special compartment.”

He nodded. “It’s for special items like jewelry, the deed to a property, something important to you.”

“Lovely,” she said as she handed him a velvet bag. “If you’ll just set that in there for me.”

He did. “Okay, Mrs. Palma, now you keep this safe closed and locked and don’t tell anyone the combination, because you’d be surprised at how people will stab you in the back and steal your money.”

“Oh my goodness. Well, I won’t let anyone even know I have a safe. It’ll be our little secret.”

He nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

“Well, dear, let me get those cookies for you. I made a whole box full so you can take some to your mother and father.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Mrs. Palma, you are so thoughtful and kind.”

“Oh, I’m just doing what the good Lord asks of me.”

“Yep. The Lord is good, isn’t he?”

"That He is," she said with a smile.

She walked him to the door and waved at him. As soon as he drove away, she went to the small dining table, sat down and had a good cry.

First making sure Banny's car disappeared around the corner, Agent Brown hurried in to check on her.

She looked up when he came through the kitchen door.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. I saw on the monitor that you were upset and I came to make sure you're okay."

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "I'm sorry. It just breaks my heart. He's so young. He could do great works. Instead, he's intent on evil and it just breaks my heart."

Agent Brown knelt down in front of her and took her hands. "I know it hurts. I've seen so many wasted lives. There is evil everywhere and it gets to the weak-minded. But don't be fooled by his act. He's not a good guy. He's not a victim. He wants you and Bristol to become his victims. We have to make sure that never happens. We cannot tolerate evil."

She nodded. "Of course, you're right, but it's just that I think I see a tiny glimpse of what our Father in heaven feels when His children choose to do evil. It must break His heart, because it's breaking mine. But I promise to be strong."

"I have no doubt of that, Mrs. Palma. You hang in there. It won't be much longer. He's coming after that money. He won't wait. And his little friends are about to be arrested. They've already been tied to several crimes in the area."

"Well, what are they waiting for?"

"If they arrest his friends, he'll stop. He'll hide and wait and let this play out in slow motion. We want him to move now. Once he does, the others will be arrested within the hour."

"Oh, well, isn't that just too smart of you," she said.

He chuckled. "Don't you play your games on me, Mrs. Palma. I wasn't born yesterday, and I've got your number."

She threw her head back and laughed.

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December 16th, 2:30 PM, Monday Afternoon

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Bristol finished speaking with the men who'd been hired to work on the control booth in the back of the chapel. They were adding theatrical lighting to make the productions more dramatic. The new fixtures meant they had to change some of the camera angles of the security cameras to make sure they didn't have a light shining right into the lens. They explained to her what they were doing and then asked her to check her monitors in the office to see if the new placement was satisfactory. She went back to the office, her mind occupied with how she was going to deal with the evening.

She tried to calm herself, but was failing, and so she picked up the phone and called her friend.

"Hey, Bristol," Melody said as she picked up the phone.

"Did I catch you at a bad time, I mean with the kids and all?"

"Nope. They are taking a nap, finally. Their dad is out of town and they were giving their mom and me a hard time, really pushing it, but we finally got them to go to sleep. So, anyway, what's up? Everything okay? Because you don't sound like everything is okay."

"Nothing is really wrong, I guess. But Banny called me a few minutes ago and wants to see me tonight. And I'm sorry, Mel, but I sort of used you. I mean, I told him I thought you and I might have plans. I'm sorry, but I just really can't be alone with him. He's acting all strange."

"Strange how?"

"Like, all lovey, and standing close and putting his hands on me, like nothing big, just putting his hands on my shoulder or on my waist."

"So, he's coming on to you," Melody clarified.

"Yeah, and every time he comes near me I almost want to throw up, and I admit it, Mel, he scares me. So anyway, I mean, are you doing anything tonight?"

"Actually I am, but I'm sure you could come with me. So, Logan's cousin, Kelstyn, it's her birthday today. She's turning four. And Logan's sister, Emily, turned four last week, so they're very close. Their mothers are sisters and their fathers are brothers. And I was at Em's family birthday breakfast, and tonight is Kel's birthday dinner and she wants me to be there."

Bristol smiled. "That's cute. You are really good with kids, aren't you, Mel?"

"Apparently I am, though I didn't know that until I started working for the Kinos. But Bristol, you can come with me. I have no doubt. And this is Joey Adams' family and he's one of the heads of Ameritech and I know he would understand your fear and would have no problem with you coming to dinner. I promise."

Bristol sighed. "Well, if you think they won't mind. I hate to crash a party, but I just can't face Banny. Now the only problem is, he's coming by here expecting me to go out with him and I don't know how to get out of it."

"I thought you told him you had plans with me."

"Yeah, and that didn't seem to mean anything to him. He said he should take precedence over plans with a friend."

"Well, I'll just swing by there to pick you up and I'll come in and let him know that you are most definitely coming with me. I'm not afraid of him. At least, I don't think I am. I'll make something up that you simply have to come with me, and I'll talk fast and he won't be able to argue and I'll pull you away and that will be that."

Bristol sighed. "I hope it doesn't make him mad."

"I don't care if it does. But if it makes you feel better, I'll bring Logan along. Banoy wouldn't dare say anything to *him*."

"Okay, that sounds good. What time will you and Logan be here?"

"Well, I'll call Logan and ask him to meet me there, and I'll come straight there as soon as I get off, so about five."

"Good, because he'll probably be here about that time too."

"Oh goody. Well, this should be fun," Melody said sarcastically.

"I can't wait until they arrest him," Bristol said.

"Well, I'm thinkin' it will be before Christmas," Melody said.

"Can't be soon enough for me. Thanks, Mel."

"My pleasure, Bristol. See you at five."

Melody hung up with Bristol and immediately called Logan.

"Hello, beautiful," he answered.

"Hey, my gorgeous guy," she said with a giggle.

He snorted. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. Kids are sleeping right now, and your grandma just got a call from Grandmaster Kino. So, what will you be doing today at about five?"

"Running around doing errands for Aunt Breez, why?"

"Oh. What all do you have to do?"

"Well, let's see, pick up a special cake from the bakery and pick up the dry cleaning because it's right next to the bakery. Then I have to stop by the stained-glass-window-people place, that's how she put it, and check on the status because they said they'd have it in before Christmas, but it needs to be in before Sunday, and that means within the next five days. And finally, go by my favorite guitar place and pick up the ukulele that finally came in."

"Oh, wow, Logan, that's a lot to do." Melody frowned. She had been about to ask him to meet her at the church to help handle Banny. But he was so busy, she wasn't gonna put the added pressure on him. Banny would just have to accept that Bristol and she were going out together.

Logan went on. "Yep, it's a lot to do, but I'm happy to help. Anyway, why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason really. So, listen, Bristol called and Banny wanted to take her out tonight and she's scared of him and told him that she and I had plans, so, I'm gonna go by the church and pick her up and bring her to the birthday dinner, unless you think your aunt would mind."

"She wouldn't mind a bit. I'll just give her a call and let her know."

"Awesome. Thanks, Logan."

"Of course. Anything for you."

She giggled. "See you a little after five then?"

"Yep, probably around five-thirty."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

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December 16th, 2:45 PM, Monday Afternoon

Lake Crossings Elementary School, Huntington Beach, California

Ricky and Bree waited patiently in the pickup line in front of the school. They'd been promised that the teachers for both Amari and Brittney would see that the kids were personally escorted to where they needed to be so that they didn't accidentally get in the bus line, because they'd never been picked up from school before and Bree was worried that the kids would be scared.

Ricky smiled at his wife as they waited. "So, Breanna Kino. Here you are, carrying our third child. What do you think?"

"I'm ecstatic. I'd be a little worried if Jeffy hadn't already told me that the baby was

fine, so that helps a lot. She's gonna keep a close eye on us. Ricky, I'm so happy. But I'm also so sorry."

"What are you sorry about, babe?"

"You know, that it took me so long to figure out what makes me happy, what makes me feel fulfilled. I love our family so much. I love being your wife."

"I love that too," he said with a chuckle. "I mean, I'm married to the highest-paid actress in the country and she wants to have my baby and nurture our family. How blessed am I?"

She smiled. "Can you believe that the baby is due just two days before my birthday?" Bree asked.

Ricky smiled. "Wouldn't it be so much fun to have the baby on your own birthday?"

"It would be awesome. It would be the best birthday present ever!"

Finally, the cars in the line began to move and in only a minute they pulled up and saw a teacher standing with both Amari and Brittney. They moved forward, the children smiling. The teacher opened the back door and the children hopped in.

"Thank you," Bree called to the teacher, who smiled and waved.

"You guys buckle your seat belts," Ricky said kindly. "'Mari, will you see if Brittney needs help with her new booster seat?"

"I can do it," Brittney said quickly.

"Hello, you two," Bree greeted the children sweetly. "How was your day? Did you have a good day?"

"Uh huh," Brittney said. "It was a good day, but I didn't eat my other breakfast very much."

"I did," Amari said with a grin.

Ricky smiled at him in the rearview mirror. It was nice to see the young man smile. He'd been fairly quiet all weekend. Maybe, back at school, falling into a routine, maybe that was helping him to feel at ease.

"Good for you," Bree said. "Anything good happen at school? Like, did anything funny happen?"

"Nothing funny, but something good," Amari volunteered. "A bunch of fifth graders, ya know, like, um, came up to me and told me to ask you to come do more karate stuff again one day."

Ricky smiled. "Remember, it's not just karate. Karate is Japanese. We teach a mixture of martial arts from many different countries."

Amari nodded. "So, like, will you come and teach again one day?"

"Yes, but even better than that, we're gonna be sending a bus to pick everyone up who wants to learn and take them to one of our studios for a real class."

"Wow. That's cool."

"Anything else good about today?" Bree asked.

Brittney drew a deep breath. "Yes, it was good that Caleb told some boys to leave Amari alone."

Bree and Ricky glanced at each other and sighed.

"Why did he have to do that?" Bree asked.

"Cuz they said our mom was a druggie," Brittney said.

"I see," Ricky replied. "Well, that wasn't very nice, was it?"

The kids shook their heads.

"What did Caleb say exactly?" Ricky asked.

"He told them to shut up and leave 'Mari alone."

"I see. Amari, is that all that happened? Did they hurt you?"

"That's all that happened. They didn't hurt me."

"Our mommy *is* a druggie, right?" Brittney asked.

"Do you remember what I told you on Saturday?"

Both children shook their heads.

Bree smiled kindly. "Your mom is sick. The answer to your question is, yes, she has what is called a drug addiction. That means she is sick because her body has become dependent upon drugs. She might try to not take them, but when you are addicted, your body craves the drug and makes you very sick and hurt if you don't take it. So, it is very hard to stop taking the drugs. But the hospital will help her. So, next time someone says that to you, they are simply being unkind. And if people are unkind to us, we don't have to believe what they say and we don't have to be unkind back."

"Ya mean, we shouldn't say anything back to them?" Amari asked.

Ricky smiled. "You shouldn't say anything unkind back to them. If they're being unkind, that doesn't mean we should also be unkind. We should just say the truth. When those boys said, 'Your mother is a druggie,' you could say the truth. Like, 'yep, my mother is a drug addict. She's sick. She has an addiction and I hope the hospital can help her to get better.' See, just tell the truth. That's the truth."

He smiled at the bewildered look on Amari's face. "You see, 'Mari, sometimes just saying the truth, a lot of times, it makes people stop being mean. Telling the truth takes away their power to be mean. And remember, this morning before school, we asked God to look after you. So, we'll do that every day, and He will keep you safe."

"But how does God keep us safe?"

"Well, most of the time He works through other people. Like, He worked through us to bring you to a new home where we can take care of you and keep you safe. And today, for example, He worked through Caleb. Caleb helped to look after you, right? Who knows how things will turn out tomorrow. It's kinda fun to pray to God and tell Him about our problems and then watch and see what God will do to help us."

"Does He always keep us safe if we pray?"

"Well, now, that's a good question, 'Mari. Sometimes things happen and we wonder why did God let it happen. Sometimes things happen because we're being taught how to think, or being made to get stronger. But no matter what, God can work all things for our good. We just have to trust Him."

That seemed to satisfy his curiosity for the moment and the kids chattered away in the backseat the rest of the way home. By the time they arrived, Taylor was just getting there. She came to the car and greeted her mother and father and the children and they all went inside together.

Young Eric was in the kitchen.

"Hey, son," Ricky said. "When did you get home?"

"Just now. I'm gettin' a snack. Anyone want anything?"

"I do!" Amari said.

Young Eric nodded. "Have a seat."

While he served the children carrot sticks and apple slices, he glanced at his mother. "So, Mom, what did the doctor say? Are you okay? Do they know why you've been feeling so bad?"

Bree nodded. "Yes, honey, I'm okay."

"Well," Taylor prodded. "What did they say?"

Ricky and Bree looked at each other. Ricky raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Kiddos, your mom—is gonna have a baby."

They froze. But only for an instant.

"Really?" young Eric asked.

When Bree nodded, Taylor squealed so loud that it scared the kids. Both Taylor and young Eric rushed to their mother to hug her. Young Eric then turned to his father and shook his hand.

Ricky smiled. "Your mom was really wanting another baby, and we're both very happy about this, though it was unexpected."

"So, like, isn't it dangerous to have a baby when you're fifty?" young Eric asked.

"I'm not fifty," Bree said with a pout. "I'm forty-nine, thank you very much. And yeah, there are additional risks for both me and the baby, but Jeffy says we're both very healthy and that she'll monitor us closely. She says I might be more tired too, or have more morning sickness than when I was younger."

"Well, Mom, whatever you need me to do to help, I'll do. I hope you know that," Taylor said.

"I want you to concentrate on school and make sure you graduate," Bree said.

"So, you're pregnant?" Amari asked suddenly.

"Yes, I am," Bree said.

"A baby is growing in your tummy?" Brittney asked.

Bree smiled and placed her hand on her abdomen. "Yes, a baby is growing in my tummy. What do you think about that?"

"When will it come out?" she asked.

"It's gonna be a long time. It's teeny tiny right now. It won't come out until the end of summer."

"The due date is August 25th," Ricky said to the older kids.

"Wow, she might be born on my birthday," Taylor said excitedly.

"Or mine," Bree said.

"That would make an awesome birthday present," young Eric said.

Ricky watched Amari's face. The boy seemed worried and Ricky knew what he was thinking.

"How long we gonna be stayin' here?" Amari asked.

"Let's talk about that," Ricky said calmly. "So, I'm just gonna tell you the truth, so that you'll understand. Your mom is in the hospital and when she's a little better they're gonna transfer her to a treatment facility that will help her get all the way better. But after that, when she gets better, she might have to stay in a correctional facility for a while."

"What's that?" Brittney asked.

"It's jail," Amari said bluntly.

"Momma's gonna go to jail?" Brittney asked.

"We're not sure yet," Ricky answered. "But— probably."

"How long?" Amari asked.

"It's hard to say," Ricky answered.

"Do you know the charges?" young Eric asked.

Ricky sighed. "Well, normally the overdose Good Samaritan law would protect her from a possession charge connected with the medical emergency. But there may still be charges for aiding and abetting and child endangerment, and her prior record could affect how those charges are handled."

"Wow."

"Yep, so, Mark says, and Justin agrees, that we could be looking at three years, maybe more."

"So, you sayin' we gonna be stayin' with you for three years?"

"Possibly," Ricky said kindly. "I know you might want to go back to live with your mom when she gets better, but..."

"No, I don't," he said quickly. "We wanna stay here. And if you don't want me, then at least let Britt stay."

Bree's and Taylor's eyes filled.

"Why would you say that, 'Mari?" Bree asked. "Of course we want you. Both of you. We want you both here for as long as—well, as long as we're allowed. We would love for you to stay forever."

"But now you gonna have your own baby," Amari said as he looked down at the floor.

"That doesn't mean that we don't want you," Ricky said firmly. "Listen to me, 'Mari. In our family, there is plenty of love to go around. Plenty of love for everyone and that includes you. We already love you two kids. We're going to love you, and take care of you and teach you how to grow up to be a good man and you, Britt, how to be a good woman. And we hope you will grow to love us too, and to love this new baby when he or she is born. You'll be a big brother to the baby, and Britt will be a big sister."

Amari raised hopeful eyes to the man who had said he wanted to be like a father to him. Could it really be possible? Could it really be true?

Ricky decided that was enough on that subject for now. The kids needed time to digest the information. "So, kiddos," he said, breaking the moment. "Eat up your snack. Does anyone have any homework?"

"Naw, we only have two days of school left until Christmas break," Amari said. "All I'm supposed to do is..." He stopped.

"Go ahead," Taylor encouraged. "What are you supposed to do?"

"I'm, uh, I gotta give you this," he said, reaching into his tattered backpack and handing Ricky a printed sheet of paper.

Ricky took it and read it. He smiled at Bree. "You're gonna love this. They are asking parents to send some cupcakes or cookies or snacks for their class Christmas party on Wednesday."

"Oh, yay," Bree said—and she wasn't being sarcastic. She truly meant it. "How

about you, Britt? Do you have one of those papers?"

She nodded.

"Well, let's get started," Bree said as she rose and pulled a clean apron out of one of the kitchen drawers. "Who wants to help me bake some Christmas cookies?"

"I do," Britt yelled excitedly.

"Okay, and don't forget that we have to FaceTime with Kelbell at six to sing her 'Happy Birthday,'" Taylor said.

"Set an alarm, Tay," Bree said.

"Yes, ma'am. Oh, and, so, are we allowed to tell anyone yet about you having a baby?"

Bree smiled. "Yes, let's tell them on the video call later, but you hurry and call Gabe right now."

"Why?"

"Because I know you want to."

She giggled. "Yeah, I do. Oh, Mom, he's gonna be so jacked. I'll be back in a few." She ran upstairs.

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Psalm 82:3-4

"Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

Chapter Twenty-One

December 16th, 5:00 PM, Monday Evening
Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Banny parked his car next to Bristol's Camry and headed into the building. He was bound and determined to spend an evening with Bristol. Even a whole night if he could seduce her, or get her drunk enough. Though, she was such a goody-goody, she'd probably turn down a drink.

He trotted up the stairs and went straight to the church office. He could see her through the slightly open blinds that hung over the small door window. She was working on the computer. He tried to open the door but it was locked and that little fact caused his temper to flare. He rapped sharply on the door.

Startled, she jumped in her chair and then held a finger up to tell him to hold on a second. She hit a few more keys on the keyboard, scooted her chair out and came to the door.

He immediately tried to come in, but she wouldn't move. "Sorry, Banny, I'm not allowed to let anyone in the office."

"Are you kidding me?"

She shrugged. "New rules."

"So, then, is the reverend here?" he asked, glancing down toward the new office.

"No, he went home about an hour ago."

He drew a deep breath. "Well, okay then." Forcing a smile, he backed up a few steps. "So, are you ready to go?"

She swallowed. "Banny, I told you I had plans with Melody."

"And I told you that plans with her shouldn't trump plans with your boyfriend."

"They wouldn't trump them if I'd planned something with you first. But I already had plans with Mel."

"What plans?"

"I'm going to a birthday party for Logan's cousin." She started to tremble when he looked like he was going to explode. She glanced back over her shoulder to look at the clock on the wall. "And Melody is coming to pick me up and she should be here any minute now."

"Well then, when she gets here, maybe I'll talk to her and she won't have her feelings hurt when you change your plans."

Bristol's breath hitched. She tried to stay calm. Shrugging her shoulders, she smiled. "You can talk to her if you want. Let me finish up in here and maybe she'll be here by the time I'm done. It'll only be a few minutes."

Sighing, he nodded. "I'll just sit in the chapel."

She nodded and quickly closed the office door.

Banny wanted to scream when he heard her click the lock. He headed to the chapel, intending to slump down in a pew and make some personal calls, but when he entered he saw that wasn't gonna be possible. Two men were in the chapel, one in the back in what was the new control booth, and another one on a very high scaffolding type deal.

The one in the control booth nodded at him and smiled. "Hello."

Banny nodded. "Hello. So, what are you guys working on?"

"Well, we're adding some lighting that can be controlled remotely so that during a program, it can be changed."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Well, let's say it's a very sad, or reverent type song, the lights could go to blue, or if it's a bright, high-paced song, they can turn the lights up to white, and they can move them around—like spot someone."

Banny nodded. "Sounds like a lot of trouble for just a church thing."

"It's pretty standard, though this one was kind of tricky."

Banny looked up. "Why is it tricky? Because the ceiling is so high?"

"Oh, no, we're used to that, but this one has so many security cameras that we have to be careful about the placements of the lights so they don't get in the way of the cameras. We've actually had to reset some of the security cameras."

Banny looked up at the ceiling. "I don't see any cameras."

The man smiled and nodded. "Yeah, these aren't your regular, run-of-the-mill, easy-to-spot cameras. They're so tiny, even I had a hard time finding all of them." He pointed straight up. "See that, it looks like a bolt is right there in that beam?"

It took Banny several seconds to finally spot it, and when he did he nodded in surprise. “That’s a camera?”

“Yep. Amazing huh?”

“Yeah, amazing,” he mumbled. Then something occurred to him. “So, do these cameras have audio?”

“Oh, yes. They pick up everything. Like the conversation we’re having right now. It’ll be clear as a bell. That’s Ameritech for you.”

What Banny didn’t know was that the man in the control booth *was* an Ameritech surveillance technician posing as part of the lighting crew. To hurry up the entire sting operation for Bristol’s sake, he had been instructed to casually reveal the cameras’ capabilities if Banny appeared and began asking questions. Things were going as planned.

Banny frowned. “So, you’re just putting the cameras in today?”

“No, we’re putting in some lighting. The cameras have been here since last week. Security was one of the first things they arranged when they inspected the building. You know, those Kinos, they don’t do anything halfway.”

Banny’s mind was racing. If the cameras were placed on Monday, then on Tuesday, when he’d made a move on Bristol’s sexy friend, it was all caught on camera. And on audio. Then he remembered something else. Sweet Melody had been sleeping and he had been worried that she’d overheard his conversation with Deuce. Even if she was telling the truth and she hadn’t heard it, it had been recorded. He wondered if anyone had monitored the security video.

The more he thought about it, the more he started to panic. Ever since that day, Bristol had been acting strange. He hadn’t been able to be alone with her since then. She’d been avoiding him. Something was wrong, and he realized it was because they’d heard him. They knew what he’d said to Deuce. They had to know. That was the only thing that made sense. And what he said to Deuce was pretty much a confession of what he intended to do to get the Palmas’ money, which meant marrying Bristol and killing her off.

But maybe they didn’t know, because the old lady was as sweet and friendly as ever. She even gave him access to her safe. But maybe they didn’t tell her because they didn’t want to upset her.

He needed to be sure. He needed to calm down. What were the chances that anyone had actually seen the security footage of that day? That was the day they’d decorated the Christmas trees, and that was also the day he’d accosted Melody. If she had tried to tell Bristol—which she had, and Bristol didn’t believe her, then Melody would have suggested they watch the security feed to prove that she wasn’t lying or mistaken. Unless Melody didn’t know about the cameras, though that’s unlikely. She must know, because her boyfriend is one of those Kino people. But if she did know and had gotten Bristol to watch the feed, then why was Bristol acting as though she believed him and not her friend?

But she’s not acting like that, is she? If she thought her friend was making false accusations against her boyfriend, she would stop being friends with her. Instead, she was going off with her instead of him. They know, he realized. He was so mad at their attempt

to play him that he felt like crashing through that office door and beating her to a pulp. Strangle the life out of her and watch her body drop.

He had to act fast. They didn't know that he knew that they knew. He had to act fast. A plan was coming together in his mind. He was gonna get his revenge, get the damn money and jewelry and hightail it out of state.

He went out on the church porch and waited. When he saw Melody drive up, he turned and went to the office. Bristol was just coming out. He smiled at her. "Oh, well, I was just coming to tell you that your friend just drove up."

Bristol nodded. "Thanks, she texted me to let me know she was almost here."

"Okay, well, it looks like I've lost this round. I'll walk you out. Anyway, I have a little something for you. It's in the back of my car. Guess you can call me sentimental."

Bristol gave a slight smile. He watched her closely. He could tell she was nervous. She was scared of him. And the only reason she had to be scared would be if she'd heard what he'd said to Deuce the other day. Yep. He was gonna have to get drastic. There was no other way out.

They walked down the church steps together and turned right to head to the parking lot. Melody parked next to Bristol's car and stood at the back of her car, a smile on her beautiful face. Banny nodded. She wasn't a bit scared. She was a fighter. He looked right at her and grinned. She rolled her eyes. He chuckled. She wasn't gonna be so feisty in a few minutes.

"Hey, Mel," Bristol said, the relief in her voice evident.

"Hi, Bristol," Melody answered brightly, then shifted her eyes to Banny. "Hello."

He grinned. "Nice to see you too," he chirped. "Look, I know I've lost and you get to have Bristol with you tonight, but I have a little something for her in the back of my car. So, you two pretty ladies step over here and I'll grab it."

They politely followed him over, thinking to placate him so he'd just go away. He opened the hatchback of his Kia Soul and leaned in. He grabbed up what he wanted, came out quickly and before anyone could react, he grabbed Melody in a headlock and put a gun to her temple.

"There now," he said as he tightened his arm and cut off her air supply. "How's that for a surprise?"

Bristol's eyes were wide with shock. "Banny!" she screamed. "Banny, what are you doing? Please, don't hurt her!"

"Keep your voice down or she's dead," he said quietly.

She nodded, as tears poured down her face. "Okay, okay, I will. I'm sorry, but please, Banny, please don't hurt her."

"If she gets hurt it will be because of you, now just be quiet and do what I say and you'll be fine. We'll all be fine. Okay?"

She nodded and sniffed. "Okay."

"Get your keys out because you're driving."

She fumbled with her purse but finally pulled the keys out.

Banny whispered to Melody. "We're just gonna move a few steps over to Bristol's car. Bristol, open the trunk."

Bristol began to cry again, but did as he ordered.

He pushed Melody to sit down on the edge of the trunk. “Okay, Bristol, open the passenger side of my car and reach into that black toolbox and bring me that roll of duct tape. And if you try anything, I’ll just shoot her in the head. Got it?”

“Yes,” she mumbled as tears ran down her face.

He kept the gun pressed against Melody’s head. “Okay, hold your hands out together and Bristol, you tape them up.”

Bristol started doing as ordered, but she was shaking so badly she could barely do it. “Tighter,” he ordered. “Faster.”

When Bristol finally finished taping Melody’s hands, he told her to wrap a large piece over her mouth and around her head.

As soon as she finished, he raised the gun and pistol-whipped Melody in the head and she collapsed into the open trunk.

When he did it, Bristol let out a little squeal. He smiled at her. “Believe me, it’s better for her, safer for her, now that she can’t make trouble and try to fight. Now, tape her ankles together.”

Once Bristol finally finished, he pushed Melody’s legs down and slammed the trunk, then held out his hand. “Give me the keys.”

She handed him the keys to her car. “You go get in the driver’s side.”

She did as ordered. He climbed into the passenger side and handed her the keys. “Don’t worry, we’re not going very far. Just down the street to your house.” He pointed the gun at her. “You make one false move, drive too fast, drive too slow, flash your lights, anything, and you’re dead, got it?”

She nodded her head as her breath hitched.

“Go to your house and pull up in the driveway.”

She drove down the street. As she passed the car she knew belonged to Ameritech, she pressed on the brakes a few times.

“Why are you slowing down so much?” he yelled.

“I, uh, don’t want to jostle her around in the trunk. I’m trying to be careful,” she said as she pressed her brakes a few more times and then turned slowly into the old driveway.

Banny forced Bristol inside the house and threw her to the floor. Christina Palma came running in from the kitchen, swinging her cane at him. He slapped her across the face and she went down.

Keeping the gun pointed at the woman, he nodded at Bristol.

“Bring two chairs from the dining table and put ‘em right here, back to back.”

She did as he asked. “Now, get your grandmother into a chair.”

Together, they lifted Christina from the floor and set her in a chair. Then Banny made Bristol sit in the other chair and he put the gun in his waistband and began taping the two women together. When he thought it was good enough, he threw down the tape and headed to the bedroom. He grabbed a pillowcase from the bed, opened the safe and emptied its contents into the case, then went back into the living room.

He cursed both women as he ranted, walking back and forth. “You made me have to do this, and now, you’re gonna die. Thought you could play me?”

He pulled out his phone. “Deuce, get Red and Dax and get over here at the Palmas’ and bring gas. You don’t even have to come inside. Just burn this place down. Burn it

down and meet me at the place in Santa Ana. I have your money. Just do it." He looked up at the two women. "You're gonna die a horrible death and that's your own fault."

Bristol sobbed. "Wh, what about Melody?"

"Oh, don't you worry about your pretty little friend. I'm gonna keep her alive—for a while. We're gonna have a great time, me and Melody. She'll eventually beg for death. And I'll eventually grant her wish."

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Though the church cameras had recorded what happened in the parking lot, no one had been monitoring that feed live. Agent Brown was calmly writing a report when Bristol's car passed him. She flashed her brake lights several times in an unmistakable pattern, immediately getting his attention.

He pulled up one of the outside cams and watched closely. She wasn't alone. Banny got out of the passenger side of the car and went to her and opened her door for her. She got out slowly. He pointed to the front door. And then—he pulled a gun from his waistband and pressed it to the small of her back.

Brown immediately hit the active shooter button on his dash.

"Whaddya got?" Jeff Davis said quickly.

"Looks like he's making his move. Banoy currently has a gun to Bristol's back and is forcing her into the home. Do you want me to move in or hold my position?"

"No. Wait for backup."

"How long?"

"A minute, maybe two, because I'm in the area."

Agent Brown couldn't stay put. "Fay, take over monitoring the action and let me know what he's saying inside that house. I'm switching to comms. I gotta move in closer, just in case I have to intervene quickly."

"Vest up," Jeff said.

"Yes, sir."

Agent Brown moved fast and in only seconds was crouched down between the privacy fence that lined the driveway and Bristol's car.

He had eyes on both the front door and the side door, which was actually the kitchen door. "What is that sound?" he mumbled, more to himself than to Fay. He listened hard, his eyes on the car and he realized the car was moving back and forth and what he heard was someone yelling.

"Davis, I think there's someone in the car. There's no one in the front or back seats, though. Someone is in the trunk. I'm gonna pop the trunk." Stealthily, he opened the front passenger door, reached over and hit the lever. The trunk popped up. He quickly moved back and peered inside and his eyes got big.

"Davis, it's Melody." Scanning her quickly, he saw what looked like a head wound. There was duct tape hanging loosely around her neck which he realized she had managed to pull down from her mouth. Her hands and feet were also taped. "She's hurt. Significant head wound. Need aid. Okay, honey, okay, I've got you. Shh, no more yelling. I'm gonna pull you up but we have to be very quiet, because we don't want Banny to know we've found you."

Melody got quiet and allowed the agent to lift her from the trunk. He closed it

quietly. “Okay, sweetie, listen, I’m gonna move you around to the other side of this fence so that he can’t see you. Then I’ll be gone a minute while I do my job. Okay? Don’t scream. No noise. Got it?”

Wisely, she only nodded her head, though she was shaking so hard, he didn’t think she could speak anyway.

Jeff Davis spoke quietly. “Brown, I’m coming up the street from the church. Agents Wyatt and Trout are moving in from the north end of the street. There are two paramedics coming at you on foot, hand her off to them. Huntington Police units are on their way. One will transport Banny, and the others will wait for the other three perps to arrive and move to burn the house, then take them. You take down Banoy the moment he walks outside. Trout and Wyatt will secure the Palmas.”

“Roger,” Brown said.

“Brown, this is Fay, he’s headed toward the door now. He’s still yelling at the women, threatening to kill them himself, but his gun is still tucked inside his waistband, front right side. He has a pillowcase in his left hand, filled with the safe contents. He’s at the door now. He should be stepping out in about five seconds.”

Brown had moved to the left of the front door, calmly waiting, allowing the anger to simmer. A few moments later Banny stepped out the front door of the Palma home. In only a few seconds he was disarmed, lifted, body-slammed face down and cuffed.

Banny was yelling and cursing. A police cruiser pulled up. Banny was searched, placed inside the cruiser, the door slammed, and immediately taken away.

While that was going on, Wyatt and Trout entered the home and closed the door behind them so no one would know that the women were now safe.

Christina and Bristol Palma looked up as they entered, their eyes wide with terror. Trout smiled kindly. “It’s okay, ladies. We’re the good guys. Let’s get you outta this mess.”

“Scissors are over there in that hutch in the dining room in the right-hand drawer,” Christina said firmly.

Both agents smiled. Brown had told them the lady was strong. She didn’t even seem fazed by what had taken place.

Trout grabbed the scissors and cut away several layers of duct tape. “Davis, the Palmas are secure,” he said. Then smiled as he helped the older lady to her feet. “Okay, ladies,” he said. “We’re gonna go out the kitchen door and head quietly up the side of the fence. No noise in case Banny’s friends have arrived. We want them to think that you are still secure inside the house.”

Both women nodded and followed Wyatt out the kitchen door while Trout brought up the rear.

The sun had set and the four people crept through the dark to the street. The ladies were picked up by Jeff and taken down the street to the church parking lot.

There were two ambulances there. No flashing lights.

Two paramedics began checking over the Palma ladies. The other two had already been working on Melody.

Her blood pressure was low. She was shaking uncontrollably. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

"Melody," a medic said kindly. "My name is Bobby. We're gonna take good care of you. Your pressure is dropping and we're gonna start an IV."

She sniffed. And looked past him to the agent standing beside the door. "Agent, wi, will you call my boyfriend?"

The agent spoke to his boss and turned back toward Melody with a smile. "Director Davis says he's already been contacted and is on the way. He should be here any minute. He wasn't far away."

The paramedics worked on starting an IV. They'd already cut the duct tape from her hands and feet.

"Did they, I mean, did Agent Brown get Banny?" she asked the agent, her breath labored.

"He did."

"So, Bristol and her grandma are okay?"

"They are. They're right here next to you, being looked over to make sure there are no injuries."

Melody sniffed. "Oh, thank you, Lord, thank you," she murmured.

Logan came flying into the parking lot, jumped out of his car and ran straight to the ambulances.

The agent pointed. "She's in here."

The paramedic got out of the ambulance. "Go ahead and go all the way to the head of the gurney."

"Thank you," Logan said as he climbed in and the medic climbed back in behind him.

Melody looked up at him and immediately relaxed. "Logan," she whispered as she cried.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here and you're safe. Everything is okay."

He took her hand that she held out to him, and bent over and kissed her forehead. "How are you feeling? Looks like you got hit in the head."

She nodded. "Yeah, and I'm not feeling very good."

The paramedic looked at him. "Her blood pressure is low. With the head injury, vision changes, and everything she's endured, we need to get her moving."

"Can I stay?" he asked.

"Yes. I think your presence is helping."

"Logan, you're all blurry, Logan," Melody complained softly. "Can I get a tissue to wipe my eyes?"

The medic handed Logan a square gauze pad and started talking rapidly on his radio. He received instructions from the doctor and started fastening her belts. They had to move quickly.

Logan wiped at Melody's eyes.

"It's not helping, everything is all blurry," she lamented.

Logan looked to the paramedic. He was frowning as he took her blood pressure. Then Logan looked back at Melody when her hand jerked on his.

"She's seizing," the medic stated calmly. He spoke again into his radio. The other paramedic closed the back doors of the ambulance and in seconds they were speeding

toward the hospital.

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December 16th, Monday Evening

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

Eric senior looked around the room. He'd been made aware that almost four months ago, his family had gathered in this very room as they prayed for him and Gabe. Today, it was only he and his wife, Mark and his sons, young Eric and Jordan, Taylor, and the Keith family.

Taylor had immediately reached out to Gabe and he had immediately contacted the "Prayer Warriors" on both Gabe's site and Isla's site and had just finished a livestream prayer about fifteen minutes ago. The circle had begun and wouldn't stop for sweet Melody.

The Keith males, David, Phillip and Lyle, were being comforted by Mark, while Carol Keith was currently enfolded in Shelley's arms. In a corner, Logan, JoJo, young Eric and Jordan and Taylor stood in a huddle. JoJo had his hand on Logan's shoulder, while young Eric reached up and ruffled Logan's hair. Eric senior nodded. He felt strongly that all was well.

They all quieted and turned as Jeffy walked into the room. She had a sweet smile on her face, which was immediately comforting to see.

"Okay, everyone," Jeffy said quickly. "There is good news. As you know, she was struck on the upper back portion of her head with a gun. The blow broke the skin and caused a linear skull fracture. Her initial scan showed an epidural hematoma—bleeding between the skull and the outer covering of the brain. As the bleeding expanded, the pressure increased. Her vision deteriorated, she began seizing, and then she lost consciousness. We were preparing to perform emergency surgery to evacuate the hematoma and relieve the pressure."

Jeffy smiled. "And that's when the miracle occurred. About twenty minutes ago, as we were preparing to take her into the OR, she opened her eyes, sat up and spoke to us. You understand that she shouldn't have been able to do that. I wanted another scan. I stayed right there with her. The fracture was still visible, but it had changed. What had been a clearly defined break now appeared to be only a fine hairline fracture. More importantly, the hematoma was gone. There was no active bleeding, no accumulation of blood, and no pressure on the brain. There was nothing left for us to remove. She spoke to me in clear, concise sentences. She was tired, but alert and asking for Logan and her family." Jeffy smiled. "And she said she was so sorry that she ruined Kelbell's birthday dinner."

The group smiled.

Jeffy sighed. "I'm telling you right now, we didn't misread the original scan. She's been healed. So your prayers and the millions of prayer warriors have once again achieved a miracle. God has heard and answered our prayers. We've stitched up the cut on her head, and will observe her overnight and if all stays well, she can go home tomorrow."

"Thank you, Father," Carol Keith whispered.

Everyone in the room agreed.

"So, you may come and visit her, two at a time. Try to keep it quiet, though I know you feel like jumping for joy and praising God, because I feel the same way. I thought this was gonna be another long night like the night of August 25th." She glanced at her father.

He sighed. "Sorry."

Everyone gave a soft laugh.

Jeffy smiled. "So, Mr. and Mrs. Keith, you wanna follow me back? I'll take you to her."

Jeffy and the Keiths left the room and the rest of them immediately gathered together, knelt in a circle, joined hands and thanked the Lord.

Just as they finished praying the door of the private waiting room opened, and Reverend Clark came in. He smiled. "Hello, everyone. Sorry I'm late. I wanted to see to Mrs. Palma and make sure some of the other ladies were looking after her. Bristol wanted to come with me, but the police were questioning her, so she wanted me to give Melody a message." He looked around. "So, if I were to read the room, I'd say, our girl is doing okay?"

Eric smiled and nodded and moved to shake Ronny's hand. "Yes. It seems God has worked another miracle in our lives."

Eric went on to explain the situation to Ronny. Mark Adams took a phone call from his brother Joey. Jordan and Taylor headed to the restroom, while young Eric, JoJo, Logan, Phillip, and Lyle stood together talking in soft tones.

Young Eric placed his hand on Phillip's shoulder in a comforting gesture. "Hey, guy, having flashbacks?"

Phillip nodded. "Yes, and I'm so glad that Melody didn't have to go through what I did. I'm really grateful."

"Me too," Lyle said. "I mean, I've only just begun to really feel like, God is real, like listening to us and stuff, but this, this is just too cool."

The guys all nodded.

"Logan?" JoJo said. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Yes. I too am so grateful," he said quietly, having to choke back the emotions clogging his throat.

Phillip looked him over. He could tell that this guy, he was totally in love with Melody. This time last year, Phillip wouldn't have even cared very much who his sister was dating or not dating. Their entire family dynamic had changed since Melody became involved with the Kino family. They were beginning to understand how beautiful, how powerful family could be. Combined with feeling so much closer to God, it had made life completely different. It made it amazing. Phillip looked forward to every day now. He felt happy inside, even on ordinary days when nothing super amazing was happening. Then something like today happened: they had almost lost Mel, and God stepped in and healed her. And here stood Logan Adams, this powerful guy who is obviously and completely in love with Melody. Phillip couldn't find the words to explain why it all made him so happy.

Jordan and Taylor came back in the room and joined the young men.

"Okay, everyone," Mark said. "That was Joey. Wanna hear some details?"

They all quieted.

"As you already know, Banoy Cruz was arrested. They are throwing the book at him. He's facing charges for robbery, elder abuse, grand theft involving money taken from the church, aggravated kidnapping, assault with a firearm, false imprisonment, criminal threats, and multiple firearm enhancements. He also solicited his friends to burn the Palma home while Bristol and Mrs. Palma were tied up inside. The district attorney will determine the final charges, but they are looking at two counts each of solicitation and conspiracy to commit murder—one for Bristol and one for Mrs. Palma—as well as solicitation of arson.

"Joey is sending some of you a video of what took place in the church parking lot today and also at the Palma home. Do not share it with anyone because it's an ongoing case. Okay, so, Banny's three friends were arrested while pouring gasoline around the foundation and on the porch of the Palma home. They are facing attempted-arson and attempted-murder charges, along with conspiracy to commit murder, conspiracy to commit arson, and conspiracy to commit felony theft along with several other crimes already uncovered during our covert investigation, including possession of child sexual abuse material, aggravated sexual assault, and possession with intent to distribute."

"Wow," Jordan mumbled. "These are some really bad guys."

"Yes, they are," Mark agreed. "And they're going down. We have either video or firsthand witness evidence of almost every crime they're being charged with. On another note, Banny smacked Mrs. Palma upside the head pretty hard. She's been checked out by a doctor and she is okay. Bristol is also okay, though she is emotionally distraught. The poor kid has had a pretty hard life and is going to need some counseling." He looked up at his stepfather. "Eric, I was hoping you might be able to recommend someone or maybe have a session or two with her yourself."

Eric nodded. "I will be happy to step in and help her. She's a sweet girl and it wasn't a coincidence that she was brought to our attention and rescued from the evil plans of Satan. Who knows what God has in store for her."

"Okay, so that's one case, shall we discuss the other case?" young Eric asked as he smiled at JoJo.

Mark also smiled and nodded. "I'm sure you've all seen the news and know about the little altercation JoJo was involved in this morning at school. He came upon some guy beating up his girlfriend and he intervened. Police believe he saved her life because the guy was waaay out of control. The guy's name is Scott Newman. The girl is Kaylee Quinn. She is currently at LA General with a broken cheekbone, a laceration on her forehead and a face swollen beyond recognition. Newman will have a bail hearing in the morning."

"Is he a student at the school?" Phillip asked.

"No. He's twenty-seven years old and works for *Apex Windows and Shutters*, installing said windows and shutters. He met Kaylee when he was installing shutters for the apartments where Kaylee lives with her older sister."

"Is she gonna be okay?" Shelley asked.

"Eventually. Right now the problem is him getting out and coming right back after her. Or after JoJo."

"Uh, that's not a problem for me," JoJo said.

Mark smiled. "I understand, but I don't want you to re-injure your shoulder."

"You guys should see the video," young Eric said with a grin. "JoJo took him out with the most beautiful kick. I mean, he went down hard. And while JoJo was kicking, he was using his left hand to hold his right arm still. It was so good."

Everyone smiled in appreciation.

Mark frowned. "Anyway, it's possible Newman won't be stupid enough to come back after Kaylee or JoJo, but our experience shows most of these kinds of bullies aren't very smart and do indeed come right back."

"What kind of bail will he have to post?" Eric asked.

Mark nodded. "I've been speaking with the assistant DA on the case and asked the prosecutor to seek detention—or, at the very least, a high bail amount and strict protective conditions. This is not the guy's first rodeo. He's been arrested two other times for domestic violence. The first time it was a misdemeanor. The second time it was felony. He was convicted both times. First time he got a year but only served six months. Second time he got three years and served one. First crime was committed in Oregon. Second one was up in San Francisco. Because of those priors and because of how severely Kaylee was beaten, I'm hoping to get the max and I'm hoping he won't be able to come up with that."

"How is he set, financially?" Eric asked.

"Paycheck to paycheck. When he's not sleeping over with Kaylee, he lives in the basement of a home where the top floor is occupied by USC students."

"Well, how did he post bail the last time, then?" Jordan asked.

Young Eric glanced at her. She was obviously shaken by this news. He put his arm around her.

Mark nodded. "Well, first time it was only a thousand. Second time, he used a bail bond to post ten thousand and his uncle put up his house. So, he'd probably have to go that route again."

Taylor shook her head. "I don't get it. What is up with these people always trying to hurt girls? And why don't girls be more careful, I mean, like in who they choose to date?"

"Well, Tay," JoJo began. "First, being careful isn't always enough. Abusers can be patient and charming until they gain someone's trust. Then they slowly begin controlling and isolating that person. And not all girls come from a stable family. These two sisters were raised by elderly parents. Their father is handicapped, and both parents are elderly. They headed out into the world pretty naive and they have very little knowledge to fall back on. When you're not used to the hustlers of the world, you can be fooled pretty easily, because the players of the world are good at playin'. Like I said, abusers can be charming."

"Do their parents live in California?" Taylor asked.

JoJo shook his head. "No. They live in Oklahoma, in a very small and very poor town."

Mark nodded. "The sisters are Native American, members of the Quapaw Nation, and their parents live in the town of Quapaw which has a population of less than a

thousand people."

Taylor nodded and contemplated the situation.

"Anyway, after I get to see Melody, I'm goin' back over there to the hospital to check on them," JoJo said. "I mean, they don't have anyone to help them."

"Well, they do now," Shelley said.

"Can I meet them?" Taylor asked.

"We'll see, Tay. Let me find out a little more about their situation and what they need and then you guys can descend upon them," JoJo said.

Logan's eyes met young Eric's. They could tell JoJo was more interested than usual. They smiled.

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Melody smiled as her mother and father came into the room. "Mom, Dad." That was all she could get out before the tears began.

They came to either side of her bed. Her mother gently leaned over and kissed her forehead. Her father placed his hand lightly on the top of her head.

"Hello, my girl," he said softly.

"Hey, Dad."

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I have a headache is all. And I'm really tired."

"You have a fractured skull," Carol said firmly.

"Yes, but it's just a tiny fracture. No big deal. They said it will heal on its own and I just need to not run or jump on a trampoline," she said with a smile and then frowned. "I'm sorry I made you guys worry."

"Don't be silly. It wasn't your fault," David said. "And no second-guessing. You did what you had to do."

Melody nodded. "Bristol was so scared of him. I couldn't *not* come to help her. Jeffy said Bristol is okay, is that right?"

"Yes, honey," Carol said. "She's good."

"Did they get Banny?"

"Yes, they did," David said. "But I haven't heard any details yet. I do know that they arrested him right after Agent Brown handed you off to the paramedics, but that's all I know."

"Thank goodness Agent Brown heard you screaming inside that trunk," Carol said. "My sweet girl, you must have been terrified."

"I was. I was really afraid of never seeing my family or Logan ever again."

"You're really close to Logan, huh, sweetie?" Carol asked.

"Oh, Mom, I love him so much."

Her father frowned. "You've only known him less than two months. Don't you think it's a little too soon to be in love with him?" David asked.

Melody giggled. "Yes. But I am in love with him. I really am."

"Well, let's take some time to talk about this later," David said. "Right now, sweetheart, I'm just very grateful that you're alive and well."

Melody nodded. "Me too. Jeffy said it was a miracle. She said one minute I was in need of brain surgery and the next, I was sitting up, talking, like normal."

"I'm so grateful," Carol said.

"Me too," David said. "While we were in the waiting room, I was thinking that two of my children have had serious head injuries in the past two months and I was worrying and wondering what Lyle had coming."

"Don't borrow trouble, honey," Carol said.

"Are the boys here?" Melody asked.

"Yes. They've been very worried about you," David said with a nod.

Carol smiled. "They've grown up so much in the past few months. It seems our whole family has changed."

"What do you mean, Mom?"

"I can't really explain it. But just the way we are with each other. The way we seem closer and more loving toward each other. It makes me very happy actually. Maybe it was because of us going out to give out the backpacks to the homeless, or just simply going to church together."

Melody smiled. She knew what the difference was. They *had* changed and she *had* changed and it was because of the Kinos and Adams families. They set such a good example of how God's children should live. The cool thing is, when you start living how Jesus would have you live, you start feeling Him, feeling His Spirit, hearing His voice, seeing things from His perspective, and it starts changing your life. First in little ways, and then suddenly, you realize, you feel different. You feel joyful. And you only want to get closer and closer to God. And how do you do that? By praying and keeping His commandments and serving others. "Love one another as I have loved you." Melody sighed. She was so blessed.

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After her parents visited with her, Melody had a very nice conversation with her two brothers who were unusually kind and loving. Apparently they had been very worried about her. After them, her employers, Grandmaster Kino and Miss Shelley visited. After giving her some encouraging words and praying over her, they gave her cards that the kids had made for her for a Christmas present. The children had insisted on giving them to her now to make sure Melody knew how much the children loved her.

After that, Jordan and Taylor visited. Melody felt very close to them. She somehow knew they would always be like the sisters she'd never had. They had her giggling over things and when it came time for them to leave, she desperately wanted them to stay. So, they had to make promises to have some girl time together soon and add Desi to the mix.

Next Mr. Adams and Reverend Clark came in. The Reverend thanked her for being Bristol's friend and coming to visit the church in the first place. He said it was because of her that the bad guy's plans had been foiled and that she was a special child of God. Mark had agreed with the Reverend and told her how grateful he was for her miracle healing, for her sake and for the sake of his son. He also let her know that little Kelstyn refused to have a birthday dinner without Mel and would wait until Melody could finally come to dinner, no matter how long it took. He then gave her well-wishes from his own wife and daughter. Finally, he filled her in on the information on the case before he and Reverend Clark took their leave.

Next, young Eric and JoJo stepped in. They too made jokes and had her laughing,

though their jokes were mostly about how worried Logan had been and they also teased her and told her they'd watched the video from the parking lot and wondered why she didn't employ any of the self-defense techniques she'd been taught. They'd both kissed her on her cheek before they left and she had to sigh. Something about the guys, the cousins who called themselves brothers, they, like Logan, had a powerful presence. Still, she was tired after having spoken to everyone. While she waited for the most important person in her life to come in to see her, she fell asleep.

Logan crept in quietly. He'd been patient. He'd insisted everyone else go first, because he was gonna stay. He would not be leaving her. He encouraged the Keiths to go home and get some rest. He promised that if anything changed he'd call them first thing. He'd almost had to beg. Her father seemed a little uneasy about it. Logan didn't know how to soothe him right now. He just knew that he wasn't leaving Melody. Besides, when she'd been rescued and brought to the ambulance, the first thing she did was ask for him and he *was* gonna stay by her side.

He neared the bed and looked down on her sleeping form. His heart swelled. She was the sweetest girl in the world, and Banny had tried to take her down. It made him want to kill. Again. He sighed. She had dark circles under her eyes. There was a white bandage that circled her head, and it made her look like a Native American. All she needed was to stick a feather in the band. Her cheeks were rosy and he hoped that wasn't because of a fever.

He stood still, gazing at her when her eyes blinked open and she smiled.

"Logan," she said softly.

"Melody." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "How ya feelin', babe?"

"I'm good. Just sleepy. I feel like I've run a marathon."

"In a way, I guess you have." He sniffed back the emotions. "Mel, thank God for Agent Brown. Thank God you're okay. I don't know what I would do if I were to lose you. I can't imagine. I just know I am so grateful that you're right here in front of me, speaking, smiling, alive and well."

"Me too. When I was stuck in that trunk, I thought I'd never see you again. You were all I could think about. And I prayed. I begged Jesus to please help me. I used so much energy trying to kick out the back lights of the car."

"You doin' that was what made Agent Brown find you. He said the car was rocking and he figured out there was someone in the trunk."

"I can't tell you how happy I was when I saw him looking down at me. He told me to be quiet, so I guess I was making a lot of noise."

Logan smiled. "Yeah, fighting for your life can be noisy."

She held out her hand and Logan took it immediately. "Logan, I'm so tired. If I fall asleep, are you gonna leave me?"

"No, baby. I'm staying right here."

"Really?"

He chuckled. "Yes, really. Is that so hard to believe?"

She smiled. "I just wanna make sure."

"I'm here. Sleep."

She sniffed back tears. "I love you, Logan Adams."

"I love you too, Melody Keith."

He squeezed her hand and watched as she succumbed to the weariness she felt. "Thank you, Jesus," he whispered for the thousandth time.

He sat thinking about what he'd just seen on the parking lot video. Banny's arm around her throat, his gun to her head. It made him wish the guy was not in police custody. He had to get this anger under control. He needed to talk to his father, or maybe to his grandfather. The old feelings were surfacing. The old feelings from after he'd shot and killed his own biological father. It wasn't that he felt guilty. It was the opposite. He'd felt good about it. He almost wished he could do it again. Like, his father suffering and feeling humiliated that a kid had gotten the best of him was not enough. His father had suffered for only a few seconds. While his mother had suffered through years of terror. He sighed. *"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord."* Logan kept telling himself that. He closed his eyes and silently prayed.

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Proverbs 24:11-12

"Rescue those being led away to death;
hold back those staggering toward slaughter.
If you say, "But we knew nothing about this,"
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who guards your life know it?
Will he not repay everyone according to
what they have done?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

December 16th, 7:30 PM, Monday Evening
Los Angeles General Hospital, Los Angeles, California

JoJo got to the waiting room and stood off to the side to place a call. However, before he could do so, he received a text.

~~ Hello, this is Raylynn Quinn. I hope I'm not bothering you, but I was wondering if you know anything about the case or if you know how I can find out anything about the case.

He texted back.

~~Hi, Raylynn. You're not bothering me at all. I was just about to call you because I just got back to the hospital to check on you and your sister.

~Oh, you're here?

~~Yes, in the emergency waiting room.

~They moved her to a room. I'll come get you.

~~See you in a few.

It took her only a few minutes to find him. She didn't come through the emergency room doors, but from down the corridor to the left. She smiled as she approached him.

He smiled and nodded. Again, he was struck by her beauty. She wasn't glamorous, which he liked. It was totally natural. She didn't appear to be wearing any makeup, but her skin was flawless. Those green eyes were piercing. Her long black hair was simply in a ponytail at the nape of her neck. She still wore her pink scrubs, which meant she hadn't been home. "Hello," he said.

"Hi. Thanks so much for coming."

"No big deal. Just felt like I needed to check on you. You've been here all day?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

He held up the bag in his left hand. "I brought you some dinner."

Her eyes opened wide. "You did? Why?"

He shrugged. "I figured you hadn't eaten and you need nourishment and this is food from a restaurant called *Nature's Table*. It's really good stuff and good for you."

"Oh, okay, well, thank you. Let's go up to the room. I don't want to leave Kaylee for very long."

They started down the corridor.

"How's she doing?" JoJo asked.

"Well, the doctor says she looks worse than she is. Her face is all bruised and swollen. She's in pain, but he says she can go home tomorrow but can't do any physical

activity for a few days."

They went to an elevator, rode to the third floor, and headed to the room. He entered quietly, set the bag down on a reclining chair and went to the bed to look her over. She looked bad. Black and blue and swollen.

Raylynn looked over the side of the bed and touched her sister's face very gently and lovingly. "Kaylee, look who's come to see you."

Kaylee squinted her eyes open and offered what must have been a smile.

"Hello, Kaylee. How ya feelin'?"

"Not so good," she said softly.

"I'm so sorry. It'll get better."

"Hope so," she said and then closed her eyes again.

He placed his left hand on the top of her head, closed his eyes and offered a quick prayer. He opened his eyes and smiled at Raylynn who was looking at him. "Please—sit down and eat your food."

She nodded, picked up the bag, sat down and peered inside.

He watched her as she pulled out a paper-wrapped burger, peeled back the paper and took a bite. Her eyes opened wide. "Wow. I think that might be the best burger I've ever eaten."

He smiled. "It's one of my favorite places to eat. Healthy food that actually tastes good. Look in the bag and you'll see an insulated cup. That is a raw milk smoothie for your sister from my mom. It's really good to help her body recover. It has all kinds of good things in it and helps with inflammation. It's what my aunt prescribes for anyone with a traumatic injury. Oh, I almost forgot, I'm supposed to ask if she has any allergies."

"No, no allergies," Raylynn said.

"Good. And there's a plastic spoon in there too, because my mom thought she might not be able to put the cup to her lips or suck on a straw, so she can use the spoon. The smoothie is thick like ice cream anyway so it'd be better to spoon it up."

"That's very kind of your mother and also very thoughtful."

He shrugged. "She knows how it feels to have her face all bashed in."

Raylynn looked up in surprise.

JoJo shrugged. "Ya see, before my mother married my father, she was in an abusive marriage."

Raylynn nodded her head. "Oh, I see. I'm sorry."

"It's all good now, because they are happily married."

"So, not meaning to be too personal, but which one is your biological parent?"

He smiled. "My father. My biological mother passed away from brain cancer right after I was born."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

He shrugged again. "I mean, I didn't know her, so it's not painful to me."

She nodded and finished her hamburger, then immediately stood to feed the smoothie to her sister.

"Kaylee, JoJo brought you a treat. Here, let's see how you like it."

She held the spoon to her lips and Kaylee accepted it. She licked her lips. "Umm, that is good. So cool and creamy and sweet."

JoJo smiled. “That right there is the breakfast of champions.”

Both girls smiled at that.

“So, Raylynn,” JoJo began. “Let me ask you a question. When I called you for your sister and you thought I was playing a joke on you. I mean, why? Explain to me why you thought it was a prank.”

JoJo watched as her face turned pink.

Raylynn smiled. “Well, it was sort of a joke between my sister and me. I told her if she ever sees JoJo Adams walking around the campus, then she needs to get your autograph for me.”

“Oh, so you know who I am?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everybody?”

He shook his head.

She explained. “I went to school at USC for the past three years. I got my degree this past summer. I love football, but I can’t afford to go to the games, but I was able to watch some practices. I’ve had my eye on you since you were a freshman. I watched all the games on TV.”

“Okay, well, I’m flattered.”

She looked down, obviously embarrassed. “You were in one of my math classes once, but I was too shy to speak to you. But Kaylee said she wasn’t shy at all and if she ever sees you, she’s gonna get your autograph for me. So it became a joke and I asked her every day if she got the autograph.” She shrugged. “But she never did see you. Or, actually, she did see you a few times but couldn’t get to you fast enough. I guess it seems kinda stupid.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he said quickly. “Really, I am flattered and humbled. But you probably know then, that my football days are done.”

She glanced at his arm in a sling. “I heard that.”

“So that means my autograph doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

“Um, well, that’s not true. I mean, it means a lot to me.”

He smiled at her. She was a sweetheart.

Raylynn concentrated on feeding her sister for a few minutes.

“So, did you want to hear about the case?” JoJo asked.

“Oh, yes. Do you know about it?”

“I know some.”

He went on to tell her all that his father had told him. She and her sister both gasped when he told them about Scott’s priors. When he was finished they both were also very afraid.

“What if he gets out and comes after me again?” Kaylee whispered.

“Well, first, my father has been in touch with the DA’s office and is trying to persuade the court to deny bail.”

Raylynn nodded. “How is he able to do that?”

“Well, my father is an attorney. A big-time attorney with the Lee and Adams Firm. He has a lot of pull. But also, if that doesn’t work, we’ll make sure your sister and you too, are protected. Aunt Angel says she spoke with you briefly.”

“Yes, but we really didn’t get to speak much because the doctor came in to talk to

me at the same time she called."

"Yeah, she told me that too. She said she'll be in touch with you soon to let you know the best way to handle this. I'm thinkin' she'll find a new place for you to stay so, if this guy posts bail, he won't be able to find you."

She nodded. "Well, we, um, we don't have, like, a lot of money to pay for a place to live. We have Kaylee's allowance from her student loan and my income, so it has to be within a certain range."

She cast her eyes down in either humility, shame, or embarrassment, and he didn't want her to feel any of those things. He smiled in understanding. "Expense will not be a problem, so please don't worry about it. The *Angel Foundation* will take care of everything."

Raylynn sighed and nodded. "So, you called her Aunt Angel a minute ago. You're related?"

"Not by blood, but I've known her and her husband, or rather, they've known me since I was a baby and my father has known them since he was eight and Aunt Angel is my grandmother's best friend, and our families are really close, so she's always been Aunt Angel and he's been Uncle Jason."

"Okay, that's cool."

"They are some of the best people I know."

"You have a very interesting family."

"What did you say earlier? They're just regular people."

She smiled. She knew that was not true.

They sat quietly for a few minutes. He decided he'd better not overstay his welcome. He just opened his mouth to say goodbye when she spoke.

"So, did you actually have surgery on your shoulder?"

"Yes. It was a grade six shoulder separation."

"How long ago was the surgery?"

"One week ago exactly."

"So, it will be at least another week before the sling comes off and you start with pendulum-type exercises?" she surmised.

He nodded. "Actually, my aunt said I'm healing fast and I can start taking the sling off four times a day for pendulum exercises now."

Raylynn nodded. "Good. So, when you say your aunt this time, you're talking about Dr. Kino?"

"Yes. Well, Dr. Kino Wallace. She's married."

"So, you really are related to the Kinos, right?"

"Yes. My father's mother, my grandmother, is married to Grandmaster Kino. And my father's sister, my aunt, is Breanna Adams and she's married to Ricky Kino."

"So, Eric Kino, the third, he's your cousin, right?"

"Yes."

"Interesting."

"Yeah, and it gets complicated after that."

She smiled.

He nodded. "Well, miss Raylynn Quinn, I guess I'll be heading out. Can I get

anything for you? Do anything for you?"

"Oh, I think you've done quite enough. Thank you so much for saving my sister today. I can't thank you enough."

"It was no big deal and I'm just glad I was there."

"Well, the news made it out to be a very big deal."

He shrugged. "Ya know, they tend to exaggerate."

"The video didn't exaggerate. You took down a big guy without even using your hands."

He smiled. "I landed that kick precisely. That doesn't always happen. Thank goodness it did today."

"I'm not buying it. It wasn't just a lucky shot. You have skills."

He nodded. "I have some."

"So, speaking of your skills, do you know what you're gonna do if you don't play football?"

"Well, there's no question. I will not be able to play football. Not professionally anyway. Though I *could* coach. But I have other skills besides football and martial arts."

"You have my curiosity piqued."

He smiled. "Well, I'm developing other skills. One of them is to minister."

"You mean, like, at a church?"

"Yes. Right now, I've been helping out a church that doesn't have a youth program, so, the Reverend of the church has made me like an honorary youth minister. I gave my first sermon last Sunday."

"Oh, that is amazing. How did it go? How did you do?"

"It went great. I think I did okay. It was enormously rewarding and I'm doing it again this next Sunday."

"I would love to come."

"You would? That would be great. So, you're a Christian?"

"I am. Kaylee too, though we haven't been very active lately. In Quapaw, there is a Methodist church on one end of the street where we live, and a Baptist church on the other end, and two different community churches, like, non-denominational churches between them. In our little town, church is a big deal, so, it would be nice to go to church. Where is the church you're gonna preach at?"

"It's the *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ* in Huntington Beach. There's a website, Hopewood Chapel dot org."

"Thanks, JoJo, I'll check it out."

He nodded. "Awesome. So, I hope to see you both. Anyway, if you need anything, please call."

"I will."

"I mean, people always say that, ya know, that they'll call, and then they never do. But I mean it, you need anything at all, call me."

She smiled. "I promise. IF I need anything. Thank you, JoJo."

He nodded and shrugged. "Okay, so, well, bye for now." He looked at Kaylee. "Bye, Kaylee. Get better."

"Bye," she said softly. "And thanks again."

He nodded and smiled at Raylynn. “Okay, so, bye.”

She nodded. “Bye, JoJo.”

He turned and left, rolling his eyes and shaking his head at himself. Could he be any more awkward? He felt like he’d just thrown a frozen rope and it bounced off the numbers.

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December 17th Tuesday Mid-Morning

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

Melody Keith looked up and smiled as her mother and brother walked into the room. “Hey, you guys,” she said cheerfully.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Carol said.

“Hey, Mel,” Phillip said.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at school?”

“Yes, but it’s not a big deal. I’m done with exams. Tomorrow is the last day before Christmas vacation and we aren’t doing anything.”

“What about Lyle?”

“He has two exams,” Phillip said. “Sucks for him,” he chuckled.

Mel smiled.

“Okay, so, you’re all checked out, sweetie,” Carol said. “We’re just waiting for the wheelchair.”

Melody sighed. Logan had left early, around 6:00 AM, and she felt very lonely without him. He said he had an early class and some other business he had to attend to. Certainly, she was mature enough to not have him by her side at all times. Maybe it was the trauma of yesterday’s events, but she truly missed his strong presence.

Phillip approached her and leaned down. “Do you like my new hat?”

She looked closely at it. It was a green knit hat with a white pompom at the top and the words “Miracle of Christmas” in red along the edge, decorated with red knit holly berries.

“Aww, actually, I do. It’s really cute.”

Phil smiled. “Cool.” He held out a small gift bag. “Because I got one for you too.”

“Phillip!” Melody said. “That is so sweet!” She pulled the hat out of the bag and looked it over.

“I figure we have matching head wounds, we really should have matching hats.”

Melody giggled. “Wow, Phil, you always act so tough, but you’re just a big softy, aren’t you?”

He snorted. “Yeah, whatever. Guess you got me all figured out. Put it on.”

She did. “How do I look?”

He smiled. “Not quite, but almost as good as me.”

Melody and Carol giggled.

“Okay, I bet you’re ready to go home,” a tech said kindly as she entered the room with a wheelchair.

Melody obediently shifted from the bed to the wheelchair. Her mother gathered her personal belongings and they were off, headed to freedom.

As they got to the loading zone just outside the automatic glass doors, Melody saw

a group of people and she started to laugh.

Logan, JoJo, young Eric, Jordan, Agent Davis, Agent Brown, and Bristol all stood there and they were all wearing the same hat as her. Carol was videoing and they all cheered for Melody as she approached.

Before she could even get out of the chair, though, some people rushed up with large cameras. "Melody, Melody, how are you feeling?"

The reporters were suddenly blocked by four Ameritech agents.

While the agents held the reporters back, Melody rose from the wheelchair and took a minute to hug and thank each person who'd come to greet her wearing the silly hat.

"Bristol, is your grandma okay?" Melody asked.

"Yes, she's fine."

"Good, and are you okay?"

"I am now. Thank you so much, Mel, and I'm so sorry you got hurt."

"Well, I'm glad it was me and not you." Melody turned to Agent Brown. "Thank you, Agent Brown. Thank you so much for saving me."

"Well, it's my job, so no need for thanks. I'm glad you're okay."

She hugged the agent and turned to Mr. Davis. "Sir, thank you so much. I know you were in charge of the investigation. I can't thank you enough."

"Well, it wasn't just me, but you're welcome. We're happy with the outcome."

She turned to JoJo and hugged him. "I saw you on TV this morning. You are so awesome cool."

He laughed. "Yeah, that's what they all say."

She giggled. "Thanks for coming."

"To see my brother's girl? It's the least I can do. I'm glad you're okay, Mel." He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

Melody turned and put her arms around both young Eric and Jordan at the same time. "Hey, you two. Thanks for being here."

"Mel, you're like my sister," Jordan said. "How could I not be here for you?"

Young Eric squeezed her. "Mel, ya know you're like family, right? Of course we're here. My mom and dad would be here too, and grandma and granddad, but they felt it would be too much. And Taylor had to go to school and is really mad that she couldn't be here. But their hearts are here."

"Oh, thank you all so much," she said to everyone. She looked over at a reporter speaking into a microphone. "Melody, Melody," she called. "Would you like to say anything about your experience yesterday?"

Surprisingly, she nodded and turned. "Yes, actually. First and foremost, I'd like to publicly thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I'd also like to give a huge thanks to Ameritech and Huntington Beach Police Department for handling things so well and for working together so well and for protecting me, the Palmas, and really, the whole community."

"Were you scared?" another reporter yelled out.

"Yes, I was terrified. I was a great big chicken."

Everyone laughed at her words.

"Melody, is it true that you work for the Kinos?" another asked.

"Yes, it's true."

"How is it working for the Kinos?"

She smiled sweetly. "It's the best. They are the best people in the world. Their whole family. I love them and they love me and they treat me like a member of their family. They are so kind. Anyway, thank you. I need to get home now."

"Melody," another reporter called.

"I'm sorry, but I'm really tired and I need to go. Thank you."

Logan opened the door of his vehicle and she scooted inside. He reached in and secured her seatbelt for her. Logan went around to get in the car and Carol leaned in to speak with Melody. "Logan wanted to drive you home, so I'll see you there."

"Oh, Mom, I'm sorry. I hope you don't feel left out."

Carol smiled. "No, sweetie. I feel happy that you've found a boy who is so good to you. You can't stay my little baby girl forever. I know that."

"Mom, I'm only eighteen. I'm still your baby girl."

Carol smiled and kissed her cheek. "I'll see you at home."

Melody smiled. Logan pulled away from the curb.

She looked over at him. He smiled at her and held out his hand. She placed her hand in his. He squeezed it.

"I'm happy to see you," she said softly.

"And I'm happy to see you," he said. "And I gotta say, I'm proud of you for what you just did. I mean, you talked to those reporters like a pro and thanked Jesus first."

She grinned. "I've learned from the best, by watching you and your family."

He squeezed her hand again. "And so, tell me, you're still your mom's baby girl?" he asked.

She giggled. "Well, I'm different things to different people."

He smiled. "You're very smart, Melody. And a little bit of a player."

She laughed. "Again, I've learned from the best."

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The rest of the week was attended to at a fast pace for both the west coast families and the east coast families. There was so much to do before Sunday, the last Sunday before Christmas. There was even more to do before Christmas Eve on the following Tuesday, just one week from the day Melody got out of the hospital.

Across the country, in Pine Forest, Georgia, the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* was in full swing. Care packages for soldiers were being sent out, Angel Tree requests were being worked on, a Christmas Dance would be held in the gym on Friday. Meals were being served to people in need. Many Christmas activities were offered to the community. Crafts were being made and sold. All over the area, in parts of town, in churches, in schools, at the center, marshmallows were being roasted, hot chocolate was being served, the Christmas story was being taught and acts of kindness abounded. Add to that, personal lives were changing.

Heather and Nolan were busy fixing up their new home, which wasn't new at all. Thirteen-year-old Hannah Brown was overcoming trauma and learning to feel safe and enjoy being able to think and act like a regular thirteen-year-old girl. She found she loved taking care of puppies with Charlie and learning to cook in the kitchen of the Inn with

Lily Tanner. She was beginning to love Miss Jodi and she felt very much at home around Mr. John. She loved taking care of babies, the Stewart twins and the Tanner twins. She FaceTimed with Taylor often and spent a lot of time with Gabe, Charlie and Matt, as they went around helping people in the community with various undertakings.

Violet and CJ and Rose and Jericho also spent a lot of time together. Jericho was getting up out of the wheelchair and on his crutches and getting around and feeling much better. He was working very hard on getting his business stabilized so that he wouldn't have to travel and could stick around Pine Forest, buy or build a home and be close to his girl.

Unfortunately, Laynah had barely heard from Jake at all since he'd returned to Kabul after he'd recovered from his injuries. She was doing her best to keep her head up by helping out at the Center or the Inn whenever possible, and of course, helping her mom with the babies.

Gabe was happy to see Dalton with Mrs. Murphy and Lucas at most every event. He was also happy that Peyton would be home by the end of the week. He intended to spend a lot of time with his friend.

The Tanners were busy with their giant family. First, Lizzy had been asked to sing at several events and church programs and she graciously accepted. Also, Keegan's parents were coming down to spend Christmas with them this year. They usually took turns between Keegan and his two sisters, and this year they were supposed to spend it with his older sister, but they wanted to spend Christmas with their new grandbabies.

Up in Nashville, Toby and Caroline and Gracie and Brody were getting ready to enjoy an old-fashioned country Christmas at the farm. The Smiths and Stillwaters and a few other friends and neighbors would be joining them for Christmas dinner. They would, of course, have a giant sing-along. And the day after Christmas, Brody was very much looking forward to heading down to Pine Forest to see Daisy. He'd kissed her before he'd left town. He'd felt it to his toes. They hadn't been able to talk much because Daisy was so busy, and he hoped her feelings hadn't cooled too much. Or worse, that she'd met someone else.

On the west coast, they were working at a feverish speed. The Kinos were busy making sure everyone who lived in the apartments next door to the church had what they needed to celebrate Christmas. The Garcias had been a tremendous help with that. Each family with children was given a five-hundred-dollar gift card per child. Every person over the age of fifteen was offered a personal financial counseling session with one of the Kinos.

Many of them had scoffed at the offer of a financial counseling session. A few of them actually said, "Just give us some money. You got more than enough." It was Leonard Garcia who set them straight. He said, "The Kinos are not gonna simply give their money away. They want to make a difference and not just put a Band-Aid on our problems. And if you don't take a man worth billions of dollars up on a financial counseling session, then you deserve to be broke. As for me, I wouldn't pass up this opportunity."

They began on the financial counseling sessions immediately, which took up a lot of their time. Besides which, young Eric and his father both had personal appearances

to make on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday to promote the movie which would be premiering on Friday nationwide.

Logan was holding rehearsals on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings for the new choir. Over twenty people had signed up online for the regular adult choir and more than ten for the children's special Christmas choir. Also signing up was Zeke Dolan, the high school percussionist and another young guy, Sal Mendez who played guitar and keyboard. Logan was looking forward to seeing what they could do and would help them if they needed help. It was gonna be a throw-everything-together-quickly type of rehearsal for the Sunday Christmas program, and everyone was gonna have to go with the flow. It would be good practice and a good lesson for them all. He was happy too, that his sweet Melody had signed up to sing in the choir. She said she wasn't a soloist, but she could carry a tune. Of course, he already knew that. She assured him that her injury would not keep her from singing. Logan was just happy that they would be working together on any musical project for the *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ*.

Meanwhile, Grandmaster Kino checked in with Jason and Justin Lee to see how their special gift to Ronny was going, hoping it would be ready by Sunday afternoon, since Ronny was coming to dinner and he could present it to him then.

All of the west coast families, Kinos, Adams, Lees, Davises, Keiths, Brooks and Alec and Desi Morgan, were going out for a few hours each day to either deliver backpacks to the homeless or to help out at the shelters. The packs had been purchased and were being filled with food, Bibles, clothing, blankets, towels, and money. They also had tents to hand out and the shelters were in need of food and gifts for children. There was not a shortage of things to do and people to help.

The new South Los Angeles branch of the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* in Compton was working on executing a scaled-down version of feeding the five thousand by feeding at least a thousand on Christmas Day. A few of the Kino Martial Arts schools were assisting them. The GTCC manager had been put in touch with Rose Tanner so that she could coach them through the process. The Kinos and especially Taylor had been asked to drop by if only for a few minutes, to encourage the volunteers. Of course, they made time for it. They also solicited some other celebrities to step in and help the Center with the project.

Another good thing happening was Agent Wyatt, having felt prompted to do something about the kids down in Hillcrest in Jordan's neighborhood, had recently seen to the purchase of two empty homes and lots that were adjacent to each other. They were being purchased by the *Gabe Tanner Foundation* and would be turned into another community center. There was also news that four more *Gabe Tanner Community Centers* were opening across the country and one in Australia. It seemed big things were happening.

On Wednesday morning, Bree and Ricky went inside the school with Amari and Brittney instead of dropping them off, and brought with them a slew of goodies. Bree got Jewell Brooks involved and they ended up filling two long special tables in the cafeteria for the entire school to munch on all day. They were thanked profusely, but Bree assured them, it was her who was having so much fun.

Breez Adams was very excited that the new stained-glass window would be installed by Friday afternoon. It was gonna make a huge difference in how the church looks from the outside, and also in the amount of light in the vestibule area.

On Thursday evening, at the home of Joey and Breez Adams, the family plus Emily, Logan and Melody gathered together to try again to have a little birthday dinner for Kelstyn, who, like her cousin Emily, had turned four. Kelstyn wanted Melody to be at her birthday dinner, because Melody had been at Emily's birthday breakfast, so she had to wait for Melody to feel better after her assault. Mark, Bella and JoJo had also been invited but couldn't attend. Mark was working on several time-sensitive cases and overseeing the work on several others. Bella had been asked to help Mrs. Paula Garcia interview the women and teen girls in the apartments and assess their needs, their lives and their situations.

JoJo was busily working on two things, though he didn't really think of it as work. One was working with Reverend Clark on preparing the Christmas sermons that would be presented on Sunday and the second was he had to recruit some participants for said program.

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December 19th Thursday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric and Shelley rose from their knees after their morning prayer. The children were still sleeping, but that wouldn't last much longer.

As they went out into the hall to head downstairs, Cam was coming out of the bedroom he shared with Jeffy and their son, Eli.

"Good morning, Grandmaster Kino, Mom," Cam said.

"Good morning, sweetie," Shelley chirped.

"Early assignment?" Eric asked.

Cam nodded. "Yes, sir. And you're about to know about it in a few."

Eric sighed. "Someone in our family?"

Cam didn't answer because Eric's phone rang. Eric smiled as he answered and put the call on speakerphone. "Good morning, Jason Lee," he said cheerfully.

"Good morning, Eric Kino and let's keep it that way. Not sure if you realize what's happening right now, but I'd like to keep an agent on you for a little while until it all dies down."

"Until what dies down?"

"The storm brewing over the Cedric May podcast that aired last night. First, it has over sixty million views already and it's growing. Second, the comments are pouring in, on YouTube alone, over twenty thousand comments. That doesn't include Spotify and other platforms. Most of the comments are actually positive. And the ones that are negative are being defended by your fan base."

Eric gave a short grunt over the term of 'fan base.'

Jason went on. "However, Eric, there have been threats made, challenges issued, a whole lot of posturing and a whole lot of ugliness. I'd just like to keep someone on you for a while, until it dies down. And since I know you don't want your privacy invaded, I've assigned your son-in-law to be your bodyguard."

"I understand your sentiment, Jas, but I hardly think this warrants one of your senior JETTs."

Jason sighed, though, he'd expected the resistance. "Let's think about this a moment, Eric. You have a lot to do over the next few days. Places to be. Let's say a group of women protesters try to impede your progress. They are females, so you don't want to touch them, right? Though recently, it has been shown that they have no problem putting their hands on someone or impeding someone as they walk, or more. Will you let them stop you from getting to your destination? Will you even allow them to be anywhere close to your wife or kids? Do you want to have to raise a hand to anyone? Again, as I said, they have no problem interfering in *your* right to move about freely. Just look at some of the protest groups that have blocked roads or entrances to buildings. Will you shove them out of your way? While you're doing that, will Shelley or the kids be in danger? With Cam there, he can take care of that kind of thing, and you can protect your family. As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, I'm gonna add one more guy to the mix. Not sure who yet, I'll have to check with Joey and Jeff. And I definitely want to keep Agent Ward with Taylor."

Eric sighed. "It's amazing, isn't it, that a man can't state his opinion without those who disagree with him trying to hurt him or his family."

"It is a shame that people who live in this country don't understand the 1st Amendment, but that's what's become of our nation with the radicals who don't think you should be allowed to state your opinion because they believe only their opinion matters. Satan's hold is strong."

"Satan is hard at work, but he will not prevail," Eric said. "Well, we will not cower, we will not be deterred, we will continue to occupy and to teach truth until Jesus comes. I'm not afraid, but you do what you feel you have to do. However, I will pay you for your services. Period. No discussion on that."

"Whatever, Grandmaster Kino. Also, I've counseled with my brother, and he recommends that you make a public statement about how you intend to handle any threat to your person or your family. Justice will be swift. Anyone posing a threat toward you or a member of your family will be stopped and dealt with swiftly and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. He and I also decided that we will notify the police departments in Newport, Huntington Beach, Los Angeles and possibly Hillcrest, to make sure it is understood that threats have been made and you will defend yourself and your family."

Eric smiled. "Thank you, Jason, and tell Justin I appreciate his input."

"Well, also Ricky, Mark and Joey have been in on this powwow."

Eric nodded and smiled. "Of course they have."

"So, I'll get back to you when Joey lets me know who is available."

"Thanks, Jason. And good job. Keep up the good work. If I haven't said it lately, I'm proud of you. When I first met you, I think you were only six, and here you are, a powerful force for good in this world."

"I am that person because I had an amazing man teaching me. So, thank you, Eric Kino, and thank God you stepped in to defend my cousin Jung. If not, Justin and I wouldn't even know you. You've been such a blessing to us both. I know you think taking out James that day in high school was a mistake on your part, but *I* think you did

exactly what you were supposed to do. And I think you are not responsible for the things that happened. You've spoken many times that people must be held responsible for what they do. Hold him responsible."

Eric nodded. "I do, but I still share some of the responsibility and carry some guilt. It was costly in that it caused my wife extensive pain and trauma. Still, it seems the good that has come from it is unmeasurable. And yet, I still feel immense guilt when I think of Shelley's swollen and bruised face, or her rape, or her torture. Still, she's strong now because of all that, so I guess she was honed in the fire."

Shelley had been standing in the hall with Eric and Cam, listening to the conversation, and she reached over and squeezed Eric's hand.

He glanced down at her and smiled.

Then the door next to their room opened and little Angelina peeked out. Shelley went to her immediately. "Good morning, sweet girl."

Eric ended his call and smiled at Cam. "Well then, so, I guess you want my schedule. Right now we're gonna head downstairs to do a morning workout and then have breakfast."

Cam nodded. "Don't leave the house without me. While you're working out, I need to go have a talk with my wife, because Jeffy feels guilty that you went on that podcast only because she told you that she felt the need to answer the accusations. You did it for her and she now feels like all of this is her fault."

Eric nodded. "If you can't get through to her let me know, and I'll have a little talk with her."

Cam nodded. "Thank you, sir."

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December 19th Thursday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

The Tanner home was beautifully decorated for Christmas inside and out. Yet, the dining room was currently filled with pink and purple balloons and streamers and a giant sign covered with spring flowers and the words "*Happy 23rd Birthday Lily and Daisy*!"

The home was also filled with people. Of course, the entire Tanner family was there plus significant others, like Nolan Sawyer, Heather's fiancé, Jericho Jones and CJ Blackmon. Also there were Chaz and Lisa Stewart, Charlie, Matthew, Aralyn, and babies Lachlyn and Jonny, and Melaynah Appel and Hannah Brown. Jodi and John Appel were unable to get away because the Inn was in full Christmas swing.

Currently, Gabe was in the large entryway between the kitchen, the den, the dining room and the staircase, holding baby Gentian and singing as he danced slowly to the song that was playing on the speaker, *"I Will Always Love You.*"

Gabe glanced at his father when he saw him smile and go to his mother, take her hand, pull her to him in the foyer area and dance with her. It made Gabe so happy to see the romance still alive between his mother and father. He could picture them, younger, looking into each other's eyes, like they were right now, swaying back and forth. He hoped he'd have that same kind of moment with Taylor twenty years from now.

Gabe looked around, suddenly realizing that Laynah was dancing with her brother Matthew, CJ was dancing with Violet, and Chaz was dancing with Lisa. Chaz and Lisa

each held one of their twins. Charlie convinced Hannah to dance with him. Young Aralyn Stewart held Iris' hands as they circled 'round and 'round. Nolan finally rose and pulled Heather to him. She had little Isaiah in her arms, but that didn't stop them. They began swaying to the music.

Jericho stood and grabbed up his crutches, but Rose stopped him. "It's okay, Jericho. You don't have to do this."

He smiled. "I may not have to, but I really want to. Just don't trip over my crutches."

She giggled and put her hands up around his neck, only by the time they'd started to dance, or at least sway, the song ended. Everyone groaned their displeasure.

"Everyone just stay right where you are," Keegan said. He went to the phone connected to the speaker and started a different song.

Everyone smiled when they heard what it was. "*When You Say Nothing At All*." Only one of the most romantic love songs of all time.

When Gabe realized the only two people not dancing were the birthday girls, he headed over to Hannah and Charlie. "Hannah, will you take the baby for a minute, and Charlie, will you come with me to ask my sisters to dance? The party is for them and they're the only ones not dancing."

Hannah smiled and held her arms out to take the infant. Gabe and Charlie headed over to the girls.

"Lily," Gabe said. "May I have this dance?"

Lily smiled and took her brother's hand. "You are such a sweetie, Gabe."

"Yep," he said with a grin and escorted her to the middle of the floor.

Charlie smiled at Daisy. "So, will you dance with me?"

"I'd be happy to, Charlie," Daisy said sweetly.

Keegan watched Gabe handle the situation perfectly. He was so proud of his son. Gabe stayed awake and aware. He stayed watchful. He was usually in the moment, serving whenever and wherever he could. Keegan sighed, thinking he was so blessed to have such a good kid for a son.

The music ended and Lizzy called out. "Hey, everyone, it's time to open the gifts, and then we'll blow out the candles and have some cake. So, let's gather around in the living room. Guys, if you could move some dining room chairs into the living room to make sure everyone has a place to sit."

As usual, the birthday girls each sat in a chair placed in front of the fireplace. The rest gathered on the sofas and chairs and a few sat on the floor, including Charlie and Matt and Hannah.

Gabe knelt down and smiled at Aralyn. He sighed. Whenever Gabe looked at Aralyn, he was struck by how much she resembled her sister. She had the same voluminous red hair and large green eyes as Laynah, and she too was tall for her age. But where Laynah was a fireball, Aralyn was quieter—soft, gentle, and sweet. Gabe had heard that Aunt Lisa too had been a lot to handle.

"So, Aralyn," Gabe said kindly as he chose a gift from the pile. "You give Daisy this one from Aunt Jodi, Uncle John and Hannah."

Aralyn nodded and handed the gift bag to Daisy.

"Thank you, Aralyn," Daisy said sweetly. "Let's see, who is this from?"

"It's from Aunt Jodi, Uncle John and Hannah."

"Oh. Well, aren't you so smart," Daisy said.

"Well, Gabe told me, but he didn't have to. I can read."

"Oh, wait," Hannah said. "I'm supposed to FaceTime with Miss Jodi when you open our gift."

They waited for Jodi and John. "Hey, everyone," they said.

Hannah pointed the camera at Daisy.

"Hey, Uncle John, Aunt Jodi, so, I'm about to open your gift."

"Awesome," Jodi said. "I hope you like it."

Daisy reached in and pulled a dark green sweatshirt out of the bag. It had a hand-embroidered emblem of a dog on the left breast and the dog looked just like Georgia. Around the dog were nine smaller little smiling puppy faces. She examined it closely. "Oh my goodness, I love this so much! And look at that handiwork. It's amazing. It reminds me of the work Mrs. Tealy does."

"Good eye, Daisy. That's because I hired her to do it for you," Jodi said.

"Oh, wow, I can't believe you went to all that trouble. Thank you so much, Aunt Jodi and Uncle John."

"There's more in the bag. Hannah picked it out."

Daisy fished through the paper and pulled out a dog collar with daisies on it and a tag that read, "Daisy belongs to me," with Daisy's phone number. Daisy held it up for everyone to see. "Oh, Hannah, I just love it. Thank you so much. Thank you too, Uncle John and Aunt Jodi."

"You are so very welcome! Hannah, if you don't mind, we'd like to watch Lily open our gift to her and then just watch a little longer, or as long as we can until a guest needs something."

"I don't mind," Hannah said.

"If your arm gets tired, I'll hold the phone," Charlie said quickly.

She smiled at him and nodded.

Gabe handed another bag to Aralyn and smiled. "You know who."

Aralyn handed the bag to Lily. "It's from Uncle John, Aunt Jodi and Hannah."

"Thank you so much, Aralyn."

She looked in the bag and pulled out a dark green apron with "Lily's Place" embroidered on the front, with a picture of orange and yellow lilies sprouting up from a thick patch of grass. It was a really nice apron with a front pocket, and then another smaller pocket that held a tasting spoon, and a little metal ring that held a small towel. Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, wow, you guys, this is awesome. You don't even realize how awesome this is. Look, Daisy, this embroidery is very similar to the picture I showed you."

She looked down again. "It's really amazing, isn't it? Is this also Mrs. Tealy?"

"Yes, it is," Jodi said. "And Lily, there's more down in there. Again, Hannah picked it out."

Lily fished through the paper and came out with a white coffee mug. It too had the picture of lilies coming out of a patch of grass, and also had the words, "The only thing on fire in our kitchen—is the cook."

Lily giggled. “Oh, thank you, Hannah. I love it so much. How did you find a mug with a picture to match the one on the apron?”

“We had it custom made,” Hannah answered.

“Well, I simply love it. Thank you so much, and thank you, Aunt Jodi and Uncle John.”

“You’re very welcome.”

The gift-giving continued. They went back and forth between Daisy and Lily. Gifts from the Stewarts. Gifts from Laynah and Jake.

Gabe lifted one gift from Rose and Jericho and presented it to Lily himself since it was a large, heavy box. It was a set of four toxin-free, nonstick pans. It wasn’t the only set of pans she received. It became a joke that she now had enough pots and pans to open her own restaurant.

“If only,” Lily said with a sigh.

“Maybe one day,” Lizzy said softly.

Keegan glanced down at his wife, taking note of her excellent acting skills.

Daisy also received wonderful gifts, including her favorite perfume, a new state-of-the-art laptop, and a kit to build her own doghouse, because it was known that she loved to work with her hands. Carpentry work, gardening work, painting walls, she loved it all.

Heather and Nolan got each sister new saddles to keep at their stables, so they could come and ride whenever they wanted.

Iris presented each sister with a bracelet she made from a kit she had. She was proud that Gabe had helped her with the color choices.

Gabe presented Daisy with a new leather sling bag with an engraved daisy on it. He gave Lily a beautiful wooden wall hanging with the words, “The Kitchen is the Heart of the Home. Nourish, Strengthen, Heal, Love.” It too had the little lily logo on it.

Lily gave Daisy a kit to build her own raised planter box.

Daisy gave Lily a business sign featuring multiple social-media QR codes. It was beautiful. A brushed nickel plaque on a gold base, it had gold squares where the QR codes would go, and above each square was the corresponding social-media logo in gold. Engraved in black was “Lily’s Place” in beautiful cursive and again, the lily logo. Lily was grateful but confused, yet still thanked her sister profusely.

Finally, there were only three gifts left. Two envelopes from their parents and one extra box for Lily.

Gabe made everyone wait a minute while he started a video call with Taylor and her parents. Young Eric, Amari and Brittney were also on the phone. “Hey, everyone,” Bree chirped brightly.

“Hey, Kinos,” Lizzy answered. “Bree, I’m so excited about the news Gabe gave us. How are you feeling?”

“I am feeling so totally blessed. I’ve had a little bit of morning sickness, but knowing that God has blessed me with another child, I really don’t care how sick it makes me.”

“Well, I do,” Ricky put in, making everyone laugh.

Bree giggled.

“I bet your mom is tickled pink,” Lizzy said.

"She is. She is. Another grandbaby. She has nine already, and now with Bella and me, there are two more on the way—that we know of. The whole family is really excited for us. Oh, and you all haven't met our newest kiddos. This is Amari, and this little one is Brittney. Wave at the camera, sweetie."

Both Brittney and Amari smiled and waved.

"It's so nice to meet you, Amari and Brittney," Keegan said softly.

"Yes, it is," Lizzy said. "Maybe you can come visit this next summer. There's lots of fun things to do here. Riding horses, bike trails, fishing, swimming, river rafting, lots of ball games. So much."

"We'll try to make that happen," Ricky said.

"Okay, let's get to these last gifts," Keegan said.

Aralyn handed the box to Lily with a smile. "It's from my mom."

Lily frowned up at her Aunt Lisa who was also her employer. "But you already gave me a gift."

"This one is from me as your employer and also from Miss Maddie. It's very special to Chaz and me, and I thought you should have it. Go ahead. Open it."

Lily tore away the wrapping paper and opened the top of a cardboard box and pulled out a shadow box for hanging on the wall. Inside the box was a rolling pin and printed on the box behind the rolling pin were the words, "Maddie's Sword."

Lily teared up. "This is from the Inn, right?"

"Yes, sweetie," Lisa said. "Maddie would want you to have it."

Lily blinked and tears ran over her cheeks. "I don't deserve this."

"Why not?" Keegan asked his daughter. "What makes you undeserving?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. But it's special to you guys, right?"

"Yes it is," Chaz said. "And because you know that, you'll work hard to honor Miss Maddie."

"So, like, is there a story behind this rolling pin?" CJ asked.

Chaz chuckled as he bounced his son in his arms. "There is indeed. You see, a very long time ago, when Miss Lisa Stewart, well, back then she was Miss Lisa Lewis, when she first came back to Pine Forest to find her grandmother, she'd been in a bit of a spat with her ex, whom she left back in California. She'd driven here in a red Corvette, a gift from her mother. We won't go into detail about that. However, Lisa's mother sent Lisa's ex to retrieve the car from Lisa. The guy roughed her up a bit, but Lisa, being a feisty little thing, was able to get the keys from him. He knocked her around and had her pinned to the ground when Miss Maddie came charging out the front door of the Inn, with this rolling pin held high in the air. She fully intended to beat the guy to death. At least, that's what she said."

The group chuckled.

"You're talking about the little lady in the picture over the fireplace at the Inn?" Jericho asked.

"One and the same," Lisa answered, smiling at the memory.

"Was she able to get in a lick?" CJ asked.

Chaz shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. The ex grabbed the pin from her and threw it across the yard. He was able to get the keys, get back in the car and take off right

before I could get to them. After I took Lisa inside and doctored the cut on her head from the tires spewing gravel, we went out hunting for Miss Maddie's rolling pin."

"And don't forget that you kissed her," Laynah put in.

Chaz smiled. "Yes, you're right. When I was doctoring up your mother's head, I mean, her lips were right there. I couldn't resist. I kissed her. More than once. And we all know where that led; it led to our marriage and your existence," he said pointedly at his eldest daughter.

She smiled.

Lily sighed. "Well, thank you, Aunt Lisa. Thank you so much for this gift. I will cherish it always."

Lisa smiled and nodded. "You're so welcome."

"And now for our gift to Lily," Lizzy said.

Gabe handed the envelope to his father who presented it to Lily.

Lily smiled and took the envelope. Inside were several papers, including a survey plat paper and a deed to a piece of property. She blinked several times. "I, uh, I don't understand," she said.

"Read the address on the property description."

She quietly mumbled the address, ending with "Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia."

"Read the previous owner listed on the deed," Keegan instructed.

Lily did and her eyes opened wide. "What? What? This says Knox Sawyer. Are you kidding me? Are you saying, are you saying that you purchased the Knox Sawyer home on Main Street?"

There were no gasps of surprise from the group because they'd all known and they'd all looked forward to this moment.

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Luke 12:7

"Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Keegan smiled at Lily. “Well, it was a joint effort. The Kinos were very much involved in this. And that isn’t the real deed. It’s a copy with your name on it. The actual deed is currently in my name. Ricky and I had a long talk after he took you on your little walk a few weeks ago. He let me know about your interest in this piece of property. He felt like he was supposed to do something to make this dream happen for you, so he and his wife discussed it and contacted us. Your mom and I know you’ve worked so hard in school, you worked so hard at the Inn, and we’d all like to help make your dream come true.”

“And honestly,” Ricky said with a smile, “I did have an ulterior motive. I wanted to have a good place to have some good, clean, nutritious food when I’m in town without having to crash the Inn every day. Though, don’t get me wrong, John, I still intend to come see you guys as much as possible.”

“I’m not worried a bit,” John replied.

Rose spoke up. “Okay, so, we all realize, Lily, that you just received a huge gift for your birthday. We were told that they intended to give you the house—and we were also told that you had extensive knowledge of the Sawyer house. Can you give us a nutshell version?” Rose asked.

Lily nodded. “Well, Knox Sawyer grew up on a small farm in Pine County. He went away to school, came back and married his childhood sweetheart, Birdie, whose name may have been Bernice. He built that house for Birdie in 1827, the same year the town of Pine Forest was established. He was the first mayor. They had six sons and five daughters. They were very happy. I believe, from the activities they were involved in, that they were fairly wealthy. But when the baby was only one and the middle daughter was seven, they contracted yellow fever and they both died. Their mother, Birdie, simply could not handle the death of her babies, and she wasted away and died a year later. Knox was inconsolable. The newspaper said he shut himself away. It also mentioned that he drank a lot. It was left to his older daughters to raise the other children. However, one of the older girls fell in love with a local boy and wanted to leave her father’s house and marry her sweetheart, but Knox wouldn’t allow it. She was so distraught over the loss of her true love that she ended up taking her own life.”

“Oh, wow,” Gabe said softly. “This is a really sad story.”

Lily nodded. “It is. It breaks me up, and it gets worse. Not long after that, a yellow fever epidemic swept through, and four more children died, leaving Knox with only his four eldest sons. Shortly thereafter, Knox died too. They say he died of a broken heart. Then his sons sold the home and left town and never came back. Since then, the house has been vacant off and on over the years, though I know it’s been a general store and a library.” She sighed.

"Lily, that is such a sad story," Heather said. "Why would you even want to own that property?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I think maybe it's because I feel this pull, this need I guess, to make it a happy place again. I've always been drawn to it. When all the other kids in town said it was haunted, I just felt like it needed some love. I told Mr. Kino that I'd love to own it one day and make it a restaurant, *Lily's Place*, and..." She stopped. "Oh! You all know that, don't you? That's why all of your gifts were about *Lily's Place* and restaurant stuff."

They all chuckled. "Glad you figured that out," Gabe said dryly.

"So, Nolan," Heather began. "Since we always say there's no such thing as coincidences, maybe you having the same last name may not be a coincidence after all. You wouldn't happen to have any relatives who grew up in Pine Forest, do ya?"

He shook his head. "Well, not that I know of. Still, I think I may do a little asking."

They all nodded thoughtfully at that.

Lily smiled. "I can't thank you enough, Mom, Dad. I'm afraid to know how much you spent on the purchase of this property, but whatever it is, I'm so grateful. I feel such a rush, such a warmth of feeling, I can't even describe it. Thank you so much. Thank you."

Keegan nodded. "Well, hon, like I said, it was a joint gift. The Kinos wanted to be a part of it."

Lily looked at Gabe's phone. "Thank you so much, Mr. and Mrs. Kino."

"You're so welcome," Bree said. "But there is more. It's gonna need some major renovations and starting up a restaurant is not an easy task. However, Ricky has invested in and been a part of dozens of restaurants here in our area, and every single one of them is highly successful. So, he would like to lend his expertise to you as well as the startup capital. He will be happy to discuss all of the business with you and your father when you're ready, and then you can make the decisions on how you want to proceed."

"I am overwhelmed."

"Don't be," Ricky said. "We got this. Easy-peasy."

"And so," Keegan interrupted, "we still have another gift to give out, and it's to our Daisy. And let me just say up front, that the Kinos also wanted to be a part of this gift." He took the envelope from Gabe and handed it to Daisy.

She opened it and frowned, almost exactly as Lily had done. She looked up. "I don't understand. It's a deed to a property."

They nodded. "That deed is to the property that is right next to the Sawyer house, which from here on out will be known as Lily's Place. So, I'll let Ricky explain his line of thinking, because it was totally his idea."

Daisy nodded and looked up at Gabe's phone.

Ricky Kino smiled. "Daisy, we were in a dilemma. We very much wanted to give Lily the gift of the house to help her progress in life. But we couldn't do that and not give you something as significant. Bree kept talking about the fact that she wished there were two houses, side by side, to purchase so that you each could have your own thing. And then we discovered that the little piece of land there next to Lily's Place could certainly hold a companion building. Of course, it probably wouldn't be a home for you, but a

place of business. We did some digging on you, and found out you love carpentry. You love gardening. You're a genius with computers and web development. You're gifted with many interests and talents. So, we thought we would build you a place next to Lily's Place, and you can be in on the planning, on the building, and mostly, on what you want to do."

"Wow. This is exciting," Daisy said. "But my mind is blank. I don't really know what to do."

Ricky smiled. "And that's okay. There's no rush. You might want to test your design skills. You might want to try your carpentry skills. I understand your father built the house you're living in. He could teach you. You might want to try gardening or landscaping. You might want to run a computer business right there. You might want to simply live there. You might want to flip it and sell it. You will have a piece of property to do whatever you please. But first, you have to look at house designs or business designs and decide on the architecture, or even if you want it to be a twin of the other house."

Daisy nodded thoughtfully and then smiled. "This is an amazing gift. I hardly deserve such an expensive gift."

"Again, what makes you so unworthy?" Keegan asked her the same question he'd asked Lily.

Daisy shrugged. "It just feels like it's too much. I mean, I get that you wanted to match Lily's gift. But I'm so happy for Lily to have that amazing gift, that is a gift for me too. You don't really have to give me anything like that. I mean, a pair of socks would be good for me."

Bree smiled. "Well now, that is sweet and humble of you. And I love the way a gift for Lily makes you feel happy. But I also understand that you like design. Interior design. And I do too! So, use your skills and imagination to design this property and sell it off if you feel it's too much. It's a gift. Do with it what you wish. And if you think it's too much, pay it forward. I'm excited to see what ideas you'll come up with. Think about it. Pray about it. Talk to your parents and family members, and we'll get together after the New Year and make some plans. Okay?"

Daisy nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I will. I promise."

"So, right now," Ricky began, "both properties are in your father's name. He tells me he will transfer them to your names when you are ready. That is between him and you girls."

"I think they're both a little overwhelmed," Keegan said. "We'll let this simmer for a bit."

Ricky nodded. "I think that's wise."

"Okay, then, so, who wants to eat some birthday cake?" Lizzy asked.

"I do," Iris said immediately.

"Rick, Bree, thanks so much for your help and input on this birthday project," Keegan said.

"No, thank you, Keeg, for allowing us to be a part of it. Go have cake and eat a piece for me."

"And me," young Eric yelled out.

Everyone laughed.

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December 20th, Early Friday Morning
L Street Apartments, Los Angeles, California

JoJo knocked on the apartment door and waited. He had reinforcements with him. Leaning against the upstairs railing outside of the apartment were young Eric, Logan, Jordan, Melody, and three guys from the USC football team, DJ, Maka, and Corey. The three players only had a few hours before they had to leave for a meeting and practice but had volunteered to help their friend and former quarterback. The task at hand was to move the Quinn sisters to a new place, where their location would not be known to Scott Newman or any of his acquaintances.

The door opened and Raylynn smiled up at JoJo. "Hi, JoJo." She looked past him to the others. "Hi, everyone. So, thank you so much for coming to help. Please come in."

They all quickly moved through the door and gathered in the small living room of the two-bedroom apartment.

"Raylynn, let me introduce you to everyone."

"Wait for me," Kaylee said as she moved slowly into the room.

Melody tried not to gasp. Jordan's eyes opened wide. The guys sighed and shook their heads at the sight of the poor girl. Her face was black and blue, literally. Her lips and cheek were swollen and disfigured. Both eyes were black.

"Hello, Kaylee," JoJo said softly. "How are you feeling?"

She gave what was supposed to be a smile. "I'm okay. Really. Thanks to you. It looks worse than it is. I have a pretty good headache that won't go away. They gave me something for pain, but it's not helping."

JoJo nodded. "Okay so, I'll call my Aunt Jeffy and get her to give us some of her special meds. She'll probably want to see you."

"Her meds work," Melody put in.

JoJo nodded at her with a smile. "Raylynn and Kaylee, this is my brother Logan and his girl, Melody. As you can see, she too had a bad guy pound on her the same day this happened to you."

Melody smiled. "But the guy only hit me once. I'm so sorry this happened to you, but you're in good hands now."

Logan smiled at the very true statement as he stepped forward and offered his hand to the sisters and greeted each one. His eyes lingered on Raylynn and now he understood his brother's interest. It was more than him being protective of a couple of young women. This girl was just as beautiful as his own Melody, and yet completely different in appearance. Black hair, bright green eyes, fit, trim, and a beautiful smile that radiated warmth. But she also had a toughness about her. A no-nonsense kind of attitude that Logan knew JoJo would appreciate. Jordan, too, was no-nonsense. His Melody was just plain sweet.

"This is my cousin, Eric, and his fiancée, Jordan," JoJo continued.

Eric offered his hand to both girls and so did Jordan. She smiled at Kaylee. "I too have been there, my face all beat up. It'll get better and Dr. Kino Wallace knows her stuff. She'll fix you up."

JoJo nodded at the others. “And these guys are from the team, DJ, Maka and Corey. They volunteered to come help with the move.”

Raylynn shook all of their hands. “Thank you all so much for taking time out of your day to come help two total strangers.”

“Hey, no problem,” Maka said. “So, where do we start?”

“Is there a truck?” Raylynn asked.

“Yes,” JoJo replied. “So, it looks like you still have some packing up of the small stuff. Why don’t you and the girls work on that and us guys will get the big stuff out to the truck?”

“Okay. I still have to pack up the kitchen, and Kaylee was gonna work on the bathroom, but she wasn’t feeling too well this morning.”

“Well, Kaylee,” Melody said. “Why don’t you let me do the work and you just boss me around?”

Kaylee nodded.

“And I’ll help Raylynn in the kitchen,” Jordan said.

“Awesome. And I’ll supervise,” JoJo said with a grin. “DJ, Maka, you guys go ahead and get the sofa to the truck. Young Eric, Logan, you get the big chair and the tables. Corey, you come with me and let’s see what the bedrooms look like.”

The guys immediately went to work.

Thirty minutes later, the last few boxes and trash bags filled with soft items like linens, pillows, bedspreads, and such, were grabbed up by the guys. While the sisters and the guys left to move into the new place, Melody and Jordan remained at the apartment to clean the kitchen and bathroom, vacuum, and sweep to make sure the place was left clean.

The new home was a small two-bedroom house on West 35th Street. It was blue with white trim and shutters and white planter boxes out front and a cute dormer above a unique yellow front door. It had been provided by the *Angel Network Foundation* free of charge, though Raylynn had insisted that she pay rent. Angel instructed her agent to accept the rent payments and put them into an account for the sisters to use at a later date.

The guys unloaded the truck while the Quinn sisters directed them where to place things. Young Eric and Logan put the beds back together for them and the girls hung their clothes in the closets, unpacked the bathroom boxes, and started on the kitchen.

Kaylee was tired and the others made her sit and rest. The guys finished up with the truck and young Eric went to return it, pick up his car and would swing by to pick up the girls from the old apartment.

Meanwhile, Jordan and Melody chatted as they finished up cleaning the kitchen. Jordan was working on the oven and Melody was wiping out the cabinets.

“So, what do you think about the Quinn girls?” Jordan asked.

Melody smiled. “I feel really bad for Kaylee. I mean, she’s sad obviously because she’s been hurt, but also, she made mention a few times of some memories with this Scott guy, like from when they first met, and I think she’s sad over the loss of the relationship.”

Jordan nodded. “Yeah, I agree. I don’t know, but if some guy beats on me, I wouldn’t want anything else to do with him.”

Melody nodded. “Right. But who knows. I mean, maybe her self-esteem isn’t real high. And when you don’t value yourself, you end up accepting the abuse.”

Jordan nodded. “They are interesting, I mean, the sisters being Native American and all. And oh my goodness, that Raylynn is drop-dead gorgeous. Like something out of a magazine.”

Melody nodded. “I agree and I don’t think we’re the only ones who noticed.”

“Are you talking about our guys, or JoJo?”

“Yes,” Melody said with a giggle.

Jordan smiled. “I was watching JoJo and it looks to me like he’s at the very least interested.”

Melody nodded. “Who wouldn’t be? She seems intelligent. She’s a physical therapist. She’s kind. She loves her sister. She’s grateful, cuz she must have said ‘thank you’ a thousand times. And like you said, she’s drop-dead gorgeous.”

Jordan nodded. “It’s gonna be interesting to sit back and watch. Ya know, I did the same thing when I realized Logan was interested in you.”

Melody smiled. “Really?”

“Sure. When I first met Logan he was on a bad date with a girl named Angi who only agreed to come to watch JoJo’s game with him because he was related to the Kinos. It was truly sickening. And then when I realized he had his eye on you, I was hoping so much that it would be different. And look what happened; he fell in love with the sweetest, kindest, and prettiest girl and I already love you like a sis, so, it’s a match made in heaven.”

“Oh, Jordan,” Melody said as her eyes teared up.

Jordan rose up from the oven and hugged her. “Oh my goodness, I made you cry. Sorry, not sorry.”

Melody giggled, and wiped at her eyes. They both startled for a second when someone knocked on the door.

Jordan smiled. “Oops, sounds like Three is here. Are we about done?”

Melody nodded.

Jordan went to let him in, but was surprised. The person at the door was not young Eric. He was a guy maybe in his thirties and he was frowning.

“Are you Kaylee?” the man asked.

Jordan scrunched up her face. “Uh, no. Who are you?”

“I’m lookin’ for a girl named Kaylee. I need to talk to her.”

“Well, there is no Kaylee that lives here,” Jordan said, pretending to play dumb, because no one was allowed to know where Kaylee moved.

“Are you lying to me?”

“Look, buddy, I don’t know who you think you are, but you need to back off. There is no Kaylee that lives here.”

He looked past her as he heard someone else talking. He frowned. “The place looks empty.”

“Very good,” Jordan quipped sarcastically.

“So, she moved. Unless that’s her in there.”

“It’s not. Go away,” Jordan said and tried to shut the door.

He shoved it open, knocking Jordan to the floor as he did.

She rose quickly though.

The guy stormed in toward Melody. “Are you Kaylee?”

“Nope, sorry, buddy. You’re too late.”

“What are you two doing in Kaylee’s apartment?”

“It should be evident,” Jordan said as she came to stand between him and Melody. “We’re cleaning. That’s what we do. We clean apartments. Now, you need to get out of here.”

“You know where she went, don’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jordan said.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “You’d better tell me where she went if you don’t want to get hurt.”

Jordan struck out quickly, her foot connecting solidly in his groin. At the same time Melody ran forward and kicked to his kneecap, forcing it into hyperextension. He fell, but began threatening to do all kinds of very ugly harmful things to the girls.

The girls themselves were very relieved when, at that moment, young Eric stepped through the door. “Am I gonna have to kill somebody?” he asked softly.

Jordan rubbed her arms where he’d grabbed her. “I’m okay. But I think this guy needs to be detained and questioned. He grabbed me. He shook me. And he threatened to hurt me.”

“And I got it on video,” Melody said as she pointed to her phone sitting up on the counter. “He wanted Kaylee and was demanding we tell him where she went.”

Eric nodded. “Well, as soon as you called me, Melody, I contacted Uncle Joey and cops should be here any minute.”

The guy rose. “I’m outta here.”

“Uh-uh,” young Eric said softly before he knocked him down. “Why do you want Kaylee? Huh? How do you know her?”

“I don’t know her. I just wanted to tell her something.”

“Tell her something for whom?”

He sighed. “For Scott.”

“How do you know Scott?”

“We went to school together. He’s got my back and I got his. He asked me to speak to Kaylee and tell her that she’d better not testify against him.”

“Or what?”

“I don’t know what he planned to do. He just told me to find her and let her know that she’d better not testify. That’s all.” He rose again. “I have to leave. You can’t keep me here.”

“Pretty sure I can,” Eric said as he knocked him down again. “There is no way you’re getting out of here, so just sit and relax.”

“Listen, pretty boy, I’m not afraid of you.”

“Well, you should be,” Jordan said quickly. “Because some guys kidnapped him and they’re all dead.”

Brows raised, young Eric looked into Jordan’s eyes. She shrugged her apology for the lie because they weren’t *all* dead. He sighed.

A minute later the police arrived.

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December 20th, Friday Afternoon

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Reverend Ronald Clark and Breez Adams stood outside the church staring up at the newly installed stained-glass window. It was beautiful. Absolutely stunning. The colors were bright. Mary and Joseph watched over the baby Jesus in the manger with the light from the star overhead illuminating the baby's face. There were also a sheep, a donkey, and two shepherds. It was breathtaking and Breez sniffed.

Ronny looked down at her. "It is moving, isn't it?"

She nodded and gave a small laugh at herself. "It's even better than I thought it would be. I didn't realize what a difference it would make. I just love it so much."

Ronny nodded. "As do I. You did a remarkable job."

She sighed. "Art has always been inside me. I love to paint, to create beauty, but doing it here in service to God is so rewarding."

"You're right. Serving God is the most rewarding thing. It fills us with so much joy and satisfaction and purpose. If only people would realize that instead of seeking after money or fame or power, they would be so much happier and so much more fulfilled." He sighed, and then smiled. "So, Mrs. Adams, may I ask where your little ones are today?"

"They are visiting with my sister. One of their favorite things to do. Though Ledger is not quite as happy this time because Logan and JoJo are not home right now and he loves it when the big boys play with him."

"Ledger is a toddler, correct?"

"Well, he just turned three in November."

"It's wonderful that his two much older cousins take time to play with him."

She nodded. "They're such good boys, or, I guess I should say, 'young men.' They're so grown up now. It's strange how fast that happened. But yes, I'm grateful that they spend time with Ledger and set such a good example for him."

Ronny nodded. "Those two young men are very special and I'm grateful to them, considering the way they stepped in immediately to give me the help I needed here. Let's be honest, Mrs. Adams. I'm ninety-two years old. I'm not gonna be around forever and I'm gonna need someone to take over the ministry here. I'm not sure how this will work out, but I feel like if I leave it in their hands, then God's purpose for this church will be reached."

Breez sighed and nodded. "It sounds like a very big undertaking for two boys. Do they know you're thinking along those lines?"

"I think they know somewhere deep inside their hearts. I know they didn't think they'd be strapped to this place. I know they usually go to different churches to spread their light around. So, I don't expect them to be full-time ministers here. But maybe they will bring others in to serve here as well."

"I see."

He shrugged. "Or maybe they'll want to make this church their base, if only for a little while. We'll see. I trust God and I trust them."

"Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me, Reverend."

"Thank you for listening to this old man ramble on."

"I don't think of you that way. I think of you as a wise, elderly gentleman who has much to share and whom God personally called to shepherd His people for Him."

He smiled. "You are very kind, young woman. Your husband must feel very blessed."

"I'm blessed to have my husband. He's taught me so much. He taught me about God and brought me into the fold. He's such a good man."

"I can see that he is. So, whaddya say, Mrs. Adams, shall we go inside and see what effect the window has on the inside of the church?"

"Oh, yes, let's do!"

✝✝✝

December 21st, 8:00 AM, Saturday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe Tanner came upstairs after his workout, grabbed his gun bag and stopped in the den to turn on the TV for a moment. He quickly changed the channel to *What's Up, Hollywood*. He didn't have to watch long before what he was waiting for was announced. He sat down to listen to the pretty entertainment reporter.

"What is up this morning, everyone, is a huge star in the making. Opening night for *The Resurrection of Elijah Beck* has taken the number-two spot among the biggest opening-day results of all time. Raking in one hundred and twenty-five million dollars in its first night, the movie has been touted as a thought-provoking roller coaster ride with eye candy that won't stop.

"Leslie Anker of Movie Mania says, 'The fresh good looks of Eric Kino the third will get you to the box office, but his natural acting talent will keep you there. You never want the film to end. This young man will take the world by storm. He's the perfect mixture of his parents; he has his father's athleticism, his mother's acting skills, and both parents' good looks. This guy is headed straight to the top. Lucie Bardot is perfectly cast in the role and played it just right. The rest of the cast was phenomenal and the direction perfect. The action scenes, choreographed by Eric's father, the legendary Ricky Kino, are the best I've ever seen.'"

The woman smiled and went on. "And Melvin Lett says, 'I was expecting another martial-arts-type plot, but this film is deep. There is some bad language to give realism to the role of the bad guy, and still, it was so refreshing to feel the emotional pull without graphic violence or sex. Well done. Well done indeed.'"

The anchor smiled prettily at the camera. "All this along with the fact that Eric Kino the third just won the Kino Challenge as the youngest competitor to ever do that, and after his kidnapping just a few weeks earlier. I agree with the reviews coming back, this young man is taking the world by storm."

Gabe watched another minute to make sure they weren't saying anything else, and then turned off the television. He sat there smiling for a few seconds, and then felt the emotion well up. He'd done it. Taylor's brother had exceeded all expectations. Gabe glanced at the clock. It was a little after eight. Taylor might be awake. He needed to tell her. He gave in and made the call.

"Good morning, Gabe," Taylor answered almost immediately.

"Morning, Tay. Did I wake you?"

"Only sort of. I was just checking to see how much time I had to sleep, so I was about to get up in thirty minutes anyway."

"Okay, so do you want me to call you back?"

"No, silly. I'm always happy to talk to you. So what's up?"

Gabe chuckled. "Yes, exactly."

"Huh?"

"*What's up— Hollywood*. I just watched their morning report. Eric's movie has had the second-biggest opening day of all time."

Taylor sat straight up. "What? Really?"

"Taylor, I wouldn't wake you up to tease you. Yes, of course, really. It's amazing the things they are saying about him, and the movie. I'm so happy for him, for all of us really. It's a win, a big-time win."

"Well, what did they say?"

Gabe went on to tell her all he'd heard.

She squealed. She laughed. "Oh man, Gabe, I'm so stoked."

"Me too. This is awesome, Tay. I can't even put it into words. Especially because usually the bad guys won't let Christians get real popular without a fight."

"Hmm, I think they did fight. They tried to take him out. They lost."

"Yes, and still, the media could have squashed this story," Gabe said.

"Well," Taylor began, "sometimes when the tidal wave is just too big, they have no choice but to go with it."

"Tidal wave." Gabe smiled. "Yep. That's what this is. A tidal wave."

"And so were you, Gabe. I mean, your story. They couldn't take you out. They had to go with it. They couldn't squash your story. God is with us, Gabe, and the dark forces can't stand against us."

"Not for want of trying," Gabe answered. "But let's don't get cocky. Stay always vigilant."

"Always."

"Okay, well, video-call with me later. I'm heading over to shoot."

"Okay, well, love you, Gabe. Um, wait, I mean, since I have you on the phone, will you say my morning prayer with me?"

"Yes, of course. Who do you want to say it?"

"You say it," she said cutely.

He smiled, knelt down in the den, closed his eyes and prayed with and over the girl that he loved.

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December 21st Early Saturday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Bree and Ricky rose from their morning prayer. Ricky kissed his wife and headed to the kitchen. Bree immediately picked up her phone. She already had several messages and missed calls from her publicist and agent. She smiled. Hopefully, it was because of good news about young Eric's numbers. She quickly read a few of the messages and

smiled, then turned and headed to the kitchen.

"Ricky."

"Yep," he answered as he added raw milk to the blender.

She smiled and held up her phone. "Are you ready for this?"

He nodded and gave her his full attention.

"*The Resurrection of Elijah Beck* has had the second-highest-grossing opening night of all time. It's already taken in over $125 million."

Ricky nodded. "Okay. Good. What are they saying about Eric?"

She scrolled a bit. "One review calls him eye candy with substance. Leslie Anker says, 'The fresh good looks of Eric Kino III will get you to the box office, but his natural acting talent will keep you there. You never want the film to end. This young man will take the world by storm. He's the perfect mixture of his parents; he has his father's athleticism and his mother's acting skills, and both of their good looks; this guy is headed straight to the top.'"

She looked up at her husband through her tears. "He passed the test, Ricky. He did it."

Ricky nodded. "What else? Read them all to me."

Bree started scrolling. "'Realistic and deep, Eric the third is equal to the task.' 'Eye candy that keeps on giving.' 'Knowing that this young man is a real martial artist, proven, just as his father had to prove himself, and knowing what he faced only a month ago, gives his character so much more credence. It's a win/win and if people are like me, they are very much looking forward to what this young man does next.' And, um, 'Eric Kino definitely inherited his parents' skills.' And then, 'This young actor is hot in every way. I'll take two.'" Bree stopped to giggle at that one.

Ricky sighed.

Bree eyed her husband. "Are you not happy for our son?"

Ricky nodded. "Yes, I'm happy for him. But you know what comes next. I have to do for him what my father had to do for me. Make sure priorities don't get mixed up. Make sure he understands the weight of what's happening. He now has tons more responsibility. People will recognize him on the street. He has to learn how to play things."

"He already knows that," Bree argued. "He's watched us over the years. He's pretty savvy."

"It's still gonna be a big deal for a while, and we have to make sure he doesn't get caught up in trying to best himself. He has to keep doing God's will, searching for the right thing, not fame. He cannot get lost in the popularity."

"So, you're saying you'd like us to be a little bit low-key about this?"

Ricky nodded. "Yep, and it's a fine line. If we go too low key, he'll think we're not interested or don't care. Too excited and he'll want to keep doing things to please us. He has to know that this newfound fame, this extraordinary popularity he's about to face, is really like a giant..." He stopped at the rumble of footsteps.

"A giant burden?" young Eric asked as he came down the stairs.

They both turned to their son.

"Close enough," Ricky mumbled.

Young Eric grinned. “What were you gonna say?”

“I was gonna say a giant responsibility.”

Young Eric nodded. “Okay. Yes, it is. Dad, don’t think I haven’t thought about all of this beforehand. What if I make a huge splash? What if I fail miserably? What is my focus? How do I respond?”

Ricky nodded. “And what did you come up with?”

“Well, first and foremost to keep things in perspective. If I do well, then hit my knees in gratitude first, which I just did, then hit my knees again to ask God how I can use this to serve Him. You’re right, Dad, it is a huge responsibility. And the world is watching me. And I can take a page from your book, and Mom’s book, and I got the message this morning as I prayed to also consider Gabe. He was thrown into the limelight. He has handled it humbly, seriously, taking what has happened to him and running with it to help so many. I will ask God to show me the path He wants me to take.”

Bree sniffed. “What if He wants you to do another movie?”

“If it meets with His approval, I will. If it interferes with my upcoming plans, I won’t.”

“What if someone says they want you for this really big deal movie, but you have to do it on their schedule?” Ricky asked.

“If I approve of the movie and their schedule and mine coincide, okay. But I’m getting married this spring and my focus for a while will be on my fiancée and then my new bride and my new life.”

Ricky nodded. “Well, son, I guess I underestimated you.”

“I’m not insulted, Dad. As my father, you had to cover all the bases, and what I think and how I feel, it’s what you taught me already anyway. You and Mom have done a good job. You’ve been awesome parents, and Dad, just like I want to please God, I also hope I can make you and Mom proud of me.”

“We are proud of you, Eric,” Bree said quickly.

“But honestly, Dad, Mom, I feel kinda happy. I feel pleased that I was able to do something halfway decent since I dropped out of school and probably disappointed the heck out of you. I mean, numbers and physics are not the only things I’m good at. And this film I made, it has some good lessons and an inspirational vibration to it. And it plants seeds. Don’t you think? And yeah, I’m feelin’ good about that and about somehow we were able to get these good reviews when normally Christians get buried here in Hollywood. Right?”

Ricky nodded. “Yes, that’s right. They really had no other choice. You were too popular. They couldn’t go against the momentum.”

“Right. It was a tidal wave and they had no choice but to go with it,” Taylor said as she came downstairs. She smiled and shrugged. “That’s what Gabe and I just talked about, anyway.”

“That Gabe has a way with words,” young Eric said.

Taylor frowned. “I was the one who said that.”

They all chuckled. “Sorry, Tay,” young Eric said. “It just sounds like something Gabe would say. I guess you two are more alike than we think.”

Taylor smiled because she liked the sound of that. “It’s okay. I’m not insulted.”

Ricky chuckled at her words and lifted his phone as it buzzed. “Looks like you have some company,” he said to young Eric.

“Jordan?”

“Nope. Go open the door.”

Young Eric went to the front door and watched as JoJo drove up in his pickup, and right behind him, Logan in his own car.

They stopped and jumped from their vehicles with giant smiles on their faces.

“You did it, Eric,” JoJo said.

Eric smiled and stood firm as his brothers rushed him and hugged him fiercely, almost knocking him down.

They laughed together as JoJo and Logan patted his head and his back and smacked his cheek, and then hugged him again.

“So, Dad and I were about to head to the beach. Wanna join us?”

“That’s what we’re dressed for,” JoJo said.

“Hey, I appreciate your effort to come all the way down here just to congratulate me.”

“We’re not here for that as much as to support you. We understand what this means, Eric, how much your life can change. So we want to help you ground. We were thinkin’ that we’ll do our little prayer circle and meditation after the workout and help you get some clarity.”

Eric’s eyes moistened. He shook his head. “Wow, I don’t deserve you guys.”

“Whatever, bro, come on. We have a choir rehearsal in a few hours,” Logan said. “Let’s do this.”

“Hmm,” young Eric began. “I bet Melody is gonna be there.”

Logan grinned. “And Jordan too, so there’s that.”

They went into the house, greeted their Uncle Ricky and Taylor, but their Aunt Bree was upstairs with Amari and Brittney.

They headed down to the beach and almost regretted it. It seemed as if Ricky’s idea of celebration was to give them one of the hardest workouts they’d ever had. Ricky pushed young Eric, Logan, and Taylor close to failure while JoJo completed a carefully modified lower-body workout and the rehabilitation movements Jeffy had approved. By the end, all four were exhausted and dropped to their knees in the sand. Ricky nodded. “That ought to do it. We’re done. Who wants to pray?”

“You pray, Dad.”

Ricky nodded and smiled, accepting the honor. He gave an eloquent and heartfelt prayer of gratitude and asked for direction and guidance for his family. When he finished, he and Taylor walked back up to the house, while young Eric, JoJo and Logan stayed on the beach.

The three young men sat in a circle cross-legged on the sand and talked for a while, making sure they knew what the others were thinking, hoping and dreaming, essentially, where their heads were at.

When Bree and Ricky looked back out to check on them, they were kneeling in the sand, and each had a hand on the shoulder of the brother beside him.

Bree smiled at Ricky as she pulled out her phone and took a picture. “That is a beautiful thing.”

Ricky nodded. “Indeed it is.”

✝✝✝

Psalm 149:3-6

“Let them praise his name with dancing
and make music to him with timbrel and harp.
For the Lord takes delight in his people;
he crowns the humble with victory.
Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor
and sing for joy on their beds.
May the praise of God be in their mouths
and a double-edged sword in their hands.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

December 21st, Saturday Morning
Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Logan smiled as he and the rest of the group listened to the beautiful sixteen-year-old girl sing *"Silent Night*." The rest of the group consisted of JoJo, young Eric, Jordan, Melody, Taylor, fourteen other adult choir members, and seventeen children's choir members, including Emily, Sophia, and Kelstyn Adams, Daniel and Jeremy Davis, Josie Brooks, and Amari and Brittney Meeks. Also in attendance were Bree Kino and several of the other parents of the children.

They were currently working on the next-to-last number in the program. Mika's voice was beautiful, which made Logan smile, but Logan frowned as she sang a run for the fifth time since she'd begun the song. She ended the song and the other choir members applauded.

Logan shook his head. "I want to do it again, Mika. You have a beautiful voice and natural talent, which is why I gave you this solo. But that was too many riffs and runs. You can keep the one at the beginning of the first phrase, on the word 'night,' and the one at the end on the word 'peace.'"

"Well, my friend says you can never have too many runs in a song."

Logan nodded. "Yeah, a lot of people feel that way, but let me see if I can explain why we don't want too many here, and I'll do that by asking a question. What is the reason for singing riffs or runs in a song?"

Mika wrinkled up her nose and shrugged. "It sounds good."

Logan nodded. "Go on, what else? I mean, why do you want it to sound good?"

"Uh, because, you wanna sound good."

Logan smiled. "But why?"

Young Eric decided to step in to help out. "We wanna sound good because we want people to know that we're good singers, right?"

Logan nodded. "Yes, and so, what that really means is, you're saying it's for the ego. We sing riffs and runs and everybody oohs and aahs over the amazing sounds coming from your voice box, right?"

"Yeah," Mika said along with several others.

"It feels good when you sing and the audience around you appreciates that you are really good, that you sound really good, that you can do amazing things with your beautiful voice, right?"

Mika smiled and nodded.

Logan sighed. "But that makes it all about you, doesn't it?"

Mika frowned. "Well, I'm the one singing."

"Correct. And what that means is you've been given the power, the power to affect

the audience in so many different ways. You have the power to make them think, wow, that girl can sing. Or, the power to take them away to another place and make them feel the love and the beauty, or the sadness and tragedy of whatever is in the song. *That* should be your goal. In this particular song, we want to take the audience back to the night the baby Jesus was born. There were shepherds out in the dark fields tending to sheep. They had no idea that an absolute miracle was taking place, that the Son of God was being born, not too far away, in a lowly stable. Then the angels appeared to them, imagine that. Imagine being out in a dark field at night and you look up and angels are in the sky, bright white and lighting up the whole sky and they're praising God and, I imagine, singing hallelujahs, and telling the shepherds to go find the baby and see Him so that they can tell everyone else. It's such a beautiful thing, a thing that really happened. We want our audience to feel that when we sing for them tomorrow."

"But don't we also want to make it as pretty as possible?"

"Yes. And Mika, your sweet voice does that. You don't have to do tricks to prove to us that you can sing. We know it. The audience will know it. But the most important thing is that we make this about Jesus and not about you."

She frowned.

Logan smiled. "Let me give you another example. How many times have you heard the National Anthem sung on TV before a big game and the singer sings so many riffs and runs, people joke about it taking forever? Yes, it's impressive that the artist can do it so well, but when they fill the song up with all those runs, the song becomes all about them, when it's supposed to be about our nation. Next time you have an opportunity to hear someone sing the National Anthem, see if they are singing for their country or for themselves."

Mika nodded.

"Now, I'm gonna backpedal a little bit. There is another reason to sing riffs and runs. Sometimes they are used to make the listener feel the intense feelings of a song. One of the songs that immediately comes to my mind is *'Unchained Melody'* by the Righteous Brothers. In that song, he is intensely missing and longing for his true love and all the runs and riffs convey that emotion, that longing. That song is an exception. And I want you to do that, produce that beauty, but only at the beginning and end of 'Silent Night'."

He stopped and smiled. "Trust me, Mika. People are gonna be so impressed with how well you sing, but they will also be impressed with how well you conveyed the emotions of the song. Silent Night is a common Christmas song. It's so common that most people don't even think about the words anymore. Bring it to life, Mika. *That's* what will bring them back and make them want to hear you sing again and again. They'll want to feel the emotion." Logan smiled. "So, let's do it again, and you make me feel like I'm present at the birth of my Savior." He nodded at the others. "The rest of the choir, do your part, and kids, you watch Melody and you're gonna do the 'ooohs' in the background like we practiced, okay?"

The children smiled and nodded. Logan played the intro and nodded his head and smiled. Mika drew a deep breath and sang it again, this time with only the two runs and so much more feeling. When she finished everyone applauded loudly and cheered and

Logan was grateful for that, because it helped him to make his point.

"Okay, we're about done here. We'll meet tomorrow morning at..."

"Wait," Mika said. "We wanna hear your song. You and your brothers."

Logan, young Eric and JoJo smiled. "Okay," Logan said. "Sal, you need to practice your guitar part on this anyway, so, let's do it."

Sal Mendez, the teen guitarist who'd signed up online, nodded his head and strummed a few times on his electric guitar to make sure he was still in tune. He smiled, sighed and began playing the opening notes of "*O Holy Night."*

A mic was quickly passed to young Eric who sang the first part of the song. He passed his mic to JoJo who sang the next part. Logan had his own mic and came in on the chorus. "Fall on your knees. Oh, hear the angels' voices. Oh, ni—ight, divine, oh night, when Christ was born, oh night, div—ine, oh night, oh night divine."

The three sang the entire next verse together, in a beautiful harmony. They divided the third and fourth verses and Logan took the lead to finish the song with his brothers singing harmony. When they finished, the place went crazy. Some of the parents and adult choir members and teens had tears in their eyes.

Logan smiled and nodded at Mika. "That's what I want you to do. Make them feel what you're singing about."

She nodded.

"Okay, everyone, we're done. It's as good as it's gonna get with such limited time. I just wanna say thank you for taking the time to come and share your talents with us. You sound awesome. And you guys," he said, turning to the children. "I mean, wow. Who knew little kids could learn so fast and sing so well? I think a lot of people are gonna be so surprised tomorrow by how good you are. I'm proud of you. Okay, everyone, let's have a prayer and we'll see you tomorrow. Oh, wait, Aunt Bree, tell them what you have for them."

Bree smiled and stood. "So that we'll all look uniform, I was able to get some choir robes for everyone to wear." She held up a pretty gold choir robe with white trim at the placket and along the edges of the sleeves. "And these are for the children." She held up a smaller robe, this one white with gold trim.

"Aww, Aunt Bree, you totally rock," Logan said. "These are awesome. Thank you so much."

"It was my pleasure, really. When you all walk down the aisle with these robes on in that first song, I think it's really gonna be amazing. Believe me. I've got an eye for this kinda stuff. I'm so excited to see you all perform tomorrow."

"Me too," Logan added. "Okay, JoJo, who would you like to pray?"

"Let's call on Mrs. Salen. Will you give us a closing prayer?"

The mother of one of the children's choir members looked up, surprised. "Oh! Well, of course." She bowed her head and prayed.

Once that was done, everyone hurried away to take care of Saturday errands before the big Christmas program tomorrow. Jeff Davis showed up to pick up his boys and Josie because she was gonna come and help Mrs. Davis with Scarlett so that Mickey could get some things done. JoJo gathered his cousins Sophia and Kelstyn, and his sister Emily to run them home quickly because he had a big project to handle.

Logan watched them all leave, smiling and shaking hands and waving goodbye to the little ones. Young Eric, Jordan and Taylor took off to go help load JoJo's truck with the things they were getting ready to transport. Melody came to stand beside Logan, and he turned to her, his eyes searching her sweet face. "Are you feeling okay, Mel?"

She nodded. "Maybe a little tired."

He glanced at the top of her head. There was a small shaved spot where they'd stitched up the wound on her head. Gently, he ran his fingers over the area. "No more headaches?"

She shook her head. "Nope. I'm good."

"Are you still coming with us to help the Quinn sisters?"

"I wouldn't miss it," she said, but frowned at the same time.

Logan's brow furrowed. "Melody, maybe you need to go home and rest."

She smiled. "Really, Logan, I'm okay. Just tired. And I have a lot to do."

"What do you have to do? Maybe I can help."

She sighed. "I have some Christmas shopping to finish up and some gifts to wrap. I just wanted to make this Christmas more special than usual for my family."

He nodded. "Okay, I understand. So, is there a specific reason this one has to be more special than usual?"

"Yes. I mean, no, not specific. Let me see if I can put it into words. I've been a Christian my whole life, but I didn't really know Jesus. I'd been going through the motions. Then your grandparents came into my life and since then, everything has changed. Our whole family dynamic has changed. Logan, you and I have already talked about this, but like, since you and your family came into our lives, I feel closer to God than ever, and so do my parents and my brothers. We feel *real* love for each other and not just like, well, like casual acceptance."

"That's beautiful, Melody. So then, why do you seem so stressed?"

She sighed. "I got a gift for each of them, but I don't feel like it's enough."

Logan sighed, his brow wrinkled. "I'm trying hard to understand the problem. I don't think I'm getting it."

"I'm not explaining it very well. I want to do more. I want to make it special."

"Sooo, are you thinking you'd like to buy extra gifts for them?"

She shrugged. "Maybe, but really, that doesn't seem right either."

"You're correct, because money and things don't express love. You want to express *love* to them, right? So, why don't you do that?"

"How?"

"Well, my father says the best way to express love to someone is to bear your testimony to them."

"Bear my testimony?"

"Yes. Your testimony, your experiences with Jesus. The communications and guidance He's given you. How He's changed your life. How you want to honor Him in the future. How you want to live your life to honor Him by honoring your family."

She looked down and thought for several moments then looked up with a smile. "I can do that. I was thinking I needed to do more shopping, but it needs to be more special than just an extra gift. I just need to give them my heart."

Logan nodded. “Now you get it. That’s the best gift in the world. I know that would make me so happy.”

“What? Have someone give you their heart?”

“Having *you* give me your heart.”

“I already did. I told you, I love you, Logan.”

He nodded. “That’s true. You did tell me, and those words make me the happiest guy in the world.”

She smiled. “And don’t forget, Logan, YOU were the person I wanted when I got out of that trunk.”

He nodded. His eyes moistened. “Every time I think about that day, those few minutes between the time I got the call and the time I reached you, it was like each second was an hour. Each minute was a day. I needed to be with you. I needed to see with my own eyes. I needed to see that you were okay. And then I got there and you started seizing. It was a total nightmare.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Logan, but I’m still glad you were there. The moment you climbed into that ambulance, I felt immediately calmer. You have a strength about you, a power, and once you got there, I felt safe.”

“Melody, I really do love you, baby, and I think the more I get to know you, the more I love you.”

She smiled. This brilliantly talented, highly intelligent, physically powerful guy loved her. “So,” she began. “I don’t suppose I could steal you away from your family on Monday night? You could come to dinner at our house? It would make my parents so happy.”

Logan nodded. “I think that would be okay. I mean, our family always spends Christmas Eve at the grands and that’s on Tuesday. My dad, Uncle Joey, Aunt Bree and Grandma, they were a family before Grandma met Granddad. And Granddad, Ricky, Justin and Jason Lee, they were like a family before Granddad met Grandma. Then Aunt Jeffy came along. And now, when we’re all together on Christmas Eve, this year, including all the kids, we counted thirty people. Plus two unborn babies.”

Melody counted in her head. “So, who am I missing?”

“Granddad and Grandma and their five children. Aunt Jeffy, Uncle Cam and Eli. Uncle Ricky and Aunt Bree, Taylor, young Eric, Jordan, Miss Jewell, Josie, Jamie, Amari and Brittney. Aunt Breez and Uncle Joey, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger, and then my family.”

She nodded. “I forgot about Jordan and her family would, of course, be there.”

Logan smiled. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“The Kinos are gonna have to build an addition to their house at this rate,” Melody said. “Anyway, so, you’ll come on Monday?”

“I would love to. What time?”

“Well, dinner is usually around six, but you could come earlier if you’d like.”

“Oh, I’d definitely like. I’m thinking we’d better make special memories this year with your family.”

“Why?”

He smiled slyly. “Who knows? It might be the last one with you home as the older

sister."

"Why?"

He smiled and raised his eyebrows. "Because, I feel like where you and I are heading, it's like, pretty serious."

She smiled. That sounded very much like another proposal, or at least another pre-proposal. Maybe he was kind of testing the waters.

Logan frowned. "Oh, wow, so like, did I misspeak?"

Melody shook her head. "Sorry, I guess I was thinking too long. My mind went to a lot of places, but, no, Logan, you didn't misspeak. It *does* feel serious between us. It feels very serious. It actually feels like..."

"Like what? Go on."

She sighed. "I was gonna say, it feels like it's a done deal."

He smiled, because in his head and heart, it was a done deal.

Melody went on. "Though really, we've only dated a few times."

"Well then, we need to make up for that," he said softly. He pulled her close, brushed some hair off her cheek and kissed her mouth. When he pulled back, he smiled. "Sit down here in the front pew. I have something for you."

Smiling, she sat down as he went to his guitar case and pulled out a small wrapped box with a tiny gold bow.

Her eyes opened wide.

He sat down next to her and handed her the small box. "This is for you. It's not the actual Christmas gift I got for you. But it's something I want you to have."

"Okay," she said as she carefully removed the bow and the paper and opened the small box. Her brow furrowed as she examined the gift.

He jumped in with an explanation. "It's an anklet. But it's not just any anklet."

She lifted it out of the box. "Logan, it's so pretty." She was looking at a gold chain. On the chain was a shiny open gold heart and inside the heart was a tiny gold cross and on the cross was a small green gemstone.

He nodded and pointed to the gemstone. "That's green tourmaline. I picked it out because it reminds me of your eyes. See how it has brown mixed in it, so it makes it look like your hazel-colored eyes?"

"I can see it, I think. Though I think my eyes are a little more plain than this pretty stone."

"This stone is a little more plain than your beautiful eyes."

She giggled. "Thank you, Logan."

He nodded. "Well, I want you to wear it. All the time. I actually really want you to wear it all the time. If you will. It's your choice."

She frowned.

"Okay, let me explain, because that doesn't sound right. Of course, you don't have to wear it if you don't want to, but so, like I said, this is not just any anklet. This was made by Ameritech. It has a GPS in it. When you're wearing this, Ameritech can locate you in an emergency."

When she frowned again, he went on quickly. "Mel, I've thought a lot about what happened to you last Monday. Every time I think about it, I almost have an anxiety

attack. Do you realize what would've happened if he'd been able to drive away with you? Well, let's not go there, but still, if you'd been wearing this anklet we would've been able to track you quickly and easily."

She nodded slowly. "I understand."

"Aunt Jeffy wears one. She was only seven when her anklet helped save her life. A bad guy crashed into the car that she was riding in with my grandmother and two Ameritech agents. The bad guy shot and killed one agent. The other agent and Grandma were badly injured. And he grabbed Aunt Jeffy and took her away. Uncle Ricky was able to call Uncle Jason and track her down."

Melody's eyes widened. "Wow. That is terrible, but thank goodness she was wearing the GPS."

"Right. Exactly. It had a happy ending because she was wearing that anklet. But there was another time that she wasn't wearing it, when she was fifteen. Mrs. Davis' deranged stepfather had a man take Aunt Jeffy out into the mountain wilderness near Seattle to murder her."

"What?"

"Yeah, it's a long story. She wasn't wearing it then because Aunt Jeffy had snuck up to Seattle to talk to Marissa, who is Mrs. Davis' sister. It's a really long story which I will tell you another time. Bottom line, this will make me feel a whole lot better knowing we can track you if you ever go missing. I promise we won't invade your privacy. We would only activate the tracking if you went missing or were in danger."

Melody nodded. "I understand and I think I like knowing that if I ever went missing you and Ameritech would be able to find me."

Logan took the jewelry from her, knelt down on the floor, picked up her foot and placed it on his thigh. "Pull your jeans up a little," he said.

She did as he asked and he carefully fastened the anklet around her ankle. Melody smiled and stuck her leg out straight to admire the jewelry. "It's really pretty. Is that real gold?"

He shook his head. "No. That is a very strong gold-tone stainless steel and the GPS is inside the cross."

Melody smiled. "That's kinda cool. You know, like, Jesus' gift, it finds us, it saves us, all we have to do is accept it."

Logan nodded with a smile. "That's a good thought, Mel. Like, Jesus is our GPS."

Melody giggled. "Sounds like a song being written."

He chuckled. "Maybe. But hey, we're in a time crunch right now, so let me check everything over and lock up and you ride with me to the Quinn house."

Melody nodded. "I'd like that, but that means you'll have to bring me back to my car afterward."

He sighed. "It's a hard job, but I think I can handle it."

They stood. "Logan, thank you. Thank you for this thoughtful gift. The way you worry about me, the way you take care of me, I mean, it makes me feel so loved."

"Um, that's because I do love you, Melody, and I'm growing to love you more every day. But I have to say, you're very easy to love."

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December 21st, Saturday Noon

Quinn Home, Los Angeles, California

Four vehicles pulled up in front of the little blue and white house with the yellow door. JoJo in his pickup truck, Logan and Melody in his red Range Rover, young Eric, Jordan and Taylor in his M4, and Jeffy, alone in her armored SUV.

Everyone grabbed something out of JoJo's truck. Young Eric tried to grab the smallish Christmas tree but JoJo insisted he could easily carry it. JoJo used his good hand to grab the tree, already in a stand. Taylor grabbed up a box filled with ornaments and other decorations. Logan had a huge box filled with wrapped Christmas gifts. Young Eric held another large box filled with household necessities. Melody carefully held a large crockpot filled with Miss Shelley's potato soup. Jordan had a plastic tote filled with other meal elements. Jeffy had her medical bag.

"Uh, JoJo," Jordan said. "So, like, you did call Raylynn and tell her you were coming, right?"

He smiled. "Yes. I know better than to drop in at someone's home without notice. I told her I needed to stop by because I had something I wanted to bring."

Jordan nodded with a smile. "Okay, good. I'm proud of you."

JoJo chuckled. "Let's go. Everyone stay behind me. I'll knock."

Inside the house, Raylynn smiled when she heard the knock on the door. She had to admit, she was a little bit excited to see the famous JoJo Adams again. If she were to analyze it, she'd guess she had a crush on the quarterback. Of course, he wouldn't be interested in a poor Indian girl from Oklahoma, but still, it was nice to be in his presence. He had a power about him. Her father would have called him a warrior. And after he saved Kaylee, she also thought of him that way. She wondered what he had to bring to her that was so important that he would make the trip from Newport. Smoothing her hair, she went to answer the door.

When Raylynn opened the door, all she could see was a Christmas tree.

"Surprise," he said softly and he moved the tree from in front of his face.

She smiled. "You brought me a Christmas tree?"

"Yes, and much more than that. I have some people with me."

He stepped aside. "You remember my brothers, Logan and young Eric and their girls, Melody and Jordan, and this pretty little thing is my cousin Taylor."

"Oh, yes, Taylor, from Gabe and Taylor! You are so beautiful."

"Heyyy," Taylor said brightly. "Thanks, and so are you and can we come in because this is heavy?"

"Oh! Yes, sorry, I was a little stunned. Come in, come in." She backed up and held the door open as everyone came inside.

JoJo immediately went to set the tree down and arrange it in a space in front of the front window. He had to move a small table out of the way and he hoped she didn't mind.

Everyone else came in and set their loads down.

"I'll just take this to the kitchen," Melody said quickly.

"And this stuff too," Jordan said.

Both girls headed to the kitchen.

Jeffy came in last. "Hello! I'm Jeffy Kino Wallace."

Raylynn's eyes opened wide. "Doctor Kino Wallace! Oh my goodness, I'm so happy to meet you."

Jeffy smiled. "You can call me Jeffy, and it's nice to meet you too. How did the meds work that I sent for your sister?"

"They helped a lot for a little while, but she's out of them and she's hurting pretty bad right now. She says her head is pounding and she feels like it's gonna explode, and that is making her nauseated."

"Where is she?"

"She went back to bed."

"Well, I'm here to check on her. Do you mind if I go examine her?"

"No, of course not. I'll show you her room."

"No need. Go ahead and talk to your friends. They have a lot of things to show you."

"Oh. Okay. Well, thank you, Doctor, uh, I mean, Jeffy."

"You're welcome."

Jeffy turned and headed straight to the correct door as if she'd been there a hundred times.

Raylynn turned to face her other guests. "Well, hello, everyone."

"Hello, Raylynn," JoJo said softly. "So, I was thinking that you just had to move on a moment's notice to a new home. You told me you were Christians and I thought you probably don't have much ready to celebrate Christmas. I hope us bringing some stuff over to help you celebrate is not insulting. We only have the best intentions."

"I'm not insulted at all. The giving of a gift is never insulting. I am truly honored by this thoughtfulness."

JoJo blinked at her solemn words. He smiled at her. She looked different than when he'd last seen her on moving day. She wore jeans, a soft green sweater with a U-shaped neckline. A pretty necklace made of a heart-shaped orange stone of some sort. It was attached to a leather cord and lay against the soft tan skin of her upper chest. He had to pull his eyes away from that. She wore white athletic shoes, and her long, dark tresses were down for a change. Her hair was parted slightly to the side and hung to her waist. She had one thin braid on one side, keeping the hair from falling in her eyes. And those eyes. Those bright, green eyes and those long, dark lashes. He took all of this in during the few seconds it took him to put a sentence together.

He cleared his throat. "Well, I, uh, we, brought lights and things to decorate the tree, in case you didn't have any decorations, and we brought lunch prepared by a soon-to-be-famous chef."

Jordan smiled. "Except for the potato soup. That was made by JoJo's grandmother, Shelley Kino."

"Oh, well, that is so kind of you all."

"And we brought gifts, for you and your sister, to open on Christmas morning," Taylor said.

"Oh, wow!" Raylynn said.

"And a few more household-type things that my mom put together," JoJo went on. "Things she thought you might need. But I mean, if you don't need them, that's okay, we can just take them back."

Ray frowned. “That would make you an Indian giver.”

The entire group got quiet. Raylynn giggled. “I’m just joking.”

The guys chuckled. The girls giggled.

“Oh, I can tell I’m gonna like this girl,” Jordan said.

JoJo smiled with pleasure. Logan and young Eric watched him and they, too, smiled.

“Well, let’s dig in so you can see what we brought,” Taylor offered.

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Meanwhile, Jeffy crept quietly into the bedroom on the left. She could immediately feel Kaylee’s pain. She sighed as she moved forward. Placing her hand gently on Kaylee’s forehead, she smiled at her as her eyes blinked open. “Hello, Kaylee,” Jeffy said softly. “I’m Doctor Kino Wallace.”

Kaylee moaned softly and tried to sit up.

“No, it’s okay. Just lie still. I want to check you over. Would that be okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m not feelin’ too hot right now.”

“Yes, I heard, and I can feel what you feel. Tell me if I get this right. Your head is pounding. The pain is mostly in the top of your head. Your broken cheek feels hot, like you have a fever. Your throat is sore. You are slightly nauseated and you’re afraid to eat because you don’t want to throw up. You hate to throw up. It’s the worst thing in the world. You’re sad because you can’t believe your boyfriend would do this to you, and you’re wishing you had kept your mouth shut so that you wouldn’t have made him so angry. How’s that?”

“Wow. I mean, that’s like, exactly how I feel right now.”

Jeffy smiled.

“How do you do that?” Kaylee asked.

“I’ve been given gifts. God gave them to me so that I can help people. Help heal them. I want to help you, Kaylee. I’m gonna check you over and get a blood pressure reading, because I think it’s high and we’re gonna fix you up.”

Jeffy carefully checked Kaylee’s pupils, eye movement, speech, balance, and neurological responses, then reviewed the hospital discharge papers and scan results Raylynn had placed beside the bed. She found no sign of intracranial bleeding or another neurological emergency, but of course, she would continue to monitor her closely. She took Kaylee’s blood pressure the old-fashioned way and frowned at the reading. “Your blood pressure is higher than I thought. Do you have a history of high blood pressure?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Okay, then that probably means ‘no.’ Your pain, fear, and inflammation are probably elevating it. I’m just gonna check some things.” Jeffy ran her hands over Kaylee’s face. Over her neck and arms. Over her heart, pausing to close her eyes so she could see and pray. As she did this, Kaylee fell asleep. When Jeffy finished, she brushed some of Kaylee’s hair that had come loose from her messy bun back from her face and smiled down at the girl. Emotionally, the girl was a wreck.

Jeffy pulled some bottles of capsules out of her bag, shook a few into her hand and woke Kaylee.

“Here, sweet girl. This one will ease the headache and the ache in your cheek, and bring down the inflammation and your fever. And this one will help lower your blood

pressure." She handed her four capsules and the bottle of water that was on the bedside table.

Kaylee obediently sat up and swallowed the pills. She smiled at Jeffy. "Dr. Kino, I think I already feel better."

Jeffy nodded. "That's good to hear. I prayed over you and asked for ease and comfort."

"Interesting. If you can do that, why didn't you just ask God to heal me completely?"

Jeffy smiled. "I asked for what I felt He wanted to give."

"So, you're saying God didn't want to heal me completely?"

Jeffy shrugged. "God didn't cause you to be beaten, but He can use trials we go through to make us strong. Sometimes we have to walk over the coals to get tough. We are not promised that everything will be easy. The good thing is, God is totally mindful of you. He loves you."

"Then why did He let this happen to me?"

"He allows us all to have free will. But He sent JoJo to help you. Don't forget that."

Kaylee nodded. "That's true. And thank goodness JoJo was there."

"Thank God," Jeffy corrected. She took Kaylee's pulse and nodded. "Your heart rate has slowed. How are you feeling?"

"Actually, I'm feeling much better."

Jeffy smiled. "Good. So, if you feel like it, why don't you come on out. The gang is here. They brought a bunch of stuff for you and Raylynn."

"The gang?"

"JoJo, his brother Logan and Logan's girlfriend Melody, their cousin young Eric and his fiancée Jordan, and Eric's sister Taylor."

Kaylee nodded. "And they are all your nephews and nieces, right?"

"Yes."

"But you seem so young."

Jeffy smiled. "Well, I'm only about eight years older than JoJo."

Kaylee pushed the covers off and stood up out of the bed.

"Dizzy?" Jeffy asked.

"No, ma'am."

"Wanna use the bathroom?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be right out."

Jeffy nodded and watched her leave the room to go use the only bathroom in the house which was in the hall between the two bedrooms. She looked around the sparse room. On a shabby dresser was a picture of a girl and guy. She picked it up to examine it. It was Kaylee and Scott, the man who'd assaulted her. Jeffy touched the photo. Though you couldn't tell right now, Kaylee was a beautiful girl. And Scott, he was dark and dangerous. The fact that after he'd almost killed her, the picture was placed on her dresser after the move, was telling. Sighing, Jeffy went out to the living room.

"Hey, Aunt Jeffy," JoJo greeted. "So, how is she?"

Jeffy's lips pressed tightly together. "Well, her blood pressure was high, but I fixed it. That was what was causing her headache. And she had a slight fever, but I fixed that

too. The meds I gave her will help with the inflammation that is affecting most of her body right now. The riskier problem is what's going on in her head. I mean, emotionally. And because of doctor-patient confidentiality, I'll stop there. But Raylynn, you and I and Kaylee need to talk and I'd like you to come by my home and have Kaylee talk to my father."

"Your father? That's um, Grandmaster Kino, right?"

"Yes. He has a doctorate in psychology and I think Kaylee needs some counseling."

Raylynn nodded but didn't say anything else because Kaylee came out of the bathroom and down the hall to the living room.

"Hi, everyone," Kaylee said.

"Hey, Kaylee!" Jordan answered quickly and went to her. She hugged her and led her to the couch to sit. "So glad you joined us."

"Yeah, Kay," Raylynn said. "Look at all of this! They brought us a bunch of stuff for Christmas. We were just getting ready to see what's in all of these boxes."

"Wow, guys, this is wonderful," Kaylee said, halfheartedly. Then she glanced at Taylor, whom she hadn't been introduced to, but she didn't have to be. She smiled. "You're Taylor Kino, aren't you?"

Taylor nodded.

"I follow you and Gabe Tanner on all the social media sites. Oh my, it's so cool to see you in person."

Taylor smiled sweetly. "It's so nice to meet you in person. Come sit down next to me and let's see what's in all of these boxes."

Taylor began lifting things out of the box and passing them to Kaylee. There were lights for the tree, and all kinds of lovely ornaments. Some were handmade from wood. Several were woodland creatures, like owls, birds, a chipmunk, a squirrel, and a reindeer, all with cute little red bows, or scarves and hats or holly. There were also some beautiful hand-painted glass ornaments, and a lovely star for the top of the tree.

Inside another box were ten gift-wrapped presents, five for Raylynn and five for Kaylee. They decided to not waste any time and everyone began decorating the tree. Logan turned on some music and Jordan took the lid off a large Tupperware container of her mom's Christmas cookies.

Jeffy smiled as she watched the power of Godly young people work miracles on the two sisters. The energy around both Raylynn and Kaylee had changed from quiet or even sad and gloomy to bright and happy.

Once they finished decorating the tree, turned on the lights, and admired their work, Jeffy spoke.

"Well, everyone. I need to get back to my baby."

"Aww, come on, Aunt Jeffy, Cam is okay," young Eric joked.

Jeffy giggled. "I'm gonna tell him you said that."

"Please don't," he said quickly.

Jeffy smiled at Raylynn. "Raylynn, Kaylee, would you mind if I speak to you privately for a moment?"

She took them aside into Kaylee's bedroom and spoke quickly. "Ladies, this has been a hard week and I think your emotions are running hot and cold, especially yours,

Kaylee. You have suffered trauma, and it needs to be addressed. And I know, Kaylee, that you are feeling mixed emotions about why Scott would hurt you like this, and doesn't he love you anymore, and you think if he came back to you and apologized, then you might consider getting back together with him."

Raylynn gasped.

Kaylee's eyes filled. "How did you know that?"

"She's psychic," Raylynn provided. "She's the one I was telling you about. The doctor who won a Nobel Prize and is curing every disease."

"God has given me gifts," Jeffy said again. "I can feel and read and even hear your thoughts and feelings. Sometimes, I can predict the future. And Kaylee, yours has a dark cloud around it. This is foreboding. So, I'd like you to come visit me at my home and have a counseling session with my father. He can help you sort out your feelings where you don't feel so sad anymore. Will you do me a huge favor and come see me and speak to my father? He will help you not feel so bad."

Kaylee sighed and nodded. "I guess it would be nice if he can help me to not feel so bad. Yes, ma'am. I'll come, just tell me when, and if Ray's not working, she can bring me."

Jeffy smiled and nodded. "Well, transportation is not a problem. We'll send a car for you, but either way, we'll get you there. I'll text you with a time and date." She immediately moved forward and hugged her. "Until then— Father, I pray you will heal and protect this child of yours, in Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," Raylynn uttered softly.

Jeffy smiled. "Bye, Ray and Kay," she said brightly. "See you soon."

She walked back out to the living room and said her goodbyes to her niece and nephews and their girlfriends, and took her leave.

Taylor smiled at the sisters as they came back into the room. "Well, the tree is a nice start, but we have more." She began pulling more things from the boxes. Table decorations. Garland. Pillar candles surrounded by holly and pine needles. From another box she pulled out new towels, a set of dishes. A tablecloth. Some glassware. A blender. It looked like they'd robbed someone's wedding shower.

"Oh, wow," Raylynn uttered. "This is just too much."

"Well, you've made it clear that I can't take it back," JoJo joked.

Raylynn smiled at him. He was so kind. He had a soft voice, which seemed surprising for a quarterback. His voice was masculine, but gentle.

Logan spoke next. "Mom wanted to send these things. She said everyone needs more towels, and everyone should have one nice tablecloth, and she said you need the blender because you need to start making smoothies to help Kaylee to heal."

"How did she know we didn't have a blender?"

Melody smiled. "Well, she asked Jordan and me, since we helped you pack, if you had one, and Jordan said she didn't see one, so she bought that one."

"She is very kind, but, well, I don't even know what I need to make the smoothies," Raylynn said.

JoJo jumped in. "If you don't mind, I was planning to take you on a shopping trip to get what you need for the smoothies and for some other things too."

Raylynn looked up at him, her eyes blinking slowly. “Why? I mean, why are you all being so kind?”

He frowned. “Oh, well, I hope all of this isn’t making you uncomfortable, but Raylynn, part of the reason is because God placed Kaylee in my path last Monday. When He does that, I, we, my family and I, we follow it through to the end. God wanted to bless you and help you and Kaylee and He’s simply using me to do that. So, please don’t feel uncomfortable.”

She sighed. “You said that was part of the reason. What’s the other part?”

He gave a quick smile. “The other part will be disclosed at another time.”

Logan and young Eric smiled. Jordan and Melody also glanced at each other and smiled.

“So,” Jordan began. “Who’s hungry? Mom sent a bunch of really good stuff to go with Miss Shelley’s potato soup. Let’s go set the table. There are so many of us, we can set the table up as a buffet, serve ourselves and eat on our laps. Would that be okay, Raylynn?”

Ray nodded. “Of course. I’m sorry the house is not very big.”

“It’s bigger than my home,” Jordan said to ease her discomfort.

“Really?”

“Yep. I mean, we have three bedrooms, but the rooms are teeny tiny. And your little dining room area here is bigger than our living room.”

Young Eric smiled. Jordan was perfect. And it helped that she’d come from humble beginnings.

Jordan, Melody, Taylor and Raylynn rose. “You guys stay here and entertain Kaylee,” Melody said. “We’ll go put the food out and call you when it’s ready.”

Jordan grabbed the new tablecloth and some candles and went to set the table with the others.

In the meantime, Logan retrieved his guitar from his car and began to serenade the group with some Christmas songs. JoJo and young Eric joined in and Kaylee was mesmerized. She looked from one guy to another. They were all very handsome. Very big and athletic-looking. And even though they were big and strong, they were singing Christmas songs, and they were doing it well. She could not picture Scott being a part of the group. He’d probably tell them all to shut up. Or belch. Or turn on the TV.

Kaylee thought about when she’d first met Scott. She thought he was cute, though he was almost ten years older than her. He flirted with her as he went about installing new blinds. He said she was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen in his entire life. She liked that. Her looks were all she had and he’d appreciated it. She’d always been outgoing. Raylynn said she just liked the attention. Maybe that was true. She had lots of attention from the guys at school, both back in Oklahoma and here at USC. She loved the way she turned heads.

However, she was turning heads now for a different reason. She sighed as her thoughts took her to the day Scott tried to kill her. He probably wasn’t trying to kill her. He was just angry. She shouldn’t have smarted off. He was hung over from the night before and she couldn’t get him to wake up.

Raylynn had already left for work. My sister, she thought. Raylynn had been very

upset with Kaylee about Scott sleeping with her. She fussed at her about it when he wasn't around. She quoted scripture at her. She tried to shame her. Then Kaylee would cry and promise to end it with Scott, but she could never find a way to do it. He'd get so angry. He'd start drinking. He'd say she didn't appreciate him. Last Sunday night, that's exactly how it went. He'd finally coaxed her into bed again. He was rough but she'd endured it.

The next morning, she had to be at school for an important exam. He'd finally gotten up and driven her to school, but she'd been irritated and complained at him for getting drunk and making her late to class. She suggested again that maybe they should end their relationship. He'd just gone berserk. The first hit to her forehead stunned her. She couldn't believe he was hitting her. He hit her so many times. The next thing she knew, JoJo was helping her out of the car. She was in so much pain.

Now that it was over and he was in jail, she began to believe that the whole thing was her fault. She felt bad that he was in jail because of her. But she also felt bad because of how Raylynn had begged her not to give herself to him. She hadn't listened. She was so confused. What was she supposed to do? How was she supposed to live? Alone?

"Kaylee?" Raylynn said again.

Kaylee blinked and looked up at her sister. "Oh, sorry, I was in deep thought. What did you say?"

"I asked if you'd like me to get your plate for you."

"Oh, no, that's okay."

"Um, if it's okay with you, Raylynn," JoJo said. "I'll go ahead and say a quick blessing on the food."

"Oh! Yes, I almost forgot that. Yes, please go ahead."

JoJo bowed his head and quickly blessed the food and also asked for healing for Kaylee.

The group went into the dining room. The table was beautifully set. A red tablecloth, white pillar candles and a bright Christmas centerpiece made it elegant. A stack of the new plates and bowls. A steaming crockpot full of potato soup. Christmas platters filled with oven-baked drumsticks and homemade garlic bread, a bowl of walnut, cranberry, broccoli salad, and carrot cake to die for.

"Wow, this looks amazing," young Eric said. "Jordan, can I serve you?"

"No, silly, help yourself. I'll get my own plate."

He touched her shoulder. "Just so you know, I'd be happy to take care of you."

"I do know, Three. I really do. Thank you."

Kaylee's brow furrowed. Is that the way a couple is supposed to be?

The late lunch was delicious and afterward they cleaned everything up and sat around to talk for a few more minutes. JoJo pulled out two gift-wrapped boxes and an envelope. "Okay, so, one more surprise."

"More?" Raylynn asked. "Really, this is getting to be too much."

"Last one, I promise. This is special and I'd like you to open it now, in case you need to make special arrangements." He handed a box to both her and Kaylee.

They opened the gifts and each pulled out a USC Trojan football jersey with JoJo on the back.

"Oh, wow," Raylynn said, obviously delighted. "This is awesome! I love this. Oh, JoJo, thank you so much!"

He smiled. "You're welcome. And this goes with it. It's the important part."

He handed her the envelope. "You said you weren't ever able to go to any of the games but you watched on TV. Well, how would you like to go to the *Rose Bowl* on New Year's Day and see a game in person?"

She gasped as she took the envelope and pulled out two *Rose Bowl* tickets. "Are you kidding me?"

He smiled. "I mean, I won't be playing, but I will be down on the field offering encouragement. My family will be there and those seats are with them. Would you like to come?"

"I would LOVE to come. Look, Kay, we're gonna go to the *Rose Bowl*!"

Kaylee smiled. "That's wonderful, Ray."

It was a lackluster remark, and Raylynn sighed as she turned back to JoJo. "Yes, absolutely, JoJo, I would love to go to the *Rose Bowl*. Thank you so much. This is a wonderful gift!"

"You're very welcome."

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Isaiah 58:10

"...and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday."

Chapter Twenty-Five

December 22nd, Sunday Morning
Pine Forest Community Church of Christ, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe sat quietly in the aisle seat of the third row of the center section of the chapel. He held Iris in his arms and she was sound asleep against his chest. His father was beside him and his mother on the other side of his father. Gabe had already listened to four teens tell about their favorite thing about Christmas. He was proud of them for getting up in front of people to bear their testimony. He knew how hard it could be. Currently, four of his older sisters were all singing a medley together as Violet played the piano. The medley included "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and "Joy to the World."

He knew he was next up and as the song was winding down, he carefully passed Iris off to his father, because his mom was already holding GenGen, and Nolan was holding Isaiah.

When the song ended, Pastor Tim rose and went to the lectern. "Thank you, Tanner girls, for blessing us with your beautiful talents. And now, we have another member of the Tanner family whom I've asked to come up and share with us some of his favorite Christmas things. Gabe, come on up."

Gabe rose, went to the podium and laid his tattered Bible down. He leaned over the lectern, his hands holding either side. He smiled. "Hey, everyone." He stood a moment looking out at everyone. His eyes closed for a few seconds. He nodded and smiled again. "It's always so much fun to stand here and look out over all the people who come to this church. It's like looking at the story of my life. I mean, I see Mrs. Rainey, my kindergarten teacher. She was fresh out of college and I thought she was so pretty." He stopped as everyone chuckled.

He grinned. "She's still pretty." They all laughed again. "And I see Allen Small, one of my first best friends. He fell off the swing on the school playground and broke his arm, and I carried him on my back to the teacher. I see Mr. Turner, my dad talks about his integrity all the time and recommends him to anyone having car trouble." Mr. Turner smiled at Gabe. "I see Maddie White who was my first crush."

The girl looked startled and Gabe grinned. "I never had the guts to tell her that." Everyone laughed. "But hey, I was only six." He smiled. "I see Mr. Rob, and Cole, and Buddy and Les, who are all paramedics who have shown up and worked on me to doctor me up and get me to the hospital on numerous occasions. I see old classmates, old teammates, teachers, police, people who work at the grocery store or at the library or at the DQ, and even old enemies."

He drew a deep breath. "So, the thing I'm trying to say is, almost all of the people here have been part of my life, or my family's lives for the past eighteen years. I feel so

much love for you all when I look out over the congregation. I know that sounds kinda mushy, but I've always been a kinda mushy guy."

"Amen," someone called out making everyone laugh.

"So, what I love about Christmas is, it's a time when it's okay for me to be a little mushy. It's okay to hug Mrs. Winley when she hands me a plate of cookies for my mom. It's okay for me to hug the Buckleys' kids when I finish helping put lights on their porch. It's okay for me to hug Mr. Pat when I help him carry his groceries in the house. So, I love all of that at Christmas. I love eating, so I love all the foods. I love giving gifts to my sisters and parents. I love helping little Iris make gifts for my sisters and parents and anyone else. I love everyone trying harder to be together. Those times together are so precious. I'm realizing that more and more because I'm getting ready to leave for school and I'm already feeling the separation.

"But on top of all that, the main thing I love about Christmas—is Jesus. I love telling God how grateful I am that He gave His only begotten Son to us. The greatest gift of all. This year, that gift is so much clearer to me. When I died back last August and I saw Jesus hugging Grandmaster Kino under a giant tree, all I could think about was that I wanted one of those hugs. I wanted it desperately. I started to holler at Him, to ask Him to come and see me over in the field of green grass where I was standing, but I realized I probably shouldn't holler at Him."

The congregation chuckled.

"So, I knelt down and began praying but I didn't think He heard me. But Miss Maddie said, 'Of course He hears you, dear.' And finally, when I looked up, He was standing right beside me."

Gabe stopped as his emotions welled up. He sniffed and cleared his throat. "It was so beautiful," he choked out. He stopped and got himself under control. "Sorry. I know some of you don't know exactly what went down in that meeting and it's too long to tell here today, but I did tell it in a Zoom call that is pinned on my website if you're interested. The thing is, Jesus, He is amazing. He is so powerful, so strong, so loving, and mainly, He's not far away. He's right here," Gabe said, pointing at the spot next to him. "Not just for me, for all of us. Right here. He's waiting for us to acknowledge Him, to speak to Him, to interact with Him. He's real. So, at Christmas time, when we are supposed to be celebrating His birth, we need to think about Him the most.

"He taught us to love one another, so He would *want* us to hug each other and be mushy. He taught us to be in service, so He would want us to do as much as we can for others, without complaining. That is the real gift we can give. We don't have to have a lot of money to give of ourselves and our time to help someone else. Someone might say, 'yeah, but who's gonna help *me*?' Maybe we should stop wondering what someone is gonna do for us and figure out what we can do for others. You might think you don't have enough to do anything for others, but always remember the scripture about the widow. Let me read it for y'all." He opened his Bible. "Hmm, I think that's in Mark, right?"

He turned to look at Pastor Tim, who nodded at him. "Mark, chapter twelve," he said quietly to Gabe.

Gabe flipped the pages and began to read. "Jesus sat down opposite the place where

the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.'"

He looked up and smiled. "It's what we do with what we have. We may not have much. But we might have a little time, or a strong back, or simply a kind word to share. There are things we can do. Things that would show Jesus that we understand that He wants us to love one another and be in service to others. But let's say you do have much. Well, there's another scripture that says essentially, that of those who have been given much, much will be required. So to me, that means either way, do whatever you can. Do it without complaining. Do it gladly. If we do it begrudgingly, it doesn't count. That's what my father always says."

Lizzy looked at her husband and patted his arm.

"Well, everyone, I just wanna say that I love you all. I really do. But what's more important is that Jesus loves you all. His love is so powerful. And He is not some genie in the sky, like someone recently said to one of my sisters. He is real. I know it's hard to understand. But He *is* real. Pray always. Quiet your mind and listen. He is trying to answer you, but we have to pay attention. Once, I prayed and begged God to tell me about when He comes for us. If He really was gonna come for us. I said, something like, 'if You come for us and lift us up out of the tribulation, it would be the most amazing show of power since the parting of the *Red Sea*. Please forgive me, Jesus, but it really is very hard to believe.' I said those words to Him in my prayer one night.

"The very next morning I was scrolling on YouTube. I saw a video from some guy. It was only forty-seven seconds long. It was titled, '*Jesus Spoke to Me.' I* started to click on it, but instead, I kept scrolling. But I suddenly felt strongly that I needed to go back and listen to that video. It was only forty-seven seconds. What could it hurt? I went back to it and clicked on it.

"The man making the video was in his car. He said, 'I was driving and suddenly Jesus spoke to me. He told me to pull over right now and make this video. Here is what Jesus told me to say. "When I come for you to lift you up out of the tribulation, it will be the most amazing show of power since the parting of the *Red Sea.*" Okay, folks, that's it. That's what Jesus said to me and told me to put it up on a video and so, now I have. Have a blessed day.'" Gabe paused a moment.

"The video was short and to the point. I almost couldn't believe it. He used the exact same words I'd used in my prayer. Jesus had that man repeat back to me the exact same words so that I would know that message was for me. He answered my prayer. We never know how God will answer our prayers, but He does answer. If I hadn't gone back and played that video, I would've just thought that God didn't bother to answer my prayer. But I followed the urge to play that video.

"And so, people, Jesus is real. Keep praying. Keep reading the Bible. Tune in. Get to know His voice. It will make you so very happy. I want to wish every single one of you a truly merry Christmas, filled with the Spirit. As always, I say these things in Jesus'

name. Amen."

"Amen, hallelujah, amen, merry Christmas," several people in the congregation called out.

Gabe picked up his Bible and went back to his seat. His friend, Allen Small, rose as Gabe passed, grabbed his arm and pulled him in for a hug.

Gabe grinned. "Love you, man," he said quietly.

Allen nodded and patted Gabe's back.

Pastor Tim went to the podium. "Well now, that young man never disappoints, does he?"

Gabe took his seat and smiled at his father.

"Good job," Keegan whispered.

"Thanks, Dad," Gabe whispered back. "Thanks for everything."

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December 22nd, Sunday Morning

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Eric Kino Sr., Ronny Clark, JoJo Adams and Logan Adams stood together in the vestibule of the small church. They'd just had prayer and were expecting the choir members and those included in the Christmas program to show up any moment. Cam Wallace, Eric's son-in-law and current bodyguard, stood nearby. Shelley had taken five little ones to the restroom, and Jeffy was making sure Elijah was well nursed, because she would be seated at the piano today.

"Isn't it amazing how much the new stained glass brightens it up in here?" Ronny asked.

They all looked up toward the window.

"I love it," JoJo said.

Logan nodded.

"It does make a big difference," Eric agreed.

Ronny smiled. "I'm so grateful, Eric. Thank you so much. I know you're gonna say to thank God instead, and I do, but I'm also thankful that you are the noble man you are so that God could send you to me."

"I'm grateful to be sent here," Eric replied. "I'm grateful Melody invited Logan to your church and that Logan felt the Spirit so strongly to take immediate action and got me involved. We've all grown so much and learned so much."

The church door opened and young Mika Burton and a few of her friends came into the church.

"Hey, Mika," Logan said quickly. "You're right on time."

She nodded with a smile. "Yeah, and there's a bunch more coming up the steps."

Logan smiled. "Good. Let's go into the chapel and get warmed up."

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The church was packed full. The online viewership had climbed into the hundreds of thousands. After two rousing songs, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and "Go Tell It on the Mountain," Reverend Clark welcomed everyone and gave a prayer that truly called in the Holy Spirit.

"Amen," he said softly and listened as the congregation echoed it fervently. He

smiled. “Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a very special program prepared for you today, this Sunday before Christmas. This Sunday before we celebrate the birth of our Savior. What an amazing and beautiful event that was, prophesied for hundreds of years. The birth of Jesus was the second of the three most momentous happenings since the beginning of time. The first was the fact that God created this world, including us, people, in His own image. We are His creation. His children. Male and female. Perfectly fitting together in His plan for us. Perfect. Masculine and feminine, perfect.”

He stopped and smiled to let that sink in. “The second happening was indeed the birth of God’s only Son into this physical world. So beautiful. Prophecies fulfilled. God’s only Son submitting Himself to become a tiny, vulnerable human, to experience hunger and pain is an incredible act of love. The third, so far, is, of course, the resurrection of Jesus after He was crucified. He is alive! And we’ll talk more about that in the coming spring. Today, we will focus on His birth.

“As you all know, I’m an old man. I’ve been pastoring this church for seventy years. Seventy.” He stopped and chuckled as he heard some mumbled comments. “Right?” he agreed. The congregation laughed softly.

“But I am so blessed and so thankful that the Lord has seen fit for now, to send me two amazing young men to help me, brothers, JoJo and Logan Adams.”

He glanced over at the two boys, who both sat behind him. They both smiled at him and tapped their hearts.

Ronny smiled warmly. “These two guys seem wise beyond their years and they have put together a beautiful Christmas program. So, I will turn the time over to them. JoJo, it’s all yours.”

JoJo nodded, rose and came to the lectern. He smiled at the congregation and then at each of the three cameras because this Sunday program was being livestreamed. He stopped short when he saw two young ladies on the far right of the second row. He’d thought they hadn’t come, but there they were, Ray and Kay. He was happy to see them. He smiled again as he focused his mind. “In case any of us have forgotten, Christmas is a birthday party. It is the giant celebration of the birth of Jesus. Reverend Clark, my brother Logan Adams, and I would like to take you back, way back over two thousand years ago, through story, acting and song. What we’re about to present is an adaptation. Why is the birth of this child so special? How did the people feel, way back then, about this birth? Of course, we all know it was special because this wasn’t just any child. This child being born was the actual Son of God. The Son of the One who created us all, and this entire world.”

He paused to let those words sink in. “We here are all God’s children, but we entered the world in the usual way with an earthly father and mother. But in the case of Jesus, He had an earthly mother, Mary, and God the Father, as his Father. He was God becoming human. Allowing Himself to become a human. Allowing Himself to experience being born, being hungry, feeling human pain, feeling human happiness and sadness. I bet he fell and scraped his knee sometimes. Maybe he got stung by a bee.” JoJo shrugged. “Or maybe not, because God sent angels to watch after him. But for just a second, let’s focus on how Mary must have felt. ‘In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose

name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said...'" JoJo stepped back as the light shining on his face went off, and another light off to the side came on.

It shone on Taylor's beautiful face. She wore the traditional head covering usually depicted of Mary. She was looking up at Daniel Davis, who was dressed all in white, depicting the Angel Gabriel. Daniel spoke.

"'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'"

Daniel finished speaking and smiled because he hadn't messed up.

Taylor frowned. "'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'"

Daniel drew a breath. "'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'"

Taylor nodded. "'I am the servant of the Lord; let it be as you say.'"

The light went out and came back up on the other side of the chapel where both the adult choir and the children's choir were now standing. Jeffy Kino was at the piano as Logan directed the choir to sing *"Mary Did You Know?"*

Logan smiled as their voices rang sweet and true and the Holy Spirit filled the entire chapel with the truly inspired and anointed song.

The choir finished and the lights came back up on JoJo. He spoke of the prophecies of the coming Messiah. He spoke of Mary and Joseph heading to Bethlehem and the children's choir sang "*O Little Town of Bethlehem."*

JoJo eloquently continued to tell the story of the birth of Jesus, at times stopping as others acted out the parts. In between, the choirs sang several more songs. One of the highlights near the end was when little two-and-a-half-year-old Nathaniel Kino came to the lectern. JoJo set the footstool up for him, carefully helped him up on it, and stood with him as he read.

"Fear not, fo, behold I bwing you good tidings of gweat joy which shall be to all people. Fo unto you is born dis day, in da city of David, a Savior, which is Cwist da Word. And dis shall be a sign unto you. You shall find da baby wapped in swaddowing cwothes wying in a manger." When he finished, beautiful little Nate looked up with a brilliant smile and the congregation melted.

Then Mika stepped out from the choir, took the microphone out of the stand and nodded at Logan. He nodded at Jeffy and the beautiful strains of "*Silent Night*" rang out.

The congregation was astounded by Mika's beautiful voice. She did as Logan had requested, giving her all to the spirit and meaning of the song, making them feel it more than they ever had.

"Silent night, holy night,
all is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin

mother and child.
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,
shepherds quake at the sight;
glories stream from heaven afar,
heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born!

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light;
radiant beams from thy holy face
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Silent night, holy night,
wondrous star, lend thy light;
with the angels let us sing,
Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born!"

When she finished, Logan turned to the congregation. "Everyone, please sing that first verse with us."

The entire congregation sang the song and it sounded so beautiful, so amazing, so very holy.

JoJo spoke again. "'And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."'"

"Come now," Logan said. "Everyone sing..."

The guitar, piano, and drums started and the words to the hymn "*Joy to the World*" flashed across the monitors and again, the congregation sang beautifully.

Once that was done, Logan and young Eric went to stand by the piano, Sal was already there because he'd just played guitar for "*Joy to the World*." JoJo spoke again. "Before I turn the time back over to Reverend Clark, we have one more song for you. Young Eric Kino and I are going to try to accompany my brother Logan as he sings some of the most beautiful words ever written about the birth of Jesus. We ARE a weary world. We need to be reminded of the joy that Jesus brings to the world. And yes, in His name all oppression shall cease. And later today and again on Christmas morning, which is just a few days away, remember the words to this song, remember Jesus. He is in my

heart every minute of every day, and He fills me with so much love and joy."

He walked over to stand next to Logan, and Melody left the choir to stand in front of the children's choir so she could help them.

The guitar began first, then Jeffy joined in on the piano. Young Eric actually began the song with a solo on the first verse. The congregation murmured because no one knew that the young man who was known as a martial artist and now as a brilliant actor could also sing.

[**This is my favorite version of "O Holy Night" because the young men in this video honor God as they sing and remind me of JoJo, young Eric, and Logan.]

"O holy night! the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth."

JoJo then sang the next two lines.

"A thrill of hope—the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!"

When Logan came in everyone became still and silent.

"Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!"

Logan went on to sing the next verse with his brothers singing harmony and the choir adding to the sound with their oohs and ahhs.

"Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here came the Wise Men from Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our Friend.
He knows our need—to our weakness is no stranger.
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!"

The three and the choirs sang the last verse with so much power, that when they finished there was at first complete silence. Then the entire congregation jumped to their feet, applauding, cheering, shouting 'amens' and 'hallelujahs.'

The three brothers smiled because they were sure that they had accomplished what they'd intended, which was to fill the hearts of the people with the awe and elation that can only come from the entrance of Jesus into our world.

Once everyone took their seats, Ronny made his way to the lectern.

"Well now, that was something, wasn't it?"

Everyone cheered and applauded again.

Ronny bowed his head. "Thank you, Lord, thank you for sending us these fine young men and women. Thank you for looking after us. Thank you, Lord, in Jesus' name, amen?"

"Amen," the congregation repeated.

"Well, there's not much I can add to that. But JoJo and Logan asked me to speak for

a moment about how we can get caught up in the commercialism of Christmas. I only have one word to say about that. Don't. Children, Christmas is not about how many presents *you receive*, it's about what *you give* to others, that is what will please the Lord and what is more fulfilling.

"Parents, stop worrying if you weren't able to get your children as many gifts as the people down the street got for their children. That's not what Christmas is all about. We give gifts as a tradition to memorialize the gifts that the three wise men brought for the baby Jesus. Those gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—what do you think that baby, the baby Jesus, what do you think he did with those gifts? Obviously they weren't for Him to play with. They were a show of respect and love and gratitude and honor. The Son of the living God had come to earth to help us to find our way back to our heavenly home. He came to teach love and service. And that's the best way to celebrate Christmas. Be in service and show love to your fellow man. To your family. To your friends. Even to your enemies.

"My brothers and sisters in Christ, there was a time that I forgot about the love. After I lost my son—a soldier killed in Vietnam—I became angry. I got caught up telling everyone, 'You're all going to hell if you keep sinning—lying, cheating, stealing, committing sexual immorality, blaspheming the name of God, and being disrespectful to your parents.' Yes, those things separate us from God, and we should try very hard to obey His laws, but I forgot about love. I became bitter and because of that, I lost someone else that I loved dearly. I drove her away. So, don't *you* forget, brothers and sisters. Don't forget to love. That doesn't mean that we should approve of sin. Hate the sin, but love the sinner.

"Be kind, teach love, teach honor, read your Bibles. Really read them. There's something supernatural about reading the Bible. It isn't just reading words. The Bible is encoded and the words touch your spirit in a way that only your spirit understands, even when you don't understand what you just read. It changes you in miraculous ways. So, read it. Don't have a Bible? Well, as you leave today, we will be handing out Bibles to anyone who needs one."

He stopped and smiled as there was a murmur about that throughout the congregation. He looked up at the camera. "That includes anyone online who is watching. Go to *HopewoodChapel.org* and click on the free Bible link and follow the directions. People, Christmas is about Jesus, so, don't deny Him, don't be ashamed of believing in Him. That's what Satan wants. He wants you to feel ashamed or silly for believing in Jesus. But I'll tell ya, Satan believes in Jesus. Don't let him trick you.

"There's a woman in this congregation who wears a pretty gold cross every day. She was invited to go to a Buddhist church by a friend and because that friend had come to church here with her, she decided she would go to the Buddhist church and see what it was like, simply to honor her friend. The friend then asked her to not wear her cross, because the Buddhist people may not like to see it. I remember overhearing their conversation. The woman reached up and touched the cross at her neck and shook her head. 'I will never be ashamed of my Christian beliefs and I will never deny Jesus, so I will wear my cross, take it or leave it.'

"She wore that cross to the Buddhist church and ended up having several members

of that church come visit us here and two of them gave their lives to Jesus. How beautiful. Thank you, Christina Palma, for your faithfulness."

Melody and Logan and Bristol all turned to smile at the strong lady in the third row, who sat humbly with her eyes cast down.

"Be a Christian all the way, everyone. These past two weeks, we've seen a fine example of that from the Kinos and Adams families and friends. They live their religion. They give their time and energy completely every day. I want to tell you to be like them, but they would say no, be like Jesus. And I agree, but I have to say, they are the epitome of what being like Jesus entails. They are a living, modern-day example of how we should be living. No matter what your situation, pick up your little crosses and carry them gladly, because Jesus died for our sins and gives us eternal life. What a gift."

He smiled. "We will ask Leonard Garcia, a new member of our congregation, to come up and give us a closing prayer. Logan and JoJo Adams and young Eric Kino will meet you outside the church if you have any questions, along with the rest of their families. Everyone, have a very merry Christmas. We're working on putting together Wednesday night activities for the youth starting after the New Year, so keep an eye on the website and on the sign out front. Brothers and sisters, God loves you, and so do I. Be safe, no fear, be joyful. Amen?"

"Amen," the people said.

Leonard Garcia gave a beautiful prayer and blessing on everyone and everyone started filing out.

Outside in front of the church was a madhouse. Logan and JoJo and the Kinos and Ronny walked around answering questions and explaining some of their plans for the area.

Mika Burton's friends were congratulating her on her beautiful voice. They all approached Logan and he took her hand. "You did a great job, Mika. I'm very proud of you. But now, I want you to be aware of something."

"What?" she asked flippantly.

"You now have a big responsibility. That church service was viewed already by hundreds of thousands of people. Your name is gonna be out there. People are now going to be watching you. What are you gonna do with that?"

She shrugged. "I guess I'm gonna be famous."

"Yes. You are, but for what reason? You just sang at a church service. You represented the Lord. Why did you sign up to sing in the church choir?"

"I love to sing."

He nodded. "Okay. And do you love the Lord? Because that's what you told me when we first talked about you doing the solo."

She nodded. "I do. I mean, I really think I do, but like, I'm just learning. But I feel it."

"Good. So now, you have to represent. You have to hold yourself in a holy way. You have to set a good example. You're famous right now, Mika, because Gabe Tanner allowed us to stream on his website, which means you now have to represent Gabe, and this church. So what do you think that means?"

She sighed and shrugged. "Um, like, no cussin' or drinkin' or smokin' and act like

a Christian girl, right?"

Logan nodded. "Yes, that's right and it's a big responsibility. Can you do it?"

"Yes, I can do it."

"That doesn't mean you have to be perfect," Logan added. "It means being honest about your faith, admitting when you make mistakes, and asking for help. Do you want to do it?"

She nodded. "Yes. I wanna be like, you know, like your cousin, Taylor. She's got it."

He smiled. "That is a perfect example."

"What if I need help? I mean I don't know a lot of stuff."

Logan nodded. "So, you're a brand new Christian?"

"Yeah, I'm new. I mean, I believe in Jesus. He's pretty cool. He seems like a good dude."

"He is cool, but He's not just a dude. He deserves our respect. He's the Lord. He can hear your prayers. He really does. He can help you when you call on Him. But it's not just a one-way deal. You have to do some things too. Just take small steps. Like, pray and try reading the Bible. Did you get one?"

She nodded and pulled it from her purse.

He smiled. "Good. So, listen, and this is important. You might find that some of your friends don't want you to be righteous, and may try to get you to do things you know you're not supposed to do. Or they might make fun of you. Be strong. And you can call me, or JoJo, or Reverend Clark anytime you might need to ask a question. And I'll see if Taylor will give you her number too."

"That would be good."

"Okay. So, we won't have choir practice this Wednesday, because that's Christmas Day, but I'll see you next Sunday."

She nodded. "Okay. See you then. Thanks, Mr. Adams."

"It's Logan, and you're welcome." He watched her run off with some friends.

"Feelin' uneasy?" JoJo asked as he joined him.

Logan nodded. "Yeah, I'm thinking I should have had Reverend Clark or Granddad talk to her about instant fame. I'm a little worried about the peer pressure with her being such a baby Christian."

JoJo nodded. "I'll see if I can speak to her and her friends. This fame could be a blessing or an accident waiting to happen."

Logan nodded.

JoJo spotted the two other people he wanted to speak to. "So, there's Raylynn and Kaylee."

"Go. I got this," Logan said as a group of women came toward him.

Meanwhile, Eric senior and Shelley were being introduced to some special guests that had been at the service. They shook hands and let them know that transportation had been arranged for them. Eric and Shelley were very much looking forward to the next part of their day.

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December 22nd, Sunday Afternoon

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Logan pulled up to his grandparents' estate. He and his passenger were the last ones to arrive for Sunday dinner. He parked in front and ran around to open the door for Reverend Clark.

Ronny beat him to it, and started out of the car. Logan held the door and took his arm. They walked up the large steps together and headed inside. The entire house was filled with people which included Eric and Shelley and their five little ones, Jeffy, Cam and little Eli, Ricky and Bree, with Taylor, Amari and Brittney, young Eric and Jordan, Jordan's mom, Jewell, with Josie and Jamie, Mark and Bella, JoJo and Emily, Joey and Breez, with Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger, Jeff and Mickey with Daniel, Jeremy and little Scarlett, Justin and Lori, Jason and Angel, Jensen and Kim with little Jay, David and Carol Keith, with Melody and Phillip and Lyle, Destiny and Alec and now Logan and Ronny. There were also six people no one had introduced to Ronny yet.

Ronny moved forward to greet everyone and finally all who were left were the six strangers. Four of them sat on one of the sofas in the living room. Two of them, a young girl and teen boy, stood behind the sofa.

Ronny smiled at the group. His eyes zeroed in on the older woman sitting on the sofa. He frowned. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place it. His eyes moved over the others on the sofa. A man and woman, maybe in their forties, and another young man, probably in his twenties. Behind the sofa stood a teenage boy and young girl. Ronny smiled kindly at the group. "Hello."

Eric senior moved forward. "Please allow me to make the introductions."

The room was absolutely silent as Ronny smiled and nodded. He stood still and waited. "Who wants to go first?" Eric asked, because he knew the eldest did not want to be first.

The man and woman who appeared to be in their forties rose, as did the younger man beside them. "I'll go first," the man said.

Eric nodded. "Ronny, I would like you to meet Jesse Barnes. Jesse, please meet Reverend Ronald Clark."

Jesse stepped forward and warmly shook hands with the elderly gentleman. "It's very nice to meet you. I loved your service today and the words you spoke."

"Oh, well, thank you for your kindness, but I can hardly take credit for the service, because these young men were completely in charge," Ronny said as he gestured toward Logan and JoJo.

"Well, it was your words that hit me the hardest," Jesse said. He then motioned to the woman next to him. "Reverend Clark, this is my wife, Rebecca."

She smiled and offered her hand which Ronny took.

"It's very nice to meet you, Rebecca."

"You too, and please call me Becky."

Ronny nodded. "I will if you'll call me Ronny."

She gave a soft laugh.

"And this is our son, Patrick," Jesse continued.

Ronny nodded and shook hands. "Patrick, nice to meet you."

"It's an honor to meet you," Patrick said quickly, "and please call me Pat."

Ronny smiled. “Again, only if you call me Ronny.”

Patrick smiled. “How about I call you— Uncle Ronny?”

Ronny frowned in confusion.

Eric smiled. “Ronny, Jesse is the son of your sister Margaret, which makes Patrick your great-nephew.”

Ronny’s mouth opened wide. “Is this a joke?”

“No, Ronny, I wouldn’t do that to you,” Eric said quickly. “As a gift to you, we decided we would do some research and see what we could dig up. As you know, we have extensive resources. We found your sister’s family. We also found your sister Donna’s family, but they were not able to come out yet due to other engagements. Still, they are anxious to be able to meet you soon.”

“This is amazing,” Ronny said.

Patrick reached out and took his hand. “So, Uncle Ronny, now that you know we’re related, let me give you a proper greeting.” He pulled him in for a hug.

Ronny felt his emotions well up. The last time he’d had a hug from a family member other than his own Connie had been over forty years ago. He pulled away only to be hugged again by Jesse and Becky.

Finally they stepped back. Ronny removed his handkerchief from his suit pocket and dabbed at his eyes. He studied Jesse closer now and nodded. “You do have the look of my little sister Meg. Oh my, this is just wonderful.”

Patrick nodded. “Yes, sir, it is. I’ve actually known about you my whole life. I’ve heard many stories about you and I’m very honored to meet a man whom God has personally called to do His work.”

Ronny again was surprised.

Jesse smiled. “We have a lot to talk about, Uncle Ronny, but for now, you still have people to meet.”

Ronny nodded and turned to the older woman on the couch and looked at her closer. She stood and he blinked several times. His eyes filled. He shook his head. “It can’t be.”

She nodded. “It’s me.”

“Linda? Is it really you?”

“Yes, Dad, it’s me.”

They fell into each other’s embrace. Linda cried. Ronny cried like a baby until he actually swayed on his feet. Eric immediately got him a chair and had him sit down right in front of the couch. Linda too, sat back down. The rest of the Kino family and friends were passing a box of tissues around, taking turns wiping their eyes and blowing noses.

Ronny sat facing his daughter and took her hand. “Oh, my little Linda, I have so much to say to you.”

She nodded. “And I have so much to say too, Dad, and we’ll get a chance to talk because we’re all gonna stay at the house, at *your* house, for Christmas.”

“You are?” The tears came again.

“Yes, we are.”

He shook his head. “But Linda, you should know, your mom, she...”

“I know, Dad. I’ve known for a long time. I couldn’t figure out how to reach out to you, because I didn’t know what to say. I kept putting it off. I’m so sorry.”

"No, Linda, I'm sorry. Oh my little girl, I'm so sorry."

She patted his hand. "It's all gonna be okay, Dad. Please, I promise. It's all gonna be okay."

Ronny wiped at his eyes, sniffed, and looked at the two young children. "Are these your children?"

Linda shook her head. "They are my *grand*children. My son passed away five years ago. This is Carson, he's fifteen and Sydney, she's eleven."

Ronny shook each of their hands. "Oh my, so, I have great-grandchildren. Amazing. I thought I was it. The end of the family line. Simply amazing. May I ask, what is their last name?"

Linda smiled. "It's Clark."

Ronny nodded. "Wonderful. I feel like I'm in a dream, like this isn't real."

"Oh, it's real," Eric said softly.

Ronny turned his head to peer at the man. "Grandmaster Kino, what you have done here, I can't even tell you how grateful I am."

Eric nodded. "I understand, but I was only doing what I felt God was asking me to do. It turned out better than I thought it would."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it could have been a big family argument. Instead, it seems everyone was in the right place in their hearts to forgive the past and move forward. It has been a beautiful thing to witness and I'm grateful for that."

Ronny nodded. "I too am grateful. There is so much to be grateful for, the blessings are just too great."

"Your cup is overflowing. Let's let it sit for a bit. Whaddya say, we have a great meal and we can all chat and get to know one another."

"Wonderful," Ronny said.

Shelley moved forward with her sweet smile in place. "Okay, listen up, everyone. We have fifty-six people here, though three of them are tiny babies who won't need a seat, but still, our dining table only seats thirty, the kitchen table will seat ten, and the rest—and by the rest I mean the young men and women—can eat with a plate on your lap or go outside on the deck. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," everyone said.

"Good," Shelley went on. "Eric?"

Eric nodded. "I think today I'll ask Jason to honor us with the blessing, since it was his company that was able to track down Ronny's family and make this happen. Jason?"

Jason nodded, bowed his head and closed his eyes.

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Ronny laughed as they sat around in the living room talking quietly. "So, that explains why you ladies were so adamant that you decorate my house for Christmas and even change the beds and fill the refrigerator."

Bree nodded. "You were being very stubborn about it."

"I thought it was a waste," he explained. "I'm grateful to you for persisting."

The group in the room chuckled. Jewell and Breez were still finishing up in the kitchen. Children, Jamie, Amari, and Sophia, were helping Bella and Lori occupy

Brittney, Kelstyn, Ledger, Emily, Angelina, Noah, Abraham, Manny and Nate back in the den. The older "children"—JoJo, Logan, Melody, Jordan, young Eric, Phillip, Lyle, Taylor, Daniel, Jeremy, Josie and newcomers, Carson and Sydney—were quietly standing around the outer areas of the room, sitting on the floor, or occupying some dining chairs that had been brought in. Everyone was listening intently to the story of what happened to Ronny's family.

Most of them knew the early part. Ronny, at the age of ten, had been visited by an angel on Shasta Mountain. His father, mother, and older brother had been unable to accept it, tearing the family apart. Then his father died in WWII and his mother and younger sisters had been invited to live with Ronny's older brother, renowned cardiologist, Dr. Marcel Clark. Ronny, however, had been ousted because he refused to recant his tale. He became homeless. He was taken in by Reverend Frank Abbot, who put him through school and treated him like his own son.

Ronny's brother ironically had a heart attack and died in his fifties. Meanwhile, Ronny graduated from college, married his sweetheart, Connie, and moved into the house across from Hopewood Chapel. They had two children, Ron Jr. and Linda. Ron died young in the Vietnam conflict. Linda left home at the age of eighteen largely because she rebelled against Ronny's harsh governing of the household.

Ronny's two sisters, Donna and Margaret, had been eight and ten years younger than him. Margaret was just a baby when Ronny had the experience on the mountain. Donna had been two. Ronny was just now finding out that as they grew older they hadn't quite understood why their father blamed Ronny for the loss of his job and why their older brother, Marcel, hated Ronny so much. Once they learned about the event on the mountain with an angel appearing to their brother, they never thought Ronny's mistreatment was justified. They didn't blame him for anything. They'd thought being visited by a real angel was wonderful, but they hadn't been allowed to speak of it when they and their mother moved into the large, very nice home with Marcel.

They remembered seeing Ronny a few times. He'd visited, but he never stayed long, mostly because Marcel made it clear that Ronny wasn't really welcome. There were no fights, just a very thick tension.

Jesse Barnes nodded. "Mom always said her heart actually broke over their treatment of you, Uncle Ronny. She had no idea how to find you but I know she intended to do just that. But then Mom and Aunt Donna went off to get ice cream." He shook his head. "They were just going to get some ice cream for us kids and they were at a red light and a truck hit them from behind and pushed them out into oncoming traffic, and that was that."

"How old were you?" Ricky asked.

"I was fifteen. I have a cousin, Aunt Donna's son, Andy, he was nineteen. It took us a long time to get over it. But we did, mostly because our mothers believed your story, Uncle Ronny. They had a strong faith. They taught us the gospel. We were saved. We are devout Christians."

Ronny sniffed. "I'm sorry about how my little sisters died and how hard that was on you, but that they told you my story and you joined the faith, that part is wonderful. I had no idea anyone in my own family believed my story. This touches me deeply."

Jesse smiled. “And now, I find I have another cousin.” He smiled at Linda. “I hope we can get to know each other.”

Linda nodded and dabbed at her eyes. “I hope so too. Maybe it’s because I’m so old now, but I finally realized that life is nothing without family.”

Eric senior frowned. He wouldn’t correct them at this time, since they were just discovering how important family is, and it is important. It is a directive from God. Leave your father and mother and cleave unto your wife. However, having *God* in your life is what makes life wonderful. So, the correct statement would be that life is nothing without God. He makes all things good. Family is a marvelous blessing that we should work very hard at to make it perfect and heavenly.

Ronny spoke again. “May I ask, Jesse, your age?”

“Yes of course. I’m fifty.”

“Oh, I thought you were probably in your early forties.”

Jesse smiled. “Thanks. But I’m feeling my age for sure.”

Linda sighed. “Well, I’m sixty-six.”

Ronny nodded. “My sisters were a lot younger than me.” He paused, then looked back at Jesse. “So, you mentioned your cousin, Donna’s son, this Andy, he’s now fifty-four?”

Jesse nodded. “Yes, and he’s married and has two children, Harrison, who is twenty-eight, and Camille who is twenty-four.”

Ronny nodded and looked to Patrick. “That means you have two second cousins who are very close to your age, right?”

Patrick nodded with a smile. “Yes, sir. And we are very close.”

“So,” Linda began, “I always get this confused, does that make my son also your second cousin?”

Patrick nodded again. “Yes, ma’am. And Carson and Sydney are our second cousins once removed, because they’re Franklin’s children—the next generation down.”

“Isn’t it strange that I’m so much older than my cousins, Jesse and Andy, but my grandchildren are so much younger than their cousins.”

Shelley spoke up. “That’s just life choices. Some have children fast, some wait.”

“Linda, what is your son’s, my grandson’s, name and how did he pass?” Ronny asked.

Linda looked down. “It’s an ugly story, but no more hiding. His name was Franklin. He and Carson’s and Sydney’s mother, who was very young, lived in a little town north of San Francisco called San Rafael. They died together, of a heroin overdose, when the children were very little. I didn’t know about their deaths and I didn’t even know about the children. Didn’t know they even existed. They were put in foster care for a few years before they found out that the children had a grandmother. Me. They came to live with me in the little town I’d finally settled in, called Sparks, Nevada, which is directly east of Reno. That’s where your people found me,” she said, nodding at Eric. “Carson and Sydney are good kids, considering their background. I’ve been trying to do right by them. I messed up my life and my son’s life, and I’ve tried to do better. But it’s hard. We live off my little bit of Social Security and I have a part-time job folding clothes at a laundromat.”

Ricky's eyes met his father's. Then they looked around to see everyone else's expression. They all nodded. Jason had already filled them in on Linda's circumstances. They all knew that life was about to get so much better for Miss Linda and the two kids.

"Linda," Ronny's voice was emotional. "If you don't mind me asking, how long are you going to visit here?"

"Well, Dad, I'm not really sure. The man who approached me told me that you'd been looking for me for a long time. He asked me to come and see you and stay for Christmas, and maybe longer if that's what I want to do. He said for me to please come and if I didn't want to stay, I didn't have to, but if I did decide I'd like to stay, there were people who could easily make that happen."

"Who approached you?" Ronny asked.

"It was one of my agents," Jason Lee said. "Agent Trout."

Linda nodded. "Yes, yes, that's it. Agent Trout. He is a very nice young man."

Jordan smiled and looked over at young Eric who squeezed her hand.

Ronny nodded. "Well, I won't ask you to make a decision. I just wanted to make sure we would have time to really talk. But I will say right here and now, you are welcome to stay as long as you like. No pressure. Really. I just want a chance to apologize to you properly."

"And I want that same chance," Linda said softly.

"This is just lovely," Shelley said.

"It is," Eric agreed. He directed his gaze to the younger man. "Patrick, I see a bright light coming from you."

Patrick smiled. "That's cool."

"I've been watching you and you seem very animated and happy."

"Well, sir, I am very happy. To meet my Uncle Ronny, and to meet you, sir, one of my all-time favorite people, all in the same day. I try very hard to emulate you and your family."

"A great compliment. Tell me, Patrick, where exactly are you from and what do you do?"

Patrick smiled. "My family and I live in Sumner, Washington, about forty miles south of Seattle and fifteen miles east of Tacoma. What I do is, I'm an assistant pastor of the Sumner Fellowship Church of Christ."

Everyone smiled at that.

"Oh, that is wonderful," Ronny said.

Patrick nodded. "It is my heart. My calling. And I've felt it since I was a little boy, and you, Uncle Ronny, were a large part of that."

"But I wasn't in your life. How could that be?"

"Because I heard your story. I believed your story, and I knew it was real because of how everyone tried to shut you down. They tried to hush you up. Angels aren't real. God's not real. That's how Satan works. Anything of the light, anything of truth—he works very hard to shut it down. But the Holy Spirit bore witness to me that your story was true. To be honest, I thought you had probably passed away a long time ago."

Ronny nodded. "I probably should have."

Everyone chuckled.

"Then an Ameritech agent came to our house too, Agent Nathaniel Hawk. He told me you were not only alive, Uncle Ronny, but that you were looking for the surviving members of your family. I was so excited. Then I learned that you had joined up with the Kinos and I was elated. Coming here today, meeting my uncle and meeting all these people that are part of the Kino entourage, seeing that you truly exist and truly are just like you appear to be in the media, I mean, well, my cup runneth over. I know I sound like I'm fanboying, but it's gonna take some time to get used to the power that I feel in this room.

"I remember about thirteen years ago, June Flower Kino was just a teenager and she was lost in Seattle and you all came up to rescue her. I was her age. Well, almost. I was fourteen. I desperately wanted to meet her. And here she is, right here, in this room, with Cam Wallace, who I watched play football for Oregon. And here is MacKenzie Daley, who was rescued up there about that time. And Agent Jeff Davis who was famous for rescuing her. And all the Kinos and Adams. And the owner of Ameritech. I can learn so much from everyone in this room. The only one missing that I'd hoped would be here is Gabe Tanner. Still, it's just amazing. So, that might be why I seem so happy and animated."

Everyone in the room couldn't help but smile at his exuberance. He was indeed "fanboying."

Patrick went on. "Don't get me wrong. I don't worship people. My whole heart belongs to the Lord, but I do have certain people I really look up to. My father and mother, my Uncle Andy and Aunt Nikki, my cousin Harrison, and all the people in this room. I can't even. From that little girl over there, who got kidnapped a few months ago," he said pointing at Josie, "and all the way up to Grandmaster Kino who died and spoke to Jesus face to face, to my Uncle Ronny and everyone in between. You people are amazing."

Eric nodded. "Okay, Patrick, that is very exuberant. And all of us here are extremely pleased to meet all of you and please allow me a moment to make a point with my family here." He gestured around the room. "This, people, this is why I press so hard for us to make good decisions and be mindful of the Lord at every second of our lives. You just don't realize who's watching and what effect you may have on their lives. We teach by example."

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1 Timothy 4:12

"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."

Chapter Twenty-Six

December 23rd, 11:00 AM, Monday Morning
Quinn Home, Los Angeles, California

JoJo Adams pulled his F-150 up in front of the tiny blue house with the yellow door. He drew a deep breath. He acknowledged in his own mind that he was excited to see her again. Obviously, he was attracted to her. Who wouldn't be attracted to such a beautiful girl? He headed up the small, narrow walkway to the door and knocked. It took a full minute for the door to open.

"Hello, Kaylee," JoJo said softly, immediately taking in her condition. It appeared that the swelling was starting to go down a little, but the bruising was more colorful than ever.

"Hi, JoJo," she said sullenly. "She's not home yet."

"Oh. Where did she go?"

"She had a couple of patients this morning that apparently just couldn't wait until the clinic opened again after Christmas, so her boss asked her to come in. She should be home soon."

He nodded. "Okay, well, may I come in?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry. Wasn't thinking."

She stepped back and he walked in the door.

"Have a seat," she offered.

He headed straight to the small sofa, took a seat and looked up at the girl. "How are you feeling, Kaylee?"

She shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"You seem a little down."

She shrugged again. "Ray says the same thing and she made an appointment for this evening for me to go with her to see Dr. Wallace and talk with her father, Grandmaster Kino."

JoJo nodded. "Good. That's my grandfather."

"I don't know what good it will do."

"Well, my grandfather is a doctor too. He's a doctor of psychology and he can help you to not feel so down anymore."

"Whatever."

JoJo smiled and patted the sofa beside him. "Come sit a minute."

She sat down.

"Kaylee, let me ask you a question. Do you wish that I hadn't come along and kept Scott from killing you?"

She looked up. "Huh? That's a dumb question."

"Right? But it appears that you are unhappy about something, and I would think that

you'd be grateful about some things."

"Like what? Like my boyfriend is in jail? Or like my face looks like Shrek? Like I'm gonna have to make up a semester of schoolwork?"

"How about, like you're not dead?"

She grunted. "Sometimes I wish I was."

He nodded and sighed, so it wasn't such a dumb question, he thought. He silently asked for guidance. "Kaylee, there are certain things we can't control. You can't control what others do. You can't control certain situations, like having to make up schoolwork. The only thing you can control is yourself, your attitude, your thoughts, that kind of thing. Look, I understand that you're hurting right now. Things might be a little bit hard right now, but you're gonna get through them. And when you do, you'll be stronger than ever. So, you need to change your way of thinking and stop feeling sorry for yourself, and one way you do that is to find your gratitude. He didn't kill you. He didn't permanently injure you with, like, a brain injury where you'd have to be taken care of for the rest of your life. That's something to be grateful for. And it's a good thing he's in jail, Kaylee, because he's done this before, actually twice before that we know of, and you might have saved another person's life by putting him in jail."

"But now I don't have a boyfriend."

"So what?"

Her mouth opened in surprise.

"I understand, Kaylee, that you think you need a boyfriend, that it's nice to have someone to spend time with, a partner, a companion. But you don't need a *boyfriend*. You need a husband. A real man who will love you and protect you and whom you don't have to fear. That's not Scott. He never intended to marry you. He wanted from you, well, what men want from women. And he wanted it without offering you any real love or commitment in return. You need someone you can trust. Someone who appreciates you. You deserve a good man. So stop pining over some guy who became so angry, that he beat you almost to death. If I hadn't stopped him, you'd be dead. Do you remember how scared you were right after he hurt you? Do you remember how you didn't want me to leave your side? Do you think a boyfriend should make you feel that way?"

"Well, maybe I deserved it."

"Good grief," JoJo said as he shook his head. "Kaylee, you are a beautiful daughter of God, and what you deserve is a good, Godly man, who protects you, not one who punches you in the face, no matter what you did or said. And Kaylee, you'll have that. I promise you, you clean up your own life, you live how God intended you to live, clean and pure, and pray, live by his laws, and the right man will find you and marry you and take care of you. And you'll be ready to recognize a good man who knows how to love, honor, and protect you and you'll never be lonely again. A man who doesn't care about God's laws, who sleeps with you before you're married, who lies, who yells, who physically hurts you, that man will never make you truly happy.

"Kaylee, you deserve a good man. I mean, you *are worthy* of a good man. God will send you a good man. Just stop looking, and work on yourself. And stop being ungrateful. And stop brooding over a man that tried to kill you. And don't let the man who tried to kill you convince you that your own life isn't worth living. Tell me the truth,

you don't feel that way really, do you?"

"If you're asking me if I really want to die, the answer is no. But, ya know, I do hate that Scott is in jail. It must be awful."

JoJo sighed. "If you're truly concerned about him, I guarantee you, this is the best thing that can happen to him. Because he now has a chance to turn his life around. Letting him get away with what he's been doing, that doesn't help him. That condemns him to hell. Now, he has a chance to make a change, and I hope he does. Don't play into feeling sorry for him. Make him take responsibility. And you, Kaylee, you also take responsibility for rising up and getting better, and doing better."

"Wow, so, what's going on? Are you two arguing?"

JoJo stood as Raylynn came in the door. "Hey, Raylynn, no, we're not arguing, but I was trying to help Kaylee to buck up and stop pining over the guy who would've been her murderer. I may have overstepped my bounds and if so, then, Kaylee, I apologize. It's only because I truly care about you."

Kaylee shrugged and nodded. "It's okay. I guess you, like, gave me some things to think about." She stood. "I'm gonna go back to bed." She left the room. Both JoJo and Raylynn watched her go.

JoJo turned back to Raylynn. "I'm sorry. Really. I may have gone too far."

She nodded. "It's okay. Maybe she'll listen to you, because she sure won't listen to me."

"Why not? You're her older sister, right? You're actually supporting her right now, right? You're taking care of her, right?"

"Yes, but like, the dynamic between the two of us is reversed. I'm kind of quiet and reserved. She's dominant. She's the pretty one. The bright one. The outgoing one. The funny one. The brave one."

JoJo shook his head. "You *are* pretty, Raylynn. You are absolutely beautiful. How could you not know that?"

Her eyes opened wide in surprise.

He looked down quickly. "Oh, I mean, I'm sorry if that was too forward. It slipped out."

She gave a nervous laugh. "Um, it's okay. You can take it back, if you want."

He frowned. "Take it back? No, I don't wanna take it back. I said what I meant. If anything, I'll double down on it. I only apologized because I didn't mean to embarrass you."

She cleared her throat. "Okay, well, then, thank you for the compliment. Um, so, I'm sorry I was late getting home. Got stuck in traffic. Do you still want to head to the grocery store?"

He nodded. "Yes, if that's okay with you. It won't take long. I have a list and my mom sent a note for me to share with you that has all the directions. I already brought you the raw milk because we have to go to a special farm to get it, but when it runs out, just let me know and I'll bring you more. It's in a cooler in my truck. Let me go ahead and get it in here so you can put it in the fridge, and then we'll head out. How long do you have?"

She shrugged. "I have all day, until this evening, why?"

"Well, I was also gonna invite you and Kaylee to join me and a few others. We're gonna go hand out backpacks and food to the homeless."

"Oh! Well, yes, that is so nice. Yes, I'd like to do it, but I don't know how Kaylee will feel about going."

"Well, it will be really good for her to stop feeling sorry for herself and concentrate on helping others for a little while."

Raylynn nodded. "Still, I don't know how to get her to come."

He sighed and smiled. "Watch." He turned and walked down the hall and knocked on Kaylee's door. She opened it and looked up at him. "Yes?"

"Raylynn and I are going out shopping to get some stuff to help you heal faster. Be dressed and ready to go when we get back."

"Where— are we going?"

"It's a surprise. But it will be fun. Just wear some jeans and athletic shoes. We'll be back in an hour. If you don't want me to come in here and dress you myself, then be ready."

Her mouth dropped open. JoJo turned and walked back to Raylynn whose mouth was also open.

He smiled at the gorgeous girl in the pink scrubs, then pasted a stern look on his face. "And you have five minutes to get changed."

She closed her mouth and rushed to her room.

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December 23rd, 1:00 PM, Monday Afternoon
South Los Angeles, California

Division Chief Jeff Davis looked over the group standing around the old abandoned gas station. His own boys, Dan and Jeremy, soon to be thirteen and twelve, were in the bed of his truck unfolding and handing out rolling carts to be filled with the backpacks and tents.

Jeff called the group together. David, Carol, Phillip, Lyle and Melody Keith, Logan and JoJo Adams, Raylynn and Kaylee Quinn, young Eric Kino, and Jordan, Josie and Jamie Brooks. Also in attendance were Agents Stanton and Torres because Jeff decided they needed eyes on the group constantly to ensure their safety.

"Okay, everyone, gather round," Jeff called. "First, I wanna say thanks to the Keith family for inviting me to help with their project over these past weeks. As some of you know, they went out on their own last month before Thanksgiving and helped as many as they could, but this month they wanted to go out on a bigger scale. Carol mentioned it to Mickey and she mentioned it to me and I am excited to be able to help, but you know, I also want to keep everyone safe. So, for the first-timers, the rule is, no one goes on their own. Stay with your partner or your group."

He pulled out his phone. "These are today's groups as I've been told. Let me know if anything has changed. With me are my boys and Jamie Brooks. David and Carol Keith will stay together. Logan, Melody and Lyle will stay together. Phillip, JoJo, and our newcomers, Raylynn and Kaylee Quinn will be a group. Everyone say hello to the Quinn sisters."

Everyone did, though many had already greeted them. Raylynn, dressed in jeans and

an old USC sweatshirt, smiled sweetly at everyone. Kaylee also wore jeans and a sweatshirt, but she had her hoodie pulled over her head and wore large sunglasses to cover her bruised face. She didn't smile, but only nodded.

"Okay, uh, that leaves young Eric, Jordan and Josie as a group. These two big guys are Agents Torres and Stanton. You run into any problem, yell at them. They'll respond. Okay, so, we're gonna cover this area, which is about a mile. Young Eric's group is gonna handle the dog food. The rest of you have carts loaded down with backpacks and tents. Like we did at Thanksgiving, if you run into any special cases, like anyone who is ill, or families with children, we'll take care of special services. David? Would you like to add anything?"

David Keith nodded. "Yes, Jeff, thank you. I just wanna say thanks to you all for supporting and helping with our project over the past two weeks. You've been great. So, as usual, let's start with a prayer. Phillip? Would you say it?"

Phillip smiled and nodded. "Yes, sir." He bowed his head and gave thanks for the opportunity to serve, asked for protection, and asked God to place in front of them anyone who might need extra help.

Once the prayer was finished, the group grabbed their carts and headed down the road. Young Eric, Jordan and Josie headed back to JoJo's truck. It held six brand-new large wheeled storage bins, similar to the big trash cans like the sanitation departments use, with wheels and the attached tops that flip back. They were black and had the words, "Dog Food" stenciled on the front and back in white paint. Each one was filled with dry dog food, and had an attached scoop. The Keiths had mentioned that there were a lot of dogs in the homeless camps they visited and those dogs' ribs were showing.

Jordan jumped up in the truck and rolled the nearest trash can to the edge and Three lifted it down. They unloaded one more.

"Josie, grab those two bags right there," young Eric said.

Josie picked up the large bags with handles, and peered in. One was full of leashes and the other was full of dog brushes and a stack of plastic bowls.

Jordan leaned her can back on its wheels, young Eric did the same and they headed down the road. It didn't take long before someone approached them.

"You got dog food?" an old man said.

Young Eric nodded and smiled. "Yep. You got dogs?"

He nodded. "Yessir, got two."

"Do you know anyone else in this area that has dogs?"

He turned and started pointing. "That dude over there has a pit. And see that blue tent? They gotta lab. Those guys over there, behind that big bush, they got a mutt that just had pups."

Eric nodded. "Okay, so, let's set this food can up in the middle over there where everyone can get to it."

"You gonna leave the whole giant can?"

"Yes. Is that okay?"

"Uh, yeah, I just thought you was gonna let us scoop out some food and you'd move on."

"We're gonna leave the can." He pulled the dog food back to the middle of the area

and immediately, several people came forward with their makeshift bowls.

"Anyone want a leash or a brush or need a bowl?" Jordan asked.

"I'll take a brush," one guy said.

Josie stepped forward and held the bag open so he could grab a brush.

"Thanks," he said and nodded at Josie.

The older man turned to young Eric. "Thanks, man. Really appreciate it. Had a momma dog come to me some weeks ago when I was walkin' along, and I brought her here and she had six pups. It's been hard trying to keep her fed."

Young Eric nodded. "Glad we can help. What's your name?"

"Name's Ricky."

Jordan gasped. Young Eric smiled. Josie's eyes opened in surprise.

"That happens to also be my father's name," young Eric said. "Nice to meet you, Ricky, I'm Eric."

"Nice to meet you too."

"You have six puppies?" Josie suddenly asked.

"Sure do. Cute little things."

"Can I see?" Josie asked.

The man looked at young Eric. Eric smiled and nodded.

They followed the man back to a shelter made of cardboard. The momma dog immediately came to Josie who knelt down and put out her hand. Jordan was about to tell Josie not to do that, but the dog came to her and dipped her head under Josie's hand.

Josie smiled and scratched the dog's head. "Hi, there, doggie," Josie said. She looked back up at the man. "Does she have a name?"

"Yep. We call her Sheila."

Josie smiled. "Hello there, Miss Sheila. Will you let me see your babies?"

They followed Ricky behind the cardboard shelter and six adorable little brown and white pups came out of the brush, wagging their tails.

"Oh, look," Josie cried in glee. "Oh, they're just so cute. Oh my goodness, look," she squealed. She petted and rubbed and stroked and talked to each one, until Jordan reminded her they had work to do.

"Well, we have others to see," Eric said. "Ricky, did you get one of the backpacks?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Got two. One for me, one for Jack."

"Who's Jack?"

"Oh, well, he's like my buddy. He's around here somewhere. Not quite sure where he got off to."

"Ricky, do you mind if I come back and visit you again?" young Eric asked. "I'd like to get to know you better. And I'd like to bring you a hot meal."

"Well, hell, don't mind that a bit. Come on back anytime."

"Thanks."

"Thank you, young man."

"Oooh, bye, sweet puppies," Josie said sadly and she gave them one last pet.

They headed back out where Jordan had left the second trash can. They grabbed it, moved down a little farther and found a place to leave it and headed back to the truck for two more.

Josie was excited and talking a mile a minute which made both Jordan and young Eric smile.

"I've never seen my sister so animated," Jordan whispered to Three.

Eric nodded. "Me neither. If you could speak another language I'd talk to you about my idea, but for now, it'll have to wait until we're alone."

Jordan frowned. "Well, I wish you hadn't said anything then, because now I'm super curious."

He grinned, stopped what he was doing, pulled her to him, and kissed her and then lifted her up into the bed of JoJo's truck so she could move two more to the edge.

Meanwhile, JoJo, Raylynn, Kaylee and Phillip had stopped to hand out backpacks to a group of kids, two girls and a boy, possibly teenagers.

"Thanks," one of the girls said softly.

"You're welcome," JoJo said firmly. He was just getting ready to ask their ages when he, Raylynn, and Phillip all turned to look at Kaylee, because they were surprised to hear her actually speak, since she'd been stubbornly quiet thus far.

"So, like, how did you guys end up here?" Kaylee asked boldly.

"I think that would be none of your business," one girl said.

Kaylee shrugged. "I get that. I was just curious. I mean, I could be like you, so, I was just wondering."

The boy smiled. "Don't pay any attention to her. She's just like that. It's probably why her mother kicked her out."

The girl glared at the boy.

"So, how about you?" Phillip asked.

The boy shrugged. "Me, well, I just got tired of my dad beating on me and I left home. I thought I was gonna be able to get a job, but, that didn't happen. Next thing I know, I've spent all my money and no place to live. So, I was living in my car. Then some nosy Karen called the cops on me for sleepin' in my car on a public street, and I smarted off to the cops and got arrested and they towed my car and I couldn't afford to get it out and here I am."

"Wow, man, that sucks," Kaylee said. She turned to the other girl who hadn't spoken yet. "What about you?"

The girl sighed. "Why should I tell you anything? I mean, you won't even take off your sunglasses. What are you, a movie star or somethin'?"

Kaylee pressed her lips tightly together, nodded her head, pulled off her hood and removed her sunglasses.

The girl gasped.

"Whoa," the boy said.

The first girl didn't say anything.

"What happened to you?" the boy asked.

"My boyfriend beat me up."

"Wow," the girl said. "How'd you get away?"

Kaylee smiled and pointed at JoJo. "He saw it happening and stepped in and saved me."

"You her brother?"

JoJo shook his head. “No. I didn’t know her at the time.”

“So,” Kaylee said. “It’s your turn. How’d *you* end up homeless?”

She shrugged. “So, like, my parents are dead and no one wanted me so I ended up in foster care. The first people were okay, but they finally got pregnant with the baby they always wanted and moved out of state. After that was a woman who had like, five other foster kids. She was doin’ it just for the money. She got arrested for abusing one of the boys and so that gig was done. After that was a couple who were super strict weirdos, and I finally had enough and ran away. But then I got hungry and went back, but they had me moved to a different home. That place was another lady who was doin’ it for the money and two of the boys ganged up on me, if you know what I mean, and no one would listen to me, or believe me, so I ran away again. And I’m not goin’ back there ever again. No way. Not ever.”

“How old are you?” Raylynn asked.

“I’m sixteen.”

JoJo sighed.

“How old are you?” Kaylee asked the boy.

“I’m nineteen. And she’s seventeen,” he offered pointing at the girl who refused to tell her story. “Or so she says.”

JoJo looked at the guy. “Have you, like, hooked up with either of these girls?”

The boy’s eyes opened wide. “No, man, it’s not like that. I kinda look after them, ya know? When I first met them some guys were givin’ them a hard time and I stepped in. I decided to stick around. You know, like a big brother or something.”

JoJo nodded and stepped away. “I gotta make a call. Be right back.” He glanced at Phillip and nodded at Kaylee and Raylynn. “Watch out for them a minute.”

“Got it,” Phillip said.

JoJo walked several steps away but kept his eyes on the Quinn sisters.

“Hello, son, whatcha got?”

“Hey, Dad, here’s the situation.”

He explained the two stories he’d heard and told about the other girl who wouldn’t tell her story.

“Okay, JoJo,” Mark began. “Well, two of them are minors and we can’t leave them out there, so I’ll call Angel to see if she might have a place. I’m gonna need about fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll go ahead and hand out more packs and circle back.”

“Sounds good. Get their names, and the minute you do, text them to me. And take pics if they’ll allow it.”

“Got it.”

He ended the call and stepped forward. “Sorry, had to make that call. So, anyway, it’s been nice to meet you. My name is JoJo, what’s yours?”

The boy nodded. “Ryder Bell.” He stepped forward and shook hands.

“I’m Kaylee,” Kaylee said as she offered her hand to the first girl.

The girl who hadn’t told her story nodded. “I’m Brook.”

The other girl frowned. “If I tell you my name, are you gonna turn me in? Cuz, I ain’t goin’ back there. I will not go back. I’d rather die.”

JoJo shook his head. “I promise, you won’t go back there.”

She sighed. “Okay, I guess I believe you. My name is Zoe. Zoe Marchant.”

Raylynn nodded and offered her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Zoe. I’m Raylynn.”

“I’m Phil,” Phillip said as he shook hands with all three.

Zoe looked closely at Raylynn. “So, is she your sister, cuz you look alike.”

Raylynn nodded. “Yes, we’re sisters.”

JoJo spoke quickly. “So, Ryder, Brook, Zoe, I’d like to do a little more for you than just giving you guys a backpack. I’m thinkin’ maybe I could take you to get you a good meal. Would that be okay?”

“Sure,” Ryder said quickly.

JoJo smiled. “Okay, cool, good, so we just need to finish giving out the backpacks we have left because we promised to do that, but we’ll be back, let’s say, in about fifteen minutes or so?”

Ryder shrugged. “Okay.”

“Be right back,” Kaylee said as they walked away and stopped at the next group and started giving away the backpacks.

JoJo was on his phone again, texting names to his father.

“Where are you planning to get them a meal?” Kaylee asked once JoJo stopped texting and they were out of earshot of the three kids.

“Anywhere they want,” JoJo said softly. “But I’m hoping to do more than that. I want those girls off the streets. I have my dad working on it.”

“Oh, wow,” Kaylee said with an actual smile. “That’s cool.”

JoJo glanced down at Raylynn. She looked up at him, also smiling. “That would be wonderful if you could do that. Where will you take them? To a shelter? I mean, because you just promised Zoe that you wouldn’t send her back.”

JoJo nodded. “And I won’t. But they are minors and they can’t live alone so we can’t just put them in a house or motel and leave them. I’m hoping Aunt Angel can work a miracle here. I’m waiting to hear back. Fingers crossed.”

“So, you called Mrs. Lee? I thought you said your dad is working on it.”

“No, I called my dad and he’s making the calls for me. He told me to give him about fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen minutes. He works fast.”

“They tend to do that,” Phillip said quickly.

“So I’ve noticed,” Raylynn said softly.

They worked speedily to give out the last of their backpacks. One hundred in all. JoJo answered his phone immediately when his father called back.

“Tell me good news,” JoJo said. “And you’re on speaker so don’t say anything ugly about Raylynn or Kaylee.”

Mark chuckled. “Darn. Okay, I’ll shelve that for later.”

The two girls smiled.

“And Phillip is with us too.”

“Well, darn, so who can I talk about?”

“Logan.”

Everyone chuckled.

"Okay, down to business," Mark said seriously. "So, I have good news and bad news. There are no places available right now. Angel made sure that all of her properties were occupied for Christmas. So, she was gonna take the girls in herself, but she had a better idea. Alec and Desi have an extra bedroom in their house and Angel spoke to them and says they are ecstatic about housing the two girls for a few weeks until a better place opens up. She's already contacted the county and had it approved, because, you know, she works closely with them on a daily basis. And now Alec and Desi are already talking about planning meals and running out to buy them gifts. They love having a chance to pay it forward."

"Okay, so, that's cool," JoJo said.

"Yes it is, and so that leaves the young man, and I think, if you and Logan don't mind, I think *we* can handle Ryder Bell."

"You mean, he can stay with us?"

"Yes. I ran his name. Ryder Bell. Lake Forest, California. Nineteen years old. Stepmother, Naomi Bell, works the front desk at a Spa. Father, Aaron Bell, runs a car repair shop. Two young stepsisters, ages two and four. Ryder was arrested six months ago for disorderly conduct, detailed as disturbing the peace and loitering. He was given probation, and a fine, which has not been paid. So, if he has another encounter with police he is flagged for arrest and could serve jail time. The car, which is in his name, a Honda Civic, remains in impound."

"Well, he was up front about the arrest. He said he was homeless and sleeping in his car because he couldn't find a job."

"Understood, and this is just the kind of thing Gabe's foundation was created for. The arrest may have been improper. I'll pull the body-camera footage and see whether we can have the charge dismissed—or whether Ryder may have grounds to sue. Though, I don't think I'll encourage that path. Let's just get this cleaned up."

"Cool. Sounds good, Dad."

"Yep, anyway, the father, Aaron Bell, has had four domestic violence calls on him, two in the past four months, so, that would be after Ryder left home. Before that, Ryder himself made the calls and both times his father was able to talk his way out of it, citing Ryder as an unruly teen. That's really all I was able to find out in this short amount of time. But I believe he's safe to share our home. We'll monitor to be sure. What is your gut telling you?"

JoJo sighed. "I think he's a good guy who's had to face some tough challenges. He's been living in a tent with two girls and he says he's not sleeping with them. I think he feels protective of them."

"That might be because he has the two younger sisters."

"Right."

"Well, go ahead and feed them, ask them if they want off the streets. If they resist, tell them who you are so that they'll trust you. Hopefully, they'll make the right choice and their lives are about to change."

"Got it. Thanks, Dad. I'll call you when we're on the way."

Phillip smiled. He knew how these people operated. Brook, Zoe and Ryder had just hit the jackpot.

JoJo hung up and glanced at Phillip. “Does that make you happy?”

Phillip nodded. “Yes. Because I know what’s about to happen.”

“What’s about to happen?” Kaylee asked.

Phillip grinned. “Well, these guys don’t know it yet, but they’ve just hit the jackpot. The Adams and Kino families are not just gonna give them a place to stay for a few weeks and then put them out. They’ll look into every single problem they have. They’ll get rid of Ryder’s legal problems. Like, pay his fines and stuff, and represent him in court. They’ll get his car back for him and help him find a job, and if he’s not able to do that, they’ll probably send him to school to teach him whatever he needs to support himself. They’ll do the same for Zoe, and probably help her finish high school and make sure she has whatever she needs, and they’ll get Brook to tell them her story, whatever it is, and help her. Maybe even reunite her with her family, depending on the problem. Whatever they do, I’m pretty sure, from this point forward, those three are gonna succeed in anything they wanna do.”

JoJo smiled at Phillip’s words, because they were indeed true.

“But why?” Kaylee asked. “I mean, you can’t do this for everyone, right?”

“Right,” JoJo said. “That would be a difficult task. So, we help whomever God puts in front of us. Today, the Lord put these three teens in our path and the Holy Spirit whispered to me to look further into their situation and I did. But actually, I think, Kaylee, that the Holy Spirit whispered to *you*. Because it was *you* who felt inclined to ask them how they ended up like they did. It was you who got them talking. If not for you being with us today, we might have looked right on past those three. So, thanks, Kaylee. Good job.”

Kaylee offered a slight smile. Raylynn also smiled, her eyes meeting JoJo’s.

JoJo nodded with a smile. “Come on, let’s go see if we can talk them into taking us up on the offer,” JoJo said.

“What if they don’t?” Raylynn asked.

JoJo smiled. “Well, then I’ll get young Eric and Logan involved. The girls won’t be able to resist those two guys.”

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JoJo glanced in his rearview mirror. Brook and Zoe sat quietly in the backseat. It was obvious that they were a little uncertain about what they’d agreed to. Ryder, on the other hand, was grateful and relieved.

Phillip had volunteered to take Raylynn and Kaylee home. Kaylee was tired and they had to get ready to go to the Kinos’ home for dinner and for a counseling session with Grandmaster Kino.

JoJo pulled into a local steakhouse called Papa’s Grill. It was casual enough where the kids wouldn’t feel out of place. They’d done their best to clean up. They’d changed clothes and combed hair. They’d gathered all of their belongings and put them into the bed of JoJo’s truck. Their tent was given away along with some blankets and pillows and extra clothes and coats.

They were seated quickly, JoJo asking for a back table.

The group was relatively quiet. The server came to take drink orders and they looked toward JoJo to order for them. He smiled. “Order anything you want, guys. My treat. Of

course, no alcohol."

Brook was the first to decide. "Do you have milk?" she asked.

The server nodded. "It's not on the menu, but if that's what you'd like, I can certainly get you some milk."

"I've been craving it," she said softly.

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am, milk it is." He looked at Zoe.

"I would love some milk too, and also a Sprite." She looked at JoJo. "Would that be okay?"

"Whatever you want."

She nodded. "That's what I want."

Ryder ordered water and Coke, and JoJo ordered water.

JoJo watched as they perused the menu. He smiled. It made him happy to be able to buy these kids a good meal. It was almost as if he could feel their hunger. He looked them over. They were obviously disheveled. Dirty. Also smelly. They were gonna feel a lot better once they'd showered and had a good night's sleep.

The server came back with their drinks, took their order and left them a cutting board with freshly baked bread and cups of butter.

JoJo cut the bread, buttered it, and began to serve them.

"So," JoJo began. "Does anyone have any questions?"

"So, who are these people we're gonna stay with?" Zoe asked. "You said they're a married couple?"

JoJo nodded. "Yes. They're good friends of mine and my family."

"Do they have kids?" Zoe asked.

JoJo smiled. "Not yet."

"Are they young?" Brook asked.

"Yes. Very young."

"How old are they?"

"Alec is eighteen and Desi is seventeen."

"Wow. That's young to be married," Zoe said.

JoJo nodded. "They have a story to tell you, but I'll give you a quick overview. They too were homeless. My cousin, Eric Kino, whom I already told you about, found them living behind a gas station. They got pregnant on Prom night when Alec was a senior and Desi was a junior. Parents got mad and kicked them out."

"And now they have their own house?"

"Well, they live in a house provided to them by the *Angel Network Foundation*. Alec will be going back to school next year at USC and will eventually get a law degree. He's working right now, at my father's law firm. Desi is due in about four weeks. She's really sweet. You'll like her."

"That's pretty cool," Ryder said. "And so, you really are JoJo Adams, the USC quarterback?"

"I really was. I'm not their quarterback anymore, because of this," he said, lifting his right arm.

"That sucks for you," Ryder said.

"It is what it is, Ryder. But I know God has other things in store for me and I trust

Him."

"Huh. Wonder if this God has anything in store for *me*," he asked.

JoJo nodded. "I guarantee you that He does. That's why He put you in front of me today. God is with you, Ryder. You may not think He is, but He is and He's providing you with a chance to finally rise up and do something amazing. He believes in you because He knows you."

"Yeah, well, where was He when my father was kicking me around?"

JoJo smiled. "He was right there with you. Right there. He didn't cause what your father did, Ryder. Your father used his free will to do something evil. But God never abandoned you, and He can take what was meant to break you and build something good from it."

"If he was right there, why didn't He help me?"

"He IS helping you. Everything that happened to you so far, it's made you stronger. We all go through hard times. It's good for us. The suffering itself doesn't feel good, but it makes us stronger. And I have a feeling that you, Ryder, are gonna be one of God's strongest warriors. Give it time. He's just beginning to work in your heart. Just remember, every single thing you've experienced so far has made you the person you are today. Do you think you're a good person?"

He shrugged. "I guess."

"He is," Zoe said. "He's been, like, our hero."

JoJo nodded. "I agree. He is. I don't know him, but I have discernment, and I feel he's a good person. He's seen some of the ugliness in the world, and he's already overcoming. I'm excited to see how this goes. And the point I was making is, everything that he's been through so far, the good and the bad, has made him what he is today. Everything happens for a reason, so be grateful. Not everything that happens is good, but God can redeem what happened. Be grateful that the evil didn't get the final word."

"I don't get it," Ryder said.

JoJo shrugged. "Okay, let me see. Um, so, if you hadn't been kicked around by your father, would you have left your home? No, and who would've taken care of these two? If you hadn't been toughened up by your father, would you have stepped in to help out Brook and Zoe when they needed you? You weren't afraid of stepping in, Ryder, because you were used to confrontation. You stepped in and what's more is, you haven't taken advantage of these two innocent girls. You stood up and did the right thing."

Ryder frowned as he thought about the words JoJo just spoke. He looked into JoJo's sincere eyes.

JoJo smiled. "It's gonna be okay. Give it time. Give God a chance. He's working in you."

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December 23rd, Monday Afternoon

The Village Garden Apartments, Huntington Beach, California

Mika hurried back from the store with her bag of soda and chips. She'd promised her mother that she would get the apartment all clean and ready for Christmas, but she'd been craving some of her favorite nacho chips and a Dr. Pepper. Her mother only had to work a half a day tomorrow on Christmas Eve and had all of Christmas Day off and

because of the Kinos' gifts to the families in the apartments, Mika and her mother were planning to have a real celebration.

Mika was excited because it seemed like her life was changing. Her mother had actually come to church to watch her sing yesterday. What's more, she complimented Mika and actually said she was proud of her. In all of Mika's sixteen years, she never recalled her mother saying she was proud of her. Mika intended to keep that going. Get the apartment all cleaned up. Finish putting up the decorations that the Kinos had provided for each apartment. They had a small artificial tree with lights on it. Mika couldn't wait to finish wrapping the gifts she'd bought for her mother and put them under the tree and see her mom's face on Christmas morning.

In the service yesterday, Reverend Clark had talked about how good it felt to give gifts. Mika nodded with a smile. He was right. It was gonna be so awesome. It had always been Mika and her mom. She had no siblings. She didn't know her father. Her mother had gotten pregnant in high school and had done her best to provide for Mika. She worked two jobs most of Mika's life. She was always so tired. But lately, she seemed different. Actually, it had been ever since she'd met with the Kinos about her financial situation. She now felt hopeful. She could see the light at the end of the tunnel. She'd told Mika that she now had a definite plan of action. She said she knew things were about to change and Mika truly believed her.

So, she headed home with her snacks to finish up the preparations but turned when a familiar voice called her name.

"Meeeeka," she heard, and turned with a smile.

"Teo," she replied with his nickname instead of his full name. "Hey." She walked over to him where he sat on the low wall that separated the apartment property from the church property.

He jumped down off the wall. "What's good, baby?"

"Me," she said with a giggle.

"I know it," he said. "Chill with me for a minute."

"I can't. Have to go home and clean stuff."

He shook his head and pulled her close. "You can clean me."

She smiled and looked him over. Matteo was her dream. Every girl wanted him, but he was hers. He was blended. Light skin. The tips of his curls were blond while the base was ash brown. He was the CEO of hot.

He pushed her against the wall, tilted her face up and kissed her.

Immediately though, he started to unbutton her jeans.

"Stop, Teo," she said breathlessly as she pushed his hands down.

"Why? You mine."

"Yes, but, not like that. Not anymore."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"I want to do things right. I'm changin' the way I been."

"You lettin' that choir boy get into your head?"

"It's not him. It's like, I mean, it's Jesus."

"Give me a break."

"It's facts, Teo. I'm gonna clean up, get right."

He cursed. “You wanna lose me?”

“No. I just want us to be different.”

“This is trash, Mika.”

She sighed. “Yeah, well, I gotta go.”

He grabbed her arm. “Wait. Let’s talk about it.”

“There’s nothin’ to talk about, Teo.”

“Okay, well, let me come home with you and we’ll just chill for a minute.”

She sighed and nodded.

They walked slowly back to her apartment. She offered him some of her soda and chips and they sat on the small couch and ate and listened to some music. Finally, he put his arm around her and they snuggled. Shortly after that, he kissed her again. This time he took his time. After several minutes he pulled his shirt over his head.

Mika swallowed hard. It wasn’t that his chest was like some big muscle boy, but it was cut, and all that light-colored skin. It was so pretty. So mesmerizing. She ran her eyes over him and then her hands.

He smiled. He knew he had her now. He kissed her harder, pushed her onto her back and after a few more minutes worked on getting her clothes off. He thought it was a green light, but it was like she suddenly snapped out of it. When she said no again and began struggling, there could be no misunderstanding, but he didn’t care about that.

“No, Teo, I already told you no,” she said as she struggled to get out from under him.

“That’s not the message I got,” he quipped, almost laughing at her.

She started to struggle for real. Before she realized what he actually intended, he covered her mouth with his hand so that nobody heard the muffled cries.

When he finished, he smiled at her. “You know you like it,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I gotta present for ya.”

Mika didn’t know what to say. She pulled her clothes back on.

“You mad?” he asked.

She sniffed. “Yes, I am mad, Teo. I told you I didn’t want to do that anymore.”

“Then you don’t want *me* anymore.”

Her eyes blinked.

When she didn’t answer, he figured all was good. He moved forward and actually kissed her goodbye.

Tamika watched the door close and quickly went to lock it. When she blinked again, two tears ran over her cheeks. She looked upward. She didn’t know what to do now. She only knew she had to do better.

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December 23rd Monday Afternoon

Quinn Home, Los Angeles, California

Kaylee looked over at Phillip as he drove. He was a nice guy. Too bad she wasn’t younger because she’d almost be interested. “So, Phil, how old are you?”

“I’m sixteen. How old are you?”

“I’m eighteen. What grade are you in?”

“I’m a junior at Oceanside High, over in Huntington Beach.”

"And you're Melody's brother, right?"

"Right."

"And Melody's boyfriend is Logan Adams, JoJo's brother, right?"

"Right."

In the backseat, Raylynn smiled. It seemed like her sister was pulling out of her funk. She was showing interest in other people. JoJo had been right. Having her help out, making her focus on someone else other than herself, focusing on something beyond her own pain, it worked wonders. The change within only a few hours was almost miraculous.

"So, do you have a girlfriend?" Kaylee asked.

Phillip chuckled and shook his head with a smile. "No. Why? You want the position?" he joked.

Kaylee laughed. "If I was two years younger, yeah."

Phillip grinned. "I can handle that."

Kaylee giggled. "Aww, you're so cute."

Phillip rolled his eyes.

Raylynn couldn't believe it. Her sister was actually flirting.

"I can't believe you don't have a girlfriend," Kaylee went on.

Phillip shrugged. "I'm too busy. Football takes up most of my time, and school stuff. And then, doin' stuff like we did today and goin' to church. Since I've been out of the hospital, my focus has mostly been on that."

"The hospital? Why were you in the hospital?"

"Hmm, long story."

"Well, make it quick."

He chuckled. "I got in a fight with my sister's ex. He bashed my head in and I had a brain injury. They say I could've died, but Miss Jeffy, I mean, Dr. Kino Wallace, she worked on me and I'm doing very well and people prayed for me and I got better really fast."

"Wow. So, how long ago was that?"

"About four weeks ago."

"Oh. So, you really are doing better."

He nodded. "God is good," he said as he pulled up in front of their house.

He turned off the car and jumped out to go open doors, but both sisters got out before he could get there.

Ray smiled at him. "Thanks so much for the ride, Phil. It's been very nice getting to meet you and work with you today."

"It was my pleasure," he said with a smile. He reached out and shook her hand, then turned to Kaylee. "Seriously, Kaylee, I know like, things have been tough for you lately, but if you ever wanna talk or just hang out, or something, I might be younger, but I'm a good friend."

"Aww, thanks, Phil. I'll keep that in mind."

The girls turned and made their way into the house. Phillip stood there and watched to make sure they got inside okay. He sighed. He felt something stir in him. There was a problem in this world and it needed to be fixed. Sighing, he decided he was gonna talk

to JoJo, his hero, and have him cover the subject. Maybe it could be in a future sermon.

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Luke 6:38

"Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

December 23rd, Monday Afternoon
Gabe Tanner Community Center, Compton, California

Ricky Kino, along with two Ameritech agents, guided his daughter Taylor into the new community center. The center, including the parking lot, covered an entire block and was completely fenced in with a beautiful brick-colored wrought-iron fence. The place was once a church, though it was big enough to be a small school. Indeed, the church used to run an elementary school on the premises. It had three outbuildings that included classrooms, a cafeteria, and a gym. It was perfect for a community center, and much needed in the high-crime area of Compton.

The moment they walked in three smiling people came to greet them.

"Mr. Kino, Taylor—oh, my goodness, it is such a pleasure to see you right here in person. I'm Jimmy Preston."

Ricky smiled. "Jimmy, very nice to meet you," he said as he shook his hand.

Jimmy turned to Taylor and shook her hand next. "Taylor, thank you so much for coming. The kids here are very excited to get to see you."

Taylor smiled sweetly. "I'm excited to see them."

Jimmy's smile widened. "Oh, wow, you are every bit as beautiful and sweet as you are online. Let me introduce you to the people helping me to run this place. This sweet lady is Candace Wilson and this is her sister, Cora Wilson. They have been a powerhouse of energy and knowledge. I couldn't do this without them."

Taylor and Ricky shook both ladies' hands.

Jimmy looked up at the other two men.

Ricky smiled. "These guys are Agents Brown and Coleman."

Jimmy nodded and shook their hands. "Nice to meet you." He turned back to Ricky. "So, I suppose you know that a community center was badly needed in this area. From the moment we opened, it's been nonstop. The kids have responded so well and look forward to coming here every single day. We have activities for kids of all ages and counseling, and we make sure every child that comes here has eaten that day. They all follow Gabe and Taylor online, and they are very much looking forward to hearing you speak today, Taylor. The stage is in the gym and that's where you'll be speaking. But please, come in, let me show you around and tell you about the things we're planning and by the time we finish that, the gym should be filling up."

Ricky glanced down at his daughter to see if she was overwhelmed, but she seemed to be quite calm and glowing with love. He was so proud of her. She looked up at him and smiled.

"You got this, baby girl?"

She nodded. "Of course, Daddy. Thanks so much for coming with me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he quipped which made her laugh.

They followed Jimmy down the hall and down some steps that led to a line of classrooms. They opened a door to have a teacher smile at them and little children stopped playing and blinked up at the big men that came in.

Taylor stepped from behind them and smiled. "Well, hello there, little ones," she said sweetly.

"Okay, children," the teacher said. "This is Taylor, like we talked about. Everyone come sit in our circle and let's tell Miss Taylor what we practiced."

Taylor smiled as the children immediately complied. She listened as each child said a few rehearsed words. "We love you." "Thank you for our new school." "We love to come here." "We love to play with each other." "We love Jesus." "We love doin' art." "I love cookies."

Everyone stopped to laugh at that one.

When they finished Taylor clapped her hands together. "Oh, wow, you guys, that was awesome! And you know what? I love you all so much and I'm so happy that you have your new school and I'm happy that you play with each other and that you love cookies, and mostly, that you love Jesus."

They left that classroom and finished the tour and headed to the gym. It was packed full. After greeting several more people, Taylor was introduced. Among thunderous applause she walked out onto the stage and looked out over her audience. There were a lot of younger children, but the whole back half of the group were teens. Taylor smiled.

"Hello, everyone," she began. "Just so you know, we're livestreaming right now on *Gabetanner.com*." She pointed to the woman she'd asked to hold her phone. "So, everyone, wave and say hello to the world, cuz, that's how many people are watching you!"

It took a few minutes for the cheers to die down.

"Okay, so, Gabe wanted me to tell you that he's sorry he couldn't be here today, but that when he gets back to California, he promises to come and visit you. He also says to do some of the challenges on his website so he can ask you about what you did when he gets here. Now," she said as she paused.

"I know you don't want to hear a long speech. So, I just wanted to tell you guys two quick stories. Once upon a time, there was a man who was walking past where they kept the elephants in a circus. He saw that the elephants had only a thin rope tied to their front leg to keep them from running off. He asked the man taking care of the elephants why that was the only thing being used to keep the elephants from running off. The caretaker shook his head. 'It's funny about that. Since the elephants were babies, that thin rope was strong enough to hold them. Now that they've gotten big, they don't realize that they are now big and strong enough to break the ropes and run away. So, they don't try to break free because they've been conditioned to think they can't. They don't know or they don't realize that they can overcome that tiny piece of rope.'"

She paused and smiled. "Sometimes people are like these elephants. They don't reach for anything because they don't think they can. We've been told that we're not smart enough, or not strong enough, or we're too poor, or too young, or we have no help or no support. These excuses are like the small ropes on the elephants. We CAN easily

overcome these things if we just believe we can do it.

"Second story. I know a little girl who has no father and her mother is in jail. She told me that she wanted to give me a gift for Christmas but she couldn't get me one because she had no money. 'Well,' I said, 'what DO you have?' And she looked around her and said she didn't have anything. I pointed to a box of crayons on the floor. 'Are those yours?' I asked. She nodded. 'But I only have three colors left cuz I lost the others.' 'Okay,' I said. 'So, we use what we have.'" Taylor smiled at the little ones in the front row.

"The little girl asked me, 'what do I have?' And I told her, she has a yellow crayon, a red crayon, a blue crayon, and a piece of paper. I told her to figure out what she can do with that, what kind of gift could she give. A few days later, she handed me the gift. I just knew she was gonna give me a picture using those three colors. But she surprised me. Instead, she wrapped the three crayons rolled up inside of the blank piece of paper. I asked her why she didn't make me a picture. And she told me, if she gave me a picture, it would give me only a few seconds of happiness. But if she gave me the crayons, it would give me lots of minutes of happiness.

"I told her, 'but these crayons are all you had.' And she smiled and told me that it's okay. If these three crayons make me happy then she was glad she had them to give to me. So, what I'm saying with these two stories is this; don't believe just because you couldn't do something when you were younger, you can't do it now. And no matter what you have, no matter what you do, give your all. If you have a lot, give a lot. If you have a little, give what you can. You will be rewarded in ways you never thought. God is real and He will bless you and look after you and teach you to be strong and to rise up. So no matter what's happening in your life, don't forget to pray. People think that prayer doesn't work. But I can tell you that I know that it does. We don't always get what we ask for, but God gives us the things that He knows will make us truly happy. So, break those ropes. Do something nice for someone, even someone who isn't nice to you.

"As a matter of fact, do it especially for someone who isn't nice to you." Her eyes got wide with excitement. "Oh yes, let's make that a challenge! Think of someone who isn't nice to you, and do something nice for them and let's see what kind of miracles that brings about. Now, be careful. If someone is hurting you, that's different. If someone is hurting you, tell someone. If they are only hurting your feelings because they said something mean, smile and do something nice for them. It will make you feel so much better! Can you do that?"

The children all cheered and applauded.

Taylor smiled. "Good. Okay, so before I end, I'd like to pray with you, pray over you. So, everyone, bow your heads." Taylor bowed her head. "Hey, Father, it's me, Taylor and I'm here at the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* in Compton and I know, Father, that You see all of these amazing people here. I know that You know their hearts. That you know what troubles and problems they have. I ask for You to bless them, Lord. I ask as you watch them try to do something good for someone, that you will see their efforts and bless them too, and fill us all with your Holy Spirit. If anyone here needs or knows someone who needs healing, I pray that You will heal them. Whatever problems or hardships they're facing, I pray You will help them, and they will know that You are

real and that You really do hear their prayers. I ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus, amen."

"Amen," they all uttered.

Jimmy came forward. "Thank you, Taylor Kino. Hey, everyone, Taylor and her dad will sign autographs for a little bit before they leave. So if you want an autograph or a selfie, please form a line starting at that table over there and stay along the sides of the gym. If you have something you want them to sign, that's fine, and if you didn't bring anything, they'll give you a signed picture of Taylor and Gabe. No running. No pushing. Teachers, please help everyone to line up calmly."

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December 23rd, Monday, Early Evening

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Why do you have to come, Matt? Just go home and help Mom. Go set the table or something."

"No, Charlie, you go set the table or something. I'm goin' down to check on the dogs."

"No, you're not. I already told you I was goin' down there."

"So, I am too."

"No, Matt, go home."

"You're not my boss."

Chaz Stewart drew a deep breath as he headed toward the house after helping his own father at the stable. "Boys. Stop."

"But Dad," Charlie began.

"I said stop. I think we need to have a little talk."

Charlie blew out a breath. "I'm losing daylight, Dad. The sun's goin' down and I don't want Hannah out here at night."

Chaz sighed. "Okay, you go down to the barn and take care of the dogs. Make sure Hannah gets home safely. Then we're gonna talk. The three of us. But Matt, you come walk with me up to the big house."

"Why we gotta go up there?"

"Because Dad's hurt his back again and Mom shouldn't have to carry firewood in by herself. And I shouldn't have to explain it to you. Are you actually complaining about helping out your grandparents?"

Matthew looked down. "No, sir. Sorry."

Chaz nodded. "You're forgiven." They walked in silence toward the house up on the hill, which was the original Stewart ranch home where Chaz himself grew up.

After saying a silent prayer, Chaz drew a deep breath. "So, Matt, tell me why you were so insistent about goin' down to the barn with Charlie."

Matt shrugged. "I don't know. I guess, I wanted to see the dogs."

"If you wanted to see the dogs, you had all day. Why did you wait until now?"

Matt shrugged again.

Chaz looked his son over. He and his brother Charlie looked very much alike and they both looked like him. They didn't get the red hair like their sisters. They got the dark blond hair like Chaz. Only the boys' hair was a little lighter. Both of them had brown

eyes. Fourteen-year-old Charlie had hit a huge growth spurt this past year and had gone from five feet, four inches to six feet. Twelve-year-old Matt was already five foot six, and hadn't hit puberty. Chaz thought he might end up passing his older brother. Charlie will be fifteen in February, and Matt will be thirteen next month. They were handsome young men and usually well-behaved.

"Matthew, think about it and just tell the truth. Why go down there now?"

Matthew sighed. "I guess I wanted to go down there when Hannah is there."

"Thank you, son."

"For what?"

"For telling the truth."

Matt looked down.

"Son, I know things have been hectic, what with the babies being born and then that crazy Thanksgiving. It's possible that I might not have been paying enough attention to you. But I'm paying attention right now. So, let's talk about this Hannah thing. Do you like her?"

Matt shrugged. "I dunno. She's nice."

Chaz nodded. "And cute too, right?"

"Sure."

"Does she like you?"

"I dunno. I mean, she's nice to me."

"So, you're friends."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Is she nice to Charlie?"

"Sure."

"Does Charlie like her?"

"I dunno."

"Okay, well, I'm gonna tell you the exact same thing that I'm gonna tell Charlie. Little miss Hannah Brown has been through a very hard time. Her emotions are gonna be all over the place. She's nice to you, Matthew, because you're nice to her and she's nice to Charlie, I imagine, because he's nice to her. She's not ready to be anyone's girlfriend."

Matt looked down again.

"Not for a very long time," Chaz went on. "She's been traumatized, buddy. She needs to learn to trust people again. She's definitely not ready to have any relationship other than friendship. She may even think she's ready. But I'm telling you, she's not. And Matt, if she *were* ready to have a boyfriend, more than likely, it would be Charlie."

Matt almost gasped and looked up. "Why?"

"Don't get me wrong. It's not because Charlie is better than you in any way. It's only because he's older than you and so is Hannah."

"She's only a year older than me."

They got to the woodpile, pulled out a cart and started loading it with firewood. Chaz talked as they worked.

"Matt, in a relationship with a girl, or with a woman, usually the guy is a little older than the girl. It's the order of things. Adam was created first. The men are supposed to

be mature, the leader, the one responsible for the protection and well-being of the woman. If the woman is older, there's a slight feeling of her being the senior in the relationship. It doesn't lend itself to a good relationship. There will be a power struggle eventually. Even if at first there was some kind of attraction. Now, with Hannah, even though she's only one year older than you, emotionally, because of what she's been through, she's years older than both you and Charlie."

"What she's been through? You mean her being held hostage by that guy?"

"Well, yes, but she wasn't only held hostage, son. She was beaten. She was chained. She was starved. She witnessed the murder of her mother and she was made to witness lewd acts."

"Whaddya mean?"

Sighing, Chaz described what Carl Deetz made her witness and the threat it implied.

"Oh. I didn't know about that. That's gross."

"There is evil in this world, son. Perversions. I didn't want to have to tell you about that. I wanted to keep you innocent for as long as possible. But I guess it's best that I let you know what happened, so that you understand what Hannah is dealing with. On top of that, she knows that her own father doesn't want her. She has a lot to work through in her heart and mind and that means that Hannah is not ready for anything other than having a few male friends whom she can trust. That means she can trust that they will help her and just be kind to her, and not pressure her to be or do anything other than a friend. Do you understand?"

Matt sighed and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And do you understand why the age difference makes it not a good idea?"

"Yes, sir, I get it, I guess, but it seems like Charlie gets special stuff just because he's older."

"That's right, he does," Chaz said unapologetically.

"Huh?"

"Matt, it's not Charlie's fault that he was born first. He hit puberty before you. Should he be punished for that? He's gonna turn fifteen in February and be eligible to get his learner's license. Should you be allowed to get yours too?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not old enough," he offered begrudgingly.

"Right. So, should he have to wait until you are old enough?"

"No, sir."

"Right. But Matt, when you are old enough, when you turn fifteen, you'll get yours too. That's as it should be."

They pulled the wagon toward the back of the house. Chaz opened the door and they each carried armfuls of logs into the den and stacked them neatly in their place.

Patricia Stewart walked into the den. "Hey, guys. Listen, thanks so much for taking care of that for me. I could've done it myself."

"I know you could, Mom, but I can't let you."

Matt went out to get another armful. When he came back Patricia grabbed him and kissed his cheeks. "Thank you so much, Mattie."

He smiled. “You’re welcome, Nana Patti,” he quipped.

Chaz and Matt both went to get a final armful of wood.

“Okay, Mom, you’re good to go. Are you still coming down to dinner tonight?”

“Of course we are. Are you guys all still coming up here the day after Christmas for dinner?”

“Of course. Wouldn’t miss it. Is Dad in bed?”

“Yes. He took something earlier for pain and is snoring away, but he’ll be up in about an hour.”

Chaz nodded. He had to swallow the little lump in his throat. His father had always been so strong, so tough, and Chaz knew that he hated being incapacitated.

“Well, tell him I said to be careful and get better or I’m gonna kick his butt.”

Patricia giggled like a little girl. “Oh, sure, I’ll go up and tell him right now.”

He laughed. “See you guys in a little bit.”

“Bye, Nana,” Matt said as they walked back out.

They left the wagon by the woodpile and headed back toward the house.

Chaz glanced down at his son. “So, Matt, about what we were talking about, how do you feel about what I said?”

Matt shrugged. “Well, I don’t feel that happy about it.”

“Son, you understand that you’re about to go through puberty, right?”

“Yes, sir, cuz you told me enough times.”

Chaz smiled. “I guess I have, because it explains your behavior lately. Goin’ through puberty, Matt, means your body is changing. You’re becoming a man. You’re showing the signs of testosterone running through you, and that makes you feel things you’re not used to feeling and they affect your moods and your emotions.

“Just a few months ago, you didn’t want anything to do with girls. That has begun to change, and that’s good, because it means you’re growing up. But we have to get this thing under control. What I mean by that is, the hormones running through you have an effect on your emotions. You might feel anger more than usual or frustration, or a strong attraction to girls. Still, that’s not an excuse to do or say whatever you want. It means that you have to learn to control those things, because a good man, a real man, can control those urges and tendencies. The bad guys are the ones who never learned how to do that. The bad ones make all us men look bad. We can’t have that.”

They both looked up as Charlie came back down the road from the direction of the Inn. “Did you see Hannah home?” Chaz asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. Boys, come sit here by the fire pit and let’s have a talk.”

“Yes, sir,” Charlie said immediately.

Matthew sighed but obeyed.

Chaz went over most everything he’d already spoken to Matthew about, knowing it wouldn’t hurt for Matt to hear some of those things again. Charlie was pretty quiet while he listened. Chaz decided to put Charlie on the spot.

“So, Charlie, tell me, *do* you like Hannah?”

Charlie glanced at his younger brother and heaved a sigh. “Not sure. I mean, I haven’t made any advances on her or anything like that. But I mean, I like her I guess.

Well enough."

Chaz nodded. "But you understand that what she needs right now is a friend she can trust?"

"I get it."

"Okay, so, here's the clincher of all of this," Chaz said sternly. "This family, our family, is important. It's important to me and your mother and God. And no way, absolutely no way can two brothers allow a girl to come between them. If somehow, you both end up liking the same girl, you cannot fight over it. One of you will have to back off. Period. There is no way a battle over a girl can be allowed to break up our family. You got that?"

They both sat silently for several moments.

Charlie looked up. "Yes, sir, of course not. I love Matt more than anything. He's my brother."

Chaz smiled, but kept his stern tone. "Well, the way you spoke to him earlier didn't sound too much like brotherly love."

Charlie smiled. "Well, he was being a little frustrating. But, like, I'm sorry, Matt, if like, I hurt your feelings or something."

"It's okay," Matt said immediately.

Chaz jumped in. "It is definitely okay if you hurt his feelings. Sometimes the truth hurts. *If* you tell him the truth in a *respectful* manner, then too bad if it hurts his feelings. He'll have to learn to get over it. That's what a man does. So, what you could've done differently, Charlie, was ask him why it was so important to him that he go down with you to the barn."

"He wouldn't have told me it was because he likes Hannah."

"If you had been kind in the asking, he may have. A good big brother would try to understand what his little brother is thinking. So, Charlie, be kinder and more understanding."

"Yes, sir. Again, Matt, I'm sorry."

"Me too, Charlie."

"Good. Now, let's get back to the house because I'm sure your mom could use our help gettin' ready for company tonight."

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December 23rd, Monday Evening

Keith Home, Huntington Beach, California

Melody smiled at the knock on the door. "I'm sure that's Logan," she said to her mother who was currently adding butter to a pot of freshly cooked rice. Melody hurried to the front door and opened it.

Logan stood there, his handsome face smiling. She quickly looked him over. He wore gray slacks and a black sweater over a white collared shirt, and he held a beautiful bouquet of flowers in one hand, a bakery box tucked under his arm, and several gift bags in the other hand.

"Logan," Melody said softly. "What's all this?"

He smiled. "It's Christmas time. You didn't think I'd show up at your house empty-handed, did you?"

"Actually, I've been so busy, I didn't think about it at all." She stepped back and opened the door wider. "Come in."

He stepped inside. "Wow, it smells really good in here."

"It does," Melody agreed. "Mom and I have been cooking frantically since we got home."

"I feel guilty. All I did was rush home and jump in the shower."

"Well, you look very handsome."

"And you look beautiful as always," he said as Melody's mother came into the living room.

"Hello, Logan, welcome."

"Hi, Mrs. Keith. These are for you," he said quickly as he stepped forward and handed her a beautiful bouquet of red carnations, red roses, white lilies, baby's breath, pine cones and holly.

"Oh my, Logan, these are beautiful. Thank you so much," she gushed as she stepped forward and kissed his cheek.

He grinned.

"I'll go put them in a vase. Come in, make yourself comfortable."

"Let me set these down for you," Melody said as she took the gift bags from his hand. She set them over near the Christmas tree and came back to him. "Who is this for?" she asked, pointing at the bakery box.

He smiled. "For everyone. These are Miss Jewell Brooks' special Christmas macaroons and they are like, so good."

Melody took the box and placed it on the coffee table in front of the couch. Logan got a chance to look her over better. She wore a dress, which she didn't do often. This one looked like a white cable-knit sweater that came to just above her knees. It hugged her body and made his mouth go dry. It had a high neck and long sleeves. She had a perfect body. Trim, strong, toned, sexy. She wore red shoes that had a small, chunky heel. She smiled at him.

He took her hands and looked her over closely. "Mel, you look amazing." He pulled her to him. "And very, very sexy."

"Oh, well, um, thank you."

He tilted her face up and kissed her softly. Briefly. He looked up when he heard someone come into the room. It was her father with an armful of wood.

"Mr. Keith, let me help you with that."

David Keith started to shake his head, but Logan quickly took the wood out of his arms and set it down piece by piece, neatly arranging it in the pretty wrought-iron rack near the fireplace. He then turned to shake her father's hand.

"Good to see you again, Logan," David said. "You clean up real nice."

Logan chuckled. "Thanks. And thank you for having me."

"Oh, it's our pleasure. Can I get you something to drink? Maybe some wine?"

"Dad," Melody began.

Logan smiled. "Mr. Keith, is this a test?"

David laughed. "No, more like a joke. But really, we do have some virgin egg nog that is made with raw milk cream. The recipe was given to us by your mother. Would you

like some?"

"I would love some," Logan said quickly.

"I'll go get it. Mel, you want some?"

"No, not yet. It fills me up."

David left the room just as Lyle came running down the stairs with a gift in his hand. "Hey, Logan, long time no see!"

Logan chuckled and shook his hand. "Hey, Lyle. Did you have a good time helping the homeless today?"

"Man, it was so good. Seeing the look on those people's faces. I actually wanted to take them all home with me. They were so grateful for the little bit of stuff we gave them. I almost feel guilty."

"Feel blessed. It's a fine line to walk."

"Right. And I am so blessed. And your dad and uncle, though— ordering all those hot meals for every single person on that street. That was amazing."

"Yeah, I agree."

"Well, anyway. Glad you came to dinner. Let me just sit this down."

He placed the wrapped box under the tree. "Phillip should be down any minute. He got home later than the rest of us. He helped your bro with getting those kids off the streets and then took the Quinn girls home."

"I heard. I'm looking forward to meeting the guy who's gonna stay at our house. I can't remember his name."

"It's Ryder," Phillip said as he came trotting down the steps.

Logan nodded. "Ryder, that's right. Hey, Phil, good to see you."

"You too, man," Phillip said as he approached and shook Logan's hand. "Finally, we get the honor of your company."

Logan laughed. "I dunno about it being an honor, but sorry it took so long. Life has been very busy, and I'm really happy to finally be here."

David came back with Logan's eggnog and handed it to him. Logan immediately took a sip and smiled. "Thanks. That is so good."

Phillip and Lyle immediately went to get some for themselves.

"Logan, sit down," David said. "Relax."

"Well, I have to go help Mom finish cooking. Dad, don't be icky."

She turned and left, Logan watching her departure. He looked back at Mr. Keith. "So, what kind of icky is she talkin' about?"

David shrugged. "Probably like not talking about your relationship with my daughter, asking if you're keeping your hands off her, or asking when you're gonna get married, or..." He stopped when Logan choked.

David's eyebrows rose.

Logan wiped the eggnog off his face with his thumb. "Sorry."

"So, was that such a far-fetched question?"

"Um, no, sir. Not far-fetched at all in my mind."

"Which one are we talking about?" David asked.

Logan's brow creased as he thought back over what the other question was. "Oh, well, no, I mean, I'm pretty much keeping my hands off her."

"Pretty much?"

"Oh, well, I am. I mean, I hug her." He shrugged. "I kiss her. But like, I don't put my hands where they shouldn't be."

David nodded with a smile. "And the other question?"

Logan nodded. "That's the one that's not far-fetched in my mind."

"So, you two have talked about getting married?"

"No, sir. I mean, not really. I mean, we've discussed that we want to date and get to know each other and that the reason for us dating is not to, you know, hook up, but to see if we are good for like, I mean, well, to get married. But I haven't proposed or anything. I wouldn't do that without talking to you first."

David nodded. "But you have intentions of doing that?"

Logan swallowed. "Well, sir, we haven't dated very long, but in my mind, she's the one. Is that what you really wanted to know?"

"Yes it is."

"But I don't think she's quite ready for that yet. So, we'll date. Be exclusive. And when I'm pretty sure things are solid, I'll ask. Oh, like, after I ask you."

David smiled. "Last week, when she was in the hospital, she told me she was in love with you. I told her it was too soon for her to be talking like that. Don't get me wrong. You're a fine young man, Logan, and you are completely capable of taking care of my daughter. But she *is* young. Only eighteen, and her feelings could change. And for that matter, so could yours."

Logan shook his head. "I understand that she's young. I guess I am too, only twenty. But I guarantee you, I know my own mind and my heart. And I am totally in love with Melody, and that will never change."

In the dining room, Phillip stopped short as he overheard the conversation between his dad and Logan. Sighing, he finally turned and headed back into the kitchen. "Um, Mel, you need to get back out to Logan."

"Why?"

"Dad is grilling him."

"Oh no, I told him not to do that." She looked around. "Um, will you and Lyle help Mom?"

"Sure," both Lyle and Phillip said at the same time.

"But Mel," Phil began, "don't make a scene."

She nodded. "I won't." She quickly headed to the living room and sat down next to Logan. "Hey, guys, so whatcha talkin' 'bout?"

Logan smiled warmly at her. "You and how awesome you are."

"I bet. Dad, you weren't being icky, were you?"

"I was being fatherly. That's all."

Melody looked into Logan's eyes and saw some trepidation there. She sighed. They all looked up as Carol came into the room with the flowers Logan brought and placed the vase on the coffee table. "There now, aren't they lovely?" she murmured. "Thank you so much, Logan."

"Glad you like them."

Carol smiled brightly. "Well, okay, everyone, dinner is ready. Let's gather around

the table."

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Logan and Melody finished washing the last of the pots and pans. The dishwasher was softly humming. Their bellies were full. Melody squeezed her microfiber cloth and ran it one more time over the countertops while Logan leaned back and watched her.

She smiled up at him. "All done."

He nodded, peeked around and then motioned her forward. She came immediately, looking over her shoulder. He quickly grabbed her, spun her around, placed her back against the counter, his hands on the counter on either side, trapping her. "I've got ya now," he whispered as he leaned forward and kissed her.

When he tried to pull back, she moaned, put her arms up around his neck and pulled him down for more. He slid his hands around her waist.

"Oh!"

They sprang apart.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Carol Keith said quickly.

Logan cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Keith. I couldn't help myself."

She laughed. "I was just coming in to see what else needs to be done."

"We're all done, Mom," Melody said quickly. "Come on, let's go out to the living room." She grabbed Logan's hand and headed out. Carol followed.

Logan and Melody sat together on the sofa, right next to Phillip.

"Well," Logan began. "I just wanna say thank you for such a delicious dinner. The pork roast was perfect, and that rice, man that was good."

"It's called Christmas rice," Melody explained.

"Yeah, because it has red peppers and green peppers, and then a bunch of other stuff," Lyle said.

Logan nodded. "I'd love to give my mom the recipe."

Phillip laughed. "Logan, you say all the right things."

Logan smiled. "What? No, really, I'm serious."

"Sure you are. Anyway," Phillip rose, went to the tree and pulled out a small gift bag. "So, this is for you."

Logan smiled and accepted the gift. "Thank you, Phil." He reached in and pulled out an insulated mug. Logan grinned. "Awesome." On the front it read, *Life Without Music Would*...and then on the next part was a diagram of a note on the third line of a treble staff with a flat sign in front of it. He glanced up at Phillip. "Very good."

Phillip laughed. "I had to look it up to make sure it meant what I thought it meant."

Logan chuckled. "Effort *NOTED*. Life would indeed 'be flat'." He looked the cup over. "Really, this is perfect. It will hold my morning smoothie and keep it cold while I'm on my way to school. Thanks so much, Phil." He stood and offered his hand, but once he had it, he pulled him in for a hug.

"I mean," Phil began, "it's nothing really. It's just a cup."

"A gift is never nothing," Logan said, quoting his grandfather.

"Cool," Lyle said, "because I have one for you." He went to the tree and picked up the gift he'd earlier placed under the tree. He handed it to Logan and went back to his seat.

Logan looked the gift over. It was a wrapped box about the size of a coffee mug, but it was too light to be a mug. The wrapping was a little haphazard. He smiled at Lyle. "Did you wrap this yourself?"

Lyle nodded. "Yeah, I tried."

"It's awesome and again, effort noted."

The people in the room laughed softly.

Logan opened the box to find another box inside. That box wasn't wrapped. It was just a small white box. Logan opened it. It was a metal keychain with a message engraved on it. Logan silently read the message and then nodded, a big smile on his face.

"What does it say?" Melody asked.

"It says, 'Never forget that the brother of the girl you love thinks you're totally cool. Don't mess that up.'" He stood immediately, pulled his keys from his pocket and added the keychain to his keys, then walked over and hugged Lyle. "I am gonna try very hard to not mess that up," he said. "Thank you so much. I love it. And I love you, brother."

Melody smiled at the words. She felt like her heart might explode and she sniffed back the tears that tried to gather. This guy—how lucky was she to have this guy? No, she thought, how blessed. She looked up briefly. *Thank You, Jesus,* she thought. When she opened her eyes, her father was looking at her. She smiled at him and nodded, hoping he saw in Logan what she did.

"It's our turn," Carol said quickly. She went to the tree and picked up a gift bag and handed it to him. "We really wanted to get you something, but had a hard time deciding what to get. So we decided to keep it simple and bought a few things because we couldn't make up our minds."

"She means she couldn't make up her mind," David added.

Logan smiled. "I'm sure I'm gonna love it." He reached into the gift bag and pulled out a black t-shirt that had a picture of piano keys on it, but in the middle, the keys rise up to make a cross. His smile widened. "I love it." He pulled out a second t-shirt, also black, that read, *'As for me and my Piano, We Will Serve the Lord.'* He grinned. "Wow, and I really love this one too! Thank you so much!"

"Wait, there's more," Carol said.

He looked again and found a blue satin-covered box. He opened it and pulled out a bottle of the men's cologne made by the same brand as Gabe's body wash. "Ahh, yes, this is really good stuff," Logan said. He stood and went to Carol first, who also stood. "Thank you, Mrs. Keith. I love all of it so much."

"I'm so glad you do."

He took her hand and leaned in and kissed her cheek. He quickly turned to Mr. Keith and shook his hand. "Thank you, sir. I really appreciate it."

"It's not a big deal, Logan. I mean, what do you get a young man who has everything, right?"

Logan frowned a bit, looked slowly around him and nodded. "You're right. I have everything. I mean, just look around me. The most amazing girl in the world, her most amazing family, and a t-shirt that proclaims to the world that I serve the Lord. My cup runneth over."

Melody smiled again, and this time the tears filled her eyes. She sniffed and rose.

"My turn," she said quickly. She went to the tree and lifted a small box from underneath and brought it to him.

Everyone sat quietly to see what Melody had bought for her boyfriend.

He opened the small white box and it was a thin, polished, white stone in the shape of a heart, edged by what appeared to be gold plate. No chain. No hole to add a chain. Just a simple heart. He looked up at her, smiling, because he believed he knew what it meant. "You're giving me your heart?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "It goes in your pocket or in your wallet. That's why it's so flat. I'm giving you my whole heart, to keep with you at all times. That's what it represents."

He sighed as his own heart overflowed. "I accept your whole heart, Melody. I will cherish it and keep it with me everywhere I go, always. Forever. I will take very good care of it. I'll be very careful not to lose it, or scratch it or damage it in any way."

Melody smiled as he stood and pulled her up to him. They were in front of an audience, so he simply touched her face. "Thank you, Mel. It's the best gift ever and it means more to me than life itself."

Her eyes opened wide.

He smiled and hugged her softly. He then sat her down and smiled at everyone. "Thank you, Keith family, for such wonderful and thoughtful gifts. And now, it's my turn." He went to the tree and gathered up his gift bags and handed the appropriate one to each member of the family.

"Lyle, you go first," David said.

Lyle reached into his bag and pulled out a picture of a machine. He studied the paper. "It's a WhipaSnap machine."

Logan nodded. "It's fairly new on the market. Only a few pros and some high schools are using it. It's a snap machine for quarterbacks, so you can work by yourself, or without a center. My brother swears by it and says he wished he had it when he was younger. It's made by a guy who was a Hall of Fame quarterback at his college. The quarterback with the most wins in his school's history. He does high-end coaching now. JoJo says this guy was an amazing athlete that got no hype. He actually lives in Georgia. His name is Jeremy Clements. He makes these machines himself, by hand, and yours was delayed, but it will be here in another week. It will really help you as you train. It comes with a pamphlet of drills and skills."

"Wow, Logan, thank you so much. This is amazing. I will definitely put this to use."

"I know you will. Let me know when it comes in and we'll work together a little bit."

"So, you used to play football?" Lyle asked.

"Sure. I was my brother's top receiver in high school."

"Oh, wow, I didn't know that. Very cool." He stood and came around to give Logan a hug. "Thanks, man."

"You're very welcome." He turned and smiled at Phillip. "Phil, I hope you like what you got. I think your parents will really like it too."

Phillip reached in his smaller bag and pulled out two small boxes, each containing a dash cam. One for the front and one for the back of his car. He smiled as he looked closer at them. "Aww, man, this is so awesome. You're right, my parents are gonna love

this."

"What is it?" his mom asked.

It was Logan who explained. "They're dash cams. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, novice teen drivers are twice as likely as adult drivers to be involved in a fatal crash. Dash cams are a must to show what really happens and they protect people from being falsely accused of causing an accident. These cams also monitor speed, location, they're voice-operated, they have audio, and all footage is stored. I just installed them in my car last year."

Phillip looked up from reading the package. "Wow, Logan, these are pretty darn cool."

He nodded. "They will keep you a little safer, and you'll drive safer too, knowing they're there."

"That is a very thoughtful gift," David said. "Thank you."

"Yeah, Logan, thanks so much." He stood and hugged Logan.

Logan smiled. "Mrs. Keith, my mom said I needed to be very careful about what I got you because women are very particular about what they use personally or in their homes, so she recommended what I got for you. I hope you like it."

Carol smiled as she reached into her bag and pulled out three very beautiful, obviously high-end scented candles. "Oh, Logan, these are absolutely beautiful."

"I hope you like them. My mom says they're all natural, no artificial scents or colors so they don't pollute the air if you're worried about that sort of thing. And she thought you would love the way they smell because they are like high-end perfume."

Carol removed the metal lid from one of the glass jars and sniffed. Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, wow, that smells so good! How did you know I love candles? I love them so much. I burn them all the time."

Logan smiled. "Well, I didn't know, but I'm glad I got it right."

She rose and came to him, took his face in her hands and kissed his cheeks.

Logan blushed and moved on. "Mr. Keith, I have to tell you about your gift."

David nodded with a smile. "I'm interested to hear."

"Some of the best talks I've ever had with my father have been in the middle of the night. I wouldn't be able to sleep and he'd get up to see who was in the kitchen, and we'd sit at the table and talk. We'd usually snack on cookies or eat a bowl of cereal. Then one year for Father's Day, we bought him the same thing I just bought for you and it has been the center of so many late-night talks, prayers, confessions. So, I just wanted to share that with you."

David nodded. "Well, now I'm really curious." He lifted the bag from the floor onto his lap. "Wow, it's pretty heavy." He reached into the bag and first pulled out a package of chocolate bars, followed by a bag of marshmallows, and then a box of graham crackers and a bag of wooden skewers. The last thing he pulled out was a rectangular concrete tabletop firepit. "Oh, this is very cool, Logan."

Logan smiled. "I hope you like it. But I do have a warning. Roasting marshmallows in the middle of the night, well, it smells really good and a lot of times people will wake up and come down to join you." He shrugged. "Still, those times were always fun and beautiful memories."

David smiled. “We will definitely put this to good use.” He stood and Logan stood and they shook hands. He looked into Logan’s eyes. “Well done, young man.”

Logan smiled and so did Melody. Logan turned to his girl and nodded at her to open her gift.

She peered into a small gift bag and pulled out a rectangular box covered in blue velvet. She slowly opened the box. It was a necklace that matched the anklet he’d given her earlier. It was a delicate gold chain with a pendant that consisted of a gold open heart with a cross inside, and a green gemstone on the cross.

She looked up at him. “Is this made by the same people?”

He shook his head. “No, this is Tiffany, and that’s a real emerald, again, to kind of match your hazel eyes.”

“Logan, this is beautiful.”

He smiled. “It’s pretty. *You’re* beautiful. Do you want to try it on?”

She nodded excitedly and removed it from the box.

“Let me,” he said.

She turned her back to him and he quickly fastened the necklace for her. She turned toward her family. “What do you think?”

“It’s lovely, Melody,” her mother said.

The guys all agreed.

Melody turned back to Logan, her hand caressing the necklace. “Thank you, Logan. I love it so much.”

“I’m glad you do.” He ran his hand over her hair, bent down and placed a quick kiss on her lips.

David rose quickly. “Well now, everyone, this has been such a wonderful evening.”

“It has,” Carol agreed. “Logan, thank you so much for coming to dinner. We loved having you.”

“It was truly my pleasure,” he said quickly, hoping that wasn’t a hint to leave, because he wanted to stay a little longer, maybe get some alone time with his girl. It was Phillip who came to his rescue.

“Well, Logan,” Phillip began. “I’m kind of disappointed.”

“Why?”

“I guess I was hoping your gift to our family might be something musical, like you singing a song for us or something.”

Logan smiled. “Well, I didn’t want to presume anything, but hey, my guitar just happens to be in the car.”

“It is?” Carol said. “Oh my goodness, please, Logan, would you go get it and sing something for us?”

Logan smiled and nodded. “I’d love to. Be right back.”

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2 Corinthians 9:7

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

December 23rd, Monday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jeffy stood out on the front steps and watched as the Quinn sisters drove up the long drive. She smiled brightly at them. They pulled just past the front of the steps and got out of the car.

Raylynn smiled sweetly. "Hello, Dr. Kino."

"Hi, Raylynn, I'm so glad you two came. Welcome!"

Kaylee looked around wide-eyed. "Wow. This place is amazing."

Jeffy nodded. "It is, and I love being here."

"You grew up here, right?" Raylynn asked.

"I did. And then when I got married, Cam and I moved out to our own place, but when I got pregnant, I wanted my mommy, so we moved back in."

"Oh, so, are you gonna move out again?"

"I'm not sure. I love being here. My husband loves being here. And I now have four little brothers and a sister that we've become very attached to." She smiled kindly. "So, come in, and I'll show you around if you like, or just come in and relax. I know you've been working hard all day."

"She has," Kaylee said. "Not me."

"Well, that's a good thing," Jeffy said. "Your body still needs to rest a little more than usual."

Jeffy ushered them inside and both girls' eyes widened and their mouths fell open as they took in their surroundings.

"It's beautiful," Raylynn said.

"Thank you," Shelley said as she came to greet them. "And welcome. I'm Shelley Kino. I met you at church yesterday, but you met so many I wasn't sure if you'd remember me."

"I remember you," Raylynn said. "You're JoJo's grandmother, right?"

"Right." She smiled sweetly at the girl that had JoJo's attention, then turned to her sister. "Hi, Kaylee. How are you feeling today?"

"Hello, I'm feelin' okay. Better now than earlier this morning."

"You were bad this morning?"

Kaylee nodded. "Yes, well, probably it was more like I was depressed this morning."

"Oh, I see. And then you went out to help the homeless people and now you feel better?"

"Hmm, I guess that's true."

Shelley nodded knowingly. "A lot of times, when we stop focusing on our own

problems and start focusing on helping others, it makes our troubles seem much smaller. It's a matter of perspective."

Kaylee nodded. "I think you're right."

"I usually am," Shelley quipped, making the girls laugh.

"Mrs. Kino, your home is so nice," Raylynn said. "It's really amazing."

"Thank you. I know how you feel. The first time I came here, I couldn't keep my mouth from dropping open. Eric showed me around and I was totally amazed. I wasn't used to a place so large. The house I grew up in could fit in this foyer area."

The girls nodded. "Us too."

"And when I married my first husband, the house we lived in was only a tiny bit bigger than that."

Jeffy smiled. "I love that little house."

Shelley nodded. "Me too. Jeffy, why don't you take the girls on a tour, while I finish dinner."

"Will do."

She led them around the giant home talking about who used to stay in certain bedrooms, giving more of a history of different rooms of the house rather than talking about the decor or design or amenities.

When they got to the large playroom downstairs, Raylynn asked where the children were.

Jeffy smiled. "They are out back with my dad and my husband having a martial arts lesson."

She led them back upstairs and out the dining room doors to the enormous deck. They walked down several levels, past the swimming pool and pool house, past the volleyball court and basketball goal and trampoline, and finally to the beach where children were screaming and beating up a grown man. The man and four boys wore white pants of a martial arts uniform and that was all. The little girl also wore the bottom half of the uniform paired with a little white t-shirt, her long, dark, wavy hair blowing around her in the breeze.

Jeffy stood silently and watched the children wrestle her father down to the ground and jump on him. He grunted as if they were really hurting him. He always did that. Jeffy remembered when she was little and her goal had been to kick him hard enough to make him grunt.

Eric made a loud roar and suddenly pushed all of the children off him and rolled away. They all screamed and tried to catch him. He stood and dodged each little body as they ran at him. Angelina tried to jump on him and he pretended that she succeeded by helping her on his back and then he fell to his knees. All the other children tried desperately to also jump on his back, but Angelina was pushing them off and then raised her hands in victory. The sound of the children's laughter was like music.

Jeffy giggled and glanced over at Raylynn and Kaylee. "So, that's my father."

Raylynn smiled. "Oh wow, he looks very different from how he looked yesterday at church."

Jeffy laughed. "I bet. Sometimes he's very quiet and distinguished, sometimes he's very bossy and commanding, sometimes he's very loving and kind and sometimes he's

like this, playful and fun. But all the time, he's wise. He's very wise and I can't even express the love and respect I have for that man."

Kaylee looked silently up at Dr. Kino. This honor she was bestowing upon her father reminded her of the way her people spoke about the honorary Chief Saracen of long ago. It touched her. She didn't often think about her people. They didn't have a chief anymore. They had a chairman. There weren't very many of the Quapaw tribe left. Listening to Dr. Kino talk about her father, it got to her and suddenly Kaylee wanted to go home and see her parents. They were old. Kaylee had always wanted to get far away from them. But suddenly, she wanted to go home and hug them.

Jeffy looked at Kaylee, smiled and nodded. "Then go."

Kaylee blinked at the beautiful woman. "What?"

Jeffy smiled as Raylynn turned her attention to what was being said to her sister. "I said— then go."

"Did I accidentally speak out loud?" Kaylee asked.

"No. But your *thoughts* were very loud."

"You actually know what I was thinking?" Kaylee asked.

Jeffy shrugged and smiled.

"You really are psychic. I really didn't believe it."

"Well, I didn't mean to intrude, but your thoughts were very loud and very clear. So, go home and hug your parents, Kaylee."

Raylynn drew in a sharp breath. "What are you talking about?"

Jeffy glanced at Raylynn then back at Kaylee. "Do you mind if I tell her? I understand that those were your private thoughts. I won't tell her if you don't want me to say anything."

Kaylee shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't really mind. I mean, it wasn't like it was anything bad."

Jeffy nodded and smiled at Raylynn. "Your sister was touched by the love and honor I show my father. It reminded her of an old chief, Chief Saracen, and how your people speak about him, and she was suddenly longing to go home and hug your parents. Her thoughts were very powerful and filled with love and so I told her to go and do what she was thinking."

"Well, that's impressive, Dr. Kino, and a wonderful thought. I love, Kaylee, that you want to show love and respect to our parents. That would make them very happy, but there is no way for us to do that, currently," Raylynn said quickly.

Jeffy smiled. "Sure there is. I know you're talking mostly about the expense of flying home, and also about the logistics. But I can make it happen and it won't cost you a penny. You can leave here tonight after Kaylee speaks to my father, go home and pack, and by early tomorrow morning you can be on a jet flying to Oklahoma. I'll have a car meet you and take you to your home."

Ray shook her head. "Dr. Kino, that sounds wonderful, really, but I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask me. I offered. And ya know what, Raylynn? The more I think about it, the more I feel it's exactly the right thing to do. I'm kind of excited. How wonderful will this be for Kaylee, to go home when her heart is so full of love and repentance? It

will actually help her emotions to heal. And..." Jeffy paused. "And I'm feeling that it will help you to find some closure."

"Closure? About what?"

"Hmm, do you really want me to tell you?"

"Yes."

"It requires me to read you."

"Okay."

Jeffy closed her eyes briefly and when she opened them, she had tears. "Oh, Raylynn, you are a beautiful servant of the Lord. When you and Kaylee left this past August, to bring her to stay with you here, there were hurtful words spoken. You were worried about those being the last words your parents would hear. They are elderly. They are... oh, they're not your biological parents."

If Ray had been skeptical about Jeffy's abilities, she was no longer. She only nodded though.

Jeffy smiled. "I see you have no wish to discuss that right now. Anyway, you want to see them smile and feel happy again. We can make that happen, because I can definitely get you there. Tell ya what, let's talk to my mom and dad and see what they think about it. But I'm telling you right now, it wouldn't take much effort at all to give you this trip."

"But I have to be back to work on Friday."

Jeffy nodded. "We'll get you back. No problem. Talk it over with your sister for a minute. I'm gonna go kiss my husband and tell my dad that you're here."

Kaylee looked out again toward the group on the beach. "That hunk on the side over there, that's your husband?"

Jeffy smiled. "Yes. Isn't he adorable? I'm gonna go see him. I'll be back in a few. Talk it over."

They watched Jeffy head out across the beach toward her husband. But the children saw her and screamed and went running to her. They overtook her and wrestled her into the sand. Cam had to come and pull them off and save her. Raylynn smiled at the sight.

"They're a pretty cool family, huh?" Kaylee said.

Raylynn looked at her. "They seem to be almost unreal."

"So, whaddya think about what Dr. Kino said?"

"I think it's happening too fast for me."

"Oh, Ray, you're such a scaredy cat. She's offering to pay for a quick trip home. Wouldn't it be wonderful to arrive home there tomorrow with a bunch of gifts for mom and dad and make their Christmas a happy one? And remember when I left, how I was really rude to dad? I feel like I need to apologize. I feel like I need to make it right. I suddenly felt so strongly that I need to honor my parents. Don't you feel it?"

Raylynn sighed. "Of course. I mean, I miss them. But they knew we wouldn't be able to come home for Christmas."

"So, that will make it an awesome surprise."

"What about your face? You want them to know what happened to you?"

Kaylee frowned as she thought, and then shrugged. "It is what it is, Ray. Let's do this. We'll never have another chance or offer like this."

Raylynn sighed. “Let me think about it.”

“Well don’t take too long.”

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Grandmaster Kino smiled at Kaylee Quinn as she sat in what Gabe liked to call ‘the hotseat.’ Currently, her face was a collage of bruises and there was still a little bit of swelling, yet still, he could tell that Kaylee was a beautiful girl. She blinked up at him currently, obviously unsure of how this little session was going to go, and she was a little nervous.

“Kaylee, tell me how you’re feeling.”

She made a face. “Well, I’m okay. I mean, my arms and legs work, my brain works, and I’m not dead, so that’s cool.”

He nodded with a smile. “It is indeed cool.” He studied her eyes for several moments, until she became uncomfortable. She shifted positions. Drew a deep breath. Cleared her throat. Crossed and uncrossed her legs.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Just not quite sure what to say. So, like, are you gonna tell me how to stop feeling so bad?”

“I think I’m too late for that.”

Her eyes opened wide. “Are you saying you can’t help me?”

He smiled. “No. I’m saying you already know how to stop feeling bad. I’m just sitting here wondering what amazing things God has in store for you. He obviously has plans for you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, there’s a number of reasons. First, your ex-boyfriend could have killed you. According to JoJo the guy was not even close to stopping. He was way out of control. If JoJo hadn’t gotten his attention, he probably would have delivered a fatal blow within the next thirty seconds. But JoJo saw what was happening and intervened. He told me he heard you yelling first. He wouldn’t have heard you had he not had to go back to his car to get his bag. And he had to go get his bag because it was in his trunk instead of in the seat beside him. And he never puts his bag in the trunk but for some reason, he did that day.

“Some people would call that a coincidence, but we don’t believe in coincidences. We believe everything happens for a reason. God’s universe is not chaos or random. It is ordered and He has a plan for each of us. So, God knew you would need help that day, and He sent one of His favored sons to help you, to save your life. Why would He save your life? The obvious answer is, He’s not finished with you. You have more to do in this earthly life, and it’s important enough for Him to intervene.”

Kaylee sighed. “Well, that’s a nice story, but I don’t think I’m special enough to do something important for God.”

“And *that’s*—what we need to work on. Why are you not special? Why are you not worthy to work for God?”

She shrugged. “I’m a nobody. I come from a dirt-poor small tribe of American Indians. No one in my family has amounted to anything. Why should I?”

“What about your sister?”

Kaylee wrinkled up her nose. “What has *she* done?”

Eric’s eyebrows rose. “She paved your way.”

“Huh?” Her eyes opened wide. “Oh, I mean, I didn’t mean to be disrespectful, but, like, what do you mean?”

He smiled because it was obvious to him that this girl was a fireball. “I mean, she paved your way. She graduated early from high school and made her way out here to attend USC. She worked hard, studied hard— instead of dating and partying. She got her DPT and found a good job as a physical therapist. She went back home to get you and bring you out here and show you how you too can get educated and get off the rez. She paid your way out here. She showed you everything you needed to do to get started. She’s there for you if you need anything or have any problems. Am I right?”

Kaylee sighed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“You know so. Why are you not willing to give her the credit she deserves? That’s not an attack. I’m sincerely asking you to search your heart and tell me why you are resentful of the one person who seems to have dedicated her life to you?”

Kaylee sat quietly. “Maybe because she rides me hard all the time. Constantly nagging me if I’ve done my schoolwork, if I’ve turned my paper in, if I’ve studied for my exam. She never lets up.”

Eric nodded. “What a pain, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I could give you a pat answer and tell you that she does it because she cares about you, or because she wants to see you succeed. But I think it’s something even more than that. I think because God has great plans for you He has prompted Raylynn to watch out for you, to watch over you until you have your balance and then she can let you go.”

“Have my balance?”

“Yes, like when a parent is teaching a child to ride a bike. They teach, they call out encouragements and they run along beside him for a little while, until they’re sure he has his balance, and then, they let go.”

Kaylee sighed. “Yeah, well, I didn’t ask Raylynn to pave my way and watch over me or run beside me.”

“No, I can see that. I think it was God asking her to do it. She just may not realize that God was urging her to do it. And I can see that you don’t want her to do it, and I think that’s because she’s keeping you from doing what you want to do.”

“And what is it you think I want to do?”

“You, Kaylee, want to have a good time. Party. Drink. Be promiscuous.”

“So? I mean, I’m a young college kid. Isn’t that what we do?”

“It is what many who have no connection to God do. But you, Kaylee, have a strong connection to God. I can feel it.”

“Okay, but I just wanna have some fun. What’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with that is Lucifer is whispering in your ear, trying to lure you into that kind of lifestyle. He’s telling you to have fun. You’re only young once. What could it hurt? Though, the condition of your face should tell you what it could hurt. And the dark side is whispering to you so much because they know that you are a bright light. They know that God has called you to do something special and they’re gonna do

everything they can to put out your light. Your sister doesn't even know what she's up against. And if she keeps urging you down the correct path, ya know, they might go after her and take her out of the picture— so that they can get a better shot at you."

Kaylee's heart sped up.

Eric decided to change the subject while that simmered a bit. "Let me ask you a different question. Do you feel like you're a victim?"

"A victim of what?"

"Of anything? Of life. Of the situation you were born into. Of your heritage or how you grew up?"

She shrugged. "Well, it wasn't the best way to grow up. My parents were old. We didn't have much. My sister was always busy. So, I had to make my own way."

He nodded. "And how did you do that?"

She grinned. "I have my ways."

He knew that she thought he wouldn't press, but he did. "Tell me, Kaylee, what *ways* do you have?"

"Oh, well, everyone thought I was pretty. Very pretty. They told me all the time, and..."

"Do you think you're pretty?"

"Sure. I mean, when I'm not all beat up."

"To be honest, you pride yourself on your looks, right?" he pressed.

She nodded. "Sure. My looks are important. I found that if you're pretty enough people will do anything for you. Boys especially. Buy you stuff. Take you places. Do your homework for you."

"And what did you do for them?"

She shrugged. "Anything they wanted."

He nodded. "That's a form of prostitution."

Her eyes opened wide.

He smiled kindly. "I'm not trying to make you feel bad, Kaylee. I'm trying to help you see your own worth, because I get the feeling that you don't feel worthy, and I see that is for a good reason."

She blinked as she looked into his face. He was not being unkind. He was being like the stories her people told of Chief Saracen. Her heart filled again, like it did when she'd been talking to Dr. Kino.

"Kaylee, you are a child of the Most High God. He has something big for you to do. I don't know what. That's something that will be revealed to *you*. You are worthy. And you will not be alone in life. There is a son of God who is searching for you. When he finds you, will you be in another man's bed?"

She looked down.

"I'm not saying that to embarrass you. I'm saying that to shake you up a bit. Kaylee, your worth doesn't come from how pretty you are. You are so much more than that. You are a leader, young lady. I can feel it. You are not shy. Your mind is quick. You are strong. You are a bright light. You are going to do great things. You *are* worthy. So, Kaylee, act like you are worthy. That man who almost killed you, you gave yourself to him because you didn't realize that you are worth so much more. He was not worthy of

you. He was actually a demon sent to destroy you. Don't make it easy for them.

"You are a Christian. That means you believe in Jesus. You must clean up your act. You must get down on your knees every single morning and every single night and pray and ask Jesus to dwell in you, to change you, to lead you, to guide you. I'm not talking about a religious thing. I'm talking about a relationship with Jesus. I know you feel it. I know you don't talk to Him because you don't feel worthy. So, Kaylee, be worthy. Make yourself worthy. Stop doing things to self-destruct. I cannot wait to see what God has in store for you. I'm excited to see what He has in store for you."

She didn't answer him because her throat was clogged and her eyes filled with tears and spilled over. He offered her a couple of tissues and waited.

"Kaylee, earlier, when we first started this session, you asked me if I could help you to not feel so bad, I told you, you'd already discovered how to not feel bad. Can you put your finger on that yet? Do you know how to not feel so bad? Do you recognize what brought you relief already today?"

She shook her head.

"You do know, but I'll make it clear to you. Today, you went out to help the homeless people and forgot about your own troubles for a little while. You stopped feeling sorry for yourself. You saw others who were much worse off than you. You had compassion for those people, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

He smiled. Her softly mumbled words told him he'd reached her and she was showing him respect. "The compassion you were able to feel for those people tells me that you are not lost. You are far from lost. You discovered that being in service to others instead of sitting around feeling sorry for yourself is the best medicine. It truly cures ailments. It pulls us out of depression. It makes us grateful. Remember *that* the next time you want to give in to the 'woe is me' syndrome, because, Kaylee, woe is not you. You are strong. You are powerful. You are bright. You are intelligent. A young man worthy of you will find you. You just work on you. Can you do that?"

She looked up and nodded. "Yes, sir."

He smiled. "Good girl. And there's one more thing I'd like you to do."

"Okay," she said simply.

"I want you to be kind to your sister and let her know that you appreciate her paving the way. If you want to tell her that it's time to let go, you can do that. But show your gratitude for what she's done for you, and maybe reassure her that you're gonna keep pedaling."

She smiled. "And try not to crash."

He nodded. "Don't be discouraged though, if you do crash, because the bad guys are gonna try to put rocks in your path."

She sighed and nodded her head thoughtfully.

"So, tell me, have you and Raylynn decided to take the trip home?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wonderful. I think you are following the promptings of God. I think you are supposed to go there and now, I'm going to follow some promptings that I'm receiving. When you get there, you might see some people who are in need of help. I don't know

what it will be. It could be they just need some food. Or a new stove. Or their car fixed. Or their plumbing fixed. Or a bill paid. Or gifts for their children. Whatever you come across, I will give you access to whatever you need to help. You can call me anytime, day or night. Don't worry about the time difference. Let's work together to make this happen. Will you do that?"

Her eyes were opened wide. "Uh, yes, sir. Is this for real?"

He smiled. "It is absolutely— for real." He rose and came out from behind his desk to stand next to her. "May I have permission to lay hands on your head and pray over you and bless you?"

"Oh! Yes, sir. Thank you. That would be awesome."

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December 23rd Monday Evening

Mark Adams Home, Newport, California

Nineteen-year-old Ryder Bell wiped the fog off the mirror and stared at his own image. He almost didn't recognize himself. His dark curls had gotten long, the beard was rough and scraggly and was about to be gone. His brown eyes looked hollow. There were dark circles under his eyes. Yet, here he was in a very nice bedroom with his own bathroom. His stomach was full. His heart was also full. How lucky was he to run into JoJo Adams, a guy who had it all, and seemed to be bent on helping a homeless kid get back on his feet. He shook his head and smiled. He was so lucky.

He started on the beard. Not an easy task. It took him quite a while and he cut himself a few times, but finally, his jaw was smooth. He patted the aftershave they'd provided onto his cheeks, waited for the sting to subside and drew a deep breath. It smelled really good.

Humming to himself, he left the bathroom, pulled the towel off his waist and tossed it onto the bed. He looked around, puzzled. His clothes were gone. In their place was some underwear, a pair of jeans, a USC t-shirt, and some socks. He shook his head in wonder at these kind people and got dressed, pulling his old, dirty sneakers on over the clean socks. He looked up at the knock on his door. "Yes, uh, come in."

The door opened and JoJo peeked in. He smiled. "Wow. The difference is amazing."

Ryder smiled and touched his smooth jaw. "I bet. Feels good to get clean and get rid of that beard."

"It makes you look so much younger." JoJo nodded. "I see the clothes work. We're about the same height, I might be a little taller and you're a little underweight but you'll fill in soon."

Ryder nodded. "JoJo, thank you. I mean, for the clothes and for, well, for everything."

"Hey, it's no big deal. Really. And it's my pleasure and I'm glad I ran into you and glad we could help."

"I can't believe how much better I feel."

JoJo nodded. "Sometimes we take things for granted until we don't have them, so I imagine something as simple as a shower probably feels pretty darn good."

"Yeah. And even a soft towel to dry off, and soap that like, smells really good. And shampoo. And hot water. And clean socks."

JoJo nodded. “You’ve really been through it. Well, my dad sent me up here to ask if you’ll come down and join the family. Everyone is interested in getting to know you and we’re gonna have some dessert. My brother will be home soon and I know he’s gonna want to meet you.”

“Where is he?”

“At his girlfriend’s house having dinner with her parents and her brothers. You met one of her brothers.”

“Oh, Phillip?”

“Yep. He’s a great guy. So, will you come down?”

“Lead the way.”

They went downstairs and Ryder was greeted immediately and sweetly by JoJo’s mother.

“There you are!” Bella sang. “Oh, wow, Ryder, you look like a different person. I bet you feel better.”

“Yes, ma’am. A whole lot better. Thank you so much for letting me stay here.”

“Oh, it’s our pleasure and you can stop thanking us. We’re happy to help you, and you’ve already said thanks about a hundred times.”

Ryder smiled.

“I wanna meet him,” four-year-old Emily demanded.

They parted and JoJo scooped her up in his one arm. “Emily, this is Ryder.”

Ryder smiled. “Hello, Emily. What a pretty name.”

She smiled. “Hello. Are you sad that you are homeless?”

“Em,” JoJo started.

“It’s okay. It’s a good question,” Ryder said. “I was a little bit sad. But now that I can stay at your house for a little while, I feel a lot happier. And now that I’ve met you, I feel even better!”

She smiled. “My brothers say I make them happy so maybe I can make you happy too.”

“I’m thinking you’re probably right.”

“How come you got homeless?”

“And that’s enough of that, young lady,” Bella said as she took her from JoJo, set her on the floor, held her hand tightly and led her into the den.

“Sorry about that,” JoJo said.

“It’s okay. Really. I mean, it’s probably hard for her to understand how it can happen. I don’t blame her. It’s hard for me to understand too.”

“Well, come in, my father’s in the den.”

They walked back to the den and Mark rose from the small desk he was sitting at and walked forward, hand extended. “Ryder, it’s good to meet you. I’m Mark Adams, JoJo’s father.”

“Mr. Adams, it’s very nice to meet you, and, well, thank you for inviting me into your home.”

“It’s our pleasure. Really. Don’t think another thing about it. Have a seat. We’re all very interested in getting to know you.”

He nodded and sat down on one end of a large sectional sofa. “So, I’m not sure that

you want to hear my story because it's not very nice."

Mark smiled. "Actually we do want to hear. But maybe it would be easier for you if we tell you about us first. My beautiful wife, Bella, and I met almost nine years ago."

"Oh, so, Mrs. Adams is not your mother, JoJo?"

"She's the only mother I've ever known. My biological mother died when I was a baby. But my mom now, I love her. She's an awesome mother."

"That's cool."

"We met in martial arts class. I was her teacher," Mark went on.

"Oh, you teach martial arts?"

"Yes. *Kino Martial Arts*. My mother is married to Grandmaster Kino."

"Oh! Mark Adams. Oh, I know who you are. Good grief. I should have put two and two together. I've been so out of it for so long. But, I remember, you fought in a *Kino Challenge* and won. I was about ten. I remember because I always wanted to learn martial arts but there was no way. Oh, and you have a brother. Joey Adams. Right? He won like a bunch of the challenges. But you fought for him because he got shot."

Mark nodded. "That's right. He was shot by a man who tried to beat up his own wife and Joey stepped in and stopped him and he retaliated by shooting Joey."

Ryder shook his head. "What is wrong with people? I mean, today I met that girl, what was her name?" he asked as he turned to JoJo.

"Kaylee."

"Yeah, she was all beat up by her boyfriend."

Mark nodded. "And my wife, when I met her, she was married to another man at the time, a man who was very abusive. He almost killed her. It's a long story, but nutshell version, her husband died, I married her and here we are. So, what I'm trying to say, Ryder, is we are very familiar with the devastation caused by people who abuse. Which means, if you'll tell us your story, we might be able to help you through this and truly get you back on your feet in a healthy mental state."

Ryder nodded. "Well, I don't even know where to begin."

Bella interrupted. "Well, don't begin yet, because dessert is ready. Everyone go grab a plate and bring it back in here. Em, sit down here by the coffee table and use your spoon and please try to not make a mess."

"Okay, mommy."

JoJo motioned for Ryder to follow him. They headed into the kitchen. JoJo picked up a plate and handed it to Ryder then grabbed one for himself. He nodded. "Grab a napkin and a fork there. And a bottle of water over there."

They got what they needed and headed back into the den.

Mark came back right after. "Bella, this looks so good."

She smiled. "Well, you know I love chocolate."

Ryder eyed his plate. It appeared to be a chocolate brownie, with vanilla ice cream topped with another brownie, topped with whipped cream and drizzled with chocolate syrup. He smiled.

They ate for a few minutes, speaking only to tell Bella how delicious it was.

Finally, Mark set his fork down. "So, Ryder, what are your goals?"

Ryder frowned. "Um, well, good question. My goal for so long has been to find a

hot meal that I need to think a minute." He sighed and shrugged. "I guess my goal is to find a job and maybe find a cheap place to live."

Mark nodded. "When you're homeless and have nowhere to live, that's a good goal. But you are no longer homeless."

Ryder didn't know what to think about that because he was sure they didn't invite him to stay with them forever.

Mark smiled. "Let's pretend for just a minute that you are my actual son. Just for a minute. And I'm asking you, son, what is it that you want to do with your life? What would you say?"

Ryder shook his head. "I'm not sure."

Mark nodded. "It's a hard question to just suddenly have an answer to, but, just throw some things out off the top of your head and let's consider them. Just as an exercise."

Ryder frowned as he thought for several moments.

Mark decided to help him out. "Would you want to go to college?"

Ryder sighed. "Honestly?"

"Always. Please, with complete honesty."

Ryder nodded. "Okay, well, I know I'm supposed to say yes I'd love to go to college, but really, I'm not sure that's what I want."

Mark nodded. "Good. If you're not sure then it's not what you want. That's not a problem. College isn't for everyone."

"Really," JoJo said. "Here's some honesty for you. If I didn't play football, I'm not sure that I would've gone to college. I could get completely educated without going through all the mess that entails going to college."

Ryder's eyes opened wide. "Wow." He sighed. "But how do I get a good job without a degree?"

"That's a lie they feed you. You can get a great job without a degree," Mark said. "Let me ask you something. Why did you have so much trouble getting a job? I'm surprised that you couldn't. You seem like a strong, intelligent young man."

Ryder nodded. "Well, the main problem is, they don't want to hire you on the spot. They want to call you, but when I left home my father cut off my phone. I tried to get a few friends to let me use their phone number and they could relay the message to me. But that was a complete cluster f... I mean, a complete mess. Then I got arrested and my car was impounded and everything I owned was in that car and it sort of took the fight out of me."

JoJo sighed. His heart went out to the guy and he felt a great deal of compassion for him.

Mark nodded kindly at the boy. "Well, find the fight, kid, cuz things are about to get a lot better. But back to the original question. You'd rather not go to college. What interests do you have? No. That's a bad question. Here's a better one. Have you ever done anything, worked on anything, maybe at school or at a part-time job, and you thought, that was fun, or that was interesting, or even, this is not so bad?"

Ryder smiled. "Actually, there was one thing. Back when I was a little kid, like maybe about twelve I guess, I helped a friend's father build a shed in his backyard. His

dad explained the plans and what everything meant. He taught me how to measure and cut the wood. He even let me use the power saw. He taught me how to make vents and a window and frame the door. I remember fantasizing about building my own shed out on some land one day and living in it. But, I mean, working with wood is pretty cool. I like the smell of it."

Mark nodded. "Carpentry is an honorable profession."

JoJo smiled. "Yep, Jesus was a carpenter."

Mark went on. "That sounds like it was a wonderful memory for you, so I'm surprised it wasn't the thing you pursued."

Ryder thought for a minute. "Well, now that you say that, I'm surprised too. I haven't really thought about that at all until just now." He sighed. "But, maybe that's probably because it had a bad memory connected to it."

"What was the bad memory?" JoJo asked.

He sighed and glanced at the two females in the room. "Um, I spent two weekends building that shed with my friend and his father. When we finished I was really excited about the final results. We painted it a reddish brown to match the brick of their house and it looked really good. I was telling my dad about it, about how it turned out and how hard I worked on it, and he was not excited about it at all. He said I should've been home helping him. He said he couldn't run our home all alone and work and cook meals and I, well, I smarted off." He stopped and raised his chin defiantly as he remembered the incident.

Mark sensed that he needed to talk about it and urged him on. "What did you say? How did you smart off?"

Ryder sighed. "I told him if he hadn't made my mother leave, he wouldn't have to do it all alone."

JoJo grimaced.

Ryder shrugged and gave a slight smile. "He went after me. Beat me with a belt. Told me he'd make me never want to talk about my mother again. And I didn't. Not for a long time anyway. I stayed in bed for three days. He finally came in my room, I guess to see if I was still alive. I was literally black and blue. He said the school called to check on me and I'd better be back at school the next day or he'd beat me again." Ryder looked up as if awakening from a trance and offered a smile. "Doesn't matter now. He can't hurt me anymore."

Mark sighed. "What you've been through, son, does matter. There is emotional trauma there that has to be healed. And we'll help with that too. May I ask, what happened to your mother?"

"She left with my little two-year-old sister. She tried to take me too, but he threatened to kill us all. He told her to go and take the little brat, but leave his son and if she did, he would let her go. I never saw her again. I have no idea where she went, where she is or if she's even still alive, or Steph. Stephanie, my sister. The day she left, I told her to go. I told her to just go. I told her I would be okay. I actually begged my mother to leave. If she didn't leave, he'd end up killing her and my little sister too."

"So, he beat on your mother fairly often?" Mark asked.

He nodded. "It was like she couldn't do anything right. She never knew what would

set him off. And one day, when he hit her, Steph cried and tried to hit him back and he backhanded her. She flew against the wall. That was the last straw. The next day my mother told him she was leaving. I was so scared. I thought for sure he'd kill her. Maybe he was feeling sorry about hittin' a little girl. But for some reason, he offered her a deal: leave me behind, and she could go. I begged her to take the deal."

"What's your mother's name?" Mark asked.

"Jeannette. Jeannette and Stephanie Bell."

"Have you ever tried to find her?"

"I tried like, on social media."

"How old were you when she left?" Bella asked.

"I was ten."

She nodded and sniffed. "Excuse me, I need to go finish up in the kitchen."

Mark and JoJo watched her go. JoJo raised his eyebrows and glanced at his father. "Is she okay?"

He nodded. "She will be. Give her time."

Ryder grimaced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset her."

Emily finished her dessert and stood up. "It's okay. I will go hug Mommy."

Mark nodded with a smile. "You do that, munchkin. And take your plate."

They watched as Em gathered her plate and spoon and headed out.

Mark looked back at Ryder. "It's okay. Sometimes her memories come back in a rush. She just needs a little time."

"So, I'm guessing my story is similar to hers?"

"In many ways," Mark said softly. "Now, Ryder, back to you. Let's make some goals so that you don't sit around wondering what's gonna happen."

Ryder nodded, not sure what to think or say.

"First, just so you know, you are welcome to stay here as long as you want, and as long as necessary. If you'd rather find a place and have more privacy, that's fine. We'll help make that happen for you. But for now, for the foreseeable future, this is your home. We will provide you with things you need in order to operate a normal life. A phone. Clothing. Food and shelter of course. And we'll get your car out of impound. You won't be able to drive it for a few weeks. There is a warrant for your arrest because the fine went unpaid. I will represent you in court and get that handled. Your license has been suspended and we'll take care of that."

"Wow, that sounds like a lot of trouble. Maybe it would be easier if I just stayed homeless."

"Do you really think that?"

He shrugged.

"Are you looking for an easy way out?" Mark asked.

"Oh, no, sir. I'm not."

"Okay then. Let's leave those kinds of thoughts behind."

"Yes, sir."

Mark smiled at him. "After the first of the year, we'll look into getting you mobile and get you a job. What would you think about starting at the bottom at a construction job?"

"That would be great."

"Starting at the bottom means you'd be cleaning up the site, running errands, helping out anywhere they need you. But they will also teach you how to do things eventually. Still sound great?"

"Yes, sir. Having any job sounds great."

"Good. I have a few friends who own their own construction companies. Some of them build commercial properties. A few of them build homes or remodel homes. Which do you think you'd like to do?"

"I think I'd like to work with homes."

Mark nodded. "I think that would be great. A homeless man learning to build homes. Just kind of makes sense, huh?"

Ryder smiled.

"Do you have any kind of health problems? Any old injuries?"

"No, sir. I have a few scars, ya know. But nothing that would keep me from working hard. I'm healthy."

"Good. And you're about to be healthier because my wife is gonna make sure you have every nutrient possible."

They all turned when they heard the door alarm ding and Emily yelled, "Logan," at the top of her lungs.

"Emmy," they heard him yell back.

"Come meet our new friend, Logan," Emily said almost immediately.

"Okay, okay, can I put my guitar down first?"

"Yes. Put it down. Come on."

Mark, JoJo and Ryder all stood as Logan came into the den.

"Hey, guys," Logan said cheerfully. "Sorry I'm so late. I got roped into singing a few numbers with the family."

"Roped into it, right," JoJo joked.

Logan smiled and immediately offered his hand to Ryder. "Hello there! You're Ryder, right?"

Ryder nodded as he shook hands.

"I'm Logan. I'm JoJo's younger and better-looking brother."

JoJo hit Logan in the back of the head and Ryder laughed.

Logan smiled at his father. "Hey, Dad. Everything okay?"

"It is. We were just talking to Ryder, getting his story and working on a plan of action."

"Cool. So, give me a nutshell version."

"Ryder will be staying here for a while. We'll play it by ear. We'll get him on his feet."

"Awesome. Sounds like a good plan. What can I do to help?"

"Well, Logan, we'll talk about that later," Mark said quickly. "For now, it's getting late. Em is up way past her bedtime and we all need to get some rest because tomorrow is Christmas Eve and we have a lot to do before we head to your grandparents' house." Mark looked over at Ryder. "Ryder, I'm hoping you will come with us. We want you to be part of the family while you're living here. But no pressure. You have free will to

choose what you want."

Ryder nodded. "Well, if you're gonna treat me like a part of your family, I should do what the family does, right? And really, earlier you said for me to pretend for a minute that I'm your son, so, I guess I could keep on pretending."

"Yes, except you don't have to pretend. You, Ryder, are in need of a father figure. I'm available. But let's think about this a minute. You haven't had to answer to anyone for a while now. You've been on your own and made your own decisions. You might not want some strange man to start bossing you around."

Ryder nodded as he thought about the words and came to a quick decision. "Well, I *have* been on my own making my own decisions, and you see where that got me. I'm thinking that I need a father figure to tell me what to do. I have no problem with a good man telling me what to do and I get the feeling that you are a really good man. So, sir, you won't get any resistance from me. Besides, I mean, really, you don't bite the hand that feeds you."

Mark nodded. "I get what you're saying, but just know, there are no strings attached. We will help you get on your feet no matter what."

Ryder nodded and cleared his throat as he got emotional. "I can't tell you enough how grateful I am for you all. JoJo, for taking the time today to talk to me. For what you're all doing for me. Thank you."

"Gratitude acknowledged," Mark said with a smile.

"Would it be possible to ask for one more thing?"

"Yes, of course."

"I was just wondering, if someone is looking after Brook and Zoe, and like, offering to get them straight too."

Mark nodded. "Desi and Alec are young, but they too were once homeless. They'll be good for them, though they don't yet have the resources. But don't worry because all of us, all of our family, the Adams, the Kinos and the Lees, we intend to step in and do whatever it takes to solve their problems."

"They are trying very hard to find a decent place for Zoe," JoJo added. "She'll stay where she is until that happens."

"And what about Brook?" Ryder asked.

"Well, right now Brook and Zoe will stay together," Mark said. "Because of emotional ties, ya know? They'll stay with Alec and Desi until after New Year's, and then we'll all have a pow wow about their future. We don't even know Brook's story yet. Do you?"

Ryder nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Will you share it?"

"Yes, sir. Her father died of cancer when she was thirteen. It was just her and her mom. A few years ago her mom met someone. Brook hated him. I asked her if he like, abused her or touched her or something, but he didn't. She just hated him. She thought he was ugly. She thought he was dumb. Stuff like that. Her mother was pretty angry with her for being so difficult about her new husband, and told her if she didn't like it she could leave. So, Brook left. It's messed up. I don't know why Brook hated him so much. I think she never gave him a chance. But I also feel like her mother shouldn't kick her kid

out of the house." He shrugged. "But who am I to judge?"

Mark frowned and nodded. "Okay, so, definitely more info needed there. Something doesn't sound quite right."

Ryder nodded.

"Okay, well, let's circle up," Mark said. "Ryder, we would love to have you join us. We pray together as a family every night before we go to bed and every morning before we start on our day."

Ryder nodded. "Cool. I'm in."

Bella and Em came in, and joined hands with the guys.

"I'll say it tonight," Mark volunteered. "Father, we come before You at this time to give You thanks. Thank You for our family, thank You for our home, thank you for all that we have, and tonight, Father, thank You that you have sent us this young man, Ryder, to take care of and help us to know the best way to do that. We ask Your blessing upon him. Heal him, give him peace of mind, heal his heart from the abuse he's had in the past and help us to know the best way to help him. Also, Father, please bless, heal and watch over his two friends, Brook and Zoe. We are thankful that Ryder watched over them for a time. Be with our entire family this night. Keep us all safe from the dark forces of this world. In Jesus' name we pray, amen."

"Amen," everyone repeated.

Everyone started hugging and saying goodnight. JoJo and Logan walked Ryder up to his room.

"So, if you need anything, that's my door," JoJo said, pointing down the hall. "Knock any time. And if you get hungry or anything in the middle of the night, feel free to go through the refrigerator or the pantry. Make yourself at home."

"Wow. Thanks," he said quietly.

"And that's my door," Logan said, pointing across the hall. "And if you have a question or just wanna talk, feel free to knock."

"Again, thanks," Ryder said. "You guys are like, unreal, ya know that?"

JoJo shook his head. "Isn't it funny that when people are simply being kind, everyone thinks it's unreal. Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself."

"Oh, so that's why you do it."

"Well, yes and no. I couldn't just love everyone well enough on my own. But I pray for Him to fill my heart with love, and He does. Sometimes full to overflowing."

"That's cool. Well, good night," Ryder said.

"'Night," Logan and JoJo said at the same time.

After Ryder closed his door, JoJo whispered, "Come to my room, bro, I have a lot to tell you."

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Proverbs 14:31

"Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

December 23rd 9:00 PM Monday Night
Reverend Ronald Clark Home, Huntington Beach, California

Ronny folded his napkin and dabbed at his eyes. Earlier today the children and grandchildren of Donna, his deceased sister, arrived. They included Andrew, his wife, Nicole, and their two children, Harrison and Camille. Andrew was Jesse's cousin and apparently they acted more like brothers. It warmed Ronny's heart to find that the families of Ronny's two sisters were very close. Andrew's children, Harrison, age twenty-eight, Camille, age twenty-four, and Jesse's son, Patrick, age twenty-seven, were also apparently very musical.

Ronny was also happy to learn that his own great-grandchildren, Linda's grandchildren, Carson and Sydney, loved to sing. The five of them had just finished singing the song by Hillsong Worship, *'What a Beautiful Name.'* Eleven-year-old Sydney had stolen the show and the entire thing was one of the most beautiful things Ronny had ever heard.

"Uncle Ronny, are you crying?" Patrick asked.

Ronny laughed and nodded. "I'm sorry, but that was absolutely amazing. This must be how it seemed that night when the shepherds heard the angels sing."

Sydney giggled.

Ronny sniffed. "This gift, this thing, the finding of my family and bringing you here, this is the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me, other than the angel when I was a boy. And the fact that you all would even come after all this time. My heart is so full."

Andrew's wife Nicole, whom they called Nikki, rose and went to put her arms around Ronny where he sat. "Oh, Uncle Ronny, our hearts are full too. You don't know how many times we've spoken about you. Andy talked about you all the time, even though he'd never met you. We honestly thought you had passed. We even looked for your obituary." She kissed him on the cheek. "So, of course we came. There was no question or hesitation."

Ronny patted Nikki's arm. "Thank you so much, young lady," he said, obviously a little flustered being hugged by the woman.

Jesse's wife, Becky, laughed. "Uncle Ronny, don't be too embarrassed by Nikki hugging and kissing you. She's like that. Very demonstrative."

"Oh, I'm just a little outgoing," Nikki said.

Andrew nodded. "It's a good thing too, because I'm a little on the quiet side. We balance each other out."

Ronny smiled. His heart felt like it might burst. It was almost like a Christmas his own Connie would plan. All the beautiful decorations. Tons of gifts under the tree.

Music. Candles. Lots of goodies. Laughter and love. It was a true miracle.

"Dad," Linda said softly. "You must be tired. I imagine you're not used to being up this late."

He nodded. "No, I'm usually in bed by now, but I'm okay."

"Well, I'm actually pretty tired myself," Linda said.

Ronny nodded. He and his long-lost daughter had been awake before the sun came up and had a long conversation before anyone else woke. The conversation had been filled with tears and apologies and regrets. Then they'd prayed together, and it was like they'd been walking on air the rest of the day.

"Yes, actually, we're tired too," Andrew suddenly put in. "I suppose we really should call it a night. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve and I have a little shopping I have to take care of and Uncle Ronny said he has rounds to make to members of his congregation. It's a big day."

Everyone began to stand and take dishes and cups into the kitchen and make sure all the food was put away and the counters wiped down. Finally, they all gathered at the foot of the stairs. It was gonna be a tight squeeze. Upstairs were four bedrooms. One was Ronny's. One was given to Jesse and Becky. One was given to Andy and Nikki and one was occupied by Ronny's daughter, Linda and her granddaughter, Sydney. Downstairs back in the den, there were three blowup mattresses that would sleep Harrison, Patrick, and Carson, and in Ronny's office was another blowup mattress where twenty-four-year-old Camille would bed down.

Ronny looked them over with a smile. "I'm sorry we're a little cramped."

"It's okay, Uncle Ronny," Jesse said. "It's kind of fun. Like camping out."

Camille nodded. "And I'm not a bit bothered. It's fun and I'm just so happy we can all be together."

"Me too," Andy said. "Uncle Ronny, just so you know, we were offered rooms at Grandmaster Kino's home or at a hotel, but we wanted to stay here, with you, like a real family."

Patrick smiled. "I love it. How awesome is this? My heart is full."

Ronny glanced down at fifteen-year-old Carson. "What about you, young man?"

Carson smiled. "It's cool. I'm good."

Ronny nodded. "My heart is overflowing. Let's have a family prayer before we all say goodnight."

"Let's do," Jesse said.

"Who should I call on?" Ronny asked playfully. "Because I prayed at dinner."

Everyone pointed to Patrick.

Patrick chuckled. "I guess it's me."

"Hold hands," Harrison said quietly.

They stood in a circle, hand in hand, feeling the connection of a family. A family Ronny never knew existed. He hadn't felt the love of a family since he was ten, until he married Connie. And then he lost his son, drove his daughter away and eventually lost his wife. He didn't even realize how much he craved this feeling, this connection. These people were his family. He couldn't keep the smile from his face as he closed his eyes to pray, his heart filled with gratitude.

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December 23rd, 11:00 PM, Monday Night
Mark Adams Home, Newport, California

JoJo turned over quickly and grabbed up his phone when it buzzed. "Hey, Aunt Jeffy. Everything okay?"

"Yes, it is, JoJo. This is just a courtesy call."

"It's not very courteous to call when I'm already asleep."

She laughed. "Sorry, but I think you're gonna want to hear what I have to say."

He sat up. "Okay, lay it on me."

"So, first, let me report to you that Kaylee's session with Dad went very well, according to Dad. He got through to her. She's gonna change her ways. Get her act together."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Jeffy smiled and went on. "Second, she was touched by the honor and respect our family shows to Dad, and it made her want to go home to see her parents and right some wrongs. I felt what she was feeling and her heart was filled with love and a longing to make things right. In other words, she was remorseful and repentant and I spoke with her and encouraged her to go home and do exactly what she was thinking."

"Okay," JoJo said, wondering where this was leading.

"And so, Kaylee and Raylynn will be on an Ameritech jet at six AM tomorrow morning headed to Oklahoma."

JoJo straightened. "In the morning?"

"Yes. I thought you would want to know."

"I would. I do." He sighed.

"I know you're disappointed, Joe. It was the only time to do this. Ray had a few days off of work, so it was now or wait months to make it happen. I felt strongly that Kaylee needed to go now. She got very excited about going home to surprise her parents and do something nice for them for Christmas and of course, she wouldn't want to go without Raylynn, and so they are leaving in the morning."

JoJo was silent.

"Again, JoJo, I know you're disappointed. I know you're interested in Ray. I get that. I know you had some plans to try to see her at Christmas. I know you have a gift for her. But this was important for both of them. Some closure. And Dad says for most of her life, Raylynn has been in service to Kaylee, and this trip may be the time when she is relieved of that duty and will feel free to pursue her own happiness."

"Okay. When you put it that way, I guess I need to stop being disappointed and support whatever is taking place."

Jeffy smiled. "Good job. That was a quick adjustment."

JoJo grunted in response. "I really don't have any other choice, do I? And it's the right thing. So, what time do they have to be at the airport?"

"Well, a car is picking them up at their house at five and they're leaving from the AMT private strip at six."

He sighed. "I guess I need to set my alarm."

"If you're intending to go see her before she leaves, you need to give her a heads up.

I'm just sayin', kiddo, she'll wanna make sure she's decent."

"Got it. Thanks, Aunt Jeffy."

"It's the least I can do, since it's pretty much my fault and my idea for them to take this trip. Please don't be mad at me."

He laughed. "No, of course not. I know how connected you are. I understand this must be important for them. When are they coming back?"

"Thursday, the day after Christmas. Ray has to be at work on Friday."

"Okay. I guess I can handle it for a few days. I'll just focus on whatever I can do for everyone else."

"Good man. Bye, sweetie."

"Good night, Aunt Jeffy." He ended the call and immediately called Raylynn.

"Hello?" she said, answering on the first ring.

"Hi, Raylynn," JoJo said softly.

"Hi. Everything okay?"

"Yes, well, sort of. I just heard that you're leaving to go home for Christmas."

"Yes, it was a last-minute thing."

"How do you feel about it?"

"Well, at first, I was not real gung ho about it. But now, I'm feeling kind of excited to see my parents and surprise them. It'll be good for them and I think it's gonna be good for Kay too."

"Okay, that's good. Well, I had a gift for each of you, and since you won't be here for Christmas, I'd like to bring them by in the morning before you leave. Would that be okay?"

"Sure, but, you know we're leaving at five in the morning."

"Yes, I know. So, would it be okay for me to be there by 4:30?"

"Sure, if that's what you want to do. I hate for you to have to get up so early."

"It doesn't bother me and it'll be worth it to see you before you leave."

Raylynn smiled because those were sweet words. She thought JoJo Adams, the USC quarterback whom she'd admired from afar for years, had just been being nice. He was known for how kind he is, how nice he is, how Christian he is. His teammates called him Preacher and indeed, he was now giving sermons at a church. But she was getting the idea that maybe, just maybe he was slightly interested in her. Could that be? She shook her head. Probably not. If anything, he was in all likelihood interested in Kaylee. She nodded. More than likely that's exactly what was going on.

"Hello?"

"Oh, sorry, I was just thinking. So, yes, of course you're welcome to come by in the morning."

He smiled. "Good. Well, then, I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

"Good night," she said sweetly and hung up. She felt strange. What was she feeling right now? She was a little excited to be able to see JoJo; who wouldn't be? But she was also a little disappointed. Why? She sighed. Because he was probably interested in her sister. Everyone was. It usually didn't bother her. Her sister was beautiful, outgoing, bright, always the life of a party. But this time, she just realized, she felt a little jealous. A little bit resentful. Why does Kaylee get everything? Especially when Kaylee has a

way of taking and taking and taking, then using and discarding everything. JoJo rescued Kaylee. He saved the princess from the dragon. So, the next logical step is to fall in love with the princess. Not with the princess' older nag of a sister.

She reset her alarm for a little earlier so she would have time for JoJo's visit, turned over and tried to sleep.

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December 24th 5:30 AM Tuesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe woke when he felt a tiny hand on his face. He opened his eyes and smiled. "What are you doing out of bed, little flower?"

"Gabe!" Iris said in an exaggerated whisper. "It's Christmas Eve!"

He smiled. "I know." He sat up and pulled her into bed with him. "Lie down and let me sleep for a few more minutes."

"I don't wanna sleep. I wanna go outside and look up in the sky and see if we can see Jesus."

He closed his eyes, drew a deep breath and resigned himself to his fate. If he hadn't reminded her last night that last Christmas they'd done just that, gone outside and looked up and talked to Jesus and Gabe had pretended that he could see Jesus, if he hadn't reminded her, he could sleep. But Iris, when she decided she wanted to do something, was as stubborn as a bull. Anyway, he knew this was one of those times that he would always remember.

"Okay, little flower. Go get your purple blankey out of your room because it's cold outside."

She turned and ran to her room. Gabe pulled on a sweatshirt and some shoes. She came running back to his room and handed him the little blanket. He wrapped it around her shoulders and lifted her into his arms. They moved quietly downstairs and headed out the front door because he didn't want to walk on the wet grass in the backyard. They walked out to the middle of the large driveway and sat down on the pavement.

"I can't see anyfing," Iris whispered.

"You have to be very still and very quiet," Gabe advised. He lay back so he didn't have to crane his neck, and Iris lay down beside him. He put his arm out for her to use as a pillow. "There, all comfy?"

"Uh huh."

"So, let's talk to Jesus," Gabe said. "Hey, Jesus, so, me and Iris just wanted to talk to You a minute. It's Christmas Eve, and we just wanted to tell You happy birthday, and we're so glad You were born. Thank You, Jesus, for teaching us about love and about being good and about how we can come back to all live together with You. We love You, Jesus."

"I wove You too, Jesus," Iris whispered.

Gabe smiled.

"Jesus, You make my heart feel so happy," she went on. "Uh huh. I will. Yes, sir. I will."

Gabe turned to look at her, his eyes opened wide.

"Okay, Jesus. I will tell them. I wove You too," Iris said.

"Is Jesus talking to you?" Gabe asked.

"Yes," Iris said. She pointed up. "He's right there."

Gabe looked up into the sky. "Where?"

"Right there," she said, pointing directly above her.

Gabe peered up in the dark sky. It was cloudy and he couldn't really see anything. No stars. No moon. His eyes filled with tears. "Please, Jesus, I know I'm not worthy, but please, let me see you," he whispered. "Let me see what Iris is seeing." The cloud he was looking at shimmered for just a second. Gabe blinked, because it looked for just a second like the cloud shifted and seemed to form the face of Jesus. Gabe's heart sped up. "Thank You," he whispered.

Beside him, Iris giggled. "I wove You too, Jesus. Have a happy birfday! Bye!"

Gabe watched the cloud drift by. He sat up and wiped the tears from his eyes. Iris sat up and climbed into his lap. "I'm cold," she complained.

He smiled and squeezed her tight.

"So, Iris, what did Jesus tell you to tell us?"

She snuggled against his chest. "Um, He said to be strong when it happens and you will all, um, you will all make it better."

"Make what better?"

She sighed. "I can't bemember."

"You can't remember what Jesus said is gonna get better?"

Iris looked up at him. "No."

Gabe smiled. "Well okay then. Anyway, thank you, Iris, for making me come out here and talk to Jesus with you."

"Can we do it again next time that it's Christmas Eve?" she asked.

"Yes. It's a date," he said solemnly, and silently vowed that from now on, no matter where he was or what he was doing, he would go outside with Iris early on Christmas Eve morning and talk to Jesus.

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December 24th, 5:40 AM, Tuesday Morning

Keegan Tanner picked up his phone when it buzzed. Someone had opened the front door. He pulled up the camera and watched his son, carrying Iris, walk down the steps of the porch and out to the middle of the driveway. They sat down together on the concrete and then lay down together. Keegan smiled.

"Is everything okay?" Lizzy whispered.

"Yes. Gabe and Iris have gone out on a little excursion."

"They left?"

"No, they're lying in the driveway looking up at the sky."

Lizzy smiled.

Keegan put his phone down and rolled over. "Come here, Elizabeth."

She sighed in pleasure and scooted closer, snuggling up under his chin. "I love the way you say that."

"The way I say, 'come here'?"

"Uh huh. That's what you said to me back when we were at my old house in Tyler Springs. I was on the couch in the den in the middle of the night and I started crying

about something, and you said, 'come here, Elizabeth,' and it made my heart beat so fast."

He chuckled. "Come here, Elizabeth," he said louder.

She giggled. "Shh, you'll wake the babies."

He pushed her onto her back and looked down at her beautiful face. "That was over nineteen years ago. I was totally smitten with my nurse. I was trying to figure out how I could stay with you. And now, here I am, almost twenty years later and I think I might be the happiest man in the world."

She smiled. "I'm glad you're happy. So, all the responsibility of taking care of my five girls all these years. That hasn't worn you down?"

"I could be insulted by that question, but I know you're just trying to get me to say that I wouldn't change a thing. And I wouldn't. Those girls are mine. I love them with all my heart. And the four children we had together, I love them with all my heart. And I love you with all my heart. The only thing I wish I could change is I wish I could slow things down. Our girls are already finding their mates."

"Our boy is too," Lizzy reminded him.

Keegan nodded. "And you know what? We are so blessed, because so far, I approve of every single one of their choices."

Lizzy smiled. "We've had some close calls though."

Keegan nodded. "Yeah, Mike Moreland and Vi's professor. We just have to stay vigilant, stay in prayer over these kids, and trust God."

Lizzy smiled. "Oh, Keegan Tanner, I love you."

"I love you too."

They both turned as one of the babies started to wake.

"Well, I guess I better get up and feed these babies."

"You do that. I'm sure my mom and dad will be up soon and we'll start on breakfast."

"Thank you," Lizzy said.

She started to get up, but Keegan pulled her back to him. "Hold on. Let's start this day out right. First, kiss me. And then, let's pray."

Lizzy smiled. Her man. *Thank you, Jesus, for this man.*

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December 24th, 4:30 AM Tuesday Morning

Quinn Home, Los Angeles, California

JoJo knocked softly on the front door. Kaylee answered it. "Hey, JoJo! Come on in. I gotta finish getting ready. Ray! JoJo is here."

JoJo placed two gift bags on the table next to the sofa and turned to watch Raylynn walk into the room. His heart sped up. Her bright smile, tan skin, dimples—and that long, shiny, black hair was down and silky and he longed to run his fingers through it. She wore jeans and a black sweater with Merry Christmas written in red sparkly letters. Instead of some fancy black boots, she wore simple off-brand athletic shoes that were white with red trim. She was holding a rectangular gift in her hand and she set it down on the back of the sofa.

"Hi, JoJo," she said brightly.

"Hey. You look nice."

"Thanks. I want to be festive when I see my parents."

"Are you excited?"

"Yes, actually. It's gonna be awesome to see them."

"I'm happy for you. Maybe you can video the surprise. I'd love to see it."

"That's a good idea."

"Well, I know you're probably in a hurry so, I wanted to give you your Christmas gift."

"Thank you, JoJo," Raylynn said as he handed her a gift bag. "Kaylee, come here! JoJo has a gift for you!" she called.

Kaylee came running in. "Oh, presents! I love presents!" she said with a laugh.

"I know you do," Raylynn said. "Go ahead and open yours."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a red satin box of Godiva chocolates. "Oh, chocolates! I love chocolate," she exclaimed.

JoJo smiled. "I'm glad you do. I wasn't sure what to get, but Mom says most girls love chocolate."

"She's right," Kaylee said. "Ray, I might try to eat them all on the plane, so you'll have to keep me from doing that."

"Hmm, I might help you eat them," she said.

Kaylee reached back into the gift bag and pulled out a square box tied with a gold cord. "Oooooh, what could this be?" she said with glee. She quickly pulled off the gold cord and opened the box. "Oh, wow, this is beautiful," she said.

Ray blinked at the pretty piece of jewelry JoJo had given Kaylee. It was a Native American beaded choker. The beads were black and blue and turquoise divided by what looked like real silver. It had one charm hanging from the center that was turquoise trimmed in silver and dangling from that were two silver feathers.

"JoJo," Raylynn whispered. "That is beautiful. Kay, do you love it?"

Kaylee grinned. "Oh, I love it so much!"

He gave a relieved sigh. He hadn't been too sure about it. He grinned. "I got it to match her face," he said quickly.

Kaylee laughed, her eyes twinkling. "Black and blue, got it. Very funny!"

She put the chocolates and necklace back in the bag and approached JoJo. "Thank you so much, JoJo. Thank you for the gifts. I love them so much. And thank you for saving me. Really. I owe you so much." She put her arms around his neck and hugged him.

He rested his left hand on her shoulder. "You don't owe me anything except to get all healed and do something wonderful with your life."

"I will. I promise." She went up and kissed his cheek. "I have to go finish packing. Thanks again, JoJo," she said as she grabbed the bag and ran to her room.

JoJo turned his eyes on Raylynn and smiled. "Your turn."

She nodded and reached into her bag. She pulled out a rectangular box.

"Oh, wait," he said. "Open that one last." He took it from her.

She giggled. "Okay." She reached back in and pulled out a colorful bag of shower steamers. "Oh, these are nice," she said.

He smiled. “Well, you work so hard taking care of other people, these are supposed to help relieve stress, restore and energize.”

“Well, I can sure use that,” she said. She reached back into the bag and pulled out a box and read the front. “Spa Relife, Korean Skin Care wraps. Well that sounds interesting. Do I detect a theme?”

He smiled. “Again, I know you work hard and are on your feet all day, so this is for you to pamper yourself for a change.”

She smiled. “I don’t really do that very much.”

“I know.” He handed her the gift he’d taken from her earlier. “Okay, so, I hope you like this.” He drew a deep breath.

She unwrapped the small box and looked at it, her brow furrowing as she read the words on the box. “Wanna Get Some Coffee? Thirty-five date night scratch-offs.” She blinked up at him.

His heart felt like it might jump out of his chest. “So,” he began. “I was wondering if you would allow me to take you on a few of those dates?”

“Me?”

His brow furrowed. “Um, who else?”

“You want to take *me* out on a date?”

“I do. Yes, I do. Is that too forward of me? I mean, you can think about it and let me know later.”

“No, it’s not too forward. It’s just, so, I thought, I mean...”

“Go on. What did you think?”

“I thought you were interested in Kaylee.”

“What?”

She shrugged. “You seemed like you were very focused on Kaylee.”

“I was. I was focused on *helping* her get through this trauma. She seems like a great kid. But it’s you, Raylynn, *you* I’m interested in. So, when you get back here, will you let me take you out?”

She blinked up at him and smiled. “Yes, I think I’d really love that.”

He blew out a breath and grinned. “Okay! Good. Well, so, have a safe trip. Oh, and, maybe I can call you? I mean, just to see how your trip is going?”

She nodded. “Yes, you can call me. I’d like that.”

He smiled. “Okay. Good. Okay, well, I’ll let you finish getting ready.” He glanced at his phone to check the time. “The car should be here any minute.”

“Oh, wait,” she said as she lifted up the gift she’d carried in earlier. “I almost forgot. I got this for you.”

“Really? You got me a present? Cool!” He took the rectangular-shaped gift from her hand. It was wrapped in white paper and tied with a red ribbon. He pulled off the ribbon and tore open the paper. “Oh, Raylynn, this is awesome!”

She smiled. “I thought, I mean you said the other day that you were coming up with all kinds of ideas for talks and sermons and I thought this would be perfect for you to keep with you and jot them down.”

He looked over the small journal notebook, handsomely enclosed in embossed leather with a leather buckle to keep it closed. He opened it and was surprised to see

writing on the first page. *To Joseph Adams from Raylynn Quinn. Looking forward to hearing every sermon you write in this book. May God Bless and Keep You. Merry Christmas, Love, Ray*

His eyes shifted from the book to her big green eyes. "Ray, thank you. Thank you so much." He closed the book, moved forward and hugged her.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. They were interrupted by Ray's phone buzzing. She pulled it up and looked at the phone. "The car is here."

He nodded. "Let me help you get out to the car."

They finished throwing a few more things together and then JoJo and the Ameritech agent helped load everything into the SUV. JoJo hugged both Kaylee and Raylynn, wished them both a Merry Christmas and waved as the car pulled away. He smiled. They'd be back in only a few days, and he intended to start on those date scratch-offs immediately.

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December 24th, Tuesday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric left his room, padded across the hall and knocked softly on Jordan's door. Jordan opened the door and smiled. "Hey, Three," she said softly.

"Good morning, Two-Three," he said softly. "You ready to pray?"

"Yes." She backed up and Eric came in the room.

Quietly, they knelt on the floor beside the bed, facing each other. He took her hands in his. "Whose turn is it?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm not ready yet."

He nodded. "Okay." He bowed his head, closed his eyes and prayed. He prayed over their day. He prayed that things would go smoothly. He prayed for the well-being of his family and friends. He asked if God had anyone they needed to help, to place them in their path today and then to give him and Jordan the energy and the wisdom to take care of business. He gave thanks for their many blessings and he did it all in Jesus' name.

"Amen," Jordan whispered. She looked up into the handsome face of the guy she loved. He smiled at her and it made her heart beat faster.

Leaning forward, he took her face in his hands and kissed her so gently, so reverently, that it almost brought tears to her eyes.

"So," he began. "Your mom is already downstairs helping my mom cook breakfast. I already told my dad we had some errands to run, and he asked me to pick up a load from a church down the street to take to a shelter in LA, so we have to do that first. Then we have to hit the grocery store and then the 'Grill' for the two hundred steak dinners. We'll go give those out and while we're in that area, we'll get Josie's gift. How does that sound?"

"That sounds great. It's always fun running around doing errands with you. And I always have fun watching people do double takes when they recognize who you are."

He sighed. "I try not to notice."

"Hmm, if you try not to notice, you might miss someone God is trying to place in your path."

He smiled thoughtfully and nodded. "You are so right, babe. Okay, I'm gonna make

eye contact with everyone we see today."

Jordan giggled. "Oh, this should be fun."

He pulled her to her feet and they headed downstairs. They were met by a beautiful girl holding a phone in their faces.

"And whaddya know, here they are, Gabe, the soon-to-be Mr. and Mrs. Eric Kino the Third."

Jordan waved at Gabe. "Hey, Gabe!"

"Hey, Jordan! Hey, Eric!"

"Gabe! How's it goin'?" young Eric said brightly.

"It's awesome, man. I just told Taylor about what happened this morning with Iris. Get her to tell you about it."

"Cool. I will. Hey, if I don't see you again today, Merry Christmas to you and your whole giant family."

"Backatcha, bro!"

Taylor turned away and went to interview her father who was busy talking to Amari and Brittney about the birth of Jesus.

"Mom," Jordan said. "Good morning and something smells so good."

Jewell smiled. "You're probably smelling the coffee cake in the oven and Bree is working on some home fries. I'm gonna make some pepper gravy for them and we'll have some scrambled cheese eggs with peppers and onions."

"Wow," Eric said. "Can't wait. What can we do to help?"

They were put to work immediately cutting up fruit.

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December 24th, Tuesday Morning

North Sequoyah Private Air Strip, Sequoyah, Oklahoma

The Quinn sisters unlatched their seat belts and smiled as the pilot stepped out from the cockpit. He smiled at the two young ladies. "Well, ladies, I hope you enjoyed your flight."

Raylynn nodded. "Oh, yes, sir, we really did. I mean, wow, this is the way to travel!"

He chuckled, as did the other four passengers, who they'd learned over the course of the flight were all Ameritech agents headed home to see their families.

"Well, I won't be catching you on the return," the pilot went on, "so let me wish you and yours a merry Christmas."

"Thank you," Kaylee said brightly. "And you too!"

"There are two agents waiting for you on the tarmac. We took off four minutes late and were in the air two hours and twenty-three minutes. You lost two hours coming east so the current time is 10:27 and the temperature is forty-one degrees. No precipitation. You should be at your destination in about an hour."

"Thank you," Raylynn said.

The single flight attendant opened the door and the girls rose to start pulling their luggage from the compartment behind the lavatory, but the agents all rose. "We'll take care of that for you."

"Oh, wow," Raylynn said softly. "You guys are treating us like we're something special."

"That's because you most definitely are," one of the agents said, making Kaylee giggle.

They followed the men down the stairs and were immediately greeted by two more agents.

"Hello, Miss Quinn and Miss Quinn," one said. "I'm Agent Allen and this is Agent Walker."

Both agents stepped forward and shook hands with the girls. Raylynn studied Agent Walker. Before she had a chance to ask, he smiled and nodded. "Yes. Cherokee."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to stare. Just being nosy."

"I'm not insulted and I don't get offended."

"Okay, so, I imagine you'd like to get on the road," Agent Allen said. "Walker and I have already unloaded your boxes of gifts from the plane. Those boxes and the rest of your luggage are in the second car." He opened the back door of the vehicle. They loaded up.

On the road, Raylynn watched the familiar scenery as it passed, thinking of her teen years. Kaylee had fallen asleep, but woke when they left I-44. Silently, they watched as they passed several churches, the old barbeque place, the post office and finally turned onto Fourth Street.

Kaylee took out her purse and tried to touch up the bruises on her face, not that the makeup really covered much. They both took out brushes and began to brush their hair. The car came to a halt on the street outside of their parents' home. It was a tiny gray house with white trim, and a little wooden porch stood out front. Around the side, off the side street, were the driveway and wheelchair ramp. No one ever used the front door. They got out of the cars and looked at the house.

"Everyone okay?" Agent Walker asked.

The girls both nodded.

"So," Agent Allen began. "We're gonna wait until after you surprise them, then we'll help you with your luggage and packages, and then we're gonna leave one of the cars with you."

"Oh! Why?" Raylynn asked.

"Well, you don't want to be stranded, do you? You're gonna need some transportation. You might want to go shopping or something."

"Well, thank you. Everyone is being so thoughtful and kind."

Agent Walker smiled. "We're just doing our job. The Kinos are the ones being thoughtful and kind. So, would you like me to get the homecoming surprise on video for you?"

"Oh! Yes. I almost forgot. Yes, JoJo said he'd like to see the video."

"Hand me your phone."

She unlocked her phone and handed it to him.

He nodded with a smile. "Action!"

Raylynn took Kaylee's hand and started toward the side door. They moved up the ramp and knocked on the door.

It took a full minute but finally their mother slowly opened the door.

"Surprise!" Raylynn and Kaylee said brightly.

"Oh! Oh my goodness, oh you are kidding," their mother said, her hands flying to her cheeks.

She reached out and hugged the girls. "Oh, Kaylee, oh, Raylynn, oh my goodness what are you doing here?"

"We wanted to come home and surprise you for Christmas," Ray said. "It was Kaylee's idea. So, here we are!"

"Oh, my goodness, come in, come in, your father is gonna be so happy."

She stopped and looked at the two men in black suits, one holding up a phone to video.

"Mom, this is Agent Walker and Agent Allen. They are with Ameritech Security and they were taking care of us on our trip."

"Oh, now that's interesting. It's nice to meet you. You come in too."

All five people turned and headed into the home.

The agents looked around. It was indeed small. The five people filled up the small kitchen that they'd walked into. They followed Mrs. Quinn down a wide hall to a living room on the left. A man sat in a wheelchair and looked up at them when they entered. He smiled widely.

"Hi, Dad," Raylynn said warmly.

"Hello, my Ray of sunshine," he said as she hugged him. "What an amazing and wonderful surprise."

Smiling, Ray backed away to allow Kaylee to approach.

"Hey, Dad," Kaylee said softly.

"Hello, my Kaykay. Oh my goodness, my sweet baby, what happened? Who has hurt you?"

She smiled at her father. "Daddy, how do you know it was someone? Maybe I was in a car accident."

He rolled his eyes at her. "I may be old, but I'm not dumb. We'll talk about it later. Oh, Kay, it's so good to see you."

She leaned down and hugged him hard. As she laid her head against his shoulder, she was overcome with emotion and tried to sniff back the tears. He patted her back. "There, there now, Kaykay. It's gonna be okaykay," he said with a smile as he sang his little rhyme he used to sing to her whenever she got hurt as a little girl. That brought on a fresh wave of tears and he patted her back and shushed her.

Finally, she backed away. Mr. Quinn's eyes immediately went to the two men standing in the room.

"Dad, this is Agent Walker and Agent Allen. Agents, my father, Alo Quinn."

Both agents stepped forward and shook his hand.

"Very nice to meet you, sir," they both said.

"Agents?" Alo Quinn asked. "Maybe you should fill me in," he said.

Raylynn nodded. "We met some wonderful people. The Adams family and the Kino family. They are so kind, and when Kaylee said that she wished she could come home to surprise you for Christmas, they made it happen. The agents work for a place called Ameritech Security and the Kinos are good friends with the guy who owns Ameritech Security, so they arranged for them to escort us home."

He smiled. “Well, that’s wonderful.” He looked up at the agents. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“It’s our pleasure, sir.”

“How long will you be here, my sweeties?” Alo asked.

“Not long. I have to be back at work on Friday,” Raylynn explained. “So, we’re leaving on Thursday late afternoon.”

He nodded. “We’ll take it, won’t we, Dani?” he said to his wife.

“Oh absolutely. I’m so happy!”

Kaylee smiled.

“You must be hungry after your long trip,” Dani Quinn said.

Kaylee laughed. “I’m starved.”

Dani looked up at the agents. “Will you stay?”

“Oh, no, ma’am, we have things we have to take care of. We’ll just unload their luggage and be on our way,” Agent Walker said.

Raylynn walked out with the agents to unload the luggage. It took only a few trips. The agents bid farewell to the Quinns and Ray walked them out. Agent Allen handed her the keys to a car. She nodded and smiled. “I promise to not go on any joy rides.”

Agent Allen grinned. “Go for it. You can do whatever you want. And listen, you have our numbers. If you need us for anything, I mean anything at all, call us.”

She frowned. “I wouldn’t want to pull you away from your families at Christmas.”

“We don’t have families. That’s why we’re working. Our goal right now is to serve you and anyone else who needs us. So, if you need anything. Call.”

She sighed and nodded. “Thank you both so much.”

“It’s been our pleasure, Miss Raylynn Quinn. Tell Kaylee we’ll see her on Thursday.”

“I will.”

“Merry Christmas, Miss Quinn.”

“Merry Christmas to you both,” she said softly. She stood there and watched them until they drove out of sight, then turned and headed into the house.

She headed in and stood in the doorway before she entered the kitchen. Her mother, as usual, was working hard preparing lunch. Ray looked her over. She was slim; her long hair, once black, was mostly gray now. She had big, brown eyes, a small nose, tan colored skin. Her lips were full and her smile was so kind. Her skin was surprisingly smooth for a seventy-five-year-old woman. Today, she wore tan slacks, and a white sweater and dark brown slip-on shoes. Her hair was back in a clip at the nape of her neck. She wore small gold earrings and of course, her gold cross necklace. Ray smiled. Her parents were very much into Jesus. “May I help you, Mommy?” she asked.

Her mother turned with a smile. “I love when you call me that.”

“I know, that’s why I said it.”

Her mother giggled. A sound Raylynn loved.

“No, my sweet Ray. I won’t be long. I’m just warming up some stew I made last night, and some fry bread. Go visit with your father.”

Ray nodded and moved forward and hugged her mother from behind. “I love you, Mommy.”

"I love you too, sunshine."

Ray headed to the living room. She stood in that doorway too, taking in the scene. The tiny living room consisted of a loveseat, a chair and an end table. On the table was one lamp. Across from the seating area was the front door that nobody ever used and a front window. On the left side of the room was a bookshelf and a space heater. There was no TV. There was an old dial radio on the third shelf up of the bookcase. Currently, music was softly coming from that.

A Bible lay on the end table. And a glass of water. Her father was in a wheelchair as usual. One of the reasons for very little furniture was to have room to maneuver the wheelchair. Further down the hall, past the living room, was a bathroom and two very small bedrooms. The floors were old, scratched hardwood. The walls were dingy and in need of painting.

Kaylee was speaking to her father and Ray stayed at the door, not wanting to interrupt.

"And like, Dad, his whole family, they all speak to him so, I don't even know what to call it. I mean, with such respect and honor maybe. They treat him like we would a chief. Like Chief Saracen. And mom says, that's the way everyone treated you back in the day, back before you lost the use of your legs. And I was thinking, Grandmaster Kino reminds me so much of you. In almost every way. He has a power about him, and so do you, Dad.

"I had a long talk with him, because he counseled me about how I felt unworthy and how I treat Ray pretty bad, and he said I was a bright daughter of God and I needed to get my act together and live so that I don't feel unworthy anymore. He said when I went out to help some homeless people it made me feel better because being in service to others makes us forget about our own troubles. Dad, he sounded just like you and I realized that I don't treat you with the respect I should. I was kinder and more polite to a man I hardly know. I remember I said some pretty ugly things to you before I left, and I wanted to come home and apologize to you, Dad. Because I love you and you deserve nothing but respect and honor."

Alo smiled kindly and nodded. "I appreciate the strength it took for you to come home and tell me this. I forgive you. Sometimes growing up means we make mistakes. But the real growing up, the reaching of maturity, that is when the strength comes in and the growth takes place."

She sniffed. "See, that sounds just like Grandmaster Kino. You even kind of look alike."

"Oh, well now, he sounds like an interesting man," Alo said with a twinkle in his eye. "I'd like to meet him."

"Oh, I think that would be wonderful."

"It might be a little hard for this old eighty-three-year-old man to travel, but let's see if we can make it happen."

"I would love for you to come out and see where I go to school and where Ray works, and see where Ray and I just moved."

"You just moved?"

"Oh, yes, sir. And that has to do with this," she said, pointing to her face. "And I

want to tell you and mom how this happened and it's gonna be hard because it happened because I was not obeying God's laws."

"I see." He sighed. "There are always consequences for our choices, my girl. But obviously someone has hurt you, and I assume it was a man, I will tell you right now, he is responsible for what he did. Not you."

Kaylee nodded. "I understand that. I do. But I also know now what you mean about consequences for our actions. You tried to tell us. Daddy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for how I treated you, for all the things I've done that I knew you wouldn't approve of, and for how I've treated Ray too. Grandmaster Kino asked me why I mistreated the one person who seems to have dedicated her life to me, and that really woke me up."

Ray decided it was a good time to interrupt. She walked into the room. "You don't mistreat me."

Kay sighed. "No, he was right, Ray. I do. I really do take advantage of you and you do so much for me and I haven't been grateful for everything you do for me, and it's time for me to get my act together."

Alo nodded his head in approval. "I see that this Grandmaster Kino is a wise man and that he has called you to repentance, Kaylee, and you have heard that call and for that I'm extremely grateful."

"Lunch is ready!"

Ray immediately went to the back of her father's wheelchair and turned him around and they headed down the hall to the small table in the kitchen. They each sat in their usual places. Kaylee between the table and the wall. Dani to her husband's left, closest to the kitchen door, and Ray to his right, closest to the hall.

"I'll say grace today," Alo offered.

They bowed their heads in prayer. He gave thanks for the food, and for the girls coming home, and for Kaylee's new perspective on life.

The meal was simple, beef stew and fry bread and water.

"Mom," Ray began. "Do you have any big plans for dinner tonight or Christmas dinner tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "No, but if I'd known you were coming home, I would have bought more food."

"That's okay, Mom. Kaylee and I will go to the store after lunch and get whatever you need. We'll do it up big. We'll have a giant party."

Her mother laughed. "Oh fun, a giant party! Hmm, who shall we invite?"

"Hmm, that's a hard one," Ray said as she thought. "I mean, who would come over on such late notice on Christmas Eve?"

Alo smiled. "Matthew 22:9-10. 'So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find. So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.'"

Kaylee grinned.

"But who's gonna pay for all the food?" Dani asked.

"The Grandmaster Kino is paying," Raylynn said. "He insisted. He gave me a card and will pretty much authorize any amount."

"So, these people, I'm guessing they're pretty well off?" Dani asked.

"Mom, have you never heard of the Kinos?"

She frowned and shook her head.

"Grandmaster Kino owns *Kino Martial Arts*. He's extremely wealthy. He has like fifty billion dollars."

"Oh, yes," Alo said. "I've heard of *Kino Martial Arts*. I thought he was an actor though."

"That's his son, Ricky Kino."

"I see. And how did you end up meeting these people?"

"Well, that was because of me," Kaylee said. She sighed. "I guess I'd better tell you what happened."

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December 24th, Tuesday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Daisy and Hannah laughed at Georgia. She was clean and dry and they'd just finished brushing her and clipped a pretty red bow on her collar. She wasn't having it. She kept pawing at it and trying to shake it off.

"Y'all need to take that off the poor dog," Charlie said sternly. "She obviously doesn't like it."

Laynah nodded. "Yeah, I don't think she likes the way it feels. It's too big."

Daisy sighed. "I think you're right."

Hannah reached over and unclipped the bow. "You don't care about lookin' pretty, do ya, girl?"

As soon as the bow was gone, she went to drink some water and eat. The fat four-week-old puppies were currently each licking their own plates of a gruel made of puppy kibble and raw milk. Though most of them were interested in the new food, a few of them wandered back looking for mom.

Hannah picked up one of those and kissed its nose. "Hey, little guy, you don't wanna eat, huh? That's okay. You'll learn." She set it down near Georgia and he immediately started to try to nurse.

Laynah smiled at Hannah. She too was learning. She didn't look so tiny or skinny anymore. She looked healthy. Her face was glowing. She seemed completely normal, and Laynah wondered if that was a front. She wondered if maybe she cried at night, or had nightmares. Laynah herself did.

"Well," Laynah began. "I'm gonna head back over to the stables and take care of a few things. Guess I'll see you all over at the Inn tonight."

"See ya, Bugs," Daisy said.

"Bye," Hannah said softly.

"Bye, Bugs," Charlie said as he tickled one of the puppies.

Laynah walked quickly to the stables. She took a moment to speak to Santana especially. "Hey, big boy," she whispered. "Are you missing your man like I'm missing your man?"

He whinnied and nodded, making her smile. He lowered his head and pressed it against her forehead and they stood there together. Laynah sighed and looked around the stable. "So, do you remember last Christmas when Jake was deployed in Germany?

Remember I told you all about baby Jesus and how he was born in a stable, but it was probably a little smaller than this one?" She sighed. "If baby Jesus was here, would you recognize who he is? I mean, that He is the Son of God? I bet you would. You'd probably stand close to him and protect Him. I just bet you would. I bet you miss Jake just like I do. Do you? Does your heart yearn to see him? Cuz mine does."

She stopped while she wiped a tear from her eye. She sighed and got herself under control. "But hey, he's gonna call us tomorrow. I'm so excited about that." Santana nodded his head a few times and snorted. She laughed. "Me too." Her phone buzzed and she pulled it from her back pocket.

Her eyes grew wide. "It's him!" She hit the green button. "Jake?"

"Hey, Bugs."

"Hey, Jake! You're early. I thought you were gonna call on Christmas Day."

He smiled. "I was, but something has come up."

"Oh, well, hold on, let me get up to the house on my laptop so I can see your handsome face better."

"No, Bugs, there's no time."

"Oh. What's going on?"

"You know I can't tell you that. I'm in a hurry. We're shipping out."

"Shipping out? Like out of Afghanistan?"

"Can't tell you, babe. But I won't be around to call you tomorrow so they allowed us a few minutes to let you know."

"Jake," she said, unable to control the emotion in her voice. "Jake, when will I hear from you again?"

"Not sure. It could be a while. I love you, Laynah."

"I love you too, I miss you. Please be careful. Please come home."

"Laynah, tell my parents I love them. And, well, tell my dad to remember the story of Surei."

"What's Surei?"

"He'll tell you the story, Bugs. Be strong. Be strong for me."

"I will. I will, Jake, but can't you tell me anything else?"

"I can tell you that I love you more than life itself. I can tell you that God has a plan. Trust Him. Let's pray together."

She sniffed. "Okay." She bowed her head and listened to her husband's strong voice talk to God and plead with Him to send His angels to protect them both and bring them back together again and to protect the people he's trying to save and help the mission to be successful. He ended in Jesus' name. Jake opened his eyes and smiled. "It's gonna be okay, Bugs. I'll see you soon."

"Promise?"

He nodded. "I promise. Listen, when I prayed just now, I felt peace. Didn't you?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Babe, don't let fear blind you or keep you from hearing God's voice. Stay strong. I have to go. Merry Christmas, babe."

"Merry Christmas," she blubbered. "I love you."

"I love you. Go talk to my father."

"I will. Bye, Jacob Appel."

"Bye, Melaynah Appel."

The screen went blank. She could see the reflection of her own face in the black screen. She wiped at the tear coursing down her cheek, shoved the phone in her pocket and headed to the Inn.

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Psalm 46:1-3

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling."

Chapter Thirty

December 24th, Tuesday Morning
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Melaynah walked into the Inn. It didn't seem right. The place was so cheerful. Christmas decorations everywhere. The smells of turkeys or chickens roasting in the oven. The table and buffets covered with goodies and an all-day coffee bar that included hot chocolate, eggnog, and other beverages. Christmas music played softly in the background. People were laughing. Children were doing crafts. Women were wrapping gifts to be distributed to the less fortunate. It could be a scene from a movie. But to Laynah, it didn't feel right. How could anything be right if her Jake was in danger?

Diane, one of the assistant managers, approached with a smile. "Hey, Laynah! Merry Christmas! How's your mom?"

Laynah smiled. "She's okay. Miss Diane, do you know where Uncle John is?"

"No, but Jodi will know. I'll go get her."

Diane ran toward the back of the Inn, down past the music room where people were gathered around the piano singing. Jodi came back with her a minute later.

"Hey, Laynah. You need to speak to John?"

Laynah nodded. "And you too. Please, can you make some time?"

"Yes, of course." She pulled out her phone and called her husband.

"Hey, John, where ya at? Okay, good, so can you come inside for a few minutes? Laynah needs to speak with us and she doesn't look too happy."

Jodi hung up and smiled at Laynah. "Let's go into the office."

They walked back to the office. Only a few seconds later, John appeared in the doorway. His eyes met Laynah's and he knew this wasn't good.

"Hey, Bugs," he said softly.

She nodded. "Jake just called."

John breathed out a sigh of relief, cuz, that meant he was alive. "Okay, and?"

"Well, he was supposed to call me tomorrow and said he would have lots of time to talk, but instead he called me today to tell me he won't be able to call tomorrow and he had only a few minutes today. He said they were shipping out. I begged him to give me some information. Was he actually leaving Afghanistan? Was it gonna be a dangerous mission? How long will he be gone?" She stopped as her voice broke.

John nodded. "And of course, he couldn't tell you anything."

She nodded. "Right, but he did tell me to tell you something about Surei, or Surrey? He said to get you to tell me about it. Before he hung up he said it again, 'go talk to my dad.' I promised him I would. And so, here I am. Uncle John, Jake's in danger, isn't he? He's in big trouble. Am I gonna lose him?"

John drew a deep breath as Jodi put her arm around Laynah. "Alright, Bugs, now,

listen up, because I have no intention of lying to you to soften things. So first, of course Jake is in danger. He has been since he left. He's a Marine in another country and that always makes him a target. Are you gonna lose him? I doubt that. If he's using Surei as an example, well, five out of six of us made it back. So, the odds are with him."

"What is Surei, or where is Surei?"

John nodded. "Surei is the name of a woman. A girl really. A young, beautiful, brave girl who traveled twenty-four miles on foot through rough terrain in the middle of winter from some mountains in Iran to sneak across the border of Iraq to find a ride to take her to a military base in Badrah. That's where we met her. She came to let us know that there was a group of refugees. Some were escaped political prisoners. Some political dissenters. A group of Christian missionaries, a group of children, three doctors, and two American servicemen, a pilot and a Marine, both injured. There were thirty people in all. They'd all come to hide in an old mine in the mountains near the border. They were pretty much stuck and cold and starving. When the girl made it to us, we began to make plans to rescue them."

"So, it's just another rescue mission, then? No big deal, right?" Laynah said.

He sighed. "No. It's not just another. These people, they were in Iran. We do not have diplomatic relations with Iran."

"What type of relations do we have?"

"Simply put, they are our enemies. We do not go into Iran to run missions. It could trigger an all-out war."

"Then how did you rescue them?"

"We parachuted in under the cover of night. We knew, if somehow we were caught, we were on our own. The US would not send anyone to rescue us. So we went in, we would have a chopper swoop in at a certain rendezvous point and we had to be there at that point in a small window of time. We had to lead the thirty people, two or three at a time, to that rendezvous point. It took us three days to accomplish it because we could only move at night.

"The last trip, there was one of the prisoners who was pretty sick. We had to carry him. We took turns. Our guy, Kaleb, slipped on some loose rocks and fell with the prisoner about twenty feet. Those rocks apparently alerted some sheep herders and two of them came to investigate. There was screaming and yelling and they took off running to go scream the alarm, so we had to put them down."

"You killed them?"

"I didn't. I was with the larger group. But one of us had to. It was them or all of us would die." John shook his head. "So, we took out those two young men who just didn't know who the real bad guys were. Your Uncle Keegan and Brayden climbed down those rocks. Keegan put that sick man on his back, Brayden helped Kaleb, who'd been injured in the fall, and they climbed back up. We almost got away after that; however, those two young men being missing from their village caused a search party to be sent out. Nutshell, we had to wait for the chopper, the bad guys found us just as the chopper approached and three of our party were hit. We lost one of our guys, a dear friend of mine, his name was also John. John Gamble. We also lost a little six-year-old girl named Lina Khan." John blinked as the memories surfaced.

"And the third?" Laynah asked. "You said three people were shot."

John nodded. "The third was Keegan. He took one in the upper chest. Actually, very similar to where Gabe was shot last August."

Laynah sat quietly, thinking about all John had disclosed.

"So, why did Jake refer me to Surei? Is it because they're gonna go rescue a large group of people?"

John sighed. "It was probably because they're gonna have to go into Iran. And if they are, it's gonna be a tough job, because no one will admit that US Special Forces were ordered to cross the border into Iran. And yes, it probably also means there is a large group, with maybe an asset, and that is why they would think it's worth the gamble." He smiled. "That's what John Gamble whispered with his last breath. It was worth the 'gamble.' He thought it was humorous."

Laynah looked at her Aunt Jodi. She had tears in her eyes, which made Laynah's tears start again. "So, Jake is probably going on a mission to Iran, where we are not allowed to go, so if something goes wrong, no one will go and help him. Is that what you're telling me?" she asked, her voice in a panic.

"That would be what the military would think, yes."

"I don't understand."

"Well, Jason would have no problem sending in JETTs to rescue one of ours. And of course, he wouldn't just rescue Jake, he'd get them all. He's done it before. He would do it again."

"He's done it before?"

"Yes."

"But no one has ever talked about it or given Ameritech credit?"

"Correct. Though they were paid handsomely. Bottom line, Bugs, Jake is strong and capable and odds are he will make it back just fine. If not, Jason will bring him back. Keegan and I would probably help if that were the case. It's gonna be okay."

Laynah nodded. "Jake and I prayed before he hung up and he said he felt strongly that it was gonna be okay."

"Then it is, sweetie. Trust God."

"I'm trying. You know, when Gabe was dying in the hospital, Jake and I prayed about it and we had this peace come over us that Gabe was gonna be just fine."

"And he was, right?"

"Yes."

"So why is this different? Trust."

Laynah nodded. "Okay."

John smiled. "Let's have a prayer."

They stood together in a circle and prayed over Jake and his situation and when they finished Laynah nodded. "I do feel better."

"That peace, that feeling where the pit in your stomach goes away and your heart slows back to normal," John said. "That is the peace that God gives us. Remember it. He's gonna be okay."

Laynah nodded. "He's gonna be okay."

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December 24th, Noon Tuesday

Davis Home, Huntington Beach, California

MacKenzie Davis looked up and smiled at her younger sister as she came into the kitchen. "Is that sweet boy asleep?"

"He is," Marissa said as she came right up to her older sister and put her arms around her. "Oh, Mick, I'm so happy to be here. I've missed you so much."

Mickey laughed. "Rissa, I've missed you too and do you realize how many times you've said that?"

Rissa giggled. "Well, I mean it. Ya know, this was not how I pictured it would be when I had my first baby. I thought you'd be by my side."

Mickey sighed as she arranged fruit and cheese cubes on a large three-tiered platter. "I thought that too. Who knew we'd be pregnant at the same time and have babies just a day apart."

"Really, just hours apart," Marissa said. "But listen, next time, let's have them at least a year apart."

Mickey laughed. "Uh, Riss, there won't be a next time for me. I don't intend to have any more babies."

Rissa shrugged her shoulders. "You didn't intend to have this one."

"Yeah, well, Scarlett was a fluke. I'm old. No more babies."

"Maybe. But you never know God's plans."

Mickey smiled. "I guess you're right. Anyway, I'm so glad you're here."

"Yeah, sorry we couldn't get out here until yesterday. Work for Chris has been crazy. At this rate Mr. Lee is gonna have to divide up the New York division. But, I'm so glad that at least we get to stay until after New Year's." She looked around. "So, what needs doing?"

"You can put those cookies on a plate for me."

Rissa nodded and looked over the spread. "Let's see, quiche cups, pigs 'n blankets, deviled eggs, giant cookies, fruit and cheese, teriyaki meatballs, goat cheese roll and crackers, veggies and dip, your amazing sour cream donut bundt cake, and— what's in that pot?"

"That is split pea with ham soup and in the oven are sausage balls. Oh, let me get the broccoli salad out of the fridge, because they'll be here any minute."

"Broccoli salad. Eeew."

Mickey laughed. "You might like this one. It has walnuts and cranberries and sunflower seeds in it," she said as she set it down on the high counter where everything else was laid out.

Marissa eyed it. "I promise to try it." She looked around. "But wow, this is a lot of food."

"Well, it would be a lot of food for us girls I guess, though, I mean, four nursing mothers, we can eat a lot. But add in Jeff, Chris, Jensen and Cam and I'm not even sure if we have enough."

"Well, the guys will just have to show some restraint," Rissa said. "So, you said the boys are over at the church?"

"Dan and Jeremy are with JoJo and Logan picking up the last of the gifts for the

children at a shelter and making the deliveries and then they're gonna help young Eric and Jordan give out hot meals to some homeless people."

Rissa nodded. "So, this Jordan, I've watched her on TV, at the news conference and at the movie premiere. She seems like a nice girl and she's definitely pretty. Do you approve?"

"One hundred percent. She's such a sweet girl, and she's strong, and she's perfect for young Eric. You'll get to meet her tonight at the Kinos."

Both ladies turned at the knock on the door. "They're here!"

"I've got it," Jeff yelled and opened the front door.

There was screaming and girls jumping up and down and crying and laughter. So much laughter.

Cam stood back and watched his wife. His sweet Jeffy, who sometimes had the weight of the world on her shoulders, was acting like her teenaged self. This was exactly how she'd act whenever she and Rissa got to see each other. They'd met when Jeffy was fifteen and Rissa was sixteen and had become fast friends. Rissa had been Cam's best friend. She'd met Jeffy and they needed a ride, so he'd offered. Next thing he learned was Jeffy had snuck away from home and Rissa wanted Cam to stay with Jeffy in a motel so she wouldn't be alone. That sealed his fate. From that night forward, June Flower Kino became his entire life.

It was a crazy time. The very next day after they'd spent the night together, Jeffy had been taken out into the mountains by a dude who intended to execute her. Cam had saved the day and protecting Jeffy became his goal and eventually, his job.

Right now, Rissa was hugging Kimmie who was Jeffy's other best friend, Jason Lee's daughter. Kim was married to Jensen, an Ameritech agent who had the guts to go after his boss' daughter. Rissa was also married to an Ameritech agent, Christopher Coley. Chris was one of the agents Cam had worked with closely when Jeffy was in Africa. He'd been wounded in the line of duty. Close call. And here he was, a senior agent running the New York Division. And Mickey was married to Jefferson Davis, the famous Ameritech agent who'd rescued her from kidnappers. Cam, Jeffy, Rissa, Chris, Kimmie and Jensen were all around the same ages, late twenties to early thirties. Jeff and Mickey had been that age when they'd met and were now in their early forties.

The girls settled a bit and turned to retrieve their babies from Cam's and Jensen's arms to place them in Mickey's and Marissa's arms. They went to sit in the living room, but Jeffy got up and headed to the guest room and came back out with Rissa's sleeping boy, tiny Christian Coley. Jeffy grinned at Marissa. "Sorry, Rissa, but I couldn't wait another minute."

Baby Chris, like Scarlett and Jay, was only four weeks old. Jeffy and Cam's Elijah was six weeks old.

The ladies purred over the babies. Mickey directed the men to snack if they wanted and that lunch would be ready soon. The men didn't even hesitate, eager to get away from the discussions of water breaking, sore nipples, sleep schedules. The men sat along the breakfast counter munching on goodies only halfway listening.

Scarlett's sweet cry could be heard on the monitor and Jeff went to retrieve his daughter. He changed her diaper and brought her to her mother. Looking around at the

group of ladies, he realized all the babies were currently being nursed, discreetly of course, still, he made his exit quickly.

Mickey nursed her daughter and placed a soft kiss on her forehead as she did.

"Oh, Mick, she is so beautiful," Rissa said for the hundredth time. "So, which of these baby boys do you think she's gonna marry?"

"Rissa! Do not talk about my baby getting married. Not yet."

Rissa laughed. "It's gonna happen, Mick. They grow up fast."

"Don't I know it. Daniel is about to be a teenager, and Jeremy is about to be twelve. It seems like they were just born."

"It's weird, isn't it?" Jeffy said. "When Mickey had Daniel, I was only sixteen. Now, he's practically grown. It's so strange. It does happen so fast."

"Right," Kim said. "So, which of these boys is Scarlett gonna marry?"

Mickey giggled. "Okay, well, not Chris, 'cause he's her cousin. And not Jay or Eli, because they're too close to her age. It'll probably be someone like, um, let's see, Ledger Adams is three, or like, hmm, who else?"

"My brothers," Jeffy said quickly with a grin. "Abe, Noah, Manny or Nate. They'll all be three next May."

Mickey held Scarlett over her shoulder and patted her back. "Do you hear that, Scarlett? You have five gorgeous young bachelors as potential mates. What a lucky girl you are, my little sweetie."

The women all giggled. Jeff frowned. The thought of his daughter growing up and getting married was disturbing so he decided to speak up. "She'll probably be so used to them that she'll think of them as brothers, so forget it," he said gruffly, making the men laugh.

"Tell that— to Laynah and Jake," Cam said.

Jeff frowned.

"Or to Gabe and Taylor," Jeffy added.

"And how about Daisy and Brody," Cam added.

"Daisy and Brody?" Kim asked.

"Oh yeah, let me tell you about that," Jeffy began.

"Uh, Mick, is lunch ready?" Jeff asked.

Mickey rose and handed Scarlett off to Marissa. "Yes. And you can help me by filling those giant mugs over there with soup and placing them on the table. Chris, you get the sausage balls out of the oven. Jensen, you fill those glasses with ice water, and Cam, well, Cam, you just sit there and look cute. You're good at that."

Cam smiled and nodded.

The women all giggled. The men rolled their eyes.

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December 24th, Tuesday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Christmas Eve at the Tanners for the past nineteen years had always begun around 4:00 PM at the Inn. Their first Christmas in Pine Forest had come after some big-time drama. Thirty-one-year-old Keegan was recovering from stab wounds to the abdomen, had recently quit his job as an FBI Special Agent and had just started working at

Ameritech. Lizzy had been two months pregnant with Gabe. Lizzy and Keegan were in the middle of planning their wedding, which would take place on New Year's Day. Heather Anderson back then, now a Tanner, was gonna be six in a few weeks. Rose and Violet would be five on Christmas Day, and Lily and Daisy had just turned four on December 19th.

That first year, they'd been staying in one of the cottages at the Inn. They would move into their new home on the day Gabe was born. Still, they'd begun every Christmas Eve at the Inn since then, and then would take the children home to have some private family time before they tucked their little angels into bed.

At the Inn, they had always put on a performance. Lizzy and the girls would sing and would put on a reenactment of the story of Jesus' birth. Gabe too would participate. His first role had been to *be* the baby Jesus, though at six months old, he was a little bit exuberant to play the role well. After that he was a shepherd boy, Joseph, the innkeeper, and later, the angel Gabriel. He sang and danced—and ate. He ate a lot. Today was no exception.

This year, the guests at the Inn were more excited than usual, because Gabe had become a giant social media icon. Many of the guests had admitted that getting the opportunity to mingle with Gabe Tanner and his family was one of the reasons they'd booked their Christmas at the Inn.

Currently Gabe was standing around the giant buffet, sampling all of the goodies and carrying on a conversation with two teenaged girls and their mother who'd cornered him. He wasn't reluctant. He was trying to be very aware of the moment and asking the Holy Spirit to lead him in what he said.

"So, is Taylor gonna come and spend Christmas with you?" one girl asked.

He shook his head. "No, she has a giant family over in Cali and they're having an awesome time celebrating Christmas together."

"But don't you miss her?" her sister asked.

"Sure. But right now, I'm having an awesome time with my own family. After this, I'll be going off to school in a few weeks, and when I do, I'm gonna miss my family, so, I'm trying really hard to take in every minute I can with the people I love here in Pine Forest."

"Gabe," Iris yelled as she ran up to Gabe as if on cue. He scooped her up in his arms.

"Like this munchkin," he said as he kissed her cheek and bounced her up and down. "Iris, this is Amber and Ashley and their mom, Mrs. Allgood. Can you say hello to them?"

Iris smiled. "Hewo, I'm Iris. It's nice to meet you," she said clearly and politely.

"Oh, well, aren't you just adorable," Mrs. Allgood said. "How old are you?"

"I'm fwee. How old is you?"

Gabe laughed. "Iris, we don't ask grownups how old they are."

"Why?"

"Because it's rude. But you can ask Amber and Ashley. Okay?"

"Okay. How old is you?" Iris said.

"I'm thirteen," Amber said.

"And I'm sixteen," Ashley said. "And you are so cute."

"Fank you. Gabe, can I have a cookie?"

"How about half a cookie because they are really big and dinner is gonna be ready soon."

She frowned. "Okay."

Gabe grabbed a cookie off one of the several platters of cookies, broke it in half and handed it to her. He smiled at the two teens. "Anyone want the other half?"

"I do," they both said.

He laughed and broke the half in two. "I feel like Jesus when he was breaking bread. So, Jesus, bless this cookie for these two sweet girls, that from now on, whenever they eat cookies, they'll remember you."

The girls giggled and accepted the piece of chocolate chip cookie.

"Thanks," Ashley said. "I can't wait to tell my friends that Gabe Tanner fed me a cookie that he personally blessed."

Mrs. Allgood smiled. "Gabe, I wonder if you realize what kind of effect you have on girls."

Gabe's eyes twinkled. "I might," he admitted, making the woman laugh.

Jodi walked up to the group. "Gabe, I was asked to get you to come warm up your voice."

Gabe nodded.

Jodi turned to the three females. "Ladies, if you're interested, Gabe and his family are getting ready to lead us in some Christmas songs in the music room and also give a little solo performance. Would you like to join us?"

"Oh, absolutely," Ashley said quickly. "I'm actually a part of it!"

"Wonderful," Jodi said sweetly.

The inn was full and at least fifty people began heading toward the music room. Violet was already at the piano, playing *Sleigh Ride* while a few couples were dancing.

Gabe bounced Iris around for a few beats but she wanted down to go see Hannah, so he set her down.

CJ, his arm still in a cast, was standing next to Jericho who was on crutches. Next to Jericho were Rose and Heather and Nolan.

Daisy and Lily stood near the piano and Gabe joined them.

There were a lot of children present and Violet changed tunes then to one they would all know, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.* The crowd sang out loud and strong, with Gabe, Charlie and Matthew leading the way with the echoes, being silly and making everyone laugh.

In the far corner of the music room, Keegan Tanner stood with John Appel, Chaz Stewart, Ty Stewart, and Dalton, discussing Jake's newest mission, Hannah's progress, Gabe's upcoming training, Dalton's plan to propose to Rebecca Murphy, and the surprise New Year's Ball that the men would present to their wives as a gift in the morning. As they spoke, they gently held sleeping babies. Chaz held his son, Jonathon Jones, whose name had already morphed from Jonny to JonJo, to JoJo, to JJ and now Jonesy.

Ty held little Lachlyn, Jonesy's twin. Keegan held his newest son, Isaiah, sometimes called Issa by his brother. John held little Gentian, whose brother had also changed her

name. It too was morphing— in a big way. It started with GenGen, to Genny, to Genny girl, to Gen G, to GiGi, and then Gabe took it on an entirely different track. It went to 'my Precious girl,' then to 'my Precious', then to 'my Pretcha,' to 'Pretcha ma,' to just 'Pretcha' and most recently, 'Pretch'.

When his sisters informed him he was not going to call their sweet baby sister any of those names, he let them know right away that whatever pet names there were between him and his sister were between him and his sister and no one had any say in it.

The room filled up with all the people from the Inn, plus the Tanners, the Stewarts, and the Murphys. Once several songs had been sung, Jodi asked everyone to take a seat. The double row of chairs was set in a large circle open at the side where the piano stood. Some younger children opted to sit on the floor in front of the chairs. Keegan's parents were given a place of honor in chairs that were closer to the piano.

John smiled at the group of men. "Well, that's my cue." Still holding Gentian, he walked to the front and stood in front of the piano and bounced her softly as he spoke.

"Hello, everyone. My name is John Appel and I am part owner of this great place. Jodi and I truly love the *Pine Forest Country Inn* and one of the things we love the most is getting to meet the amazing people from all over the country. This Christmas crowd has been awesome.

"As you know, one of the things we focus on in this place is Jesus. We are Christians, we live like Christians, we love like Christians and we celebrate Christmas like Christians, meaning, we focus on the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As you've probably read in our Christmas brochure, every Christmas Eve for the past nineteen years, we have been so blessed to have our own Grammy Award-winning singer perform for us. Not only that, but she has trained her family to sing and they will perform here tonight in a few minutes. We also have the principal owner of the Inn, Lisa Stewart, who is our neighbor and you've already met her and her family at the Stewart ranch where we just had a fire pit musical two nights ago.

"Right now, we are honored to hear the Christmas story, taken from different books of the New Testament and mashed together. Some of your very own children will be helping out in this production, so let's all be quiet so that we can hear the ones who might be a little shy. This performance is being recorded but you parents are welcome to video, just no bright lights to distract from the Spirit. Okay, without further ado, I turn the time over to *Pine Forest Country Inn Christmas Players*."

The lights in the room went off and one lone spotlight shone on the handsome face of Gabe Tanner. "And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High."

The light went off of Gabe's face and switched to Hannah's sweet face. She wore

a covering on her head to represent Mary. “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

Again, the light changed from Hannah to the angelic face of Lizzy Tanner, her beautiful blond hair and blue eyes taking everyone’s breath away because she looked so much like an angel. Violet played a beautiful piano intro and Lizzy sang, *The Angel Gabriel Visits Mary*. Everyone was mesmerized by Lizzy’s sweet voice and if they didn’t already know, they knew now why she had won Grammys.

They went on to tell the beautiful story of the birth of Jesus. Some of the highlights included the Inn’s guest children singing *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, and one of them, Ashley Allgood, speaking some of the narration of the story.

Another huge highlight was fourteen-year-old Charlie Stewart orating the message the angel delivered to the shepherds. “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

Not only did Charlie do a fine job, but he was filled with emotion as he delivered it, and his emotion traveled to the others in the room. Later, he confessed to Gabe that he’d become so emotional because he thought of his mother giving birth in the back of that wrecked ambulance.

Gabe’s narration in between each scene was also powerful. Maybe it was because these two teenaged boys, known for being rough and tumble and jovial, were so reverent and obviously felt the true meaning of what was happening in these scriptures, that it conveyed the message that much more.

Another highlight was when little Iris had to begin the song, *Mary Did You Know.* She was to sing her one line a cappella, and she asked Violet for her note. Violet struck the note three times on the piano and Iris sang, “La La La, Violet does I have da note?”

“Yes you do, baby girl,” Vi answered as everyone laughed softly.

Then in exaggerated slowness Iris belted out, “Mawy— did— yuu— know— dat— yo— baby—boooy—would—one—day—wak—on— wadda.” Her adorable little voice, right on key, mixed with her baby accent was enough to melt the hardest hearts.

Another highlight was a surprise Violet had worked out with twelve-year-old Matt Stewart. She nodded at him as she played the intro to *Away in a Manger*, and he opened his mouth and blew everyone away. His mother, Lisa, had known he could sing, and had asked Violet to get him to do a solo. It had been a battle, because Matthew himself didn’t know he could sing as well as he could. But Violet had worked with him for several days and she knew, if he didn’t freeze up, he was gonna knock their socks off. He did.

The last highlight had been a chorus of Lizzy and her girls, along with Gabe, Charlie, Matthew, and Hannah, singing O Holy Night in the most angelic strains and harmonies anyone had ever heard. After that, the entire room was asked to join in several Christmas Carols and then a prayer and blessing on the food was given and they all adjourned to the dining room.

The Tanners ate quickly and took their leave. They were back at their own house before seven. Except for CJ and Jericho, they were all bathed or showered and in their pajamas by 7:30. The large group gathered together in their den to talk about the birth of

Jesus and how beautiful and how blessed they all were. They each bore their testimony. They each spoke their hearts. They laughed and they cried together.

CJ, Jericho and Nolan had always known this was a special family, but they were getting a glimpse of how to be with their own families. How a man truly leads his family and encourages them to stay close to the Lord.

Together they sang and worshiped and ate goodies. They lit candles and told funny stories from past Christmases. They listened to their grandparents as they shared stories about their father when he was a little boy.

Gabe loved hearing those stories, because it helped him to see his father in a different light and he felt closer than ever to the man he loved and respected most in the world. Gabe leaned down to whisper in his brother's ear. "So, Issa, do you see now why I wish I didn't have to go away? But, I have to leave. I have to stop being a little boy and start being a man who can lead my own family like this some day." He kissed the baby's soft cheek and looked into his eyes. Isaiah reached up and grabbed Gabe's nose, making him chuckle. He glanced over at his father who smiled at him.

They sang more songs together, this time Lily playing her guitar to accompany them. Just before the evening ended, Keegan spoke to his family. He confessed his love for them. He spoke to each of them telling them about things they'd done that made him so proud of them. He even included CJ, Jericho and Heather's fiancé Nolan, which surprised the young man and honored him, making him emotional. His own father had never been tender with him. He'd been strong, yes, a leader, yes, but never emotional or tender. Nolan was beginning to learn that a man can be a strong leader and still have a heart that is reachable. He glanced at Heather and she smiled at him in understanding. Lord, how he loved her and her whole family.

As the time reached 9:00, Iris made her way off Jericho's lap and stumbled over to her father. He lifted her up onto his lap. "You tired, my little flower?"

"Uh huh," she said as she leaned her head against his chest.

"Tell ya what, we're gonna have a family prayer and then I'll tuck you into bed, okay?"

She yawned. "Okay. And we gonna open pwesents in the morning."

He smiled. "What presents? Did someone get you a present?"

She giggled. "Yes, I know they did."

"Did you get someone a present?"

"Yes. But I'm not gonna tell you what it is."

"Why do we give each other presents?"

"Cuz we wove each other."

"Yes, but why do we give each other presents on *Christmas*?"

"Oh, cuz, when da baby Jesus was born the fwee kings bwought him pwesents."

"Very good." He looked up. "Everyone, let's kneel together, except you, Mom and Dad, and you, Jericho. Y'all just stay right there."

Keegan, Lizzy, Heather, Nolan, Rose, Violet, CJ, Daisy, Lily, Gabe and Iris all knelt in a circle. Gabe held Isaiah in his arms and Rose took Gentian from her mother's arms.

Keegan glanced up at his father. "Dad, we don't often get to have you here. Would you like to pray?"

His father smiled. “Actually, son, I don’t often get to hear *you* pray and would love to be witness to you leading your family in prayer.”

Keegan sighed, nodded, and closed his eyes. “Father, we come before you at this time on this eve of a special birthday celebration for the birth of Your Son, and we simply want to thank you. We are so grateful, Jesus, that You would come to this earth, take on human form where you feel pain and sorrow. You knew what was coming, you knew the pain you would be feeling, you knew the horrible death you were facing and you did it all for us, so that we could come home to live with You. Thank You. Thank You.

“This family, Father, this family kneeling here together, we’re so grateful that we’ll be able to be together because we love each other so much. Our hearts are so filled with love for each other and for those that are not here right now, like Nolan’s family, Jericho’s family, and CJ’s family whom he hasn’t seen in ten years and I know...” He stopped as emotion welled in his heart and he heard CJ sniff. “I know, he’s looking forward to seeing them again. And I can’t forget my sisters and my nieces and nephews and their families. So many we can’t even name them all. Gabe’s Taylor and her family, the Appels, the Stewarts, and so many more. We’re grateful, Father, that this love can go on because of the birth of Your Son.

“I’m grateful for my wife, for the beautiful angel You sent to rescue me, who brought me more love and happiness than I could ever imagine. Thank you for her. Thank You for our children, thank you for these fine young men here, courting my daughters, for their nobleness and their faithfulness. Thank You for my parents, who have cared for me and my family and loved me so much. Father, may I be so bold as to ask blessings on this family, blessings of health and strength, blessings of wisdom and clarity of thought, blessings of peace and mostly, I pray that every person in this room will know You and Love You with all of their heart and mind and soul. For I know if they do that, they will obey You, they will seek You, they will be filled with the real joy that comes from being in Your presence. Lord, how we love You and how we desire to be with You. Make us strong. Keep us safe from all the dark forces of this world. Help me to be diligent in watching over this flock until we are able to be with You again. We pray all of these things in the mighty name of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, amen.”

“Amen,” everyone said, some louder than others.

Keegan looked up at his wife as they all stood up. She had tears running down her cheeks. He glanced around. His daughters too had tears. His son too. Actually, everyone seemed to be clearing the emotion from their throats and the tears from their eyes. He smiled. “Well then, I guess you all felt that too.”

“Thank you, Dad,” Gabe said immediately. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget that prayer and how much I felt the Holy Spirit. So, thank you, Dad, for being you and for taking such good care of us. I love you.”

He carefully embraced his father as he held the baby.

“What an amazing family I’m marrying into,” Nolan said softly.

Heather smiled and sniffed. “They are awesome people.”

“Well, merry Christmas, Tanner family,” Jericho said from his place on the couch.

“Merry Christmas,” everyone echoed.

Lizzy smiled. “Iris, make your rounds and tell everyone good night and then Daddy and I will tuck you into bed. The rest of you are welcome to raid the refrigerator. Gabe, if you and Rose will please hold the babies until I get back down, it would be a big help.”

“Of course.”

“Hold on, I wanna see that boy,” Jericho said. “I hardly ever get to hold him.”

Gabe reluctantly placed Isaiah into Jericho’s arms. He then turned to Rose. “Pretch! Let me see my Pretch!”

Rose rolled her eyes. “The names you come up with, boyo, you are so silly.”

“What? Pretch? She’s my little Pretcha ma,” Gabe said with a chuckle.

“What is Pretcha ma?” CJ asked.

“It’s a contortion of my precious,” Rose explained.

CJ grinned. “Oh, I get it. I like it!”

“Of course you do,” Violet said with a laugh.

“Well,” Nolan said. “I have to go downstairs to my room and get some things that need to go under the tree, and then I’m gonna spend some alone time with MY baby.”

Heather smiled. “Me too.”

“Well, we’re gonna head to bed,” Deb Tanner said.

“‘Night, gwandma,” Iris said as she ran to hug her.

“Good night, my little sugar plum,” Deb answered as she kissed both her cheeks.

Roger Tanner lifted her up into his arms. “Goodnight, sweet girl. See you in the morning.”

“‘Night gwandpa,” she said sweetly and hugged him hard. He set her down and she ran back to her father who scooped her up onto his shoulders.

Keegan’s parents made their rounds saying goodnight to all of their grandchildren and finally, Roger, Deb, Keegan, Lizzy and Iris headed upstairs just as Gabe’s phone went off.

He quickly handed Gentian off to Violet and answered the video call with a giant smile. “Tay! Hey!”

“Hey, Gabe! I hope I didn’t disturb your family’s Christmas Eve but I just thought you might want to hear what’s about to happen.”

“What’s about to happen?”

“Uh, Logan, young Eric, JoJo, and Jeremy are gonna sing a special number, accompanied by Aunt Jeffy of course.”

“Ooooh, I wanna listen,” Violet said quickly.

“This sounds like it’s gonna be great,” Gabe said. “But will you do me a favor? Go live on my website. That way it will be recorded for history and we can pull it up on the big screen.”

Taylor grinned. “Yes! Of course. I should’ve thought of that. Okay, give me a minute. Bye.”

Everyone gathered around the TV as Gabe pulled up his site and waited. It took another few minutes as they waited, but finally Taylor’s beautiful face filled the screen. “Hey, everyone! Taylor Kino here. I’m gonna give people a chance to get on for about one minute, and then I’m gonna tell you what’s happening. First though, let me just say that Gabe and I wish you all a very merry Christmas. I’m with my family in Cali and

Gabe is with his family in Pine Forest, Georgia, but he told me to go live with this and he's watching. Gabe, say 'hey' in the comments so all your peeps know you're on here."

Gabe quickly typed out, *Hey it's me I love you all and Merry Christmas!*

Taylor's eyes got wide as she watched the numbers grow. "Okay, so, we have almost eighty thousand live viewers right now. Awesomeness! What you're about to see is Logan Adams, with his brother, JoJo, and my brother Eric, and a good friend of ours, Jeremy Davis, who's only eleven and can really sing, and these guys are about to sing one of my favorite songs of all time. They are accompanied by my Aunt Jeffy, whom you all know as Dr. Kino Wallace. So, here they are. Let's listen."

Jeffy began to play a beautiful piece of music and Logan took the first verse solo with the guys oohing in the background. The song was "I Can Only Imagine."

As they sang the song imagining what it would be like to see Jesus and walk by His side, and look into His face, it drew you in. It made the listener also wonder how it would feel to be surrounded by His power and glory, wonder if you would want to break into dance or song or simply fall at His feet. Logan's voice especially drew you in, making you imagine all the things the song suggests.

Jeremy Davis sang solo on a few lines, surprising everyone.

JoJo and young Eric sang the next lines wondering what it would be like to forever worship God. Then Logan took the chorus by himself next and blew everyone away with the power and emotion with which he sang.

Finally, all four young men sang the chorus through again together in harmony. When they finished, the Kinos' living room was silent except for a few sniffles.

After a few seconds, Taylor's face appeared on screen as she wiped tears from her eyes. "Well, now, that was a beautiful Christmas gift." She turned the camera. "Okay you guys, wave to all the people who just watched you."

Logan, young Eric, JoJo and Jeremy all waved at the camera. "Hey, everyone! Merry Christmas!"

Taylor glanced down at the comment section. "You guys are a hit. Let me read a few of these comments. 'I have never felt the spirit so strong since I prayed for Gabe.' 'You guys tore it up.' 'I feel like I'm already in heaven.'

'Can't wait for Logan's album to come out. Hurry.'" Taylor giggled. "You guys are awesome. Well, my family is getting ready to eat and I imagine Gabe's family was about to say goodnight, so I'm gonna sign off. Thanks, everyone, for tuning in so we could share that with you. We love you all so much. Thank you, Jesus, for being born. We love you. Merry Christmas, everyone!"

Gabe watched as the screen went blank. Then his phone buzzed again and he answered and put it on speaker. "Hey, Taylor. That was absolutely phenomenal. I'm so glad you thought to share it with us."

"Well I thought to share it with you because I always seem to be thinking about you like 24/7."

Gabe smiled. "Me too. I mean I think about you all the time too."

She giggled.

"Well, I have to go. They're waiting on me to say the blessing."

"Okay. I love you, Taylor. I miss you."

"I love you and miss you and I'm going out of my mind without you."

"Just nine more days, babe. That's not too bad."

She didn't respond. "Okay, I'm coming. Gotta go. Love you sooo much!"

She made a big kissing sound and ended the call.

Gabe smiled. He looked up and saw everyone smiling at him and he blushed.

Rose laughed. "Gabe, you two are so cute."

He sneered. "Yep. Almost as cute as you and Jericho."

Jericho nodded. "Touché."

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December 24th, 7:00 PM CST, Tuesday Evening

Quinn Home, Quapaw, Oklahoma

Raylynn looked around her. The backyard of her parents' home was crowded with people. Word got around quickly that the Quinn sisters were in town and throwing a little Christmas Eve party. There were at least a hundred people here, milling around the backyard, most of the older people sitting in lounge chairs around the large fire pit. It was pretty much the only thing about their home that could be described as "large."

Ray and Kay had driven down to the local Walmart to buy some food and a few gifts for their parents and maybe have a few friends over. Ray had called Grandmaster Kino to see if it was okay to use his card to do so. He had insisted they invite the entire neighborhood. He then said he was sending the agents to help her. Next thing she knew, the agents met up with them and were doing most of the shopping. They bought large plastic totes to fill with drinks and ice. They bought meats to roast, fruits, veggies, cakes, cookies, salty snacks, premade party platters and added some festive decorations and party favors. They even bought lights to hang out around the yard and along the ramp that led to the side door of the house where everyone would go in and out.

Ray had felt nervous about spending so much money. The agents assured her it was nothing to the Kinos and the agents had been ordered to take care of everything because Grandmaster Kino knew that the Quinn sisters would feel awkward about spending the money. Now, she looked around at the festive event and smiled. Some of the younger men were busy cooking up a storm on the grill, which was more like a brick oven with a grate, built by her father many years ago. Her parents were sitting by the fire, blankets on their laps, laughing and talking and singing. A speaker hooked to a phone blasted out Christmas music from various Indian artists. Some of the elders had also brought their own instruments, a flute, a few drums, a guitar. It was a nice mash-up.

Ray walked around to make sure nobody needed anything and then came up behind her father and put her arms around him. "Are you having fun, Dad?"

He patted her arms. "Sunshine, this is a wonderful gift. Thank you so much."

"Well, it's actually a gift from Grandmaster Kino. I was reluctant to spend the money but he insisted."

Her father nodded. "Let's allow him to have the blessings."

"Hmm, I never thought about it that way." She sighed. "Can I get you or mom anything?"

"Oh no," her mother said quickly. "I think I'm gonna pop."

Her father laughed and squeezed her mother's hand. Ray smiled. Kaylee was right.

They did remind her of the Kinos. Why had she never noticed just how amazing they were? All she'd wanted to do was get out of Quapaw, but her parents, they were amazing people.

"This really is nice to have all these people whom we love right here in our yard, sharing food and stories, isn't it?" Ray said softly.

Alo Quinn nodded his head with a smile. "It must be what heaven is like. Sitting around with beautiful music playing, surrounded by the people you love, sharing time, celebrating our Lord." He nodded with a smile.

"Daddy, I've never realized how faithful you are. Why have I not realized it? It's like, I never really knew you."

Dani Quinn eyed her husband. Her heart was so full. Finally, finally her husband may see that it's time to tell their children about their father. Every time she'd suggested he tell them, he said it wasn't the right time. They weren't ready to appreciate the sacredness of what he told them. Of course, he wasn't their biological father and Dani wasn't their biological mother. When Raylynn's and Kaylee's parents had died they'd adopted the girls. They'd been older but there was no one else who would take in and be responsible for two growing, rambunctious little Indian girls.

Alo squeezed Ray's hand. "Your heart has always known my heart, Sunshine. But maybe sometime tomorrow we'll sit together, you and I and Dani and Kaykay and I'll tell you a little bit about how I came to be who I am."

Dani smiled in pleasure at his statement.

Mr. Smith from down the street also smiled. "You know, Ray, your Dad is an amazing man. Even after he lost the use of his legs, he quietly goes about finding ways to help everyone in this town."

She blinked. "No. I didn't know."

"When he sits down with you tomorrow, listen very closely. He is special."

Ray nodded. "I will." She stood back and looked closely at her father, wondering what he had to tell her. Even though he was in a wheelchair, he was still a handsome man. He was heavier than he used to be. His face was not as tan, she figured because he didn't get out as much. His hair had gone gray, white really. It was long, actually, again, like Grandmaster Kino's hair. Her mother usually braided it back out of his way. It came to right between his shoulder blades. Why did it feel as though she was really seeing him for the first time? He wasn't just an old disabled man. An elderly parent. He was strong, and kind, and patient and wise, and filled with love.

Why was she just seeing that? She used to think that Kaylee was the one who was oblivious and shallow. But maybe not. Maybe Kaylee was the one in touch with her real self and Raylynn had only been focused on putting one foot in front of the other. She felt confused and troubled.

She walked away from the fire and through the crowd of people, stopping to talk to friends and acquaintances. She saw Agent Walker nodding and talking to the town mayor. She didn't see Agent Allen. Kaylee approached her with a big smile. "Hey, Ray! Isn't this just so much fun?"

Ray smiled. "It's wonderful. I don't know how I can ever thank Grandmaster Kino."

"Right?" Kaylee said with a laugh. "Well, I gotta go."

"Go where?"

"Go," Kay said. "Like, to the bathroom. Be right back." Kay walked briskly toward the ramp at the side of the house.

"Hi, Kaylee!"

Kay stopped and turned to see who called her name. She nodded. "Hello, Jax," she replied, eyeing one of her old boyfriends. She went to school with him until he dropped out as a junior.

He came to her and hugged her. "How's it?"

"It's wonderful actually."

He touched her face. "Doesn't look like it's wonderful."

She shrugged. "Looks can be deceiving."

He smiled. "Well, it's okay, cuz I don't have to look at your face to do what I'm gonna do."

Her eyebrows raised. "I'm not sure what you think you're gonna do, but whatever it is, I'm sure you're mistaken."

He ran a finger down her arm, hooked his finger in the waistband of her jeans and pulled her against him.

She immediately removed his finger by twisting it.

"Ow, that hurts. What are you doing?"

"What are you doing? You think you can just grab me like that?"

"You've never had a problem with me grabbing you before."

She sighed. "Well, I do now. I've turned over a new leaf."

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Nope. Not kidding. No more messin' around."

"None at all?"

"No, not at all."

"Come on, Kaylee. I heard you were home and I came straight here thinking you and me, ya know, for old time's sake."

"Well, you were thinking wrong."

He grabbed her by the shoulders and backed her up against the railing of the ramp. "Are you sure? Maybe you don't remember how good..."

"I wish I could forget. Now let go of me. I'm serious, Jax."

"Hey, Kaylee, there you are. Your sister needs your help."

Kaylee drew in a sharp breath and blinked up at Agent Allen. "Oh, hey! Um, okay, I'm coming."

Jax stepped back. "Never seen you before."

"That's a good thing," Allen quipped. "Come on, Kaylee."

"Who is this guy?"

"Friend of the family." He took Kaylee's hand and led her away.

Jax watched them go.

Kaylee looked at the agent as they walked. "Thanks, Agent Allen, but I think I had it handled."

"I think you probably did, but it bothered me the way he put his hands on you so I stepped in. Sorry."

"It's okay. But listen, I was on my way to use the bathroom."
"Oh." He turned around. "Come on, I'll escort you."
She giggled. "Thanks."

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1 Corinthians 7:1-2

"Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me:
It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless,
to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife,
and let every woman have her own husband."

Chapter Thirty-One

December 24th, 9:00 PM PST, Tuesday Evening
Mark Adams Home, Newport, California

Bella yawned as she got out of the car and headed into the house. Mark lifted a sleeping Emily from her car seat, locked the door, carried her into the house and straight to her bed. Bella met him there and started getting the sleepy girl into her pajamas. Mark stood back and watched, so grateful for his wife and his daughter. His phone started buzzing and he stepped out into the hall to answer.

"Yes, Tessa. Lay it on me."

"You say that like it's something bad."

"Well, you're calling me at night on Christmas Eve, I figure it can't be good."

She sighed. "Well, hopefully, it's not bad. It's just an FYI. I just got a notification from VNS."

Mark frowned. Victims Notification System on Christmas Eve. "And?"

"And yesterday Cade Kessler was let out of jail on bail."

Mark sighed. "I wonder how he came up with the money."

"From what I was able to find out, the judge reduced his bail to $5,000 and he bonded out. Bottom line, Mr. Adams—he's out. I don't know why I didn't receive this notice yesterday."

"It's automated. Could be a holiday lag. Do we know whether the judge required an ankle monitor?"

"I haven't been able to confirm that yet," Tessa said.

"Okay, well, thanks for the heads-up. I'm gonna check on the Keiths. Thanks for calling."

"No thanks needed, sir. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you and your family too, Tessa." He hung up.

"Is there a problem?" Bella asked.

"Cade is out of jail. I need to check on the Keiths and call Joey."

Mark turned and ran down the stairs.

Logan, JoJo and Ryder made it home and had hit the kitchen for a snack before they started getting the gifts from their closets to put under the tree.

"What's up, Dad? You look upset," JoJo asked.

He nodded. "No time. Just listen." He called Joey and put his phone on speaker.

"Hey, bro. This can't be good."

Mark sighed. "Tessa just got a message from the Victim Notification System. Cade Kessler was let out of jail yesterday."

Logan drew in a sharp breath.

"Is there still surveillance on the Keith home?" Mark asked.

"Yes, and I'll put someone on the live feed to monitor it. And we'll get in touch with our friends at Huntington Beach Police Department to see if he has a monitor and right now I'm gonna put an agent on Cade. Hopefully he'll be able to locate him at his house and stay on him. I'll also put one on the Keiths."

Mark nodded with a sigh. "Can you do that ASAP?"

"I can and I will, and we'll get agents over there to watch the house 24/7 and we'll put one on Melody. Have you checked with the Keiths?" Joey asked.

"Not yet. I called you first. I'm hanging up. I'll call you back."

He ended the call and immediately called David Keith and again put his phone on speaker.

"Well hello there, Mark," David said jovially. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you as well. David, I am sorry to have to disturb your Christmas Eve, but I'm checking in with you to let you know that Cade was let out of jail yesterday. I'm just now finding out. Joey is gonna send an agent to watch over you guys and another one to stay with Melody."

David sighed. "Well, that's just great."

Mark sighed. "I understand how you're feeling. I didn't want to ruin your holiday, but you needed to know there's danger. Make sure you lock all doors and windows and turn on the alarm. As soon as the agent gets over there, he'll contact you by phone to let you know he's in place, but since it's Christmas Eve, it may take a few hours to get him there, so go right now and lock the house up tight."

"Will do."

"Now, just to make sure you really are okay at this moment, using our new code words, tell me what is your favorite pizza?"

"Pepperoni with extra cheese."

"Okay, good."

"Mr. Keith?"

"Yes?"

"This is Logan. I'm gonna come by to watch the house until the agent gets there. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes or so."

"It's hard to believe that Cade has become that unbalanced. Do you really think that's necessary?"

"Hopefully, it's not. I just don't wanna take any chances."

"Well, I'm sure Melody would love to see you."

Logan nodded, and checked his pockets for wallet and phone, then grabbed up his keys from the counter.

"You're not goin' alone, bro," JoJo said.

Logan nodded. "Well, come on then."

Mark waved at them as the two boys left the house. He ended the call with David Keith and called Joey back and let him know that currently the Keiths were fine and that Logan and JoJo were going over to watch the house until the agent got there. Joey got to work.

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December 24th, 9:10 PM PST, Tuesday Night

Keith Home, Huntington Beach, California

David Keith put his phone down and looked around for his family.

"Who was that?" Carol asked as she came into the living room, drying her hands on her apron.

"That was Mark Adams. Where are the kids?" he asked as he went to the front window to look out and make sure Cade's yellow Mustang wasn't lurking around.

"I think they're up in their rooms doing some last-minute wrapping."

"Kids!" David yelled. "Come down here a minute!"

"Coming," Phillip yelled back.

Melody was the first one down. "What's up, Dad? You sound upset."

"That's because I am. Let's wait for your brothers."

It took all of another thirty seconds for the two boys to come clumping down the stairs. "Have a seat, boys."

They came down and sat next to Melody on the sofa.

"I just got off the phone with Mark Adams. A judge reduced Cade's bail, and he bonded out yesterday."

Melody's face paled. "He's out of jail?"

"Yes, as of yesterday. Mr. Adams just found out and called us immediately. Joey Adams is sending agents to watch over us here at the house and to stay with you, Mel."

"Do you think he'd actually try to come here?" Carol asked.

"He's not stable and they don't want to take any chances. So, for now, be careful. Boys, I want you to go check the garage and then make sure all the windows down here are locked. Melody, you go check the windows upstairs. Let me know when you're all finished because I'm gonna turn on the alarm."

"Yes, sir," the boys said quickly.

"Okay," Carol said. "So, I was about to go put the paper trash out back. It's taking up half the kitchen. Do I have time to do that?"

David sighed. "You probably have time to do it. But let me come with you. You go get it together. I'll be right there."

Carol hurried to the kitchen. David looked out the living room window again, then double checked the locks on that window. Carol gathered up the two bags of paper and cardboard trash. There was a lot more than usual because of the Christmas season. David joined her and glanced through the window in the back door before picking up a larger box filled with paper. Seeing nothing, he unlocked the door. She stepped outside, David right behind her.

Carol never saw Cade pressed against the wall beside the door until it was too late. Before she could scream, he had his hand over her mouth, and a large butcher knife at her throat. He bent to whisper in her ear. "Be still, Mrs. Keith. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to."

David dropped the box he was carrying. "Cade, let go of her."

Cade only smiled. Carol pawed at his hand over her mouth.

"Be still," he growled. "Move your feet, Mrs. Keith, because we're going right back into the kitchen. You too, Mr. Keith. You try anything and I'll slit her throat. Now move."

David turned and led the way back inside. They stepped through the kitchen door and Cade closed it sharply.

"Good, you're back," Lyle said as he glanced into the kitchen. He came up short, drew in a sharp breath.

"Let her go!" he yelled as he started forward.

Cade smiled and yelled back. "Don't come any closer, little boy, or I will slit her throat."

Phillip came running into the kitchen and stopped, his eyes big.

"Let her go," Phillip yelled.

"Calm down, little boy," Cade threatened. "Don't come any closer or I will kill her. It only takes one slice and she'll bleed out in a few seconds. Ya know that, right? Now, where's Mel?"

"I'm right here," she said as she came running into the kitchen.

Cade looked her over with a smile. She wore a red skirt, with a matching red sweater that had white snowflakes on it, and red heels. "Well now, Melody, don't you look pretty tonight."

"Cade, please," Melody begged. "Please don't hurt my mom," she pleaded, tears streaming down her face.

"I swear, Melody, I really don't want to. And I won't. As long as you all do what I say."

"Okay, we will, but you let her go first," Melody begged.

He smiled. "I'm not stupid. You do what I say first, and I'll let her go. I swear. I don't want to hurt her. She's always been nice to me."

Phillip started forward.

Cade immediately began to slice the knife across Carol's throat. She whimpered, blood dripped from the thin cut.

"Please!" Melody screamed. "Please don't hurt her, Cade, please," she cried.

"Everyone just back off and shut up," he yelled sharply. He nodded toward the basement door. "Open that door and go down the stairs."

They all looked at him.

"Move! Do it now, or she dies."

"Okay, okay," David said. "Boys, come on." He unlocked both bolts on the door and stepped down onto the first step.

"Go!" Cade ordered.

Phillip stood at the top of the steps. "Okay, we're going, now when are you gonna let her go?"

"As soon as you get down those steps. And I have to tell you, my patience is running out."

David headed down. Phillip motioned for Lyle to go ahead down. Then he looked at his sister. "Mel, go ahead."

Cade shook his head. "Uh-uh. She stays here."

Phillip started to argue and then Cade made another slight slice across Carol's neck and she winced in pain.

"I swear, I will kill her if you don't do what I say right this minute."

"Okay, Okay."

"Mel, you put your back against this wall right here," Cade ordered.

She did what he said.

"Now slide down to sit."

She did it.

He nodded at Phillip. "Go down the stairs."

Phillip didn't see a way out. He went down four of the ten steps and turned.

Cade stood with Carol at the top of the steps. "Step down," he ordered her. When she didn't move he spoke fiercely, almost desperately. "I don't wanna hurt you, Mrs. Keith, now just step down."

She stepped down. He let her go and shoved her.

Phillip rushed to break his mother's fall. As he caught her, Cade slammed the door and turned both bolt locks. "That oughta hold 'em," he said with a smile. He nodded at Melody. "Time for some fun."

She jumped up and took off running. He tackled her, both of them landing on and sliding across the coffee table in the living room. The vase of flowers Logan had given to her mom yesterday went crashing across the room. The Christmas tree fell over. He stood and gripped Melody around the waist and lifted her off the floor. She was kicking and screaming, her fists pounding on his arms, her legs kicking only air.

He jerked her around and headed toward the stairs. "This is gonna be so much fun, Mel. We're gonna go up to that bedroom that you would never let me in and have a party." He laughed as she screamed again. "And then I'm gonna cut you up into tiny little pieces, put it all into a trash bag and throw you to the sharks. And don't forget your weak-ass father and your two brothers. I'm gonna slice them up too." He started up the stairs with her.

Melody planted her feet against the nearest step and pushed out with all her might. The motion caused Cade to stumble backward. He let go as he fell down a few steps. She tried to scramble out of his reach, but he grabbed her by the back of her sweater. That stopped her progress, until the sweater went over her head. She slipped out of the sweater and tried to run, but he was too fast and he grabbed her again. This time he had one arm around her waist and one around her neck. He squeezed to cut off her oxygen.

She screamed, she kicked at first, but finally slowed as she started to pass out. He loosened his arm, because he didn't want her dead. Not yet. He shoved the knife into his pocket so he could get a better grip on her. She grabbed the banister and held on for dear life. He jerked her hard three times before he was able to make her let go. He finally made it to the top of the stairs. He knew her room was in the front of the house because he'd talked to her at night sometimes, back when they were in school. He'd always thought she would eventually invite him up. She never did. Today he didn't need an invitation.

He slammed open the first door on his left and smiled. Jackpot. He tossed her onto the bed. She jumped up immediately and tried to get to the window. If she could open it and scream, maybe one of the neighbors would hear her. He ran at her, slamming her against the window.

She screamed and tried to unlock the latch, but he grabbed her again. Slamming her

hand against the window, hoping to break it, she screamed again. “Help! Somebody, please!”

He swung her around and tossed her back onto the bed. Grabbing a bottle of water sitting on the bedside table, she threw it at him. He dodged it and it hit the window. She looked for anything else to throw, but he was on her too quickly. He ripped her bra and the skirt from her body. She screamed again and again and kicked with all her might.

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Logan drove fast, though to him it seemed like he was driving in slow motion. Finally, he turned off Highway 55 and headed toward the Keiths’ neighborhood. Once he turned onto her street he took a deep breath. He glanced at his brother and then back at the street and his eyes opened wide. He slammed on the brakes.

JoJo looked at what Logan was seeing and immediately called his Uncle Joey.

“Talk to me,” Joey said.

“Uncle Joey, we’re on Melody’s street and Cade’s Mustang is here, parked about four houses, um, west of Melody’s house.”

“Hold on,” Joey said immediately.

JoJo could hear him giving orders on another line.

“JoJo, I have agents and Huntington PD coming at you.”

Logan floored it the rest of the way, flew up in front of the Keith home and ran toward the front door. JoJo finished the call, letting him know that Logan was going in and that he would be following close behind.

Logan jerked open the front screen door and tried the door. It was locked. He looked up at the sound of someone screaming and pounding on the window upstairs. “Jesus, help us,” he prayed as he ran around the house to the back door.

Thankfully, the back door was not locked and Logan ran inside. He didn’t hesitate. He headed up the stairs and straight to the front bedroom. What he saw enraged him. Cade knelt on the bed over Melody. Immediately, Logan grabbed Cade from behind, sliding his forearm around his neck. Logan jerked him off of Melody and threw him against the wall.

Cade came at him and Logan quickly and easily plowed an elbow into his face, immediately breaking his nose. Cade screamed and dropped to his knees. Logan punched him several more times, pulled him up, kneed him in the groin, and then allowed him to curl into the fetal position. Cade went limp and lay still. Logan turned to Melody who was crawling out of the bed. She ran to him before he could move toward her. She slammed herself against him and he put his arms around her and held her tight against his chest. Meanwhile, JoJo glanced around the room, quickly moved to the bed, pulled the top sheet off, headed back to Logan and wrapped the sheet gently around Melody’s shoulders.

Logan pulled back long enough to grab the edges of the sheet and pull them around her until she was completely covered. He looked down into her tear-streaked face. “You’re okay now. I’ve got you.”

Shivering uncontrollably, she only nodded and laid her head back on his chest.

“Melody,” JoJo said. “Where’s your family?”

She looked up, her brow furrowing as if she couldn’t remember for a minute.

"Th—they're in the basement. The door in the kitchen."

JoJo started downstairs but stopped when he heard, "Police!"

He put his good hand in the air. "Don't shoot me, I'm JoJo Adams."

The cops nodded. They'd already been told that the Adams brothers were already inside and were helping the victims.

"Sir, my brother Logan is upstairs with Melody. He has subdued Cade Kessler who may regain consciousness soon. I was coming downstairs to let the family out. Apparently Kessler locked them in the basement."

While two officers headed upstairs, JoJo went into the kitchen accompanied by two other officers. He unlocked the door. Phillip and Lyle came out first.

David helped his wife into a kitchen chair, tending to her and holding Lyle's t-shirt against her neck.

"Melody is okay," JoJo said immediately. "She's upstairs with Logan."

David glanced at the police. "That monster cut my wife. We need paramedics."

The officer nodded. "They're here." He hit a button on his mic and told them to come in.

"Yeah," JoJo said to the cop. "You also are gonna need medical assistance for Kessler and maybe for Melody too."

Upstairs, Logan looked around the room and nodded at one of the officers who'd just cuffed Cade. "Is it okay if I grab something for her to wear and get her out of here?"

He nodded. "Try not to move anything."

Logan slid a couple of drawers open, grabbed some jeans, went to her closet, grabbed a sweatshirt, secured the sheet that was wrapped around Melody, lifted her into his arms and took her downstairs. The house was full of people. Police, Ameritech agents, paramedics and the Keith family.

Logan looked up at the sound of a familiar voice. He let out a sigh of relief. His father was here, and he'd brought along their house guest, Ryder.

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December 25th 12:15 AM Wednesday Morning

Keith Home, Huntington Beach, California

Mark Adams peered around him. The last police officer left the house around twenty minutes earlier. The last Ameritech agents just took their leave.

Reverend Clark had called Logan and JoJo to wish them a merry Christmas and had been told what had taken place. He'd immediately called Bristol, whom he knew was Melody's good friend. Bristol, and Reverend Clark's two great-nephews, Harrison and Patrick had come over immediately. Once the investigators finished documenting and collecting what they needed, everyone else pitched in and had ended up restoring the Keiths' home to order. Most of them had already left.

Looking around, Mark couldn't find one trace of evidence left that declared what had taken place here earlier. Even the flowers had been saved, most of them put back in a vase and set neatly on the coffee table. The tree had been picked up and redecorated. Melody's room had been cleaned and blessed. The entire house had been blessed. Mark nodded his head in satisfaction.

Logan stood in a circle with Ryder, JoJo, Phillip and Lyle, discussing the terror that

had taken place a mere three hours earlier. Logan and JoJo were assuring the brothers that there was nothing safe they could have done while Cade held a knife to their mother's throat. They explained that the brothers weren't trained well enough to do anything differently and to not feel guilty that they hadn't been able to interfere with Cade's plans. They gave them a few pointers for the future and offered free classes at the *Huntington Beach Kino Martial Arts* facility.

David stood quietly next to Mark. Carol, her neck neatly bandaged, sat on the sofa, cuddled up next to her daughter. Police and Ameritech agents had taken pictures of Carol's injuries, and the red marks on Melody's throat where he'd strangled her, and other marks on her body that would be very large bruises tomorrow.

Mark cleared his throat and turned to David. "Are you sure you don't want to come to our house? You're completely welcome."

He nodded. "My wife and kids want to stay here."

Logan glanced at Melody to see if that's really what she wanted. He couldn't tell. She seemed void of emotion and that meant she was still in shock. He went to sit next to her.

"Melody, are you sure you want to stay here?"

She nodded. "It's Christmas. I really want to spend this special time with my family in our home. Up until a few hours ago, it's been the best Christmas I've ever had, and Logan, a lot of that is because of you and your family and the Kinos coming into my life. You've shown us that God is real. You've shown us to not just go through the motions of being a believer, but how to be a real Christian. You've given us a newfound faith, and so, I want to stay here. Don't be upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm just trying to understand, babe."

She sighed. "I guess it's kinda like in the Grinch story."

Logan's eyes narrowed as he tried to get what she was talking about.

"I mean," Melody went on. "The bad guy, the Grinch, he came to Whoville. He tried to take everything away from them at Christmas time, but the Whos, they didn't let it change them. They still went out on Christmas morning and stood around that tree and sang praises together. Well, I don't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking he ruined our Christmas. I want him to know that he didn't change anything at all. We're still here, all together. And in the morning, we're gonna get up, though it may be a little later, we're gonna give gifts to each other, we're gonna read the Bible together, we're gonna pray together, we're gonna sit around the dining table and enjoy a delicious Christmas morning breakfast and then I might call my boyfriend and get together with him."

Logan smiled. She went on.

"The Grinch has NO power over me, over us, over our families. He tried to destroy us and he didn't succeed. Thanks to you, Logan, and your family."

"Thanks to God," Logan corrected.

Melody nodded. "Thanks to God."

Logan sighed. "You know what? You're absolutely right. Except it wasn't really a Grinch. It was a demon, set on destroying the new faith and light they could see developing here. They tried to put it out. They used Cade, a weak-minded person who

chose the dark side. And here you are, using that horrible experience to shine your light even brighter. I thought I couldn't love you more than I already did, and here it is. Melody, you are a beautiful, bright light. A faithful daughter of God. Thank you, Jesus, for bringing her and her family into our lives."

"Amen," Mark suddenly said, reminding Logan that everyone was listening to their conversation.

Melody sighed. "Mr. Adams, what's gonna happen to Cade?"

"Well, probably he'll spend the night in the hospital. His nose was badly broken and he has a concussion."

Everyone glanced at Logan who simply looked down toward the floor.

Mark went on. "Then, sometime tomorrow, he'll be transported back to jail. I intend to file a complaint against the county for allowing bail to a group of people without even looking into their cases. It was lazy and irresponsible. Hopefully, he won't be allowed out again. He will face trial for the original charges and for the new ones, which are pretty heinous."

"What will the new charges be?" David asked.

"Something along the line of attempted rape, attempted murder, kidnapping, violating a protective order."

Melody nodded. "I wonder what happened to him to make him change so much. He used to be a nice guy."

"Hah, no he didn't, Mel. You just didn't see it," Phil said.

She frowned.

Mark sighed. "Well, I actually tried to speak to his father back when he got arrested for assaulting you, Phil. Talk about evil. That man is totally lost. He had no interest in Cade whatsoever. He laughed about his kid messing up and ending up in jail. He had no intention of arranging bond. I think he was doing meth. He was on something. He's extremely bitter and has real anger issues. He certainly doesn't display any love for his own son like a father should. He seemed to actually hate him. He muttered things about Cade's mother leaving him. I think she walked out on him a few years ago. I got the idea that he'd used his fist on Cade many times and so probably he did on Cade's mom too. It's not a good situation. So, let's not be too quick to judge. A home with no father usually doesn't produce good results, and neither does a home with a violent father filled with hate. And a child can be deeply hurt by any absent parent or a violent one." He shook his head. "Still, men have the power to do so much good in this world, but they also have the power to destroy."

Phillip looked up at Mr. Adams. Monday afternoon, when he'd dropped Ray and Kay Quinn off at their home, Phil had pretty much the same thought. He was gonna wait and talk to JoJo about it, but it seemed like this might be a good time. He opened his mouth to say something, but suddenly got shy. After all he was just a kid. He sighed.

"What is it, Phil?" JoJo asked. "It seemed like you had something to say."

Phil grimaced. "I did, but thought better of it. It was something I was actually gonna talk to you about. I'll wait."

"Don't wait," Mark said. "Don't hold back. Something prompted you to speak, be brave. Was it about Cade? Or was it about the same subject?"

Phillip nodded. “Yes, sir. I mean, not exactly about Cade, but about men. It was a thought I had when I was dropping the Quinn sisters off at their house. We’d talked about what happened to me, back when I tangled with Cade, and we’d talked a little about what happened to Kaylee. And that made me think about Jordan, and so, that made me think about...”

“Go ahead, Phil,” JoJo encouraged.

“Well, you might not agree with me on this subject, but actually, so, I mean, no wonder there’s all these women goin’ around saying that men are toxic. Like you just said, Mr. Adams, they really do have the power to destroy lives and it seems to be a thing. Rape women. Beat up women. Kill women. I mean, I know not all men do that. But still, no wonder women wanna get rid of men.”

Mark nodded and smiled. “You are absolutely correct, Phil. No wonder. I get it. That’s why we, my family, we are so adamant about protecting women. That’s why we go after the bad guys.”

Phillip nodded. “Yes, but we have to do more. I mean, I don’t think masculinity is toxic, but like, I’m a guy. I’ve come to realize that women, they have a right to feel scared of men. I mean, they really are vulnerable.”

JoJo nodded. “I’m feelin’ ya, Phillip. But it’s like, women keep tryin’ to say men and women are equal, and that’s a lie. Of course they are equally important and of equal worth, but we are completely different, and Satan perpetuates that lie. But us men keep trying to tell women that we’re bigger and stronger, but if we want them to understand that, then we have to understand that makes them vulnerable. They really are at a physical disadvantage. Pretty much any man in this room could easily hurt or kill a woman, but any woman in this room could not best us in a fight.”

“It’s a thin line to walk,” David offered. “But don’t you think that women are battling this problem all wrong? Men can cause them immense pain and heartache, but men can also help them.”

Mark nodded. “Exactly, David. And the way you put it is perfect. You said women are battling this problem all wrong. You’re right. You can’t ban all men from your life because you’re afraid of their strength. Like I said, men have the power to destroy but they also have the power to make everything right. We should be working harder to do that. And men and women should be working on this problem together instead of as foes.”

“Right,” Phillip agreed. “And that’s why I was gonna talk to JoJo. I don’t know if he was gonna give the sermon this coming Sunday, or if Reverend Clark will, or the next Sunday, or whenever, but I was gonna offer that a sermon about how to be a better man or boy really would be helpful. If men did better, if good men stepped up and talked to other men and they all started doing better, it could change the feeling that women have that men are toxic.”

“That some women have,” Melody corrected. “Not all women feel that way. I certainly don’t.”

Logan nodded. “Right. And it’s cool that you put that in there, because you have a right to feel that way. You are seeing the broader perspective.”

“So, what can we do to help this narrative?” David asked.

Mark nodded. “I think your son is right. We start at the pulpit. We teach men how to be men. We teach women how to understand that the good guys are good guys and not put all men into one category. JoJo? Maybe you can speak with Ronny and see what you can put together for a sermon.”

“Yeah,” Phil said. “And like, maybe even a program.”

JoJo’s eyes narrowed as he thought. “You mean like an ongoing program. Maybe for the guys?”

“Yeah, like that.”

JoJo nodded. “I think you’re onto something, Phil. Let’s pray about it, ask for some guidance and I’ll talk to Reverend Clark.”

“Cool.”

“Just one more thing,” Mark added, and then turned to Carol and Melody. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to hold you ladies up, but I just had one more thing to add.”

“We’re good,” Melody answered. “I’m curious to hear what you were gonna say, Mr. Adams.”

Mark nodded. “Okay, well, one of the key things Phil said was men have to do more. He’s right. I just want to emphasize that it’s *men* who have to do more. What I mean is, women can complain all they want that men don’t treat them well, but obviously, that’s not gonna change anything. What *will* change it is if MEN stand up and talk about it, expose it and handle it in a logical, efficient way. I say logical because people tend to push the pendulum too far the other way. For example, to make it right we don’t quote, ‘believe all women.’ That’s illogical to think that women don’t ever lie, because they do. I can’t tell you the number of men I’ve defended who had been falsely accused of rape or domestic violence. Those women who lie about it do women more harm, because it takes away from the legitimacy of a woman’s claim when they actually are raped or beaten. So, in that area, the good women can help too, with other women.”

Ryder stood there observing all of this as an outsider. He was totally impressed with these people. Even this young guy, Phil, was trying to do something good in the world. And the house Ryder had just come from, the Kino family Christmas Eve, they were the most amazing group of people he’d ever met. It gave him hope. It made him smile that those strong men, those beautiful and sweet women, those happy children, that is how the world should be. If only the whole world could be like that, what an amazing place it could be. His own father was one of those toxic males. Hurting women. Beating on children. It was prevalent. Phillip was right, it has to stop. That is a giant, uphill battle. Somehow, they have to do more.

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December 25th, 10:30 AM IRST [Iran Standard Time] (2:00 AM EST)
Sistan Province, Iran

Jacob Appel looked around him at the eager faces of eighteen people: one infant, seven children ages four to ten, all orphaned, two female American missionaries, three male American missionaries, two Afghan civilians who’d tried to help rescue this group, two Afghan soldiers who also tried and failed, both wounded and weak, and finally, one MIA Navy SEAL who’d been declared dead almost two years ago. Jake felt a powerful need to reunite him with his family. He looked around at his fellow Raiders. They all

looked grim and determined.

The baby was currently sucking on the corner of a plastic bag of goat's milk, but there wasn't a very large supply of it. The Raiders had all brought extra food, knowing the group was half starved. Feeding them the meager meals had been rewarding. Jake reached into his sack now and pulled out four chocolate bars. He motioned to the children and they came immediately and sat down around him.

Jake smiled at them to put them at ease. "Do you know that today is a special day?" he said slowly. The missionaries had been teaching them English, but he wanted to be sure they understood.

A girl smiled. "Yes, we are going on a travel."

He nodded. "Yes we are, in a little while. But right now, it is Christmas Day. Do you know about Christmas?"

A boy nodded. "Jesus was born."

"Very good. Tell me, do you know who Jesus is?"

"He's the Son of God," another answered.

Jake nodded with a smile. "Very good. Yes, He's the Son of God. He is very good and very powerful and I've prayed to Him and asked Him to protect us when we go on our little trip."

"Do you believe He will do that?" the boy asked.

Jake nodded. "I know He will. He talks to me." Jake pointed at his head. "In my head." He patted his chest. "And in my heart, and He's telling me that everything is gonna be okay."

The children all smiled.

"For now, I wanted to tell you a little bit about what my family does on Christmas Day." He stopped and looked into all of their sweet faces. "First, we wake up very early and we all hold hands and we pray and tell God thank you for sending His Son to save us."

The children nodded.

"Since it's Christmas Day, would you like to help me do that?"

The children nodded. Jake held out his hand to the boy next to him on one side and the girl on the other side and smiled as they all held hands.

"Good. Now, I will bow my head and pray." He bowed his head. "Dear Father who is in heaven, it's me, Jake, and I'm here with these beautiful children of yours and these other people whom I know You love and we just want to say thanks on this special day, for sending Jesus into the world to show us the way to get back to You. Father, right now, these people here with me, are a little bit scared about what's gonna happen when we leave this place and travel to the border, so will you please send Your Holy Spirit to help us feel not so scared and to help us think clearly. Will you please also defeat the enemy so that we can have no problems while we travel? Bless our legs to make them strong. Bless the baby to not cry. Bless the wounded that they won't feel pain. I love You, Father. I feel like you sent me and my team to help these people and I feel like you want these people to do great things once we get them out of danger. Be with us, Father, help us, Father. We pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen."

"Amen," was said loudly several times by the adults in the small room.

Jake nodded and smiled. “And the next thing my family does after we pray is we give gifts to each other, and so, the only thing I have right now is this, which I think you might like.” He opened one chocolate bar and began to break it into pieces and hand it out to the children. His heart swelled when one of the young girls rose and took her piece of chocolate to one of the wounded soldiers. “That is so beautiful,” he said to her. “That is exactly what Jesus taught us to do. To be kind and help one another. Well done.”

The girl smiled.

Jake took two more bars and nodded at Shane, a fellow Raider who’d been at his wedding. Shane rose and passed the chocolate around to the others in the room, which was only a small shack in the hill country. Jake opened the last bar and again gave each child another piece.

“Is that good?” he asked with a smile.

They all smiled and nodded.

Derrick nodded. “It’s time. Okay, everyone. There’s a truck that’s gonna pull up here in about one minute. No talking. No shouting. No crying, little baby. Hop into the back of the truck, lay down and cover up. Got it?”

Everyone nodded and began to stand up.

Jake watched the SEAL go to help one of the wounded soldiers to his feet. The SEAL, Ethan Neal, had been MIA for five years. He had a permanent limp. He was thin, he was quiet and Jake could only imagine the things he’d seen and endured. Jake sighed. He really wanted to see this man whole again. Jake cleared his mind and watched as one of the civilians went to help the other wounded soldier. The older children took the hands of the younger children.

Here we go, Jesus, please help us, Jake prayed silently.

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December 25th 6:00 AM EST Wednesday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jodi came quietly into Hannah Brown’s room. Gently, she rubbed her hand over Hannah’s hair, like she did most mornings. Hannah’s eyes blinked open and she smiled. “Hi, Mo—I mean, Miss Jodi.”

Jodi’s eyes opened wide as she realized that Hannah had almost called her ‘Mom.’ “Good morning, my sweet Hannah girl,” Jodi sang sweetly. She bent down and kissed her cheek. “Merry Christmas.”

Hannah smiled. “Merry Christmas.”

“So, are you excited about this morning?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What are you most excited about?”

“Well, I heard everyone talking about how Christmas shouldn’t be all about the presents, but is it okay if I’m most excited about seeing you and Mr. John open the presents I got for you?”

“Oh, Hannah, of course it’s okay. You know why? Because you’re not excited about *getting* presents, but about *giving* them. That is a beautiful thing. Especially for someone so young. And I think you’re right. Giving presents and doing things for others, it is really the most fun. I get really excited too, about giving gifts. And Hannah, I happen to

know how hard you worked to make money to buy the gifts you got for us, so that makes them even more special. Oh, Hannah, I'm so glad you came into my life. I know it's been a hard time for you. But I'm really grateful that you're here with us."

Hannah didn't say anything but reached out and hugged Jodi.

Jodi smiled. "Do you know what you're gonna wear?"

"Yes. The red velvet skirt and the white sweater and the white boots that Taylor sent me."

"Oh, good choice. That'll look so pretty. So, do you want to dress first and then come to our room, or do you want to just come in your pretty Christmas pajamas and then get dressed after?"

"I'll come in my pajamas."

"Wonderful. Go ahead and use the bathroom and then come to our room."

Hannah quickly went to use the bathroom. She brushed her teeth, washed her face and brushed her straight, dark blond hair. When she came back out of the bathroom she saw immediately that Miss Jodi had made her bed and laid out the clothes that Hannah told her she would wear today.

Smiling, she went to her dresser, opened the drawer and pulled out two small white boxes. One box had Miss Jodi written on it in black marker. The other had Mr. John on it. Her heart pounded a little. She put both boxes into the small gift bag then picked up the small note she'd written to go inside the bag. Unfolding the note she read it over for the fiftieth time.

Dear Miss Jodi and Mr. John,

I just wanted to say thank you for how kind you have been to me. I'm really glad that God answered my prayer and made it so I could come and live with you. Is it too soon to say that I love you? I hope not. Love, Hannah

Merry Christmas

She frowned, wondering if it really was too soon. Maybe she should leave the note out. She folded it and laid it on the dresser, picked up the bag and started out of the room, but came to a halt. Biting on her lower lip, she turned and looked at the note lying on the dresser. She drew a deep breath, went back and grabbed the note and slipped it into the bag and hurried to her foster parents' bedroom and knocked on the door.

John opened the door and smiled broadly at her. "There she is! Merry Christmas, Hannahbee."

She smiled at the pet name he often called her, Hannahbee. "Merry Christmas, Mr. John," she replied softly.

"Come in, come in."

Hannah came in and saw Miss Jodi sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the tree in the corner of their large bedroom. She waved Hannah over and the child came to sit down next to Jodi. Jodi reached out and hugged her.

"Well, little Miss Hannah," Jodi said. "This is kind of a special time. It's our first Christmas together. I really hope there will be a whole bunch more."

John sat down on the other side of Hannah. "Well, my two girls. How lucky am I

to have two gorgeous girls here with me to help celebrate the birth of Jesus!"

Jodi smiled at her husband.

"It's sort of tradition, especially when Jake was home, to quote together what the angel says to the shepherds. Whaddya say, Hannah? Wanna try?"

She nodded. "I listened to it being said so much when we practiced for the Christmas Eve program that I think I can remember it."

"Okay, cool. Do you remember which book of the Bible it's in?"

She frowned. "Is it Luke?"

He smiled. "Very good. It's Luke 2:8-14. Let's do it."

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

They finished and Jodi sniffed. "That was beautiful, you guys. And Hannah, it looked like you remembered the whole thing!"

Hannah smiled.

"So, who wants to go first?" John asked.

Hannah didn't say anything but held her bag up.

Jodi took the bag. "Awesome. Who is this for? Me or John?"

"Both."

They both peeked into the bag. John pulled out the two boxes and gave the appropriate one to Jodi. Jodi looked into the bag to make sure it was empty and found the note. She unfolded it and held it up for her and John to read together. They were silent as they read. Then, Jodi made a soft whimpering sound as her eyes filled with tears. She reached out and hugged Hannah.

Hannah closed her eyes and relished the feeling.

Then John cleared his throat. "Hannah, it's definitely not too soon because I love you too, little girl. I think how I feel about you is like how I'd feel if you were my own daughter." He too bent over and hugged her against his chest. Again, Hannah closed her eyes. She felt so safe. This was heaven.

"Okay, I'm gonna open my box first," Jodi said quickly. She slowly opened the white box and gasped. "Oh, sweetie, oh look at this, John!"

Hannah watched with pleasure as Miss Jodi picked up the necklace. It was a glass heart on a silver chain. The glass was etched with a picture of a woman with long dark hair hugging a little girl with blond hair. She immediately put it on. "Oh, Hannah, I love this so much!"

Hannah smiled and again, relished the hug.

Jodi giggled. "I'm gonna wear this all the time. John, let's see what you have."

He nodded and opened his box and smiled. It was a keychain that was engraved with

a picture of a man hugging a little girl. On the back it said, *Daddy's little girl.* He looked up at her and smiled. "This—is perfect and I love it."

She smiled and nodded. "I know I'm not really your little girl, but it was the only one that had a man and a girl on it."

He shook his head. "No, Hannah, I said it's perfect and I mean it. I know I'm not your real dad, but I think of you as my real little girl. I hope that's okay."

She blinked back the tears that threatened. She only nodded in response.

Jodi smiled at her husband.

He leaned down and kissed Hannah's cheek and then kissed Jodi's cheek.

"Oh, well, aren't we special," Jodi chirped.

"Yes, you are," he said softly.

Hannah smiled.

"So, Hannah," Jodi began. "All these are for you."

Hannah's eyes opened wide.

"It won't always be this much, but I kept thinking about things you might need. I mean, you're goin' to school a week from Monday. You needed stuff."

Hannah began opening presents. She unboxed or unbagged all kinds of goodies. Rugged, waterproof boots to wear to the barn. A white coat like Taylor's because she'd exclaimed over and over how pretty it was. A matching white hat and scarf. Several new outfits for school. Shoes, dress boots. A backpack. Toiletries, perfumes, hair products. They gave her a gold chain with a cross. Another necklace that was a locket with the pics of John and Jodi. She cried over that one. Finally, it was down to two gifts. Each box held an apron. One apron had the recipe to Hannah's favorite cookies tucked in the pocket and a promise for Jodi and Hannah to spend time together teaching Hannah to cook. The other apron had plans for a doghouse, along with her very own personalized hammer and a promise for John and Hannah to build a doghouse for her puppy of choice when it gets weaned from its mother.

"Well," John said. "I have guests to look after. Shall we have our family prayer and get started on our day?"

Hannah and Jodi nodded. Hannah loved this part of the morning. She loved that Mr. John always made sure they had time to pray. They knelt together and held hands and Mr. John prayed today. He gave thanks for Jesus, he gave thanks for Hannah and Jodi and asked a blessing of protection on Jake. Hannah had never met him but she thought he was probably at least as nice as Mr. John. He blessed their guests at the Inn and all of their friends.

When Hannah left the room, she rushed to get dressed. She stood looking herself over in the full-length mirror and nodded in satisfaction. Instead of putting on the white boots, she put on her new mud boots and headed down to the barn. Even on Christmas day, momma dog and puppy dogs have to be fed and Hannah promised Daisy that she would handle it this morning. Daisy had a lot to do, because tonight, there was another birthday party for Rose and Violet.

Hannah didn't mind going to take care of the dogs. She had to admit, she was looking forward to seeing Charlie and Matthew this morning. She had a little gift for them. They were always so nice to her and Miss Jodi helped her to get a gift card to the

movie theater to give to them. She smiled as she ran over the muddy dirt road toward the Stewart ranch. She was free. Life was awesome. God is real. Hannah realized that she'd never been happier than she was at this moment.

She jumped out of the road when a car sped by. The car tires hit a puddle and splashed muddy water all over her outfit. She stood there a moment looking at the mud. Then looked up, grinned and waved at the car. "Merry Christmas," she yelled at them happily, then turned and skipped the rest of the way to the barn.

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December 25th 7:00 AM Wednesday Morning
Murphy Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Peyton Murphy sat up in bed at the sound of a deep male voice in the house. He startled for a minute and then remembered. That was Dalton. He'd said he was coming over early. Andrew Dalton, whom everyone merely called Dalton, was an Ameritech agent, now the Assistant Agent in Charge of the Southeast Division of Ameritech. Peyton had first met him when he was operating as Gabe's bodyguard. But now, Peyton saw him often, because Dalton and Peyton's mom were dating. He smiled as he thought about the conversation Peyton had with Dalton yesterday.

Dalton had asked Peyton to come outside yesterday, saying he needed to speak with him privately. The conversation surprised him. At first, Peyton thought Dalton was telling him that his mother was ill.

"Peyton, you're eighteen, and that makes you a man," Dalton said.
Peyton laughed. "Hardly. But okay."
"Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about your mom."
"What about her? Is she okay?"
"Yes. She's fine." Dalton sighed. "She's more than fine. Your mom is such a good woman. She's so strong. She works so hard. She's beautiful. She's kind. She's a good mother to you and Lucas."
Peyton nodded. "I agree."
"And so, you know I've been dating her for a little while now, right?"
"Yes."
"And like, Lucas and I we get along just fine, at least I think we do."
"Yeah, Luke says you're cool. He gives you a lot of respect because you're Ameritech and because like, Mr. Tanner trusts you, and also because he says you're good to Mom."
Dalton nodded. "I'm good to your mom, Peyton, because I'm in love with her."
Peyton's eyebrows shot up. "Oh! Oh, well, okay. That's cool, I guess."
"Peyton, I'm telling you this because, like I say, you're a man. Until I came along and started seeing your mom, you were the man she depended on to help her. And by the way, from what she tells me, you worked really hard to help her make ends meet."
Peyton shrugged and looked down. "Well, I tried."
"Well, Gabe can't say enough good things about you and how hard you worked to take care of your family."
Peyton smiled. "Gabe's a good friend."

"So, as the man of the Murphy family, I wanted to tell you, Peyton, not only that I'm in love with your mother, but—I want to ask her to marry me."

Peyton smiled. "Wow! I mean, that's cool."

"Then it doesn't bother you?"

"No, sir. I mean, not at all. I think it's great. I've watched my mom really struggle and work hard and never have any fun. I knew she was lonely. But since she met you, Dalton, like, she laughs again. She smiles a lot. She seems to enjoy life. I mean, she's not that old. She's thirty-six, and she shouldn't be acting like an old woman whose life is at the end."

"I totally agree. And I think it's really good, Peyton, that you see it that way."

Peyton shrugged. "I want my mom to be happy. My dad, he, well, he sort of did a number on her. She always thought that she drove him away. But my dad, he was just a loser. He didn't want the responsibility of us kids. He got my mom pregnant and then complained that having babies made her look old. He's a loser. I used to watch Mr. Tanner with his family and wish I'd had a dad like him, but mostly wished my mom had a husband like him."

Dalton nodded in agreement. "Mr. Tanner sets an example that's hard to measure up to, but I want to try. I want to make your mom happy. I want to marry her and take care of her. She won't have to worry anymore about making ends meet. I will take care of her, I will love her, I will do right by her. Peyton, so, Gabe told me that he already told you about my history. So you know, in the past, I made a whole lotta mistakes."

"Yes, sir, he told me."

"But I give you my word, I have my act together. It's been a long road back. Your mom, she gives me hope that from here on out, life is gonna be so good. I have a good job. I'm a relatively new Christian, but I AM a Christian and I will obey God's laws and therefore, I will be a good husband to your mom, and if you and Lucas want me, then I will be a good stepfather to you boys."

Peyton felt his eyes moisten.

"Does that upset you?"

"Oh, no, sir. I was just thinking. The other day, at baseball practice we had a parent day. Mom couldn't come. Some of the other guys, their moms couldn't come either. But all of their dads came. Me and one other guy, we didn't have anyone. I mean, it's not like I'm sitting around saying, oh poor me. Still, it would be cool to have you bring Mom to a couple games. Season starts the middle of February and goes through June."

Dalton nodded. "If you'll have me, I'll be at more than a couple. Of course, remember, Lucas has games this spring too, so we'll have to work it out."

"I know. And I'm not gonna be able to make any of his games and that's upsetting, but if you and Mom go, and maybe the Stewarts, that will go a long way to help him to feel supported."

"So, who supported you as you were playing in high school?"

Peyton shrugged. "My mom came when she wasn't working. Of course Gabe was there because he played too, but that meant the Tanners, the Stewarts, the Appels were all there. They've all been really good to me."

"They're good people," Dalton said. "So, then, we're good about me asking your

mom to be my wife?"

"Yes, sir. Really good."

"So, now I just need to check with Lucas."

"He'll be on board."

Dalton nodded. "And I'd like to surprise her and propose tomorrow. I want it to be the last present opened tomorrow morning. If that's okay."

"That's fantastic," Peyton said softly.

Dalton offered his hand and Peyton shook it and then Dalton pulled him in for a man hug.

Peyton sniffed. "This almost feels too good to be true."

"For me too," Dalton said with a smile. "I feel so blessed."

Peyton smiled as he went over that conversation in his head. He was very excited to get started on the morning. He rose and began making his bed, something he usually didn't pay much attention to until Gabe mentioned it on one of his messages. Peyton looked up when Lucas came into his room.

"Merry Christmas, bro," Lucas said.

Peyton smiled. "Merry Christmas, Luke. You're lookin' fly."

"Yeah, thought I'd get a little bit dressed up for Mom. You know she likes that kind of stuff."

"Good idea. I'll do that too. I heard Dalton is already here."

"Yep. He's funny. He's so nervous. I had to keep from laughing," Lucas said.

"Well, don't accidentally give up the surprise," Peyton cautioned.

"I won't."

Peyton sniffed the air. "Smells like Mom is making her special Christmas breakfast casserole."

"She is."

"Lookin' forward to that."

Lucas nodded. "Me too. So, like, later today, are we still gonna meet Gabe and Charlie and the others for backyard football?" he asked.

"Yep. Can't break that tradition."

Lucas smiled. "This year, we can ask Dalton to join us."

Peyton also smiled. "Does that make you happy?"

"It kinda does."

"Yeah, it kinda does me too."

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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 Thirty-Two

December 25th 5:33 AM PST Wednesday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ten-year-old Josie Brooks opened her eyes when five-year-old Brittney whispered in her ear.

"Are you awake?"

Josie smiled. "I am now," she said with a giggle.

Brittney smiled.

Josie turned toward her and looked into her eyes. "Are you excited about it being Christmas morning?"

Brittney nodded her head. "Taylor said we're gonna get presents."

"Yeah, we are," Josie confirmed. "Do you like presents?"

"I think so," Brittney said with a smile.

Josie frowned. "Have you ever had presents on Christmas?"

She nodded. "One time, my teacher gave me a present."

"Really? What was it?"

"It was a little bear. It was really soft and had a red bow."

"Do you still have it?"

Brittney shook her head with a frown. "Momma took it away from me one day when she was mad at me and threw it in the dumpster."

Josie felt tears well up. "Oh, well, I'm sorry that happened. Is that the only present you ever got? I mean, did you ever wake up on Christmas morning and have presents under the tree?"

"We didn't ever have no tree."

Josie felt so sad for her. "Well today, you're gonna get lots more presents and no one is gonna take them away from you."

"When are the presents gonna come?"

Josie sat up with a smile. "They already came. The presents are under the tree. Do you want to go see them?"

Brittney's eyes opened wide. "Can we?"

"Sure. We can't open them yet, but we can peek in. Wanna go see?" Josie said as she got out of bed.

Brittney jumped out of bed.

"I gotta go to the bathroom first," Josie said.

They both used the restroom. When they started out the bedroom door, Brittney grabbed Josie's hand. "Can we get 'Mari?"

Josie put a finger to her lips and nodded. They tiptoed toward the boys' door where Amari and Jamie had spent the night. Just as they got there, the door opened. Josie and

Brittney both gasped but covered their mouths to keep from making noise.

Jamie grinned and put a finger to his lips. “Shhh.” He smiled at his sister. “Are you goin’ down to peek?”

Josie nodded and motioned for the boys to follow. The four children crept silently down the steps and into the den.

Amari’s and Brittney’s eyes opened wide at the sight of wrapped gifts and gift bags. So many. Some big. Some small. Even Josie and Jamie were surprised by the amount of gifts.

“Wow, that’s a lot of presents,” Jamie said.

“Well, they’re not all for us kids, I’m sure,” Josie said wisely.

They crept in and knelt down to read some of the name tags on the gifts.

“See, this one is for Jordan,” Josie whispered. “And that one is for Three, and that one is for Miss Bree.” Josie smiled. “And that one is for Brittney from Jordan.”

Brittney’s eyes opened wide as she examined the gift. It had red paper with snowmen on it. It was a big box. It had a big white bow on it.

“Wow,” was all she said.

“Do you see one for me?” Mari asked.

They searched for a minute. “Here’s one,” Jamie said. “To Amari from Miss Jewell. That’s my mom.”

“And here’s another,” Josie said. “To ‘Mari from Eric.”

Mari smiled. “This is so cool.”

“Where’s the present we made for Mom? I mean for Miss Bree and Mr. Ricky,” Brittney asked.

Josie shrugged. “It must be here somewhere, but we better not move anything. We can look but not touch. That’s the rule.”

The children all nodded.

“What’s goin’ on in here?”

Startled, the children all jumped and turned wide-eyed to see young Eric standing in the doorway.

“You scared us,” Jamie said with a laugh.

He chuckled. “I see that. Well, kiddos, good morning and merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” Josie said brightly and went to give him a hug.

He hugged her hard. “Aww, thank you, Josie. I sure do love you.”

“I love you too, Eric. I will always love you forever.”

He rubbed his hand over her long, dark hair. He knew the sweet girl saw him as her rescuer, and that she was extremely emotionally linked to him. He smiled at her. “I love you too, miss Josie posy. Forever,” he assured her.

“Where’s Jordan?” Jamie asked.

“She’s helping Taylor with something. They’ll be down in a minute.”

He turned as he heard a sound behind him in the kitchen and smiled. “Merry Christmas, Dad,” he said brightly.

“Merry Christmas, son.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yes. Your mom is just having a little bit of morning sickness but I’m about to fix

her up. So, that means that morning activities will be delayed by about twenty minutes. Occupy the time, okay?"

Young Eric nodded and turned back to the four kids. "Okay, kiddos, here's the plan. Everyone go upstairs and make sure your beds are made. You don't have to get dressed if you don't want to, cuz I know you like wearing your Christmas pajamas, but make your beds, brush your teeth, straighten up your bathroom, and lay out your clothes that you want to put on later. Josie, use your phone to take pics to document that everyone was obeying orders. It'll be good to see what you all did on your first Christmas with the Kino family. Then, everyone, report back to me in fifteen minutes and show me the pictures. On your mark, get set, go."

The four took off.

Ricky smiled at his son. "Good job, Eric."

Young Eric chuckled. "Just copying you."

"Oh, I recognized it. Still, that means you learned and applied."

"I'm smart enough to emulate greatness."

Ricky rolled his eyes, but looked up and smiled as Jewell Brooks came down the stairs. "Merry Christmas, Jewell," Ricky said warmly.

"Good morning and merry Christmas to you, Ricky." She looked over at Eric, who would soon be her son-in-law. "Good morning, Eric," she said warmly.

"Morning, Mrs. Brooks. I have to say, it is so awesome to have your family here with us this Christmas."

"It's awesome to be here. We are so blessed."

"Indeed we are," Ricky said as he placed a cup of tea on a tray, added some soda crackers and nodded. "Be back soon."

"Mom's not feeling well," young Eric explained.

Jewell went into the kitchen and started working on something.

"Whatcha makin'?" Eric asked.

She smiled. "Some buttery cinnamon rolls. I just want to get them in the oven before we start opening gifts."

"Oh, wow, Ms. Brooks, how lucky are we that we get to have a famous chef in our home this morning!"

"Well, I'm not famous."

"Not yet, but you will be." He went to her and hugged her.

"What was that for?"

"For being the sweetest lady who raised the best girl in the world. I'll be forever grateful to you."

"We're grateful for you, Eric. Our whole family is so grateful that you came into our lives. Thank you for stopping to help my girl on the highway that day."

Eric nodded. "Thank God he nudged me to stop. But ya know what? If I hadn't gotten the message that day, God would have found another way to get us together."

Jewell nodded. "I believe that too."

"What do you believe?" Jordan asked as she and Taylor came down the stairs.

"That God brought you and me together. Good morning, you two."

"Good morning and merry Christmas," Taylor said, her eyes shining.

She hugged her brother and Jordan's mom.

Jordan went straight to Eric and kissed him. He ran his hand over her face and kissed her a second time.

Jewell smiled. "I guess it's hard to be away from each other even for just a night, huh?"

Young Eric grimaced and Jordan giggled. "Sure, Mom."

Taylor smiled. "Miss Brooks, can I help you with anything?"

"Sure, come in and butter these two pans."

Taylor went to do as told. A few minutes later the four children came running down the stairs.

Eric made them all sit down at the breakfast bar and show him the pictures. As it turned out, Josie had done a great job of recording them doing their tasks. Brittney brushing her teeth. Brittney wiping off the counter in the bathroom. A selfie of Josie and Brittney in front of the made bed with their clothes laid out neatly. Then, she had pics of both boys brushing their teeth, the boys making silly faces as they held their clothes up, the boys standing on their heads, the boys hitting each other with pillows, and finally, both boys making their bed. The pics made everyone laugh.

Ricky and Bree finally emerged and everyone cheered. Jewell put two pans of cinnamon rolls in the oven and set a timer.

"Let's gather in the den," Ricky ordered.

The family gathered and found seats in the den. Ricky turned on the camera that sat on the mantel because the family always shared video of their Christmas morning with the other members of the family.

Ricky stood and looked at everyone with a smile. "You all look very nice in your Christmas pajamas. It is so awesome to have six more people here at Christmas than we usually have. Ten people all together. What a blessing. I'm so grateful for every single one of you.

"So, today is a special day. It's Christmas day, the day we celebrate the fact that Jesus was born. The Word became flesh. If not for Jesus, our family here may not even be here. Without God in my life, I probably wouldn't have fallen in love with and married my Breanna. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have young Eric and Taylor. Or without God in his life, young Eric may not have met and fallen in love with Jordan. And then we wouldn't know Jewell and Jamie and Josie. Without Jesus in our lives, we may not have been over near the Hopewood Chapel church and met Amari and Brittney, whom we love so much and feel like they too were meant to be a part of our family.

"Jesus came into this world. He taught us about love, about the Father, about honor and integrity and he showed us the greatest love of all by allowing Himself to die for us. His life and then His death paid our way to be together again after we die. How awesome is that? If we couldn't be together after we die, then life would be horrible, scary, and very, very sad.

"It's hard for a lot of people to even believe in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ, but it's easy when you get to know them. And how do you do that? You talk to Him every day through prayer and you read the Bible. That's it. So easy. When Bree and I prayed together before we left our room a few minutes ago, just a simple prayer, for some

reason, we felt the Spirit so strong. It isn't always like that. But it wouldn't be like that at all if we didn't pray each and every morning before we leave our room. So, fam, if you're not doing that, start. Taylor, don't mean to put you on the spot, but did you pray before you left your room this morning?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir, I actually did. Jordan was in my room with me and so we prayed together."

"Wonderful. Young Eric, did you pray before you left your room?"

Eric glanced at Jordan and chuckled. "Yes, sir. Jordan was in *my* room with me and we prayed together."

Bree and Ricky both laughed softly.

Ricky smiled. "Well, Jordan, as you were making your rounds, did you go to the kids' rooms and pray with them?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "No, sir."

He nodded. "Okay, so, what I'm trying to say is, let's make sure God is in our lives every single day by taking the minute it takes to pray, to acknowledge God, to thank Him for our many blessings, and to ask for his guidance and protection. Teach the children this."

He looked directly at the children. "Try to remember to pray every day before you leave your room. If you don't feel like you can do it by yourself, one of us will be happy to come and pray with you each morning. I'm not asking for you to just say some words to please me. I'm asking you to talk to God, because He's real and He's listening. He loves you. He sent his Son to be born on this earth and die for us. That's a lot of love. The more you talk to Him, the more He'll talk to you and THAT is a wonderful feeling." Ricky turned to his daughter.

"Taylor, will you read the Christmas scripture this morning?"

Taylor nodded and lifted up her Bible. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. And that is Isaiah 9:6."

"Beautiful," Ricky said. "Okay, Jamie, your turn. Why do we give gifts to each other on Christmas?"

Jamie smiled and said the words he'd been practicing. "Because it's to remember how the three kings came and brought gifts to the baby Jesus."

"Good job. Josie, how should we feel about getting gifts on Christmas?"

"We should feel thankful when we get gifts. We should remember that someone gave us a gift because they have love for us and they want to, um, honor us, like the three wise men honored Jesus."

"Good job. Jordan, tell us how you feel about Christmas presents."

Jordan smiled. "It's fun to receive gifts. But what's even more fun is giving gifts. I may not have a lot of money, but it's so much fun to find a gift for someone that doesn't cost very much but has a lot of meaning and shows the person that I really care about them."

"Perfect. And young Eric, can you give me a summary?"

"I can. This feeling that we get, this joy of giving someone a gift and doing it with

love and joy because we care about that person, that is the feeling that Jesus wants us to have for one another. Love, compassion, kindness, care, gratefulness. All of those things and more are why the giving of gifts is a wonderful thing."

"Jewell, would you like to say anything?"

She nodded. "Christmas should never be just about giving presents to one another. It's about the feeling Jesus wants us to have, as young Eric just said. My whole life we never had very much money to buy gifts and it made me sad that I couldn't just go buy my children everything they want. I learned instead, to simply be grateful for those children. I had enough money to buy some ingredients and cook them a delicious meal. I wasn't bitter that we didn't have a lot. It's a good thing we didn't have a lot. Because it kept us humble and kept us kind. My kids were not greedy little brats who got mad if they didn't get the right kind of Nikes for Christmas. They were grateful for what little they did get, and I'd much rather have good, grateful kids than all the money in the world."

Ricky smiled and nodded, as he choked back the emotion her statement brought to the room. "Absolutely beautiful, Jewell." He turned to his wife. "Bree, my love, what say you?"

"What more is there to say? You are all so wonderful in what you've already said. Now, let's lay all the cards on the table. We've been blessed. Our family has a lot of money. That money is simply a resource for us to help others. We don't believe in being lavish. We don't believe in flaunting our wealth. We do believe in using it to help others stand up and succeed. We work hard to take care of whatever God has placed in our path. And when we help someone, we try to make it a permanent help instead of just throwing money at a problem. That takes more time, more resources and more thought and prayers. We are happy to serve God in any way we can.

"But oh, the blessings we get from that are so plentiful. Today, we have Brittney and Amari with us and we love them both so much and they bring us so much happiness already, we are so blessed to have them with us. And of course, Jewell and your precious family, we love you and can't imagine life without you. You, Jewell, are my sister in Christ. Your children, well, you know, we love them like they were our own. I thank God for you every single day. So, we want to give you all gifts because we want to honor you and show you love, just like the three kings wanted to show love and honor to the Son of God when he was born. Christmas is a wonderful time and I hope we can do even more next Christmas for more people and you can all help in the endeavor."

Ricky smiled. "Bree, baby, I love you. And just think, next Christmas, we'll have a new little Kino baby with us. How exciting is that?"

She smiled. "It's an amazing blessing and an amazing gift and I'm so grateful that I can't even put it into words."

Ricky grinned. "So whaddya all say that we have a prayer and start opening these gifts so that we can have breakfast sometime today?"

They all stood in a circle and held hands and Ricky prayed a powerful prayer. They sat back down filled with peace and calmness and love. Bree turned her phone to play soft music.

Ricky smiled. "Young Eric, you and Jordan do the honors of handing out the gifts.

Let's go youngest to oldest."

Eric nodded. "Okay, so that will be Britt, then Jamie, then Amari, then Josie, then Taylor, Jordan, me, Mrs. Brooks, Mom and last but not least, Dad, right?"

"Sounds right," Bree said.

Brittney was handed a gift and the opening began. A few minutes later, Jewell had to run into the kitchen and take out the rolls.

One by one the mound of gifts under the tree began to diminish. One of the highlights was when Brittney pulled a large, cuddly, ultra-soft panda bear from a bag and her eyes lit up. Josie then asked her if it was okay with Brittney if she could tell the story about her Christmas gift from a teacher. Brittney nodded, Josie shared the story and that caused some tears. It was Brittney who comforted them all. She said, "Aww, don't cry. Cuz now I got this big bear and I LOVE it! And it has a red bow too!" She squeezed the bear and kissed it.

Another highlight was Amari and Jamie each getting Nerf Elite Blasters and young Eric telling them he had a huge set of Nerf guns and there was gonna be a giant battle later.

The funniest gift was from Jordan to Three. It was a crystal globe to sit on his dresser. Inside the globe was a small orange Monopoly game card that read, "Get out of Jail Free." That had led to a delightful wrestling match, which Eric purposefully lost.

Eric gave Jordan a very nice set of luggage along with the promise that they were going on a road trip back to Pine Forest. Eventually.

Brittney and Amari made a joint gift from them to the family. Taylor had helped them. It was actually her idea because she made something similar when she was in kindergarten. It was a framed picture. Across the top, Amari colored bubble letters that read '*The Kinos.*' The rest of the picture consisted of flowers made out of each person's fingerprints or thumbprints. The last two flowers were Amari and Brittney. Bree made a big deal about it and cried and said it was going on the wall right above the kitchen table. The kids were praised and thanked over and over.

Finally it seemed all of the gifts were opened.

"Wait," young Eric said. "Jordan and I haven't given Josie her gift yet. It's out in the garage. Be right back."

Jordan smiled as young Eric came back in with a red box with a matching top that had a big white bow on it. He set the box down on the floor in front of Josie. "It's kind of fragile, so, don't move the box. Just open the top."

Josie nodded while Taylor videoed. Josie's reaction was perfect. She opened the box and a little brown and white puppy immediately tried to get to her. Josie gasped and instantly started crying.

"Really? Really? He's mine?"

"*She's* yours, yes," Jordan said.

Josie wailed.

"Aww, Josie, it's okay. Go ahead and pick her up," Jordan encouraged.

Josie reached in and gently lifted the puppy into her arms. "Oh, sweet girl, oh my goodness, sweet girl," she murmured. She lifted her up and looked into her eyes then rubbed her nose against the soft fur. "Oh Jordan, Eric, thank you so much. Oh my

goodness thank you so much," she cried.

"You're welcome, sweetie," young Eric said softly.

"Mom? Is it okay?" Josie asked.

"They already cleared it with me," Jewell said.

"Oh, wow. I'm so happy."

Young Eric smiled at Jordan, then looked at Josie. "Jordan and I will take you shopping to get everything you need. A collar. A leash. A kennel. A tag. Food. Toys. Whatever you need."

"What kind of dog is it?"

"Well, we're gonna get a DNA test to be sure, but we think it has Beagle, Golden Retriever, and Pit," Jordan said. "Which means, it's probably gonna be at least as big as its mother. You remember her?"

Josie nodded.

"So, that's about a forty-pound dog," young Eric explained to everyone else.

"Can I hold her?" Jamie asked.

Josie kindly allowed her little brother to hold the puppy.

"So, before breakfast," Ricky began. "We actually have one more gift for Amari, Jamie and Brittney."

The three turned to look at Ricky, their eyes big with excitement.

"They are out front. Eric, take your phone out and video."

"Yes, sir," Eric said as everyone moved to watch out the door. Eric went out and got ready.

The boys and Brittney went outside and their eyes got big.

Amari couldn't close his mouth. He turned to Ricky. "A bike? For me?"

Ricky nodded. "Yep. Our family likes to go biking up in the canyons, so everyone needs a bike."

Amari smiled as he approached the bike with his name on it.

"You know how to ride?"

Amari nodded. "Caleb let me ride his bike sometimes."

"Awesome." Ricky knelt down next to Brittney. "So, kiddo, your bike has training wheels on it, but when you're ready, we'll take them off."

"Okay."

"And when we go riding in the mountains, you'll probably ride with someone like, Taylor or young Eric."

"Can I ride with you?"

He smiled. "Of course. Is that what you want to do?"

She nodded.

Ricky's heart went out to the child. "Ya know, sweet Brittney, I will always keep you safe, right?"

She grinned. "Yep. I know. That's why I wanna ride with you."

Ricky laughed.

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December 25th 8:00 AM PST Wednesday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Cameron and Jeffy nestled together on one of the sofas in the living room, Eli cradled in his father's arms, huge smiles on their faces and tears in their eyes. Across the room, Eric too had tears in his eyes. The children had just finished singing a song that they now knew would soon be a big hit. It was a song written by Logan, called simply, *'Baby Jesus'*. It was beautiful, the melody sweet and perfect, the lyrics all about the birth of the Son of God and His light, His goodness, and His destiny. Shelley and Melody had spent many hours teaching the song to the five little Kino children. Logan had stopped by to help several times. It was a gift for their daddy, and it was beautiful.

Five pairs of big brown eyes blinked up at their father. Eric smiled at them. "I think that is the prettiest song I've ever heard." He stood and helped his wife up from where she was kneeling in front of the children to direct their song, and pulled her close. "Thank you so much, my Shelley girl. I can tell you have all worked hard on that." He lifted her chin and kissed her softly.

He then knelt down in front of the children and held his arms out. They scrambled into his arms and hugged and kissed him. He shook his head in wonder. "I love you all so much. You bring me so much happiness."

"I love you too," Angelina said, always the first to speak out.

Eric smiled at her. His little girl was not a bit shy. Her spirit was bright and beautiful. Noah and Abe were quiet and thoughtful *and*, they were learning, somewhat psychic, because they could pick up on someone's distress. Three times now, they'd been concerned about Melody. One, when she fell as she gave out backpacks to the homeless, another when Banoy Cruz hit her on the head and put her in a trunk, the third when Cade Kessler intended to rape and murder her. Eric assumed they were picking up on Melody because she was their caregiver and they loved her very much.

They'd also known their mother was sick with a headache one morning, before Shelley was even awake. They'd started crying and Eric went to see about them, and they held their heads and said, "Mommy has a hurt head."

Eric went back in to check on Shelley and she was sitting on the side of the bed, her hand to her forehead.

"Headache?" Eric had asked.

Shelley looked back at him. "How'd ya know?"

He'd smiled. "I didn't. Noah and Abe knew."

It was interesting to say the least. Eric would be very careful monitoring those two sons. Manny, Eric thought, had a little bit of a learning disability, but nothing that couldn't be overcome with a bit of extra work. Nate had the opposite. He was brilliant. His mind was very much like Jeffy's, and Eric wondered what his big calling would be on this earth. He wondered what all of their callings would be, because they came to the earth in a very different way.

Eric had thought many times that he and Shelley should have had more children. So many things were happening, it never seemed like the right time. Had he intentionally disobeyed God? Did he ignore God's promptings to bring more children into their home? Had he simply not been paying attention? He sighed. Then, bad people who intended evil did it for them. Eric and Shelley wouldn't even have the children with them, if not for God intervening. If not for Luciana stumbling across the truth and then having the

courage to step forward. Thank God for Luciana. Thank God for these children. Thank God for intervening. Eric blinked back tears and looked upward. “Thank you, Jesus,” he whispered.

“You okay?” Shelley asked.

He nodded and smiled at his lovely wife. “I’m fantastic.” He clapped his hands together. “That was amazing. Okay, Christmas is over. Let’s go have breakfast!”

He glanced around at the silence and chuckled.

Jeffy spoke up. “Daddy, that wasn’t funny when I was little and it’s still not funny. We haven’t opened the gifts yet.”

“What? There are more gifts for me?”

The children giggled.

“Yes, there are,” Angelina quipped, making everyone laugh.

“Okay,” Shelley said. “Everyone sit down and let’s remember why we have gifts on Christmas. Eric, go ahead.”

He looked around. “Jeffy, why do we celebrate Christmas?”

She smiled at the group. “Because we are having a birthday party for Jesus. We’re so happy He was born.”

Eric nodded. “Why are we happy He was born, Cam?”

“Because Jesus is the Son of God, and He came to the world to make it possible for us to go back home to heaven and be with Him and with our families.”

“Awesome. So, why do we give each other gifts instead of giving presents to Jesus? I mean, it’s Jesus’ party, right?”

There was silence.

Shelley smiled. “Because Jesus is the most happy when we are kind and loving to others. He would rather us give gifts to others than receive gifts for himself. And actually, being kind and giving gifts to others really is a gift for Jesus.”

Eric nodded. “That’s right. Jesus said, ‘As I have loved you, love one another.’ So, Nate, on Jesus’ first birthday, which we call the first Christmas, did Jesus get any presents?”

Nate smiled and nodded. “Yes.”

“Right! Who brought Him gifts, Angel?”

She jumped up. “Da fwee wisemen!”

“Right! Manny, how many wisemen did Angel say?”

He grinned. “Free.”

“Right! Noah, what else do people sometimes call the three wisemen?”

“The free kings!”

“Right! Abe, what did the three kings or the three wisemen bring as gifts for the baby Jesus?”

He swallowed. “Gold, um, fwanksins, and myrrh.”

“Very good! Nate, why did they bring Him gifts?”

“To honor Him, because He was the Son of the most high God.”

“Is it fun to give gifts to someone you love?” Eric asked.

“Yes!” the children all yelled.

“Is it fun to get gifts from someone?” Eric asked.

"Yes, yes!" they said, jumping up.

"Okay. Let's calm down a bit. I want you to listen very carefully. It IS fun to receive gifts on Christmas morning, but that's not what Christmas is all about. The real part is we are so glad that Jesus was born, that God sent His only begotten Son to this world, because He loves us and wants us to come home to Him. At Christmas we should help others. Give gifts to others, give gifts of service. Love each other. That gift you just gave me, the gift of a song, that was the best gift ever. So, that means, the presents don't have to cost a lot of money. As long as you have love in your heart when you give a gift, that's all that matters. Does everyone understand?"

"Yes!"

"Mommy, tell them what we talked about."

Shelley smiled. "Remember the story we had last night, about the little boy and his little sister and how they didn't have any presents at all, and their mommy was so sad that she couldn't get them presents? So to cheer her up, what did the children do? Does anyone remember?"

"They took the orange they got fwom school and the candy cane they got from the neighbor and gave them to deir mother and dwew her pictures and hugged her," Angelina said very quickly before Nate could answer.

Eric nodded. "Very good, sweetheart."

"And then the mom said it was the best Christmas ever because her children knowed that Jesus wanted them to don't be selfish, and to show love to their mom," Nate added.

Manny sniffed. "Deir daddy was dead."

Eric nodded.

Manny went on. "Bememba when you got dead?"

Eric nodded again and gathered Manny into his arms. "I do remember. But God blessed us and here I am, right?"

Manny smiled.

"We are so blessed, aren't we?" Shelley said.

"Yes," the children all agreed.

"But Mawia died," Angelina said.

Eric nodded his head. "You know, because Jesus was born, we're gonna be able to see Maria again because Jesus died too, but he overcame death and came back to life. Now, when Jesus comes again, we'll all get resurrected and we'll see Maria again. So, don't be sad. It's gonna be a happy time."

Angelina smiled timorously and sniffed.

"Okay," Eric began. "So, who has a gift for Jeffy?"

"I do, I do," they all sang.

"Awesome. Let's find one of those and give a gift to your sister."

Shelley watched as the children gave gifts and opened gifts and were grateful and excited and sweet and happy. Her mind wandered back to the first Christmas she and Bree and Mark and Joey had with Eric. It was the December after Shelley had won the MART. Mark had just turned ten in October, and Joey had turned eight in August. Shelley and Eric had been married six months and Shelley was six months pregnant with Jeffy.

Eric had hired Justin to rework Shelley's and Robert's child custody plan, because Shelley had received the short end of the stick in the original one. She'd been manipulated into her having the children most of the time, but summer and Christmas vacation they spent with their father. That meant she never had her children for Christmas or out of school time. It was very unfair.

Justin was a pro at getting Robert to cooperate with reworking the schedule. After that, she had the boys every other summer and Christmas, until, they became teenagers and made a stand about not wanting to leave their friends or activities to go visit their father. After that, Robert ended up coming and spending time with them in LA. Thank goodness he had long since given up trying to manipulate and dominate Shelley. Shelley thought his new wife, Camille, had a lot to do with that. Shelley and Camille were good friends.

That first Christmas with Eric was amazing and informative. All their lives, they'd celebrated Christmas because that's what the world did. They put up a tree and bought presents the best they could and followed all the Christmas traditions. The only thing they didn't do was relate any of it to the birth of the Savior. But once Shelley and the boys began to know God, it took on a whole new meaning. Suddenly, it actually HAD meaning and it became a whole new ball game. It became beautiful. It became peaceful. All was calm, all was bright. Having Jesus in your life, not just thinking about Him every once in a while, but having a relationship with him, where you feel His Holy Spirit, where you receive answers to prayers, where miracles happen and you feel His peace, it brings so much joy.

Bree didn't learn about Jesus until much later, because she was busy having a career. Finally, Ricky was able to convince her that they were meant to be together and he taught her the gospel. Seeing the change in her was a beautiful thing, and once Bree bought into something, she went all the way.

"Shelley?" Eric said softly. "You with us?"

She smiled. "I am. Just taking a trip down memory lane. Oh, Eric, you have brought so much to my life. You taught me about Jesus, and helped me through and you have made me so happy. I can't even imagine how I would be, how things would be without you."

"Well then, don't imagine it, baby. Don't try. Just be grateful."

She sniffed and looked heavenward. "Thank you, Jesus, thank you. I AM so very grateful," she said softly.

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December 25th 1:00 PM CST Wednesday Afternoon
Quinn Home, Quapaw, Oklahoma

Lunch was over, but the Quinn family remained seated around the small kitchen table. It had been a lovely morning. They had finished cleaning up the backyard together very early. Then they'd prayed together and had breakfast together. Then the girls had given their parents the small gifts they had bought them. A new blanket for their father to keep over his legs and some nice-smelling soap and cologne. For their mom, they bought some new ceramic cookware and body wash and body mist set. They didn't tell them about the larger gifts, because they were coming later and because they thought

they would put up a fuss about them.

"This has been the best Christmas ever," Kaylee said.

"It's been wonderful," Dani agreed. "Except I'm sorry that we didn't have any gifts for you."

"We already told you, getting to come home to you has been the best gift of all. Thank you for being our parents," Ray said.

Dani smiled. "I'm so happy you girls decided to come home."

Ray nodded. "Me too. I'm glad Kaylee thought of it. Coming home this time, Mom, it's been different. I can't put my finger on it, but it's been so special."

"I think the reason for it feeling so special is because of you two," Alo said softly. "I think you coming close to being beaten to death, Kay, and you watching and learning from the Kino family, Ray, I think it opened your hearts. And I think you were supposed to come home."

"Why?" Kay asked.

Dani and Alo glanced at each other. "Some of it is because I need to tell you some things. And some of it is because you needed to open MY eyes."

"What do you mean, Daddy?" Ray asked.

He sighed. "Last night, Jesus came to me in a dream. It didn't start out as a very nice dream. First, I was running and running, trying to get away from something, but then I could see myself from far away and I had been running in a circle. Then it morphed to where I was stuck, um, I guess in a room, and I couldn't get out. There was a small window and it opened up and I looked out of it. There were amazing things outside that window. Beautiful music, beautiful colors, lots of books, people doing amazing feats, but I closed the window.

"Then Jesus came to me and smiled and told me it's time to stop living in fear. He said, 'Enough is enough. Go.' And I said, 'Go where?' And he pointed to the window. I shook my head. I was afraid to go. But he insisted. The window opened again. Jesus smiled and nodded at me. I tried to climb out the window but when I was about halfway out, it started to shrink and I got stuck. Jesus told me it was all in my mind. It was my fear that was shrinking the window. He touched my head and the window grew into a large door and I stepped outside of the room into the most amazing world.

"I couldn't believe all I'd missed out on by staying in that room. At first everything was amazing. But then I came across a boy, who was screaming for help. He had fallen into a river and was drowning. I watched him go under and his last words were, you could have saved me. I didn't understand. I was confused and I felt immense remorse. Then I came to a woman who was being torn apart by black spiders. It was horrible. And she screamed at me to help her. But I turned my back because I didn't want to see the terrible sight. Then I saw a map of the world, and all over the map there were people who had a big black 'X' over them.

"A feeling of extreme sorrow and sadness filled my soul and I cried and cried and finally, Jesus came back to me. He explained that there are people all over the world whom I can help and all I have to do is overcome my fear and go out that window. He said all my life I've been running in fear and that I had been doing a little, but not near what I was supposed to do in my life. He said it was time for me to move forward and not

to fear because He would be with me.

"He hugged me then, and the greatest feeling of love and power flowed through me and it took my fear. I woke up. I was breathing so hard and as I lay there, I was filled with a knowing. It was like for the first time in my life, I knew and understood everything. I knew Jesus was right. I'd locked myself away in fear without realizing I was doing it. But it's time to change."

"But Dad," Kaylee said. "I don't get it. I think you are brave."

He smiled. "Thank you for that, Kaykay, but I only appear to be brave. I realize that now. Jesus has been waiting for me to wake up and step out. He says this is the time. He even says to accept the gifts."

"What gifts?" Ray asked.

He shrugged. "I'm not sure what He was talking about but I imagine I'll know eventually."

They were quiet a moment. Ray finally took her father's hand. "So, Daddy, last night you said you were gonna tell me and Kay something about you that we didn't know. I think you said it was something that made you who you are today, or something like that. When were you going to tell us?"

He sighed as Dani took his other hand and squeezed it. He nodded.

"It's not like I'm keeping a big secret. I just didn't think you girls would want to hear a story that would be very hard for you to believe. I thought it would be easier for you if you didn't know." He smiled. "But again, I think the Lord is telling me to own my experience, to tell it, and to expand it."

He smiled, nodded and drew a breath. "So, when I was a boy, just ten years old, I lived with my father and mother and little brother in a little shack outside of Quapaw. In the spring, my father told us that he got a good job over in Wichita. Remember now, that was seventy-three years ago and things were different back then. I couldn't believe my father was going to go to a white man's city and work for them. I was appalled. I didn't want to go. I was adamant that I wasn't going. I cried and begged him to stay in Quapaw. He told me I needed to grow up and we would be leaving in two weeks. So, I did what any ten-year-old boy would do."

"What's that?" Ray asked.

"I ran away."

Kay giggled. "You're kidding."

He smiled. "Nope. Not kidding. I wrapped up four apples that I stole, and some extra clothes in a blanket and tied the ends of the blanket together, grabbed a fishin' pole and string, and took off. I headed south, mostly along the Spring River."

"Well, that sounds pretty brave to me," Ray mumbled.

"It only sounds brave. I ran out of fear, though I didn't think of it that way at the time. Now I realize, my whole life, I've been afraid of going anywhere or doing anything out of my own comfort zone, and Quapaw has been my comfort zone. Anyway, I took off, and by day two I was out of food. I decided I needed to catch some fish, so, I found a nice spot, secluded, near a fall. I waded out into the water, threw in the line and caught a fish pretty quickly. I decided to go for two, but as I was throwing the line into the water, I dropped the pole. I tried to grab it but I wasn't fast enough. I didn't want it to go

over the falls so I dove in to save the pole. But the current was stronger than I thought and sure enough, I went over the falls."

"Oh no!" the girls both said at the same time.

He nodded. "I remember thinking, this is it. I'm dead. I waited for the pain of hitting rocks or whatever was at the bottom. But I never did. It was like I was in a whirlpool, going round and round and I went under the water. I held my breath as long as I could and finally, instinctively sucked in. There was a pain in my head and in my chest and everything went black. When I woke it was so strange. It seemed I was like inside of a bubble. I could see through the bubble. I could see that it was nighttime. I could see the waterfall in the distance, though it was weird because I couldn't hear it. I could see the stars shining above, but there was like, this curtain of water all around me. Truly, like I was in a giant bubble."

"Were you dreaming?" Kay asked.

He shook his head. "I thought I was but as it turned out, I wasn't."

"Were you still in the water? Or, I guess, was the bubble in the water?"

"No, I was on the ground, but I was actually inside the bubble. It was, I guess you could say, a supernatural bubble. I felt pain on the side of my head and reached up to touch it and there was blood, so I guess I did hit my head on a rock. Then I realized, I couldn't move my legs. I was sitting on the grass beside the river and I couldn't move my legs. I began to realize that whatever was happening, I was in big trouble. A mountain lion, wild boar, black bear, or wolves or coyotes could come upon me anytime. I wasn't close to a town or village and doubted any person would just happen by, and if they did, would they be friend or foe? I couldn't move and I realized I was gonna lie there by the river and either die a long, slow death or be eaten by a wild animal."

He stopped, because the look on both girls' faces was wide-eyed and comical. He smiled. "Obviously, I didn't get eaten at that time," he quoted from one of his favorite movies. "I did lie there and watch the night turn to day. I tried desperately to move my legs. I couldn't. I turned on my stomach to try to use my arms to pull myself away, and then discovered, I couldn't escape the bubble. I had no idea what was happening. I stayed like that, throughout the entire day. I was hungry and thirsty and confused. So confused.

"As the sun went down and darkness fell again, I finally allowed myself to cry. I was scared. I was miserable. And yeah, I wanted to go home. I started talking to God. My parents considered themselves Christians, though, like many Christians, they didn't really practice their faith. They didn't pray, as far as I know. They didn't trust God to help them in any way as far as I know. But *I* was finding my religion real fast. I started calling out to God. I begged him to help me. I pleaded with Him to send someone to find me. I cried out to Him in complete agony, but finally, I gave up. I remember thinking, fine, I'm gonna die. Fine. Can it just happen please? Just take me. Just die. I lay there thinking that all night. Just die. I was so thirsty. I remember that because I was thinking, there is water right there. A whole river of it. But I couldn't get to it. I was frustrated and angry. I was really angry.

"I think I finally fell asleep again or passed out. When I woke again, it was daytime. Well into the day. My head was pounding. The anger had passed and I had finally let go. I thought, okay, I'm almost done. Thank goodness. I won't last much longer. Thank God.

That was the thought that made everything change. Thank God. I just want to be with you now, God.

"I stopped thinking about myself. I thought how my mom and dad must be really worried about me. And my little brother, whom I rarely thought about, he always told me I was his best friend. They're gonna be sad and they'll wonder whatever became of me. I felt remorse. I'm sorry for running away. I'm sorry for causing trouble. I'm sorry my heart was so full of hatred that I ran away. My father had been trying to provide for his family. He was doing what he could to protect our family and I had run off and caused him so much heartache. I wished I could be a better person. Too bad. It's too late now. Sorry, God, if you're up there. Sorry."

Alo shook his head as if he was still there being that little boy. "After I said I was sorry, the bubble around me began to shimmer and there was a rainbow of color and then there was a man standing inside the bubble with me. He had a bright light all around him. I thought I'd finally died and gone to heaven. I mean, literally. I thought I was looking at an angel or a dead person or something like that. He knelt down beside me and smiled. He said, 'It's been a long three days, hasn't it, Alo?' He produced a small bowl and lifted my head and helped me to drink some water."

Alo smiled. "That was the sweetest drink of water I've ever had. Cool. Sweet. Refreshing. It was like I could feel it mix with my blood and hydrate my body. It tasted and felt so good."

"So, he saved you!" Kaylee said.

Alo sighed. "Well, he told me that it wasn't my time to die. He told me that I had chosen to come to be born and to be God's servant here on earth but that I don't remember the calling and I was heading in the wrong direction. I asked him if I was God's servant, then that means there really is a God? He smiled and said, 'Yes, Alo, God is real. He exists. Jesus is the Son of God, the only begotten Son of the Father and He really did live on the Earth and was crucified and died to pay the debt for our sins and He was resurrected and ascended into heaven. He is real. God is real. And you, Alo, said that you would come to earth and tell people about Jesus. There is a plan.'

"I told him that I guess I messed up because now I'm dead and didn't do what I said I would do. He told me I was not dead yet. He asked me if I still wanted to fulfill my calling. It was my choice. I thought about it a minute. I was being given a second chance to start over and do things right. So, I told him, yes, I wanted to do it, but I didn't know how."

Alo smiled and shrugged. "After all I was only ten. The angel said, 'You must study and learn the Bible, but that is only the beginning. You must work hard. You must change your ways. You are saved by the grace of Jesus' gift, which is free, but you must live the best, most righteous life you can, because in order to teach others, you must set the best example. So that means you must be honest in all you do and say. You must be noble and have integrity. You must not have your heart set on money and riches and comfort, but instead, live to serve, and to love. You must ask Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Father, to come into your heart and teach you and fill your heart with love. You must pray continually. Pray with faith and knowing that God hears you and will answer you if you stay awake and aware.'

"He then asked me if I understood and I told him I think I did. He smiled at me so kindly. I wanted him to stay with me and talk to me and teach me and he said *I* had to take the initiative to do what I needed to do. The effort had to come from *me*. He said it won't be easy for me, but the learning and the trying will make me strong. I tried hard to understand what he was talking about. I told him I would try my hardest. He said he believed me. And then I asked him how I would get home and I told him I couldn't walk. He assured me that when he left me, all would be well.

"He laid his hands on my head and blessed me. He reminded me to pray always. Keep a prayer in my heart at all times and take time to kneel and pray several times a day. I would learn to hear God's voice. And then he bid me farewell. The light around him shrank down until he disappeared. The bubble around me shimmered brilliantly. It was so bright, I closed my eyes. I think I fell asleep. I'm not sure how long, a few minutes, a few hours, maybe another day. When I opened my eyes again, I was looking at a little girl. Almost a baby. She was looking down at me and she smiled and pointed at me. 'Who is you?' she asked, in a very cute baby voice.

"I heard a woman say, 'Child, who are you talking to?' Next thing I knew a woman looked down at me. She said, 'Oh dear, grandpa, come see. It's a boy. I think he's hurt.' An older man came and next thing I know, there were people all around me. I was no longer in a remote place by the river. I was in a park near a small neighborhood just south of Quapaw. I was taken to a hospital and my parents were contacted. I was so worried that my father would be furious, but my mother and father had been devastated and were so relieved that I was found and I was safe, that they simply smothered me with hugs. I had a big gash on my head, that was stitched up. I could walk again. My parents forgave me immediately. I apologized over and over and I cried and I promised I'd never again give them any trouble."

Alo stopped and sighed as he thought about the next part of the story.

"Wow, Daddy, that is quite a story."

He nodded. "I know. Anyway, I did what the angel man told me to do. I became a model child. I went with my family to Wichita. I studied the Bible. I prayed all the time. I went to church. I didn't feel comfortable enough to tell anyone what had happened to me. I just tried to be as good as possible and as I did the things I was instructed to do, I began to hear God's voice."

Raylynn smiled. "You've never wanted to talk about your parents, Dad, and I always assumed they had passed. Did I ever meet them?"

Alo shook his head. "My father took his job in Kansas and I went along obediently. We lived there for ten years. The Vietnam war started. I was drafted. I did my best to teach my fellow warriors about God, give them hope and comfort, because that war was hell. I made it back home four years later to find that my father, mother and little brother had died in a house fire. I was devastated, but I swore to not be a victim like so many others affected by tragedy, and especially those affected by the war. But I admit, I did seek refuge in something familiar, and that was, I came back to Quapaw.

"I got a job working for a land developing company which taught me a lot. I then used my skills to help the people of the town with anything they needed to fix on their homes or in their businesses. I became the go-to person for all things to do with building,

plumbing, electricity, landscaping. I never lacked for work. I charged very little but I made enough to eventually purchase this little home. But the main thing I did, was, I joined the local churches and began a ministry of my own."

"Daddy, I'm so proud of you," Ray said.

He smiled. "So, when I first came back, one of the first jobs I had was to lay the gym floor at the new high school. When I was doing that, I noticed a cute little girl. She was only sixteen. Lord, she was something. She liked to come and talk to me while I was working. Then one day she told me that she knew who I was. She told me that she was the little kid who found me when I was a boy. She didn't really remember me, but she'd been told the story enough and when I came home, people were talking about it."

Kaylee giggled. "So, did you get together with her?"

He smiled. "Oh no, KayKay. She was only sixteen and I was twenty-four. She graduated from high school and went away to work in Tulsa, but she actually came back four years later to recover."

"To recover? What was she recovering from?" Ray asked.

"She'd been violently assaulted."

"Beat up like me?" Kaylee asked.

He shook his head. "No. Sexually assaulted. She'd been gang raped and was permanently injured. She would never be able to have any children."

"That is so sick, and so sad. So, what happened to her?" Kay asked.

He smiled. "I married her."

Both girls gasped and looked at their mother. "Oh Mom," Kay said as she reached across the table and took her mother's hands.

"It's okay, babies. That was a long time ago. I'm good and your father has been so good to me."

"Were you sad though, I mean that you couldn't have any children?"

"Of course that was a sad thing. But then, when I was sixty, I was blessed to be able to take in two little girls. A five-year-old and a three-year-old and I've never been happier."

Kaylee's eyes filled. "Oh Mom, I've been so selfish. My whole life, I was like, all about me."

"Nonsense," Dani said.

Ray shook her head. "I think we both have been selfish, KayKay." She sighed. "So, Dad, earlier, when you were telling us about your dream last night, you said that Jesus came to you and told you to stop living in fear. I don't understand. How are you living in fear?"

"Well, He showed me running in circles, which is what, I guess, like running in place, right? You never get anywhere. You always come back to the same place you started. But He also showed me a window and told me to go through that window. I'm wondering if maybe He's telling me to stop hiding out here in Quapaw. When I was ten, I didn't want to leave Quapaw. I did because I promised to be good and part of that was obeying my parents. But when I got out of the military, I came right back here and I've been here ever since. Do you suppose the Lord is telling me to go out into the world? I mean, He showed me a map of people all over the world who need help. Is he telling me

to leave Quapaw?"

"Where would you go?" Raylynn asked.

He sighed. "I don't know. The bigger question is how will I go? Traveling takes money and as you know, I have very little. So, I need to pray and ask Him to show me if this is what He's asking me to do, and if so, He will provide a way."

Dani sighed. "Maybe He'll make your legs work again too."

Alo smiled at his wife. "I will bear whatever cross I have to bear, without complaint."

Ray frowned. "Isn't it strange, Daddy, that when you were ten and inside that bubble, that your legs wouldn't work, and now they don't?"

He nodded. "I've often wondered if that was a message to me, that one day my legs won't work."

"Well," Kaylee said brightly. "When you were ten, your legs worked, and then they didn't and then they did again. Maybe THAT is the message!"

They all laughed softly, but stopped at the knock on the door. Ray and Kay both smiled at each other. Ray went to open the door.

"Delivery," a man said.

Dani rose. "Delivery? From whom?" She went to the door and saw Agents Allen and Walker. Agent Allen held a large box. Agent Walker was behind with a giant box on a hand truck.

Kaylee giggled and kissed her mother's cheek. "Merry Christmas, Mom and Dad." She pointed to the smaller box. "That, Dad, is a computer. Agent Allen is an expert and is gonna get you all set up and teach you how to use it."

"Wow," Alo said. "Wow."

"Daddy, don't even think about turning it down."

He smiled. "I won't. Jesus already told me to accept the gifts."

"Oh, wow, that's right," Kaylee exclaimed. "Wow. Jesus is so cool!"

Alo nodded. "Yes, He is."

"And that," Ray said, pointing to the giant box, "Mom, is a new oven, since I know you've been having a hard time with the oven."

She nodded and dabbed at her eyes. "Yes, I have. Sometimes it heats up. Sometimes it doesn't."

"Well, there won't be a problem anymore," Agent Walker said.

"Oh, this is just amazing. Oh my goodness, thank you so much," Dani said.

While Walker started looking over the situation in the kitchen, Agent Allen went to set the computer box in the living room then went back to the truck they'd driven to collect another box. This one was a small desk. He brought it into the living room and began assembling the desk. Alo wheeled his chair in so he could watch the setup. The girls also came into the living room to watch the excitement.

Agent Allen smiled. "Mr. Quinn, once we get you all set up, you're gonna be able to access any information you want. It's like having a window to the world."

The other three in the room gasped.

Agent Allen looked around. "Did I say something wrong?"

Ray shook her head. "No. You said something perfect."

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December 25th 5:00 PM EST Wednesday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Music played softly in the background, mostly drowned out by the conversations and loud laughter of the Tanner family. Lily was cooking up a storm and bossing everyone around in the kitchen. There was pan-fried steak with a creamy sauce, honey glazed salmon, sheet pan gnocchi with sausage and green beans, cherry glazed ham, duck-fat roasted potatoes, classic mashed potatoes, cranberry salad, fig cornmeal skillet cake, chocolate Bundt cake, and yeast rolls.

Everyone had their assignments and they had worked together in harmony. Lily was currently working on the sauce for the steak and her mother was making gravy for the mashed potatoes, and pretty much everything else was ready. The men were arranging everything on either the kitchen counters or on the dining room buffet.

Keegan's mom and dad were holding their grandbabies and talking softly to Jericho, who, being on crutches, was unable to help. They were talking about Jericho's newest business plans and how exciting it was for his company to be growing so quickly. Isaiah started to fuss and Debbie stood up to bounce him.

Iris was happily and carefully placing a fork next to every plate. They were using the larger dining table that usually had places for twelve, but they were squeezing in two more places. For the Christmas dinner those present were Roger and Debbie Tanner, Keegan and Lizzy, Heather and Nolan, Rose and Jericho, Violet and CJ, Daisy, Lily, Gabe and Iris. Directly after that would be a birthday celebration where the Stewarts, Appels, and Murphys would be arriving to celebrate Rose's and Violet's twenty-fourth birthday.

Lizzy finished up the gravy and looked around with a smile. "Okay, girls, I hear Isaiah calling for a snack. I'm gonna go nurse him real quick and put the babies down. You finish up. You got this?"

"We got it, Mom," Heather said quickly. "Don't worry. Go feed that boy. I swear, he wants to eat every thirty minutes."

Lizzy smiled. "Sound like anyone you know?"

They all said 'Gabe' at the same time and they all laughed.

Gabe poked his head in the kitchen. "Someone call me?"

Lizzy smiled and walked past him. "Your sisters did."

He walked into the kitchen. "Whatcha need?"

They hadn't really called him, but they went with it. They all circled around him. "We need you."

He frowned. "I'm right here."

"How come you haven't asked for a huddle at all today?"

"Oh, hmm, I've been a little busy." He smiled and nodded. "Okay, huddle up, ladies, I don't have all day."

They giggled as everyone gathered close and put their arms around each other with Gabe in the middle.

Gabe cleared his throat. "Okay, here's the call. Trips to spread right, full house blitz, special wide, all green, no burn, all hearts, on three."

"And what exactly does that mean?" Heather asked, as she always did.

Gabe smiled. "It means, everyone in the whole house head straight to the dining room, hit the table, eat until you burst, go full out, don't stop 'til you drop and mostly that, well, you know...I love you." His voice clogged.

Rose laughed. "You choked yourself up, didn't you?"

He sniffed and laughed. "Maybe."

"I love you, Gabe," she said softly.

He grinned. "Yep. Me too. I mean, I love you too. All of you guys. Okay. Big squeeze and break."

They all moved in close, hugged him really hard, stepped back, clapped their hands and shouted, "Break!"

Keegan stood at the kitchen door and drew a deep breath. He thought his own heart would burst. He was so grateful for his family. Thank God, all those years ago, his SO, Nigel Kort, decided to place him in nurse Lizzy's home. Keegan had been so angry with Nigel. He'd learned over the years that it was one of those times when someone might question God, how could He let that happen? Keegan had no idea that dangerous situation would lead to this kind of happiness. He hadn't spoken to Nigel in many years. Maybe he needed to give him a call and tell him that God used him in His plan. Keegan smiled. He'd have to do just that.

The evening was wonderful. Dinner was five-star. The company was elite. Rose and Violet received beautiful and heartfelt gifts. There was laughter and music and singing and dancing. The evening wound down. Everyone was exhausted. They pushed through to clean up the kitchen. Friends and neighbors went home. The Tanners had their family prayer. Violet carried Iris to bed. Gabe went to call Taylor. Everyone hugged everyone and wished them a good night's sleep. Keegan checked security and spoke briefly with CJ and Jericho, encouraged them to not stay too late, kissed Rose and Violet goodnight and made his way upstairs.

He stopped by the guest bedroom to make sure his parents didn't need anything. Chatted in their doorway a few minutes and finally went to join his wife. She was sitting in bed, just finishing nursing Isaiah.

Keegan lifted the baby from her into his arms. Bouncing him softly, he gently laid him down in his bed. Turning, he smiled at his beautiful wife. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head. "No, but thanks for asking."

He smiled. "Thanks for thanking me for asking."

"Did you have a good time today?" she asked.

He nodded. "It was the best Christmas ever."

"I think so too. But we say that every year."

He chuckled. "I guess we're doing something right."

Lizzy frowned. "I was just thinking about poor Laynah, and Jodi. It's hard for them to not know what's happening with Jake right now."

Keegan sighed. "Right now, no news is good news."

She nodded. She'd been told that many times over the years when Keegan had been off on assignment. Yawning, she smiled up at her handsome husband. "I changed my mind."

"About what?"

"There is something you can do for me."

"What's that?"

"Come snuggle with me."

He nodded with a smile. "Hold that thought."

He went into the bathroom, took a quick shower and then climbed into bed with his wife. Pulling her close, he kissed her and tucked her snugly up under his chin. "How's that? Better?"

"Umm, perfect. You smell good."

"Yeah, I didn't a few minutes ago."

Sighing, she snuggled closer, making him smile.

She yawned again. "You or me?" she asked.

"I'll pray," he said softly and closed his eyes.

"Father," he began. He prayed for several minutes, giving gratitude and asking for protection for his family and for his friends and right now, especially for Jake and the people with him. When he finished, he realized, Lizzy had fallen asleep. He kissed the top of her head, gave thanks for her one more time, and closed his eyes.

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James 1:17
"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,
and comes down from the Father of lights,
with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning."

Chapter Thirty-Three

December 25th Wednesday Evening
Adams Home → Quinn Home Quapaw, Oklahoma

Ray glanced down at her phone when it buzzed. She jumped up quickly and walked out the back door.

"Hello."

"Hi, Raylynn," JoJo said softly.

"Hi, JoJo. I'm so sorry I didn't answer earlier. It's been pretty hectic since we've been here."

"That's okay. I imagine it has been, trying to squeeze everything into a few days' time."

"Right and thanks so much for understanding that."

"I'm just glad you answered this time."

"Why?"

"Well, if you didn't answer this time, I'd probably get the message, ya know what I mean?"

She laughed. "I guess. You mean, like, it's over before it began, huh?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. So anyway, thanks for sending the video. It was fun to watch. Your parents were so surprised. Good stuff."

"You're welcome. I almost forgot to video the surprise, but Agent Walker reminded me."

"I'm glad he did. So, how's the trip been so far?"

"It's been wonderful. I'm so grateful that your aunt talked us into going. It has meant so much to me. How was your Christmas Eve?"

"Hmm, well, it was eventful. The first part of the evening we had a great time with a whole lotta people at the grands' house. Then we got home and had to go rescue Melody at her house."

"Rescue her?"

"Well, so, Melody's ex was in jail for attempted murder of Melody's brother, Phillip, because he bashed him in the head."

"Oh, yeah, he actually told us about that."

"Good, so Cade, that's his name, he got out on some kind of holiday bond out program and he went straight to the Keiths' home."

"Oh no. Did he hurt Melody?"

"Yeah. He went a little crazy. I don't think you wanna hear what happened."

"I do want to hear. I care about Melody. I've only known her a short time but she's such a sweet girl."

"Yeah she really is, and my brother is madly in love with her." JoJo sighed. "Okay,

well anyway, the dude locked Mel's family in the basement and drug her upstairs. Said he was gonna rape her and then cut her into little pieces and throw her body parts into the ocean. He actually said he was gonna do the same thing to her father and brothers."

"Rape them?"

"No, but the other part, chop them up and toss them in the ocean. Anyway, Logan and I got there just in time. It was sad really because Melody looked so pitiful. The guy came very close to accomplishing what he wanted."

"How—far did he get?"

"If you're asking if he raped her, then the answer is no. We got there literally just in time."

"I am so sorry she had to go through that, but I am really glad you guys got there in time."

"Yeah, me too. Anyway, today has been peaceful. So far. How about you?"

"Today has been wonderful. I learned a lot about my parents that I didn't know. It's really special. Really interesting. I'll tell you about it when I get back."

"I'll look forward to that."

Ray smiled. "Me too. It's weird. Being here at home, I feel so separate from the rest of the world. Like it's not real."

He frowned. "Why do you feel that way?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe because this world here is so different. Maybe a little out of touch. In some ways I guess that's good. But in other ways, it feels like I'm stranded on an island."

"Interesting."

"I've always wanted to get away from Quapaw. I think because I felt the separation from the rest of the world. But I think now that I've come to understand some things, it's not so bad. I don't know. My feelings are all over the place."

"Maybe when you get back we can talk about it and figure some things out."

She smiled. "I'll look forward to *that.*"

He chuckled. "You get back in tomorrow evening, right?"

"Yes."

"And you have to work on Friday, right?"

"Yes."

"So, what are you doing on Saturday?"

"Nothing yet."

"Well, my family has an event we have to be at Saturday evening. Would you like to go to an early dinner with me and then go to the event?"

"I would love that, I think."

"You think?"

"I mean, what kind of event is it?"

"It's some kind of honors night."

"Is it, like, a formal event?"

"No. Just regular like, Sunday clothing."

"Okay. That sounds okay."

"Awesome. Is four okay?"

"Four is perfect."

"Awesome, then I'll see you Saturday at 4:00."

"Sounds great," she said, her teeth close to chattering.

"You sound cold."

She laughed. "I am. I stepped outside to have a private conversation and it's thirty degrees outside right now and I didn't put my coat on."

He frowned. "Well then, I'll hang up. Go inside. I'll see you Saturday."

"Okay, bye, JoJo."

"Bye, Raylynn."

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December 26th Thursday Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor hung up the phone. It was the third call she'd received today from a guy at school asking her to a New Year's Eve party. She went to the mirror in her bathroom and wiped at the tears in her eyes.

Gabe had told her to go out, have a good time. See people. But he didn't understand that if she accepted an invitation to a New Year's Eve party, then she would be expected to kiss her date when the clock struck twelve. Or she could be a goody goody like everyone always calls her and tell the guy 'no.' But the way guys are, he probably would try to kiss her anyway and she'd probably end up having to throat punch him.

Some people don't think a kiss is any big deal, but it is to her, and she didn't want to kiss anyone other than Gabe. This last guy that called, Sean, told her she should at least go out with a few other guys besides Gabe just to make sure he really is all she thinks he is. Maybe she would meet someone else she liked even better. She owed it to herself to say she tried other guys but Gabe is still the one. But it still didn't seem right to her.

She sniffed. She missed Gabe so much. She'd had so much going on at Christmas that she didn't have time to think about him. But today, he was all she could think about because guys kept calling her to ask her out.

She wiped her cheeks, grabbed her phone and called Gabe. It went to message. She sighed. "Hi, Gabe. It's me. Just wanted to talk to you a minute. I miss you. I love you. Call me back when you get a chance. Bye." She lay on her bed and let the tears come, but rose when someone knocked on her door.

She sniffed and wiped away the tears. "Come in."

Ricky poked his head in the door. "Taylor. Just came up to check on you."

She forced a smile. "Hey, Daddy."

"What's goin' on?"

"What do you mean?"

Sighing, he came to sit next to her on her bed. "Honey, it's obvious that you've been crying."

Her lips trembled as if to prove him right. She sniffed as her eyes welled with tears again.

"Baby girl, has someone done something to you?"

"No, sir. I mean, Sean just called me to ask me to a New Year's Eve party."

"Okay. So, do you want to go?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to go anywhere with anyone except with Gabe."

"Didn't he tell you to go out and have a good time?"

"Yes."

"But?"

"But I can't, Dad. I just can't. What's the use? I belong to Gabe. He belongs to me. I am not available. Not in any way. If I go to a party, someone is gonna want to dance with me, or kiss me at midnight. I don't want to put myself in that kind of situation and actually, Dad, I'm surprised that you would want me to."

"Well, I guess I didn't realize that you going to a party would mean you have to kiss someone."

"Well, that's how it is. Maybe not way back when you were young, but that's how it is now."

He smiled. "I see." He frowned. "But you went to that Christmas Dance."

She nodded. "I had to perform. And Phillip and Lyle escorted me and I knew you guys were all gonna show up and there was no tradition at the Christmas Dance to kiss someone at the stroke of midnight."

"Aww, I see." He sighed. "Well, I hate to see you so sad, Taylor."

She sniffed and wiped her tears. "I'm sorry. I'm trying to be grownup about it, but I just miss Gabe so much."

"Well, then I guess there's only one thing to do."

"What?" she mumbled.

"I think I'm gonna have to send you to *Pine Forest* to surprise Gabe for New Year's Eve."

Her eyes opened wide. Her mouth dropped open. Then she frowned. "If you think you're being funny, you're not."

He chuckled. "I'm serious. I have to pass it by your mom first, but I have a feeling she'll be on board."

"Really, Daddy? Really?"

"Yes, baby. I'll arrange your transportation and protection and I'll get your mom to arrange the surprise, like where you'll get dressed and when you arrive, and that kind of stuff."

"Oh, Dad," she cried as she threw her arms around his neck.

He held his baby girl tight. "My sweet girl. I love you so much. Sometimes it feels like I've already lost you."

She sniffed. "What do you mean, Daddy? You'll never lose me."

"I mean, I think your heart belongs totally to Gabe."

"Some of it will always be yours, Daddy. Always. Oh, Dad, I can't believe this is gonna happen. This is the best gift ever. Thank you so much."

She laid her head on her father's chest, closed her eyes and he held her for a long time.

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December 27th 10 AM Friday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

The women sat around the large dining table at the Inn going over plans for the New Year's Eve Ball that would be held at the Kinos' Plantation Home. The men surprised their wives with the news from the Kinos on Christmas morning and the women were excitedly going over the decorations and drinks and foods and what they would wear.

Most of the men had gone back to work. Keegan was busy at the Ameritech offices. Chaz was working with the ranch hands and with Nolan Sawyer, Heather's fiancé. CJ had an assignment. Jericho had an important virtual meeting with Jason Lee. Gabe and Peyton were spending time together with a few of their former classmates. Lucas, Charlie and Matt had decided to give Hannah a riding lesson. John was busy taking care of Inn business like checking guests out and helping them to their cars and inviting them back.

Currently at the table were Lisa Stewart and her eldest daughter, Melaynah Appel, Jenny Stewart who was Sheriff Tyson Stewart's wife, Megan Turner, who was Lisa's half-sister, Jodi Appel, Rebecca Murphy, Lizzy Tanner, and her daughters, Heather, Rose, Violet and Daisy. Lily was currently in the kitchen, making a breakfast for a new guest arriving any time now. Aralyn Stewart was occupying Iris in the front room/lobby. The Stewart twins were being held by Melaynah and Daisy, and the Tanner twins were at the Tanner home, being looked after by Keegan's parents.

"This is gonna be so nice," Heather said as they looked over the plans for the ball. "So romantic," she added.

"I agree," Megan said. "What a great way to usher in the New Year."

"So how many couples do we have and who needs a date?" Jenny asked.

"Okay," Jodi said. "Count while I name them off. Me and John. Lisa and Chaz. Lizzy and Keegan. Jenny and Ty, Megan and Josh, Joe and Shirley, Charles and Patty, Heather and Nolan, Rose and Jericho, Vi and CJ, Lily, hmm, Lily needs a date, and Laynah, well, Laynah needs Jake."

Everyone sighed and nodded in agreement.

Jodi breathed and smiled. "Moving on, there's Rebecca and Dalton, and then all the kids, like, Rylie and Kylie might have dates I hear. And Peyton might have a date. And poor Gabe, when you look at him, he looks so lost without Taylor."

Lizzy smiled. "No, not poor Gabe. Not anymore. Okay, don't anyone tell Gabe because it's gonna be a huge surprise, but Taylor is coming in to surprise him."

"Oh, wow," Rose said. "That is awesome! When did that happen?"

"Just this morning. Bree called. It's all arranged. Bree said that poor Taylor was having a hard time and Ricky felt bad for his baby girl, and he decided to send her to Pine Forest!"

"Ooo, I am so excited for this," Violet said.

"Me too," Heather said. "Just make sure Gabe doesn't go inviting some local girl to the ball."

"He would never," Lizzy said.

Rose spoke up. "Okay, so, back to counting people. If we're actually counting heads, don't leave out Jericho's employees. I mean, we should invite them."

Jodi nodded. "Of course we should. Who wouldn't want to invite five young, single,

totally hot firefighters to a ball!"

"Right?" Daisy said.

"That reminds me, Aunt Jodi, you didn't mention Daisy," Rose said.

"Oh, Daisy, I'm sorry. So, isn't Brody supposed to be here?"

Daisy shrugged. "He said he'd be back the day after Christmas but he couldn't make it. He said he was delayed. I tried to reach him today but he's not answering his phone. So, well, I don't know what's up with that."

"Well, don't be sad, Daisy. I'm sure he has a good reason," Jodi said sweetly.

Daisy nodded.

"So," Lizzy began. "Now that we have that all taken care of, let's talk about Rebecca's engagement."

"Oh, yes, let's do," Rose exclaimed excitedly. "Tell us how it went down, Mrs. Murphy, soon to be Mrs. Dalton."

Rebecca smiled. "He was so cute. He was really nervous. He gave me the ring as a gift and when I opened it and saw the ring he got on his knee and told me all the reasons he was in love with me. I accepted of course. He's such a good man."

"And he's cute," Lizzy said.

Rebecca laughed. "Yes, he really is, isn't he? And he's kind and he's very strong, and he loves God. His hands were shaking so hard, he almost dropped the ring as he slid it on my finger."

"What do your boys think about him?" Lisa asked.

Rebecca smiled. "They really like him and they are happy to have a man step in and come to their games. He went to both boys privately before he asked me and got their permission."

"Oh, that is so sweet," Megan said.

Lily came into the dining room from the kitchen. "Okay, so I have breakfast ready for our guest that's arriving," she said pointedly.

"Do you want us to get out of the dining room?" Rose asked with a laugh.

Lily made a face at her. "Daisy, may I hold the baby for a bit? You've been hogging little Jonny."

Daisy laughed as she stood up. "Well, don't ever let it be said that I am a baby hog," she quipped as she handed the baby over to Megan.

"No, don't ever let that be said," a deep voice sounded behind Daisy.

She gasped and turned, her hands going to her cheeks. "Brody!" she screamed and ran to him.

He picked her up and held her to him, hugging her long and hard. He finally set her down and looked into her eyes. "Hey there."

She gave a little yelp and jumped into his arms again.

The ladies at the table laughed and were getting it all on video.

He put her down and this time he cupped her face and kissed her right there in front of everyone. When he pulled away he smiled. "Oh, I've been wanting to do that for weeks."

She giggled. And then frowned. "I tried to call you."

"I know. I was afraid if I answered I might ruin the surprise. Sorry. I hope you didn't

think all kinds of horrible things about me."

"How could I?"

He smiled and finally looked past her gorgeous blue eyes. "Hello, ladies," he said with a smile.

"Oh, Brody," Lizzy said. "That voice is so much like your father's."

He smiled again. "Well, I don't want to interrupt your meeting. Mind if I steal this girl?"

"Do you want some breakfast?" Lily asked.

"Can I come back for it in a little bit?"

They all smiled. He chose Daisy over food. A good sign.

"I'll keep it warm for you," Lily said. "You two go on."

In the lobby, Brody shook John's hand.

"Brody, long drive?"

"Not too bad. About five hours."

"What did you drive?"

"My pickup."

"Really, what do you have?"

"F250 Super Duty."

"Nice."

"Yeah, I like it."

"So, the Inn is gonna be empty for the next week or so. You have your choice of rooms or cottages. What'll it be?"

He smiled. "Hmm, how about cottage number one?"

John nodded. "Closest to the gate that leads next door. Good choice."

Daisy smiled.

John handed him the key. "Here. We'll finish the check-in later. I can see you're anxious to say a proper hello to your girl."

"Uncle John, stop," Daisy said.

He winked at her. "What? Are you not his girl?"

She shrugged.

Brody frowned. "She is as far as I know. Be back in a little while." He helped Daisy with her coat and led her out of the Inn. They stood on the porch and stopped.

"Where are we going?" Daisy asked.

"I didn't have a plan. Just needed to get you alone."

Daisy smiled.

"Shall we walk down to see Georgia and her pups?" Brody asked.

Daisy nodded. "That sounds good."

He took her hand and headed down the steps, across the drive and out the front gate. They walked in silence a minute. Brody drew a breath. "So, what did you mean by that?"

"By what?" Daisy asked.

"You shrugged when John asked you if you were my girl. Has something changed?"

"No, nothing has changed. I guess I wasn't sure if you're still feeling that way so I didn't want to say it."

He sighed. "I just drove five hours to see you. Do you think I did that so that I could

come here to tell you I'm not feeling it anymore?"

"No, I don't really think that. It was just a moment of insecurity."

"Okay, so, I get it, Daisy, but think about it. I've liked you for almost twenty years. You have nothing to be insecure about. I finally got up the nerve to tell you how I feel and I'm not backing down. It would take a whole lot of meanness on your part to drive me away."

She giggled. "A whole lot of meanness. I wonder what that would look like."

"I doubt you'll ever figure that out. You're just too sweet."

She laughed. "Not hardly."

Brody smiled. "It's kinda cute how you don't realize how adorable you are."

She smiled up at him and he squeezed her hand.

They got to the Stewart ranch and headed down toward the barn.

"So, it's Friday, did anyone come out and shoot at the ranch this morning?"

"No, everyone was too busy getting back to work. We might shoot in the morning, though. Did you bring some guns?"

He nodded. "I brought a hunting rifle and my Glock."

"Awesome."

He smiled. They got to the barn and headed in.

Georgia came running to him immediately. He knelt down and tussled with her for a few minutes.

"Did ya miss me, girl?" he asked as he chuckled.

He rose and walked to the enclosure that held the puppies. Nine fat puppies, almost five weeks old scurried around. He smiled. "They look great."

"They're eating puppy food now. We wet it down with raw milk and they seem to love it."

"Do you come down and feed them every time?"

She shook her head. "No. Hannah and Charlie and Matt and Laynah have been a huge help. Really, Hannah and Charlie spend more time with them than I do. Charlie takes Georgia out on a good long walk every day."

"Does he leash her?"

"Nope, she just follows Charlie around. Sometimes he rides and she runs beside him. She's a good little ranch dog."

"And she doesn't bark at the horses?"

"No, not at all."

Brody nodded. "Good girl," he said to her and gave her a rub.

He knelt down to pick up a puppy. "Have you chosen one yet?"

"Well, Iris has. And Hannah has. Charlie has and Matt has."

Brody chuckled. "Just five more to go."

"I think Jericho's bunch of guys are wanting one or even two."

Brody frowned. "Wow, well that would bring it down to only three. We'll work it out. Whoever is left, I can take up to the farm with me."

They checked their water. Instead of leaving the barn though, Brody pulled Daisy over against a wall and leaned over her. He skimmed his knuckles over her cheek. "Wanna ride with me in the morning?"

"Sure. Anything you wanna do, I'm game."

He swallowed hard and smiled. "Good to hear."

She giggled.

Pressing against her, he used his finger to tilt her head up and bent down and skimmed his lips over hers. "Ahh, Daisy, I've missed you so much. It's been really hard to be away from you."

"I feel the same way," she said as she went up on her toes and lifted her face for his kiss.

He kissed her a long time then finally pulled back. "Now that we are like, a thing, I don't know how I'm gonna handle being away from you. Do you think you can come up to some of my games?"

"I think that will be possible. Season starts in February, right?"

He nodded. "Right. And goes for four months."

She smiled. "And then you hit the pros."

He nodded and then frowned. "Don't wanna get ahead of myself."

"Brody, everyone knows you're goin' pro. I mean, right now, you're the number one pick."

He smiled. "Well, everyone knew JoJo was goin' pro too, right? And we know how that turned out, so, let's just take it a game at a time."

She nodded. "Okay. A game at a time."

He kissed her again and this time lifted her up and pressed her back against the wall. She wrapped her legs around his hips and moaned.

The door burst open and Chaz walked into the barn.

"Oh! Sorry, kids," Chaz said with a smile. "Man, it's gettin' to where I don't know who I'm gonna catch makin' out in this barn. Laynah and Jake. Brody and Daisy. Violet and CJ. Charlie and Hannah."

"Uh, Charlie and Hannah?" Daisy asked.

"Oh, well, they don't make out. They're just always here, playin' with those pups. Matthew and Aralyn too," Chaz added.

Daisy laughed. "Well, sorry, Uncle Chaz. We also came down to see the dogs, but we got distracted."

Chaz laughed. "Oh, is that what you kids call it nowadays?" He shrugged. "Well, don't mind me. I just needed to grab a padlock." He walked up to Brody and held out his hand. "Welcome back, Brody. Good to see ya."

"Thanks, Mr. Stewart. Nice to see you too."

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December 28th 3:58 PM PST Saturday

Quinn Home, Los Angeles, California

JoJo pulled up to the small blue house with the yellow door. Smiling, he took a deep breath. He glanced around the front seat of his F-150. He'd just vacuumed it out and wiped down the seats and dash. He sniffed. He didn't think it smelled like sweat and footballs like it usually did. He headed up to the door and knocked.

Kaylee opened the door. "Hey, JoJo! Don't you look scrumptious."

He smiled. "Uh, thanks. And you, Kaylee, look good. I mean, you look like you're

healing. It looks a lot better."

"Well, it's been almost two weeks. It should look better, right?"

He nodded. "May I come in?"

"Oh," she said with a giggle. "Sorry." She backed up and held the door open for him while he walked in. "So, Ray will be out in a second."

He nodded.

Kay smiled. "So, you like my sister, huh?"

He chuckled. "That's why I asked her out." He sighed. "Did you girls enjoy your Christmas back in OK?"

She nodded. "It was the best Christmas ever. Your family..." She shook her head. "I can't even..."

He nodded. "I'm glad Aunt Jeffy heard you and acted on it. The whole family is pretty good at that."

"Yeah, that includes you, JoJo. You saw Scott beating on me, and you acted."

He shrugged. "I had no choice."

"You could've just walked on by."

"No— I couldn't."

He looked up as Raylynn came out of her bedroom. His eyes opened wide. He blew out a deep breath. "Whoa, Raylynn, I mean, you look amazing."

She smiled at him and he allowed his eyes to roam over the beautiful scene he was looking at. She wore a dress, and she wore it well. It was navy blue with tiny white flowers all over it. It came to a few inches above her knee. It had a u-shaped neckline and a short row of five, tiny white buttons at the top center of the dress. It had short sleeves. It flowed out softly from the high waistline to just above her knees and she wore tan suede boots. Her long, black hair was down, cascading over her shoulders and down to her waist. She wore a gold necklace, which had a small charm on it which he didn't dare look close enough to see what it was, and when she tossed her hair back over her shoulder, he could see shiny gold earrings.

She smiled at him as she approached, showing her adorable dimples. "Hi, JoJo. Thank you, and you, well, you look very handsome." She too allowed her eyes to roam. He wore a tan, three-piece suit with a crisp white shirt, a brown tie and a tiny brown handkerchief in the breast pocket. "No sling tonight?"

He nodded. "Well, I'm not supposed to use my arm yet, but I've been doing some PT with Aunt Jeffy and she said it was good enough for me to go without the sling if I promise not to use my arm too much."

Raylynn nodded. "I'll make sure you don't." She glanced over at Kaylee. "You gonna be okay?"

"Of course. I'll see you later. Have a great time, kids."

JoJo chuckled. "Will do."

Ray picked up a tan shawl that was lying on the back of the sofa.

He immediately took it from her, stepped behind her and gently placed it around her shoulders. He breathed in and sighed. "You smell really good too."

She smiled. "Thank you. Actually, you do too."

He smiled. "It's Gabe's body wash. Well, I mean, it's not his, but it's the one he

represents."

She nodded. "I remember that. The lady at teenspotter.com remarked on how he smelled after he'd come home all sweaty from mowing an elderly lady's lawn and he'd run upstairs and taken a quick shower." She laughed. "That Gabe Tanner. He is adorable."

JoJo nodded. "He'll be back out here soon. I'll introduce you."

"I'd like that."

"Me too," Kaylee said.

Ray turned and hugged her sister. "If you need me for anything, don't hesitate to call."

Kaylee laughed. "Even I wouldn't do that to you. Go. Have fun."

They headed out. JoJo opened the truck door and helped her in then headed to his side.

"So, where are we goin' to eat?" Ray asked.

"It's called the *Bayside Grill*. It's one of my favorite places to eat. It's one of the many restaurants that Uncle Ricky has invested in. This one has been around a long time. It's the place that my Uncle Joey took Aunt Breez on their first date."

"Oh, that's sweet. So, what's their specialty?"

"Steaks mostly. But they do have other stuff. The unique thing about them is clean food. Organic, non-GMO, grass-fed beef. You can go there and pig out and not feel guilty about it."

"Sounds good and you're making me hungry just talking about it."

He smiled. "I'm hungry too, but I'm always hungry."

She nodded. "Most big, strong athletes are."

He smiled and glanced over at her. She was smiling at him. He wondered if she was wishing he was still a big, strong athlete. He wondered if she used to be a fan of JoJo who is the QB and is now disappointed. Well, he'd know the answer to that soon enough.

They pulled into the parking lot of the *Bayside Grill* and she looked around curiously. They were on the harbor. The smells coming from the restaurant were mouth-watering. They walked in and JoJo reported to the hostess, JoJo Adams reservation for two. The woman smiled and nodded. "I'll be right back."

She disappeared and a second later, Cal Vaughn came hurrying out of the kitchen. "JoJo, it's so good to see you."

JoJo offered his left hand, even though his right arm was not in a sling. "Mr. Vaughn, good to see you too."

"How's the shoulder?"

"It's a slow recovery process, but I'll be starting physical therapy big time after the first."

"Wonderful. We'll keep you in our prayers."

"I appreciate that. Raylynn Quinn, meet Mr. Cal Vaughn. He and his wife own this place."

She offered her hand and he took it.

"It's so nice to meet you," Cal said. "Well, come on back, I reserved a table with a view for you."

They followed him back to a table with a view of the harbor. The sun hadn't gone down yet, so they would have a perfect view of the sunset as they ate. JoJo smiled and nodded. "Nice, Mr. Vaughn. Thank you."

"My pleasure always. Your server will be here in a minute."

He took his leave. Before the server could arrive, Ellie Vaughn came rushing over. "JoJo Adams! So nice to see you."

"Hey, Mrs. Vaughn."

"And oh my goodness, who is this beautiful young lady?"

JoJo smiled. "Mrs. Vaughn, this very special young lady is Raylynn Quinn."

"It is so very nice to meet you," Ellie said brightly. "So, JoJo, you know the drill. You want or need anything, just let us know. I'll get out of your way."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Vaughn," Ray said quickly.

"You too, sweetie," Ellie said and rushed off.

"Well, it seems they know you well here."

JoJo nodded. "Like I said, it's one of my favorite places to eat."

The server came and efficiently delivered drinks as they perused the menu. It didn't take Raylynn long to decide what she wanted. They both ordered steak, potato and salads. As they waited for their food, JoJo looked into her big green eyes and smiled.

When he didn't say anything, she laughed. "So, JoJo, you know it's not polite to stare."

He shook his head. "Sorry. This is gonna sound like such a player thing to say but you are so beautiful, I can't help but stare."

She made a face. "Yeah, no— that's my sister. Not me."

"Oh no, Ray, you're wrong. That is definitely you. Do you really not know how gorgeous you are?"

She sighed and shrugged. "I guess I haven't ever taken the time to stare into the mirror and think, 'my goodness, Ray, but you *are* pretty.' Ya know, I've been kind of busy, school, school, school, for most of my life and now, work, work, work. And don't get me wrong, I really love helping people at my job, but I don't have much time for frivolous things like, am I pretty?"

"Well, let me just save you some time and let you know, Ray, you are drop-dead gorgeous."

She frowned. "Is that why you asked me out?"

He shook his head. "That's what got my attention. But I've met lots of pretty girls that got my attention. I didn't ask any of them out. But you, Raylynn Quinn, you are exceptional in so many ways. The love you have for your sister, that's a beautiful thing. The willingness to go out and help the homeless, very nice. The obvious love you have for God, that is awesome and the most important thing to me. And I sense you have a logical mind. I like that. You're not shallow at all. I have an intense dislike for shallow girls. You intrigue me, Ray. And well, I'm not sure if you can feel it, but I think there's a chemistry here, between you and me."

Her eyes opened big and then she smiled. "I think I can feel that. But I mean, you ARE a gorgeous, big, hunky athlete."

He frowned. "Is that why you agreed to go out with me?"

She shook her head. “No. Of course, you know that I’ve had my eye on you, the public you. I love football, so I loved watching you play. I love God and I know you do too. You’ve made that very public and very obvious. I mean, even your teammates call you Preacher.”

He smiled. “I can’t help it. Scriptures just pop out of my mouth.”

She giggled. “So, here’s this awesome, God-loving guy, who plays football, and I understand is also a martial artist, he actually calls me and I hang up on him. And then I find he has saved my sister’s life and he prays over her, right there in the hospital. When everything I’ve ever dreamed of in a guy asks me to dinner, how could I turn that down?”

He grinned. “Everything you’ve ever wanted in a guy? Wow! Well, that just got us past a bunch of hurdles.”

She giggled, then shrugged. “Just being honest.”

“Another thing I like about you,” he said on a sigh.

They looked up when their food arrived. Once their server left, JoJo held his hand out to Raylynn. She placed her hand in his and he quietly gave thanks for the company, for the food and blessed it.

“Amen,” she whispered.

Again, he looked into her eyes as he released her hand. She smiled and took a bite of her steak and moaned with pleasure. He watched her a moment more before he took a bite of his steak. They were quiet a few minutes as they ate, but his eyes wandered back to her as she put a forkful of potato, covered in butter and sour cream, into her mouth. Her lips were full and pink. He wasn’t sure if she was wearing any makeup. He didn’t like girls who wore so much makeup that he couldn’t tell what they really looked like. The fact that he couldn’t tell if she wore makeup, he thought, was a good thing.

Her long, black eyelashes fringed her bright, green eyes. Her skin was flawless. Her hair so silky. His eyes dropped to the necklace she wore. He had to swallow hard as he noted it lying there against the soft, tan skin. He realized it was a gold cross flanked by two small, clear, teardrop-shaped crystals. He found he desperately wanted to reach out and touch it and caught himself.

He cleared his throat and looked up into her eyes and found her looking at him with her eyebrows raised.

He shrugged. “I was looking at your necklace. It’s very pretty.”

She smiled. “Thank you. It was a gift from my parents when I graduated high school. The cross represents Jesus, of course. And the two crystals, well, let me ask you, what do they look like to you?”

He smiled because he had permission to study them. He took a good long look. “Hmm, they look like teardrops.”

She smiled. “Very good. That’s exactly what they are.”

“Because your parents were sad that you were growing up and going away?”

She shook her head. “That’s a very sweet notion, but no. They’re a reminder of my heritage.”

His brow furrowed a moment. “The Native American heritage in general or, your personal heritage?”

She smiled again. “I love the way your mind thinks so quickly.”

He grinned and pointed to his head. “QB.”

She nodded in agreement. “Right. The answer to your question is actually somewhere in the middle. Not my personal story, but the story of the Quapaw. The Quapaw have their own ‘Trail of Tears.’”

“Oh. Tell me, unless you’d rather not talk about it.”

“Hmm, let me try to give you a nutshell version. Quapaw is a derivative of O-gah-pa, which means downstream people. The Indians, when they crossed the Mississippi, headed upstream, the Quapaw went downstream, so they were the O-gah-pa, the downstream people and settled in what is now Arkansas. Their territories actually included a large area, all of Arkansas and portions of southern Oklahoma, and northern Louisiana and Mississippi.”

“Wow, that is a large area.”

She nodded. “But in the early 1800s, the government forced them into a treaty that put them into a reservation in the central part of Arkansas. Which was a much smaller area, tiny in comparison, from around Little Rock to Pine Bluff, which is about forty-five miles south of Little Rock. So they went from, like, a huge territory spanning several present-day states to a much smaller area.” She shook her head. “Then six years later, they were forced again to sign a new treaty that removed the Quapaw from Arkansas to a tiny area just north of Shreveport, Louisiana. It’s THAT journey that is called the ‘Quapaw Trail of Tears.’ First, they were forced to settle among the Caddo tribe, who were our enemies and did not welcome us. Both tribes became destitute. Quapaw lost close to half of their people due to starvation, disease and flooding. I won’t go into the detail, but nine years later, they were forced into a third treaty that put them up in northern Oklahoma, where they are today. By then, our people had endured devastating losses—some say there were less than two hundred people. There’s a lot more detail. A lot of lying by the government. Many Indians are very bitter over this whole taking of the land that we thought of as ours.”

He nodded. “Are you? I mean, are you bitter?”

She smiled and shook her head. “We—not just the Quapaw but all the American Indians—are a conquered people. We were not strong enough to stand up and hold our land. We lost that war. It was a contest and we lost. How can I be bitter about that? As my father says, it is what it is. We can live in bitterness or move on. In the Bible, when God sent Joshua across the Jordan to take the promised land back, God was with them and made them strong and they took the land. God was not with us. This country, the USA, was meant to be. Land of the free. Home of the brave. And I’m an American too now.

“And we Americans, mostly used to be God-fearing people. Not so much anymore. God has a plan though, and I trust Him. The land was not ours. It didn’t really belong to the Quapaw. It belongs to God and He decides who gets it. So, the necklace is to remind me of this; yes, there was a trail of tears for the Quapaw, but we are in God’s hands, and Jesus gave his life for us all.”

“Wow, Ray, that is such a beautiful and wise way to think of it.”

She shrugged. “It’s the only way that makes sense to me and that view is taught by

my father to anyone who will listen."

JoJo nodded and they both turned to see the sudden orange and pink light that filled the sky. They sat quietly, watching the sunset. When Raylynn murmured a soft, "oh my," at the beauty she was witnessing, JoJo shifted his eyes to watch her. The soft light was shimmering on her lovely face. She was glowing. Her hair was so shiny that it reflected the orange-yellow light. It played over her skin and reflected off the necklace where it lay on her skin, almost as if God was agreeing with the sentiment she'd just spoken.

She turned to see him looking at her. Her eyes were moist with tears and she smiled and looked back out toward the last rays of light as the sky went dark, then turned back to him. "That was beautiful," she said softly.

He nodded. "Yes it was."

She blushed as she realized he was talking about her.

"So," JoJo began. "Tell me about your parents. You said they were elderly and your father is handicapped. How old are they?"

"My father is eighty-three. My mother is seventy-five."

His eyebrows rose. "Oh, I didn't expect them to be that old. And they are your parents, not your grandparents?"

She nodded. "My parents adopted Kaylee and me when I was five and she was barely three."

"Oh. Interesting. Do you remember your real parents?"

"Just vaguely. Kaylee not at all."

"What happened to them?"

"They were killed when a gunman shot up the casino where they worked."

"Oh wow, Ray, I'm sorry that happened."

She nodded. "Thank you. My father was a bartender. My mother was a cocktail waitress. I'm told that's how they met. They got married. They had two kids and they died. Pretty sad for them."

"It is sad. No time to appreciate what they created. And so, are your adoptive parents actually your grandparents?"

"Nope. Had no grandparents. Did have two aunts and an uncle but they weren't interested in taking on two little girls. My father and mother were elders of Quapaw and they say they were grateful for the opportunity to take us girls and raise us. They say they were secretly hoping that our aunts and uncle wouldn't take us."

"Are you happy that they got you and raised you? Or were you hoping that your aunts or uncle would want you?"

"We didn't even know our aunts and uncle, so there was no hope there. We also didn't know the Quinns. But they are the best. I didn't always think so. Ya know, 'older parents don't understand us kids' kinda stuff. But really, my parents are awesome and I love them so much and I'm so grateful for them. And this trip home has been eye-opening."

"How so?"

She sighed. "Well, one thing is, I always wanted to get away from Quapaw. I just wanted to get out into the world. I felt trapped there. I worked very hard to make that happen."

"And you succeeded."

She nodded. "But when I went home this time, it was different. It was like, I began to appreciate my heritage. I began to appreciate my parents in a way I never did before. Not that I didn't love them. I did. But I always wanted to get away."

"And now you don't?"

"It's not that. I mean, I wouldn't want to settle down there. But I found being there is a base. It IS home. And it was so much fun to go home and give them gifts and do things for them. Of course, it was your grandfather who made that happen."

JoJo smiled. "He's the best."

She nodded. "He is so kind. I really love him. And the thing is, he reminds me of my father. Or my father reminds me of him."

JoJo nodded. "And you told me on the phone that you learned something new about your parents."

"I did. My father told us an amazing story of how and why he is who he is."

"That sounds cool. Is it too personal for you to tell me?"

She sighed. "Not really, though it is pretty unbelievable and I wouldn't share it with just anyone."

"I understand."

"But I'd share it with you."

He smiled. "Oh! Well, I'm all ears."

"But it's a very long story."

He frowned and glanced at his phone to check the time. "Hmm, well then I guess we'll have to save it for another time. We have to be at the auditorium and in our seats by 6:45."

Raylynn smiled. "So, what is this event all about?"

JoJo shook his head. "I'm not really sure. It's some kind of honor event for Ameritech. I think honoring all the agents who have put their lives on the line over the past year and done remarkably heroic things. Our family has been highly dependent on them to protect us and of course, several members of our family ARE Ameritech. Uncle Jason owns it. Uncle Joey is second in command. Uncle Cam is a JETT. Mr. Davis is a Division Chief."

"What's a JETT?"

"Jason's Elite Tactical Team. They are special forces, special ops, kinda peeps. Uncle Joey is also a JETT. He's over the Teams. Anyway, we are all expected to be there, not that it's a chore. We *want* to be there to honor them."

They looked up as their server arrived. They declined dessert. Ray accepted a to-go container since she'd only eaten half her steak. The check was paid, and the server tipped extravagantly.

"Well," JoJo began. "This time went by waaay too fast."

"I agree."

"I want to spend a lot more time with you," he said.

"I'd like that."

He sighed. "The next few days are gonna be a little crazy for me. I have to go straight from church in the morning to a football meeting."

"That reminds me, are you speaking at church tomorrow?"

"Briefly. Reverend Clark's nephew, or uh, grand nephew I guess, he's a pastor and he's going to have him speak some. Then Reverend Clark himself is going to share a very special story with us."

"Oh, that sounds intriguing."

"It is. It's very special. Anyway, after the football meeting Sunday, I'll be with the team most of every day until after the game on Wednesday. What days are you working next week?"

"I'm working on Monday and Tuesday, but I get off early Tuesday since it's New Year's eve. Then I'm off on Wednesday and by the way, Kay and I are very excited about going to the *Rose Bowl*. And then I'm back at work on Thursday and Friday."

He nodded. "Okay, so, two things. First, since I don't actually have to play on New Year's Day, I can stay out on New Year's Eve, so, would you like to usher in the new year with me?"

"That would be lovely, JoJo, really, but I don't want to leave my sister alone on New Year's Eve."

"Well, my family is having a little party, so she is invited."

"Well, that sounds fun. Is it at your house?"

"No. We're using a ballroom at *Golden Hotels*. Our family is getting too big to squeeze us all into my grands' house."

"And yet to me, that house seems ginormous," Raylynn said.

He nodded. "I know. But when our entire west coast family is together plus their dates or friends, there are like, seventy people. Then add in Ameritech agents and their dates or families. It's a lot of people, so, we have a ballroom and a DJ and a band. Will you and Kaylee join us?"

"I'll check with her, but I'm pretty sure she'll want to come. I definitely do."

"Awesome! And then, I want to check with my Dad and make sure he doesn't need me to take care of anything for him, and if I'm free and clear, how about you and I spend some time together next Friday night, or even better, on Saturday?"

"I would love that," she said softly.

"Okay, good. We'll plan it out. For now, I think we need to get going over to Ameritech."

She sighed and then smiled. "Well, our dinner might be over but at least we can spend the next few hours sitting together during the honors program."

"At least there's that," he murmured. Rising, he went to pull out her chair, helped her with her shawl, took her hand, waved to the Vaughns and made his way out to the truck.

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1 Corinthians 13:4-5

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy,
it does not boast, it is not proud.
It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking,
it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs."

Chapter Thirty-Four

December 28th 6:40 PM PST Saturday Night
Ameritech Auditorium, Los Angeles, California

When JoJo and Raylynn entered the auditorium they quickly headed to their seats. They were told the first two rows of the large auditorium were reserved for the Kino/Adams families. For their own comfort and so that the parents could enjoy the program, the children had been allowed access to the daycare area and were attended to by the highly screened and trained Ameritech child care workers and protected by three agents.

In the day care area were the five Kino children, Manny, Angelina, Nate, Abe and Noah, also Amari and Brittney Meeks, Jamie Brooks, and Emily, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger Adams. The tiny new babies remained with their mothers and included Elijah Wallace, Scarlett Davis, Christian Coley, and Jay Deal.

In the audience, in the first two rows were Jeffy and Cam, Eric and Shelley, Justin and Lori, Jason and Angel, Ricky and Bree, Taylor, Jewell Brooks, Mark and Bella Adams, Joey and Breez Adams, David and Carol Keith, Jeff and Mickey Davis, Daniel and Jeremy Davis, Josie Brooks, Lyle and Phillip Keith, young Eric and Jordan, Ryder Bell, Logan Adams and Melody Keith, Chris and Marissa Coley, and Jensen and Kim Deal.

JoJo and Raylynn stopped and greeted each person as they went to take their seats next to Logan and Melody.

"Pushed it to the last minute," Logan said quietly.

JoJo smiled. "Or— timed it perfectly."

Raylynn leaned over to whisper to Melody. "I heard about what happened. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. I was pretty shaken up and I'm still sore, but I'm grateful that no one was seriously hurt."

"Me too," Raylynn said as she glanced up at JoJo. "These guys, they really are heroes, aren't they?"

Melody nodded. "They really are. I'm so blessed to have Logan in my life."

Raylynn smiled, because she was thinking the same thing about JoJo, but it was too early to state that publicly.

The lights dimmed and there was a lot of movement as more people hurried into the auditorium and took their seats. JoJo looked back and saw that the whole place was suddenly filled to capacity. Impressive.

Jason rose from his seat and went up the small flight of four stairs and headed to the center of the stage where a lectern stood. Behind the lectern was a row of ten empty chairs. Two large monitor screens on either side of the auditorium came on, showing a

close-up of the handsome Korean face of Jason Lee.

Jason nodded at the applause that erupted. He smiled. “Thank you, thank you. I know you’re just applauding the fact that we’re starting on time.” There was laughter. “And it’s a good thing because we have a lot to accomplish here tonight. So, let me begin with a prayer and I’d like to provide my brother Justin Lee with that blessing.”

There was laughter again at the way the invitation was worded. Justin came up to the lectern, bowed his head and blessed the gathering and asked God to watch over the event about to take place and please keep the Kinos and Adams calm and forgiving when they find out what this is really all about. He prayed in Jesus’ name and left the stage.

Eric senior smiled at his best friend as he returned to his seat next to him. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Justin whispered. “You’re about to see and don’t be angry and accept it, not for your sake, but for the sake of the people who felt the strong need to do this.”

Eric’s brow furrowed but he stayed silent.

“So,” Jason began. “For those here who don’t know, my name is Jason Lee. I am the owner and Chief Director of Ameritech Security. This company is my dream come true. So, if you know anything about Ameritech, we pride ourselves not only on honor and integrity, but on the highest and best training for extremely worthy agents, and on an advanced and vast high-tech intelligence community. Therefore, making this event tonight happen and keeping it secret from my second in command, Joey Adams, and from the entire Kino and Adams families and from the psychic Dr. Kino Wallace, it has been a challenge.”

The family began to look around at each other as the light was beginning to come on.

Jason went on. “They believed they were invited here tonight to support the honoring of our Ameritech agents, but as most of you know, that is not really what this event is about. We had been approached by hundreds of people, telling us how Grandmaster Kino and/or members of his family had worked miracles in their lives and how they wished they could at the very least, acknowledge it publicly and thank them publicly. I explained to many of these people that the Kinos and Adams do not want to be thanked for their acts of charity and kindness. They would absolutely deny the opportunity for us to thank them because they don’t do it for thanks or for recognition but, they say only to serve God. That is their sole purpose. And though I know they honestly want to serve God, I also know that is not their ONLY purpose. The other reason is because their hearts are so full of love and compassion for others that they thrive on helping and teaching others. They crave it. They want to see others happy, they want to see them at peace and they want to let everyone in the world know that God is indeed real.”

Grandmaster Kino drew a deep breath. Ricky did the same. Mark and Joey did the same. JoJo and Logan glanced over at their father. Young Eric and Taylor glanced over at their father. They all knew that this was very uncomfortable for them. Their faces were void of emotion, which the entire family knew was a sign of high stress or tension or emotion.

“Just so you know,” Jason continued. “This event is being live-streamed. I will

begin, since I have the opportunity, with my own testimony. My brother, Justin, and I came to this country from South Korea when he was a teenager and I was just a little kid. Our family came with our cousin's family, Jung Lee. Jung was bullied in high school, beaten severely and ended up in the hospital. Eric Kino, a seventeen-year-old senior at that high school, defended my cousin's honor. He brought down a guy who was five inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than he was, an incredible feat. My brother and I went to Eric's home to thank him and to beg him to teach us his style of martial arts, and that was the beginning. You have all probably heard that Grandmaster Kino began his schools by teaching martial arts to a few students in his backyard. Well, Justin and I were those students."

There was a murmuring as this information was digested.

"Long story short, Grandmaster Kino taught me everything I know and he gave me the confidence to pursue my dream. If not for him, Ameritech Security would not exist. Therefore, I am extremely grateful to God that he brought Eric Kino into my life and I believe I have forty thousand employees who feel the same way. I will always honor him and be grateful to him. I've watched, over these years as everything he touches, as every person he comes in contact with, blossoms and is lifted up. I'm so privileged to be able to witness this, pretty much on a daily basis.

"Now, this event is not just about Grandmaster Kino, but also about his sons, Ricky Kino, and Mark and Joey Adams, and about his daughters, Breanna Adams Kino and Dr. Kino Wallace, and about the wives of these men, Shelley Adams Kino, Bella Adams and Breez Adams, and Dr. Kino's husband, Cam Wallace, and finally, about their grown grandchildren, Eric Kino the third, Taylor Kino, JoJo Adams and Logan Adams."

Raylynn grabbed JoJo's arm and squeezed. He looked down at her.

"You had no idea about this?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "None."

She giggled. "I'm loving this. I'm so glad I'm here."

He smiled and patted her hand where she'd gripped his arm.

"I won't take up any more time," Jason said. "I will however, turn the time over to a man who was adamant that I make this event happen. This man drove a school bus for twenty-five years and then worked concessions at *Rosewood Sports Arena* for twenty years. Some kids were having a grand time knocking this gentleman down whenever he had a load of drinks. Young Eric and Logan Adams witnessed that the night of the most recent Mini-MART a month ago. They helped him up and they took care of business. I'll let him tell you the rest. Please welcome, Mr. Jeremiah Cobb."

Everyone applauded as Jeremiah Cobb came up on the stage. He was a slim and fit older black man, with gray hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. He wore a black suit and he smiled brightly as he came to the microphone.

"Thank you, and hello, everyone. We have a lot of people to speak tonight and I don't want to waste time telling you my personal story. Let me just say that Eric Kino the third and Logan Adams not only helped an old man stand back up after I'd been knocked down, but they discovered that I was being mistreated by my supervisor who was unlawfully charging me for the spilled drinks and pocketing the money. They looked into what was happening. The supervisor was fired. I was offered the position but I didn't

care for the stress of that position, so a new supervisor was appointed. Instead of leaving it like that, which they could have done, they had an agent visit me, look into my life and find out what I wanted to do with what was left of my life. My wife had died and I lived alone.

"That agent reported back to the Kinos and Adams and let them know that during my time as a school bus driver I had counseled many a young boy and helped them to learn to be worthy men and I'd always wanted to do that. Next thing I know, I'm being contacted by the director of a place that was in need of a counselor for the young people of an under-served community. They needed someone who understood them. I am happy to report that I have completed training and am now certified to help work with and help counsel youngsters at the newly opened *Gabe Tanner Community Center* in Compton.

"I also discovered that they caught the boys who had been terrorizing me and after some push back from the boys' parents, the boys and their parents were made to take responsibility for the boys' actions and they are on the way to becoming model citizens at their schools. You see, the Kinos and Adams didn't have to take it that far. I asked them why they did and it was explained to me that they believe every soul is important to God and they had to make the effort. They told me that every day their family prays and asks God to put in their path the people God wants them to help and when God does that, they will take it as far as God presses them to take it. These people live what they talk about.

"So, I not only wanted to thank them personally, but I wanted to explain to the world what they do, how it has changed millions of lives and how we too can change the world and save souls. I've been told that they wouldn't be very happy to be called out and thanked publicly for their efforts, but I hope they can see that showing the world what can be accomplished by one caring family, by one man who started teaching his friends in his backyard, they are setting an example and teaching others how to do it. We're gonna call on the Kinos and Adams to speak to us later, so that will be a real treat. For now, Eric Kino the third and Logan Adams, I want to personally and publicly thank you."

Both young Eric and Logan humbly nodded, a slight smile on their faces.

Melody looked up at Logan and leaned over. "I love you, Logan Adams."

He smiled down at her. "I love you too, Melody," he whispered.

"Feeling awkward?" she asked.

He nodded. "A little bit."

"And now that I've said my part," Jeremiah went on. "I will call on the first ten to come fill these chairs, and along with them, the next speaker."

Everyone looked around to see people begin to rise from the audience to come and sit in chairs.

Jeremiah smiled. "These chairs will continue to fill as each person speaks and exits the stage. Don't worry, most of the speakers have arranged their thoughts quickly and will take approximately one minute to speak. But a few speakers will go a little longer. Our next speaker is one of those, a wonderful lady I met at the *Rosewood Sports Arena*. She was checking on how her cookies were selling at concessions and we got talkin' and I found out that she too is extremely grateful to the Kino/Adams family for all they've

done for her and her family. She's a wonderful lady, a chef, with a remarkable talent, Miss Jewell Brooks, will you please come on up?"

Jordan gasped. She turned to see her mother rise, with a smile, wink at Jordan, and head up to the stage. An Ameritech agent stood near the stairs and ushered her up onto the stage. Jeremiah shook her hand as she came up and then he went to sit on a chair set way off to the side.

Jewell went to the microphone, looked down at the family and smiled. "The Kino/Adams family had no idea I was speaking today. Neither did my own family. I'm gonna talk fast because there are a lot of people lined up here in these chairs to speak. The family does not like praises heaped upon them, I've learned that firsthand, but I hope they will understand where this is coming from. We, Jeremiah and I, also listen to God, and we felt prompted to share our experiences with the world. Maybe it will give the world ideas on how they too can serve the Lord." She paused and smiled.

"Okay, so, instead of me continuing to say the Kino/Adams family, I will just call them the family. My family first came into contact with *the* family the day my daughter had a flat tire on the highway. Young Eric stopped to help. He was following God's nudge. They ended up having to call a tow truck and he felt an urge to invite my daughter, Jordan Brooks, to their home instead of leaving her on the side of the highway. He had to convince her first that he wasn't a serial killer."

She waited for the laughter to end. "Things happened very quickly from there. The two started to date. Young Eric came to meet me and Jordan's brother and sister. He saw firsthand that obviously we struggled financially, that my children needed a father, that there were serious issues with my ex getting out of jail and wanting to hurt Jordan. Young Eric and his family swung into action. My children were brought into the Kino Martial Arts world where my kids were given scholarships to a local studio. The Master of that Studio, Master Cook and his wife have been wonderful for my kids. Mr. Joey Adams assigned Ameritech Agents to protect Jordan at first, and then to protect the whole rest of our family. Mr. Mark Adams, who is an attorney, arranged all legal problems, getting restraining orders, working with the police on the case.

"Then Ricky Kino discovered that I can cook, and sparked me to follow my dreams and invested in me opening a restaurant, which is happening in a few weeks. You see, he didn't just throw some money at me to pay off some bills. He was making it so I could, well, 'learn to fish,' if you know what I mean. In the middle of all of this, Breanna Adams befriended me as if I were an important person. Now, she is like a sister to me and I love her dearly.

"Grandmaster Kino has taken it upon himself to counsel my family because of the trauma we've been through. He also is teaching Jordan self-defense personally. The rest of the family have stepped in and they treat us like family. Bella and Breez Adams. Mickey Davis. Oh, and don't forget the Davis boys who have befriended my children. All of the Kino family and the friends that they consider family, like the Davises and Keiths, all of them are following in the Kinos' footsteps. And the children of these people, they are simply amazing. Several people have said if the Kino family could bottle how they raise their children, it would sell out in one hour.

"So, in closing, I just wanted to thank the family for what they do without expecting

anything in return. Please don't ever stop. You are changing lives daily. Of course, most of you know that my daughter is now engaged to young Eric, and so, I now am part of *the* family. I promise to try to represent. I will try to emulate what you all are doing, grow closer to God, listen to Him and follow His promptings. I love you, family, so much. I'm so grateful that God sent you to be in my life. May God bless and protect each and every one of you, is my prayer, in Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," the entire audience said.

Jewell left the stage and went to sit down. Mickey Davis put her arm around her. "You were awesome, Jewell."

Jewell smiled at her. "I think I'm gonna throw up."

Mickey giggled.

They all watched as the first person sitting in the chairs came to the microphone.

"My name is Janette Gibson. I'm a single mother of two girls. One day my teen daughter was in a grocery store and some kids that usually bullied her at school were in the store and were giving her a hard time. Who should walk up but Mrs. Shelley Kino. She immediately stopped the girls from pushing her around. One of the girls actually tried to hit Mrs. Kino."

"I bet that was a mistake," someone said loudly, making the whole place laugh.

Janette nodded. "Mrs. Kino blocked her. She took control of the whole situation. Police had already been called and they actually arrested the three girls. But Mrs. Kino didn't let the incident end there because she was wise enough to understand that the situation would only get worse for my daughter. She went to court and had the girls serve time at a Kino studio learning martial arts with my daughter. Those Kino studios, the Masters of each studio, they are amazing with kids. Within six months, my daughter and the three girls that bullied her are not only friends, but they are running a campaign at school to stop the bullying. I just want to say thank you to Shelley Adams Kino, to Kino Martial Arts, to the man who started it all whom we almost lost this year and to his family. You people are like angels on this earth and I'm so grateful to you."

She stepped back and smiled and left the stage amongst applause, while the next person came to the microphone.

"Hello, my name is John Pollard, I'm sixteen years old and I met JoJo Adams at a football camp where some of the SC players came to motivate us. He took the time to speak to me and encourage me, I know you think that is no big deal, that's just what these guys do when they attend a camp. But as he spoke to me he asked me about my family. He didn't have to. He just seemed genuinely interested. So, I told him I lived with my mom and little brother who is handicapped. I told him how much I wanted to use football to do something good for my mother so we could get the van we needed for my handicapped brother and so I could eventually make her life easier.

"Well, JoJo took over. First, he took up donations and got the van for my mom. Second, he asked his father to look into helping my mother get a better job, better pay, better hours. The next thing we know, all the medical bills are taken care of, my mom is working at a local attorney's office and I'm being offered two weeks of quarterback training with the man himself. JoJo spent two hours a day with me for two weeks. He didn't have to do that, but he went the extra mile. But the most amazing thing he did for

me was he prayed over me and my mother and brother and when he did I just had like, I just knew, that things were gonna change."

John smiled and pointed at someone in the audience. "We now have a father, a man in our home who loves my mother and is taking care of our family. Having a father in the home, well, it means the world to me and to my brother, and well, of course to my mother. Our whole lives turned around just because JoJo took the time to ask questions. He totally rocks. I know whatever he ends up doing, he's gonna touch a lot of lives and I'm grateful to him and to God, whom I'm just getting to know. So, like, that's it. That's all I got. Thanks for letting me say this, Mr. Cobb." He turned and left the stage.

Raylynn smiled up at JoJo, then reached over and took his hand. The gesture surprised him. He held her hand and squeezed it, his heart taking a little tumble.

One by one, the people in the chairs each came up, had their say and sat down out in the audience. At one point, in between two speakers, the monitor showed a video recording.

A pretty, young girl in a wheelchair appeared on screen. "Hi, I'm Sara Peterson. I'm fifteen years old. I'm in a wheelchair because I have a brain tumor and my legs stopped communicating with my brain. My father met Taylor Kino at a high school football game. She signed a program for me and said that she and Gabe Tanner would pray for me. She also took my father's number and said she would have her Aunt, Dr. Kino Wallace, get in touch with us. My father didn't really think that would happen. But it did. Dr. Kino is amazing. She's a true healer. She has it to where my tumor is actually shrinking. She thinks I will one day walk again. I can't thank her enough, and Taylor and Gabe too, for their prayers. And Taylor, she didn't forget to give my father's number to her Aunt and Dr. Kino took the time to call. They are amazing and I'm so grateful. At one time I thought I was gonna die soon, and now I might actually eventually live a normal life. Thank you, God, for the Kino family and please bless them to continue to do your work. Love you, Taylor. Love you, Dr. Kino Wallace." She blew a kiss and the screen went off.

Bree reached down and squeezed her daughter's hand. Taylor smiled up at her. "I am so glad I didn't forget to give that card to Aunt Jeffy."

Bree smiled. "Me too," she whispered. "Good job, sweetie."

Person after person came up and spent a minute or two to tell their stories about how someone in the family changed their lives.

One of the highlights was when two young men came to the lectern together. No one in the family knew who they were except for Mark Adams.

They smiled at the audience. "Hey, my name is Jamal White," one said. The other leaned toward the microphone. "And I'm Jordan Kingston. And we first met Eric Kino the third by voice only. We were in jail cells next to him. We couldn't see him, but we could hear him. He was singing." Jamal leaned forward. "He was singing pretty good too."

Young Eric shook his head. Jordan looked up at him and smiled.

"Yeah, he was," Jordan Kingston agreed. "We never saw his face, but he asked our names as he was leaving and he actually remembered us. He helped us. We messed up and got into some trouble. Jamal here was just because of drinking." Jamal leaned

forward again. “It was my twenty-first birthday and I got wasted and someone had me arrested for public drunkenness. I didn’t have anyone to get me out of jail and I’d been there three days. It sucked. Oh, sorry.”

Everyone laughed.

“Yeah, and I was caught driving what I thought was my friend’s car. I borrowed it so I could go see a girl.” Jamal leaned forward. “That right there will mess you up every time.”

Jordan waited for the laughter to end. “Yeah, but the car, it was stolen and it had a gun in the glove compartment that I had no idea was there, and I had no family and no money and I was good and stuck. But Eric, he gave our names to his Uncle Mark Adams and Mr. Adams went to court for each of us. He got us out. He did it like he really cares about people. Most people don’t know that he does a whole lotta free, I mean, pro bono work. Sometimes he works on it in the middle of the night. He helped us so much and so did Mr. Lee, uh, Mr. Justin Lee. They got us straightened out and we, me and Jamal, we promised we’d keep it right from now on. The thing is, we wanted to do something nice for them, and so, Mr. Cobb let us come here today and give this little speech. And he also has us coming to help with the kids’ program at the GTCC. So, Eric, and Mr. Adams and Mr. Lee, we can’t thank you enough.” Jamal leaned forward. “Thank you. I mean, really. And my mom also says ‘thank you.’”

There was great applause as they left and an older man took his turn. “My name is Nick Sutter. Mr. Eric, the young one, used to feed me when I was homeless. He was bound and determined to get me off the streets. I wouldn’t listen to him too much, but then one day he brought his father along with him. That Ricky Kino, he’s like, hard to turn down. He somehow knew I was also selling, and he called on the Ameritech people to help me get out of that. I got arrested and Mr. Adams helped with that, and Ms. Angel, who is Mr. Lee’s wife, she got me into a home and I’m doing really well. I have a regular job. And Mr. Kino, I mean, Grandmaster Kino, he’s counseled me a whole lot and his wife is so kind to me. I love their family and I’m grateful to God for them all.”

Jordan looked up at young Eric and squeezed his hand. He had tears in his eyes.

The next person to come up was a beautiful woman. “Hello, everyone, I’m Isla August. It’s so awesome to be able to address you personally like this. I was simply a mediocre social media influencer until this past March. I was asked to cover that first Mini-MART. Well, as you all know, Gabe Tanner stole the show. But that’s not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about Breanna Adams Kino. What an amazing woman she is. Besides the fact that she is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, she is the epitome of grace. She told me that she chose me to cover the Mini-MART because she felt like I was honest, which I try very hard to be. I don’t like dishonesty in any way.

“Bree has changed my life forever. She has called on me many times over this year, she has given me exclusives, she has allowed me to participate in prayer circles and those have changed my life. I know that the Kinos will tell you, that none of this is about them, but about God. And they are right. Because the main and most important thing the Kinos have brought to my life is Jesus. I’m so glad that they selected me. I’m so glad that I have been privy to some of their most painful moments and beautiful moments. So, thank you, Kinos. I truly love you. And because of you, and of course, because of Gabe Tanner, I

now know God." She smiled her brightest. "This is Isla August, signing off for now. Bye!"

Isla left the stage and another video came on the screen. It was another girl in a wheelchair. "Hello, my name is Mandy Tull. I have a disease called Paget's disease. This past year on my twelfth birthday, Miss Taylor Kino took the time to speak to me when I was at dinner in a restaurant in Nashville with my parents. She was so sweet and she had Gabe Tanner with her and they made me feel so happy and so special. Thank you, Taylor, for taking the time to meet me. I'll never forget that night as long as I live."

Several more people came to the mic to speak and then there was a big surprise when Desi and Alec Morgan came up together.

"Hello, everyone, I'm Alec Morgan and this is my wife, Desi. The Kinos found us when we were homeless. We'd totally messed up our lives. We'd gotten pregnant, I lost my job, I lost my scholarship to Stanford and I lost my apprenticeship with a prestigious law firm and we were homeless and we were hopeless. Well, when God closes a door, he opens a beautiful window. The family worked miracles. They got us off the streets. They fed us, cleaned us up, gave me a job, got my scholarship reinstated, got me an even better apprenticeship at the most prestigious law firm in the state. And then they went above and beyond to make our dreams come true, which was, they facilitated a reconciliation with our parents, and gave us the wedding of our dreams and so much more."

Desi leaned forward. "We are now living in a very nice home and Alec is supporting us. We are so excited to be housing a few guests right now, who were also homeless, giving us a chance to pay it forward. And that's the main point we're here to make. The Kinos and Adams families have made such a difference in so many people's lives, touching thousands, maybe even millions of people. How cool would it be for those people to pay it forward and do something wonderful for someone else. That is Alec's and my goal. To pay it forward. Thank you, Kinos and Adams, thank you so much for all that you've done. We love you."

Finally after several more testimonies, the chairs were empty. And then an elderly gentleman came up. "Hello, everyone," he said warmly. "My name is Ronald Clark. Well, they call me Reverend Ronald Clark. I am ninety-two years old. Let me tell you what *the* family has done over in my neck of the woods. I have a little church called the *Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ*. It was old, run down, falling apart. Membership had dwindled to almost nothing. I was gonna have to sell. I felt God was telling me to invite young people. So, one of the few members we have invited her friend Melody, and sweet Melody invited her boyfriend, Logan Adams. He came that first Sunday and apparently got totally inspired.

"He went home and engaged his family and they all felt moved by God to come to church and make a difference and oh, what a difference they have made. They have renovated the church, renovated my home, bought the properties on either side of the church. One property was an old abandoned motel and it will be turned into a teen ministry center annex of the church. On the other side is an apartment complex. The slumlord that owned it has just signed a contract to sell the property to the Kinos.

"The Kinos' intention is to renovate each unit and improve the lives of the forty-five

families who live there. But that's not all. As you know the theme here tonight is that they don't just put a Band-Aid on things. They 'teach a man to fish' and so they have counseled with all forty-five families on life plans, how to get ahead financially. They have created real plans for those people. They have covered all costs of the plans. They have invited and involved those families in the renovation of the church and that has brought them out to find God. They've joined the band and the choir and are simply attending church. It is phenomenal.

"They have arranged to have free martial arts classes for every single person who lives on our entire street. They have provided a bus for transportation to and from the *Huntington Beach Kino Martial Arts*. They have spent hours counseling almost all of the residents now, for mental and emotional issues including substance abuse. They have even broken up a crime ring who was robbing all the elderly in our congregation and even the church itself.

"There are things that go unheralded, like Mrs. Breez Adams, who is an exquisite artist and designed the new stained-glass window, which is beautiful, and she was adamant that it be in before Christmas and 'by God' it was. Mrs. Bella Adams, and Mrs. Mickey Davis, Mrs. Jewell Brooks, Mrs. Carol Keith and Mrs. Breanna Kino scrubbed, cleaned, painted, dusted, polished and decorated every inch of that church. Every room, every nook and cranny. Mrs. Brooks also redesigned the kitchen and community room. Young Eric and Logan worked mostly in the chapel. They bought a piano, which we'd had to sell, and an organ which we'd had to sell. Joey and Mark Adams and Grandmaster Kino and Ricky Kino, they upgraded the church electrical and security systems. They put in big monitors like these," he said pointing off to his side, "to bring us into the modern world and allow us to livestream to a much larger audience. The brothers, JoJo Adams and Logan Adams have been stand-in ministers. Completely capable ministers, I might add. I think they know the Bible better than some Bible scholars. Logan is a musical phenom and his music awareness has brought so much light and spirit into our congregation. JoJo is wise beyond his years and the congregation loves to hear him speak.

"And then, on a more personal level, when I told 'the family' that I was all alone in the world and that I was unable to locate my long-lost family, my daughter and my sister's children, Ameritech went to work and found my family and brought them here to see me, some to meet me for the first time. They are here with us tonight. Grandmaster Kino has healed a hole in my heart and I'm so grateful that God brought them into my life. I could go on and on. They are living the way God would have us live when He rules on the New Earth. They are filled with love and wisdom. They have been blessed with extensive resources, but they don't use those resources to indulge the flesh. They use them to further the kingdom. I and obviously so many others are immensely grateful for *the* family. The Kino and Adams family. Thank you, Jesus. Can I get an 'amen'?"

"Amen," the audience said loudly.

"Thank you, Mr. Cobb, for allowing me to speak a tiny bit longer than I was supposed to." He left the stage to great applause.

Jeremiah Cobb came back to the podium. "Well, these few people are just a small sample of the people that the family has helped this year. And that is only this year. If we

had people from previous years, this would go on all night, all week really. The scope of all the things the family has accomplished, all the people they've helped, is almost too much to count. This little sampling of people represents so many more. Just think of how every single one of the four hundred Kino Martial Arts studios is helping and teaching others. Think of how Grandmaster Kino helped Mr. Lee at Ameritech and Ameritech Security is emulating the Kino creed and coming up with the same amazing results. These people are real heroes." He stopped and nodded and smiled as the crowd applauded a long time.

"Okay, we have one more video to watch and then one more person to hear from." He turned and looked at the monitor as it flashed.

"Hey, everyone, I'm Gabe Tanner."

Taylor drew a sharp breath and sat up straighter. Seeing his handsome face so big on the screen made her long for him. He smiled, his dimple making Taylor's heart flutter.

"So, first, let me just say that Taylor didn't know I was making a video to be a part of this wonderful night to honor the Kinos and Adams, and so she's probably getting all emotional right now. At least I think she is, cuz, I really miss her too. So, hey, Taylor. I miss you and I love you."

The audience chuckled.

Ricky and Bree nodded in approval. He chose to first acknowledge the girl whom he says he will one day marry. He didn't have to do that, but he realized the importance of doing that. More brownie points for Gabe. He was very good at earning brownie points.

Logan, JoJo and young Eric were thinking the very same thing.

"Okay, so, I just have to say how grateful I am to be a part of the Kino/Adams family. They have honored me this year so much and I want to honor them. As you know, it was them seeing something in me and asking me to fight in the first Mini-MART that literally 'shot' me to the top of the social media world. Get it? Shot? Ya know because I've been shot nine times this year." He chuckled. "Yeah, anyway, life got harder too. I wasn't sure that I wanted all that fame. But Joey Adams came to me when I was in the hospital after I'd been kidnapped, and told me that God's light was shining on me. I told him I just wanted to be a normal kid, and he told me that God had given me something. Was I gonna bury it? Was I gonna hide my light under a bushel just because I wanted to simply be a normal kid or was I gonna do something with what God has given me?

"Well, you know how it goes. You'd better do something with what God gives you, so I'm trying to do that. But it was Ricky Kino who was in Pine Forest and saw an old empty elementary school and got prompted by God to buy it. He did. He then gave it to me and told me to do something with it. And you all know that's how the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*, the GTCC, came to be. And now they're popping up all over the country. This isn't because of me. This is because the Kinos, who have vast resources, started the ball rolling and made it happen. So, I have them to thank. They often quote the scripture Luke 12:48, 'to whom much is given, much will be demanded.' Uh, that is not an exact quote, but it's close enough. Anyway, they feel like they've been given so much and they work tirelessly all day, and night too sometimes, to do the work of God

in return.

"Oh how I love them. Oh how my family loves them. They have made this world better. And really, they, the family, was created by Grandmaster Kino. I honor him. I love him. We are kindred spirits. We were even born on the same day. That is so cool. Anyway, I won't take up any more of your time. Just know, my west coast family, that our family here on the east coast is grateful for you and we honor you." Gabe took a few steps back from the camera so they could see his whole body and his family was all there with him. They all bowed.

The Kinos and Adams family all teared up.

Mr. Cobb approached the mic. "Okay, so, we have one more testimonial. She's not last because she's more important or less important than the other speakers. She's last because this is the last thing the Kinos/Adams have been working on before today. I'll let her explain. Come on up."

Raylynn drew a sharp breath as she looked up at the monitor and recognized her sister. Kaylee approached the lectern, leaned toward the microphone and smiled.

"Hello! My name is Kaylee Quinn. Some of you may remember two weeks ago there was a girl at USC, whose boyfriend was beating her up and JoJo Adams intervened and saved her life. Well, that was me." She looked down at her sister's face and had to giggle. "My sister always says I can't keep a secret, but I guess she's wrong. I kept it. Even when JoJo stopped by our house earlier today, and I talked to him. I didn't let on. I thanked him again and told him he was a hero. He denied it. I told him he didn't have to stop that morning to help me. He said he'd had no choice. I told him he did have a choice, he could have chosen to walk right on by, and he said, 'No– I couldn't.'" She paused to give that time to settle.

"That shows you how these people think. They do what they believe they have to do and they don't think twice about it. They really are heroes. So, anyway, I was worried about the guy getting out of jail and coming after me for like, revenge, because he was probably embarrassed that a one-armed man kicked his butt. JoJo put us in touch with Mrs. Angel Lee and she was so kind and within one day she found my sister and me a place to stay so that if he came back looking for me, I wouldn't be at my old place. And it was a good thing because, he did come, I mean, well, my ex-boyfriend didn't come, but he sent someone to threaten me. I was already gone but he tried to hurt Jordan and Melody.

"You see, JoJo and Logan and young Eric and Jordan and Melody and a couple of SC football players came to help us move. So there was that. Isn't that crazy? We were strangers to them. They didn't have to do that, but they went the extra mile. Also, Dr. Kino came to see me. Like, out of the blue. She wanted to assess my health. She didn't have to, but she went the extra mile. And like, so, I was messed up, emotionally, you know, because I got beat up so bad by the guy who was supposed to be my boyfriend. I was having a hard time dealing with it. I was thinking maybe I deserved what I got. Dr. Kino picked up on that and she asked me to come see her father. So, she invited Ray and me over to their home for dinner and to speak with Grandmaster Kino who wanted to counsel me. I went to his house, bound and determined that I wasn't gonna listen to anything he had to say."

Eric smiled at that and Shelley squeezed his hand.

"He was hard to ignore. He has such a power that emanates from him. I found myself clinging to every word he said. He reminded me of someone, my own father, whom I'd quarreled with before I'd left for school. Something about being around the Kinos, it made me start to search my own heart. They make me want to be a better person. While I was at their home, I started thinking about how I wish I could go home to Oklahoma and make up with my father. Dr. Kino was standing next to me and said, 'Then go.' I gotta admit, she freaked me out a little bit. I mean, it was only a thought. I didn't say anything."

The audience laughed. Cam took Jeffy's hand and kissed it.

"My sister and I left the very next morning. Christmas Eve. The Kinos made it happen. They arranged transportation. They paid for Ameritech agents to meet us at the airport and get us home. Then they stayed close by in case we needed them for any reason. Grandmaster Kino gave us his freakin' credit card. Oh, sorry. I mean, he gave us his credit card, I mean, who does that? Not only that but he knew we'd be reluctant to use it so he got the agents to go with us to buy stuff. They really did all the buying and Ray and I just tagged along.

"They threw a big Christmas Eve party for my parents and all of the neighbors. They bought food and gifts for my parents. And they did something else that we didn't even know about. Let me first tell you that my sister and I are American Indians from the Quapaw tribe. We live in a tiny, very poor town in northern Oklahoma.

"Okay, so, I just got a call from my parents right before I came here tonight. So, apparently, Grandmaster Kino had the agents that took care of Ray and me when we were in Oklahoma, he had them talk to the mayor of our little tiny town and find out who was hurting in some way, what was needed by the people of the town, how could he help the people to thrive and now— well, now they are currently involved in big projects taking place in my little home town. And..."

She stopped a moment for emphasis. "And I also just found out that Dr. Kino wanted to look into the reason my father couldn't use his legs because it didn't sound right to her. So, my parents are going to be flown in here so she can tend to my father and make her own diagnosis."

Raylynn gasped audibly. Everyone turned to look at her. She looked up at JoJo. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

He smiled and took her hand. "It's okay. What a surprise, huh?"

She nodded and wiped at the tears that welled in her eyes.

Kaylee smiled. "I'm just so blown away by this all. I mean, that Grandmaster Kino would even think so far ahead, to think of the people of the little town I grew up in, to think that they may be in need of help, I mean, the generosity he shows, he just blows me away, him and his whole great big family. So, thank you, Mr. Lee and Mr. Cobb for giving me this chance to thank them publicly. They came into my life and made everything good. So, like, thanks for listening." She looked up. "And thank You, God."

"Amen," several people muttered.

Mr. Cobb came to the microphone with a smile. "We've heard from a lot of people this evening. It's been wonderful and inspiring to hear all of these stories. The scope of

what one family has done in service to others is motivating and yeah, it feels good to be able to thank them publicly in this way. But what it really makes us want... is to hear them. And since Mr. Justin Lee was one of Grandmaster Kino's first students and I understand has been his best friend for all that time, I have asked him to come up and make that happen. Please welcome, the brother of Chief Director Jason Lee of Ameritech, the founder of the Lee and Adams National Law firm, Mr. Justin Lee." He stepped back and applauded.

Justin rose and went up the steps. He shook hands with Mr. Cobb and went to the mic.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's been a wonderful evening listening to these marvelous stories, giving credit and thanks to the people I love most in this world. I too, always love to hear from the Kinos. Now, there are thirty-six members of the family sitting here this evening and we might not have time to hear from them all, but I would love to hear several of them. I'll leave it to them to choose which family members might give a word or two. Now, watch this. This will be a fun lesson. Jason, can we aim the cameras down at the family?" He looked at the monitors and nodded. "Okay, Kino/Adams family. We'd like to hear from maybe about ten of you in whatever order you choose. Whenever you've made your decision, come sit in these chairs so everyone can get a look at your faces."

The audience murmured as there was no movement from the family except for a few nodding heads. Resigned to their fate, the family rose and came up on stage. Justin met them and shook hands with each of them as they filed up. Taylor, Bree and Ricky. Young Eric, JoJo and Logan. Mark and Joey and last but not least, Shelley and Eric, the matriarch and patriarch.

Justin went back to the microphone as the family sat in the chairs on stage. "Quick and easy. There you have it. There is an order of things. Combine that order with the duty they feel they must fulfill, and the respect they show to one another and with the no-nonsense attitude of a martial artist, we get the treat of hearing from these special people. And don't get me wrong. They are ALL special and we wish we had time to hear from every single one of them. I have no idea what order they will speak in, therefore, I will leave it in their capable hands." He turned and bowed to the family.

The family on stage surprised everyone by rising quickly and bowing to Justin. Justin left the stage and went to sit with his wife.

Taylor rose and went to the microphone her beautiful smile in place, her eyes shining, her beauty breathtaking.

In the audience, Melody and Jordan scooted over close to Raylynn.

"Isn't this amazing?" Melody whispered.

Raylynn nodded. "I'm so grateful to be witness to this event."

They looked up at Taylor. She wore a light blue, very feminine dress that had ruffles and came to just above her knees. The sleeves fluttered as she moved to adjust the microphone. She looked out and smiled boldly.

"Hi, everyone, it's me, Taylor Kino. I'm seventeen years old. My dad is Ricky Kino. My mom is Breanna Adams Kino. My brother is Eric Kino the third. My boyfriend is Gabe Tanner. I used to think that was all there was to me. Someone's daughter.

Someone's sister. Someone's girlfriend. But I've grown so much this year and I learned something amazing. God sees *me.* As I came up here on the stage, I asked God to please tell me what to say. Please let me know how I can best serve Him in this moment that He has provided. And I felt the words rush into my brain and into my heart. He said, 'You, Taylor, are a daughter of the most high God and I see you. Tell them, that I see them all.'"

She paused and smiled. "God sees you. He sees us. He loves us and He wants to have a relationship with all of us. He wants you to know that. I don't have a lot of wisdom yet. I'm pretty young but I went first because I'm not shy and I'm kinda known as an ice breaker. I know my family really doesn't like to be in the limelight. They don't want or need thanks for any service they might perform. They simply crave serving God. They will lay down their lives to do that. And I am with them. I love Him so much. And I love my family and I love Gabe. My heart is totally filled with love for you all and that is what God does for me. He fills my heart with love. Quick shoutout to Sara Peterson and Mandy Tull, I love you both so much and I will continue to pray for you both. So, thank you all so much for recognizing our family tonight. It makes me happy to know that my family is touching so many lives and helping so many people. May God bless you all with His presence in your life, in Jesus' name I pray as always, amen."

Taylor turned and walked back to the seat that was on stage as the audience clapped and cheered and called her name. Her mother met her halfway and kissed her cheek. Bree walked gracefully to the microphone and almost brought the house down with her smile.

Ricky glanced up at the monitor to see her face and smiled. He was so grateful for his wife, his companion, his partner in life. She was a strong, beautiful, ultra-feminine woman.

"Hello, I'm Breanna Adams Kino." She had to stop and wait for the applause to end. "This evening was a very big surprise. Everyone who's said that our family doesn't like to receive accolades for what we do, they are correct. But I do understand when someone's heart is so full they just want desperately to express their gratitude, because that's how I feel every day when I wake up next to my husband. Lately, that's how I feel because I'm carrying another one of God's children right now."

There was a gasp in the audience and she smiled.

"I can't even tell you how grateful I am. But it feels good to say it out loud and publicly and so, yeah, I get it. I promise to continue to do my best to serve the Lord in anything He sets in front of me. At this time, it's the opportunity to speak to all of you. Taylor hit it right on. God loves us and He wants us to love one another, and to serve Him by serving each other and to do our best to live honest, worthy and holy lives. He knows we make mistakes. That's where His gift of grace comes in. I promise publicly to try my best to set a good example and to live in service to Him by serving my family, serving my husband and serving all of you. May I be strong in that endeavor, in Jesus' mighty name I pray, amen."

"Amen," they all repeated and once again applauded for her.

She went to sit and her mother kissed her cheek and went to the microphone. Shelley wore a chic white, knit dress with bold coral-colored flowers on it. She smiled at the audience. "Hi, I'm Shelley Adams Kino. I have the extreme blessing of being chosen by

and married to Eric Kino. I am grateful for the extreme blessing of being the matriarch of this amazing family and the mother of five new little Kinos. The burden is sometimes heavy in this position and sometimes I do not rise to the occasion. I may or may not be a bit of a rebel."

The family all laughed at her words, causing the audience to also laugh.

"But I do try. I didn't know God until I met Eric. He didn't force his beliefs on me. He set an example of righteousness and humility and faithfulness and his light radiated out to me and I simply could not deny the miracles God showed me. This pouring out of love and gratitude for my family from all of you, it is such a beautiful thing and I get it, because I feel the way you do. These people, these people I'm honored to be able to call my family, I'm in awe of them. I love them with every fiber of my being. So much. So, so, much. So, I too, will add my thanks to yours for these amazing people. They stir me. They motivate me. They inspire me. They humble me. They protect me. They take care of me. I am so grateful and so blessed. Thank you, Jesus, for allowing me this amazing family. Thank you," she whispered as her voice clogged with emotion.

Shelley turned and faced her family on stage and bowed to them.

They all immediately rose and bowed to her. The audience all applauded for her. As she walked back to her chair, Eric stepped in front of her, put his arms around her and hugged her. She laid her head on his chest for a few moments, they parted, he took her hand and led her back to her chair and sat down next to her.

One could almost hear the entire audience sigh with the pleasure of witnessing such love and devotion.

Logan rose and went to the lectern. "Hello, everyone," he said with his beautiful voice. "I'm Logan Adams. Like Taylor, I too asked God what to say as I came up here. And like Taylor, the words rushed into my brain. God said, 'I've given you a gift. Use it.'" He stopped and smiled and adjusted the mic. "And so, this is a song I've recently written and I will sing a tiny bit of it for you."

He cleared his throat and leaned close to the mic and sang a cappella. The song was about doing everything in life from the little things to the big things solely in the powerful name of Jesus. The place was completely quiet as Logan's sweet voice floated over them. When he finished, he raised his eyes heavenward and whispered, "thank you."

The place burst out in applause and cheers. It turned into a standing ovation. When it finally quieted, Logan smiled. "All those things I mentioned in the song, I pray all of those things for all of you. I pray the spirit of the Lord will fill you, indwell in you and give you peace, in Jesus' name, amen."

He headed back to his seat and young Eric rose. The audience erupted again in cheers and applause. Young Eric laughed. He pulled the mic up a bit. "I haven't even said anything yet," he quipped, but they didn't stop.

He bowed his head and waited. He realized they were probably cheering for the role he played in the movie that was currently setting all kinds of records, and maybe for his win at the Kino Challenge, or maybe simply because he made it back from his abduction relatively unharmed. Maybe because he'd brought Josie home. "Thank you," he said humbly and touched his heart. "Thank you, so much."

In the audience Melody and Raylynn each grabbed and squeezed Jordan's hands

because she'd burst into tears.

Logan and JoJo grinned at each other. Ricky glanced at his father.

Finally, the applause came to an end.

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Ephesians 4:1-3

"I therefore...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Well," young Eric began. "I did not expect that. Thank you so much for your kindness. I'm deeply touched. Thank you. Well, you made my thoughts scatter. Let me see if I can gather them." He drew a deep breath. "I had several things to say, but first, not to be outdone by Gabe Tanner, I want to publicly tell my fiancée, Jordan, that I love her and that she is my personal river of life." He smiled. "Now, don't get me wrong, there will be some people who would want to read something into that, I have no secret inner dislike of Gabe. I love him too. It's a joke. He's my brother.

"Okay, now that I've let you know that Jordan has my heart, I wanted to say how grateful I am to be a member of this family, this Kino/Adams family. I love watching my parents and see how they handle things together as a team. I love seeing how my mother supports my father and vice versa. I love the way they love each other first and foremost, second only to God. I love seeing the same thing in my grandparents' relationship, in my uncles' and aunts' relationships. When you have a father and mother in a home, united and filled with love, it makes the whole world seem better and gives a guy a base to be able to go out into that world and serve God. That's what my family does for me, so, really, I can't take any credit for things I accomplish. And that's okay, because I don't need or want any credit. I truly want one day for God to say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.' I also truly want my parents to say, 'Well done, my good son.'" He stopped because he became emotional.

He cleared his throat. "I just mentioned to you that Gabe is like a brother. He and my two cousins, Logan and JoJo we are brothers. There is actually a fifth brother, Jake Appel, who is currently serving in the military. I'm thinking my two cousins and I are like the three musketeers, and Gabe, he's like D'artagnan. The star. And Jake, I guess he's like Richard the Lion-hearted, though that's a different time frame in history.

"The five of us together, we intend to wage war against the evil in the world, each in our own way. To do that we have to be strong, physically, mentally, and most

importantly, spiritually. That is our goal and our aim. That, and to marry and create families that will stay strong in the faith and no soul lost. I pray we will be able to succeed. My love for my family, and really for you all is immense and cannot be contained. May God bless each and every one of you, and remember, when He places people in your path, there might be a task He is asking you to complete. Do it with your whole heart. I pray God's protection for each of you, in Jesus' mighty name, amen."

There was another standing ovation as young Eric went to his seat. He bumped fists with JoJo as he rose and headed to the lectern. JoJo stood at the lectern and smiled as he waited. Finally he touched his heart and bowed slightly.

"Thank you. So, for those who don't know, I'm JoJo Adams. Most people know me as the USC quarterback though..."

He had to stop again as everyone stood and cheered and chanted USC. He nodded and laughed. "Yep, Go Trojans." He waited and they finally quieted. "Though I am no longer their quarterback," he continued. "My level six shoulder separation has a long way to go to heal. I'm just starting on rehab and though I'm not wearing a sling tonight, I still can't use my right arm very much. Still, I appreciate the sentiment. This evening came as a complete surprise and it's true, my family is very uncomfortable receiving accolades for the things they do in service to God. In truth, I haven't been a big part of that. Football has pretty much occupied my time from pee wee, to middle school, to high school and college. Football occupies a whole lot of time."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. In order to be good at something, you have to dedicate yourself to that thing. I've been dedicated. But I have to say, mostly, I'm dedicated to God and so, if God has other plans for me, then I will not complain. I will lift my head and 'tackle' whatever he puts in front of me." He smiled when he put the word 'tackle' in quotes.

"That'll be the first thing he's ever tackled," young Eric quipped from behind him, making everyone laugh.

JoJo shrugged. "Hey, I tackled that one guy last year when I threw that interception."

Young Eric nodded. "I stand corrected."

JoJo went on. "Really all of the accolades being given to my family tonight, I stand with you. I too see their hard work. Many times I got up in the middle of the night for a snack and my father would be in his office taking care of someone or something. Then my mother would come down and see if he, or I, needed anything. That wasn't just our household. My father would be on the phone to my Uncle Joey, or to Uncle Ricky or to Granddad, and almost always to Uncle Jason or Uncle Justin, that is Jason and Justin Lee. They all set the standard very high, and I will try hard to emulate them. If that becomes your goal, and I hope it does, my only advice is to find God every single day. Talk to Him; ask Him to lead you and guide you. Because they've told me many times that THAT is why and how they do what they do."

Raylynn felt like her heart was beating out of her chest. This hunky, hot, handsome guy who spoke so eloquently was interested in her. She looked him over trying to be objective. He was tall and his shoulders were broad. Though he was dressed as a gentleman tonight, she knew his body was rock hard. He had brown hair and big brown

eyes. His lips were perfect. Especially when he smiled. The way he carried himself, shoulders back, head high, it was like a general in the Roman Empire. His voice was actually kind of soft when he spoke, though she'd heard him gruffly yell out plays. He was amazing. She forced her mind to stop wandering and made herself listen.

"I don't know exactly what the Lord has for me to do now, but I will listen to Him and follow His urging. I will rehab and become operational again and see what God has in store for me. I know this... I will serve Him. Thank you so much for this amazing night and this amazing gesture of love and gratitude. May God bless every single one of you, in Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," the audience repeated.

JoJo turned and bowed to his family. They stood and returned the gesture. Joey Adams walked to the lectern.

"My name is Joey Adams. Joseph, if you wanna get technical. My wife is Breez Adams, the amazing artist that Reverend Clark mentioned earlier. I have three beautiful children. I'm so blessed and very grateful. First, I cannot believe I didn't get wind of this little event. Good job, Jason. I am second in command here at Ameritech. Since I was a little kid, I could see and understand the vision for this company and Jason could see that I could see. I am honored by him and grateful that he trusts me. He says I was preordained. I don't know, because I've always been a little reckless, a little wild, a little rebellious and I used to have quite a temper. I guess I should say that I take after my mom."

Everyone laughed.

Joey nodded with a smile and went on. "I need to say that Jason and his brother Justin should also be honored and thanked, because most everything we, the Kino/Adams family, accomplish utilizes Ameritech and the Lee and Adams Law firm in some manner. So, let me just say to the Lee brothers who do a very good job of being the men behind the curtain and deflecting praise to everyone else, let me just say that I see you, I acknowledge you and I love you both very much.

"To the rest of you, thank you all for this amazing outpouring of love. May God bless you and keep you and heal you and be with you always. In Jesus' powerful name I pray, amen."

"Amen," the audience repeated and then applauded.

Joey passed Mark who mussed his hair as he went by.

Mark smiled. "My little brother also does a good job at deflecting. He's second in command at Ameritech and that is not a fluke. It's because his mind is sharp and quick. His body is the same. If you've ever watched him in the Kino Challenges, his skills are almost unbeatable. He is lethal. He is also quite the orator, and the movies he's been in were well done. He only stopped doing them because he likes real danger instead of the fake, movie kind. Go figure.

"Anyway, hello, I'm Mark Adams. JoJo and Logan are my sons. The beautiful love of my life is Bella Adams. We have one daughter and one child on the way. Also, currently, we have a young man staying with us whom we already love like a son. We're very excited to see the heights to which he climbs. So, I guess there is really nothing left for me to say. Our whole family does not like praise and accolades. You've already been

told that. It did not deter you. We appreciate your need to thank someone, and we truly do hope that you will pay it forward like Desi and Alec suggested.

"While I'm up here, I too will add Justin and Jason Lee to the people who should be thanked. I am a partner at Lee and Adams. Justin took me under his wing and I'm honored to be the recipient of his knowledge. He is truly the best. He serves humbly. Usually anonymously. He is a loyal friend, an honest and ethical businessman, and I truly love him. I've called the Lee brothers Uncle Justin and Uncle Jason for most of my life. That's because they too are a part of 'the' family." He stopped, smiled and nodded. "THE family. My family knows how much I love, honor and respect them. My beautiful mother, Eric, my stepfather who has taught me so much about how a man should act and be, as well as my brothers Rick, Joey, Cam, Abe, Noah, Manny and Nate, my sisters, Bree, Jeffy and Angelina, in-laws, nephews and nieces, they fill me with so much love and I thank God every day for them being in my life, so I appreciate you all here, showing them this honor." He stopped and sighed. "Enough said. May God bless and keep you all, in Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," the audience responded and then applauded.

Ricky rose and hugged Mark as he came back to sit. Ricky went to the lectern and waited for the applause to end.

"Thank you," he said reverently. "Really. Thank you. You've all been so kind." He turned immediately toward his wife. "Bree, I love you, baby."

Bree gave a thumbs up and Ricky turned back as everyone laughed. "That's my girl," he said softly.

Every woman in the audience sighed.

"I'm Ricky Kino. I'm fifty-two years old. My real name is Eric Kino Junior. I'm telling you that to let you know that I have my father's name, and I'm proud of that. I love him and honor him and do my best to emulate him. I tell him I want to step up and fill his shoes. He tells me to get my own shoes." He smiled and shrugged. "I guess I'm a late bloomer. Just wanna add my thanks to what the rest of my family has spoken here tonight. This was a beautiful and kind gesture and if it helps others to draw closer to God, then I'm all for that."

He sighed. "So, everything that's been said here tonight makes it seem like our family is perfect. We are far from it. Especially me. I've made mistakes that I truly regret. But still, that gives me the ability to say even after grave mistakes, you can come back, repent, and start again. That is what Jesus is all about. His gift, His sacrifice. Thank God for His grace.

"Like Mark said, pretty much everything has been said. So let me just take a minute to express my love for my family. My father and my stepmother, they are the best. The five new little Kinos, they bring us so much joy and laughter. My wife, my son and daughter, I'm so grateful for them and proud of them. And we too have a few children staying with us whom we are foster parents to, and we already love them so much. My little brothers Mark and Joey. They were eight and six when I first met them and now they are full grown men with families of their own. That's sick. I love them and their wives and their children with my whole heart.

"Then there is my little sister Jeffy, whom you know as Dr. June Flower Kino

Wallace, and she is married to a fantastic guy, Cam Wallace, and they have a new son. She is a treasure to be guarded and Cam does that well. Jeffy didn't come up here. My father will explain why. Then the Lee brothers, Justin and his wife, Lori, our rock in times of trouble, and Jason and his amazing wife, Angel who's done so much with her *Angel Network Foundation*. Their daughter Kim, who is married to a very brave Ameritech agent, Jensen Deal and they have a new son. He has to be brave to marry Kim," Ricky jested and grinned at Jason. "The Davis family, Jeff and his wife Mickey and their sons, Daniel and Jeremy and new daughter, we love them so much. And Chris Coley and his wife Marissa and their new son.

"What we call the 'west coast family' is growing. We now include the Brooks, Jewell, Jordan, Josie and Jamie, the Keiths, David, Carol, Melody, Phillip and Lyle, and now, the Quinns, Raylynn, Kaylee and their parents. And we certainly can't leave out the Morgans and Copelands. And don't forget Reverend Clark and his newfound family.

"There are so many and we love them all so much. Someone once asked how we can spread the love around until it's so thin. When you spread love, it doesn't get thinner. It gets thicker. It gets stronger. It grows exponentially. Love is an amazing thing. So open your hearts and feel it. Forgive those who have crossed you. Love your neighbors and even your enemies. Love is beautiful and it changes lives. Just one caveat. Loving someone doesn't mean compromising with evil. Never compromise with evil. You can love someone who does evil, but you should never approve or condone it." He smiled and paused. "Well, it's been an amazing evening. Again, thank you all so much. May you go forth and do your part in changing YOUR little corner of the world, I pray in Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," they all said reverently.

Ricky smiled. "I bet you didn't know this would turn into a giant sermon!"

They all chuckled. Ricky gave a stern look. "Well, you should've known."

They laughed and applauded as he turned and bowed to his family. They stood and returned the honor.

Eric stepped forward and hugged his son, then moved to the lectern.

He waited for the reverent applause to end. He nodded and turned toward his wife. "Shelley, I love your rebelliousness and your fearlessness, and your strength and your wisdom. Thank you for allowing me to love you."

She blew him a kiss.

"You just had to outdo everyone, huh?" Ricky quipped.

Eric smiled and shrugged. "It is what it is. If that outdoes you, then I guess you'd better up your game."

Everyone laughed.

Ricky nodded. "And that, my friends, is why he's never lost a challenge."

Eric smiled. "Hello, everyone. My name is Eric Kino. I'm seventy years old. There is a member of our family that should've been up here, June Flower. She made the mistake earlier of opening herself up to all the emotions in this auditorium and it overwhelmed her. She was afraid she might pass out up here in front of everyone and elected to stay in her seat. I hope you understand. She is a remarkable young woman, and she is sometimes quite vulnerable." Eric smiled down at her. "We all love you so much,

baby girl."

Jeffy grabbed another tissue and wiped at her eyes.

"Well, it's been a long night. Though we don't like to be recognized publicly for serving God, as it's been mentioned several times tonight, we understand the need to give thanks and that doing so may inspire others to serve God. I'll go with that. I think some of this has come about because it's been a rough year for our family. I almost died. Well, I guess I did die. Gabe almost died several times. Young Eric almost died. Taylor was a victim of two attempted kidnappings, Jeff was shot, Cam was cut up, Josie and young Eric were abducted, Jordan was accosted by a man who wished her harm, and she was severely beaten by an attempted rapist, Melody too was hurt by two different criminals, her brother Phillip almost died, JoJo received a career-ending injury, and our new friend, Kaylee is recovering from being beaten almost to death.

"A lot of bad things have happened. But also, that brought about a lot of good things. Something I learned from Jesus is, it's all small stuff, in the long run. If our family has inspired anyone or set an example for anyone on how we can live a noble and holy life, on how we can bring goodness and light to the world through service, then I will feel like we have been successful and all of the hard times will have been worth it. We are all being honed in the fire. Some fires are hotter than others. We will accept whatever God places in our path, good times and hard times and we will do our best in every situation. No matter what happens, we will never turn our backs on God. Why? Because we know that He is real."

Eric looked out across the auditorium. "Everyone who is here tonight who is part of the Kino, Adams, Lee, Davis, Brooks, Keith, Morgan, Copeland, Clark or Quinn family, will you all please stand?"

He turned to look at the ones on the stage. "You too."

Eric looked around and stepped out from behind the lectern. "All of my family, please turn to face the audience." He then spoke in Korean and then English. "Attention. Bow."

The family all bowed to the audience.

"Be seated," Eric commanded. He went back to the mic. "We have just shown you honor and respect. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. I pray I may continue to serve you in all that I do and say. I pray blessings and healings upon you. I pray the Holy Spirit to fill you and open your hearts and minds to all of God's miracles. In Jesus' mighty name I pray, amen."

The entire audience stood and applauded for a long time.

Jeremiah Cobb went to the microphone and waited, as he too applauded with everyone else.

"Well, everyone," he finally said. "This has been an evening to remember. And surprise. It's not over. We've kept you all here for two whole hours. If you will adjourn to the banquet hall which is out those doors, to the left and follow the signs. We have some amazing refreshments for you. I have to say, you'd better move fast to get some of Miss Jewell's delightful treats. I should've had Grandmaster Kino bless the food, but I didn't think of that, so I'll do it." He bowed his head and quickly blessed the food and the hands that prepared it. The lights came on and everyone started out.

JoJo came down immediately to join Raylynn. Young Eric and Logan too came immediately to join their girls.

Jordan smiled. “That was amazing, Three.”

“Which part?”

She giggled. “The whole thing but when you spoke was also amazing.”

Melody giggled. “It was when you sang, Logan, that was so amazing.”

He grinned.

Ray decided to step up. “I thought what JoJo said was the best.”

They all laughed.

“I did too,” Kaylee said as she joined her sister.

Ray hugged her. “I’m so mad at you. I can’t believe you kept that secret.”

Kaylee laughed. “I was awesome, I admit it. And guess what? Mom and Dad watched the livestream.”

“Oh wow. Really?”

“Yes. I’m so glad you thought to get that computer for Dad.”

“I’m so glad Grandmaster Kino made it happen.”

Kaylee nodded and her eyes opened big. “Who’s the hottie?”

They all turned to look at who she was talking about. It could only be one person because everyone else in his area was women. JoJo waved at him and motioned him to come over.

“Hey, Ryder,” JoJo said as the young man approached. “You remember Raylynn and Kaylee?”

Ryder nodded. “I do.” He nodded and smiled at Raylynn then turned to Kaylee. “Wow, you look different. Your face has like, healed a lot.”

She frowned. “You’re Ryder? The homeless guy?”

He nodded. “Yes,” he said warily.

“Wow, who knew?” she quipped.

“Who knew what?”

“Who knew under all that dirt and beard there was a hot guy.”

Ryder smiled nervously and rubbed his hands on the slacks of his new suit.

“Give the poor guy a break,” Raylynn chastened.

JoJo, Logan and young Eric all smiled. To them, Ryder’s nervousness was funny and Kaylee coming on like a locomotive was also funny.

“Well,” Logan said, “let’s go grab some goodies.”

They all turned to go, except JoJo. He reached out and took Ray’s hand. “Sorry,” he said softly.

“About what?”

He grinned. “You said you were glad you’d get to sit next to me for a few hours. And I ended up leaving you.”

She smiled. “Well, it was all for a good cause.”

He placed her hand in the crook of his arm. “Come on, beautiful Raylynn, let’s go get something to eat.”

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December 29th 12:00 AM Sunday Morning

Quinn Home, Los Angeles, California

Raylynn sat up at the soft knock on her door. "Kay?"

The door opened and Kaylee peeked in. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course. What's wrong?"

"I can't sleep."

Ray motioned her in and patted the bed beside her.

Kay scurried in and climbed under the covers with her sister.

They turned and lay face to face. "Did you have a bad dream?" Ray asked.

"Uh uh. I'm just excited."

"About what?"

"Not sure. About life I guess. Everything feels so different."

Ray sat thinking a moment. "It does seem different. We're in a different home. We have a bunch of new friends. Everything back in Quapaw is different. Mom and Dad will be here next month. That's really weird."

"Yeah it is. I was just thinking, we've never seen them outside of Quapaw, except when we went shopping over in Joplin, or the few times they came to an out of town high school basketball game to watch us play."

Ray smiled. "You, little sis, were so good."

Kay smiled. "*You* were so good. I didn't even try."

"I know, and that's my whole point. You were just naturally good. I mean, just think if you had actually applied yourself."

"I didn't come to your room to be preached at."

Ray giggled. "Then why did you come?"

"I don't know. Maybe to talk about your boyfriend."

Ray shook her head. "He's not my boyfriend yet."

"Who are you kidding? He asked you out, right? And you said he asked us out for New Year's Eve."

"Yeah, he did," she said with a smile. "And the next Saturday after that."

"See, he's thinking ahead. He's your boyfriend."

Ray sighed. "Not officially. But he is something, isn't he?"

"He's quite the guy. Who knew that you'd fangirl some famous college football player and he'd end up asking you out?"

"Yep, who knew. He is so..." Ray began.

"Go on. So what? So hot? So gorgeous? So ripped? So cute?"

Ray frowned. "Kay, those are all superficial things."

"You can say that all you want, but ya still gotta be attracted to the guy who's your boyfriend."

"Oh, I'm attracted to him alright."

"So, did he kiss you goodnight?"

"Don't be silly, Kay. It was our first date."

"I bet he's a good kisser."

Ray smiled as she imagined it, and then caught herself.

"If he didn't kiss you, how did he say goodnight?"

"He held my hand and looked at me in my eyes, like real close and he said..." She

stopped.

"What? What did he say?"

Ray smiled. "He said, 'Goodnight, Raylynn.'" Ray giggled.

Kay smacked Ray with her pillow. "Is that it? Really?"

"Well, he did put his knuckles under my chin and raised my head when he looked into my eyes. I thought he was gonna kiss me, but instead he smiled, kissed my cheek and said goodnight."

Kay frowned. "He probably thought it was too soon to kiss you."

Ray nodded. She didn't want to bring up Kay's past and the way she'd always jumped right into a physical relationship with any boy who showed her attention. Kay had turned a new page, and Ray thought it wasn't right to bring up Kay's old ways. She smiled and sighed. "It'll happen."

"Yeah it will. So, whaddya think about that Ryder guy?" Kay asked.

Ray smiled at her sister. "He seems pretty nice."

Kay nodded with a smile. "He cleaned up real good, didn't he?"

"Yeah. I didn't realize he was so handsome underneath the dirty clothes and the dirty hair and the giant beard. How old is he again?"

"He's nineteen."

Ray nodded. "He's a cutie. I hope the Adams are able to help him get his life straightened out."

"You hope? Did you not hear tonight all the miracles they've worked in people's lives? He's gonna be fine," Kay exclaimed.

"Well, I saw you and him eating together. How does he feel about things?"

"He's hopeful too. He's excited actually. He says he already has a job that starts the day after New Year's."

"Wow. That was fast. What is he gonna do?"

"He's going to work for a construction company that builds homes. He says he wants to learn every part of it, like not just the building, but the plumbing and the electrical, and all the building codes. He likes working with wood. He might become a carpenter. And Mr. Adams or Logan or JoJo will give Ryder a ride to work every day until he gets his car out of impound and gets his license reinstated and that might take a week or two."

"It sounds like you learned a lot about him."

Kaylee giggled. "Well, he's pretty cute and I really like listening to him talk. He's nice. He asked me if I was coming to the New Year's Eve party and he said if he had a car he'd actually ask me to go with him, but since he doesn't, he hopes he sees me there."

"Wow, Kaylee, I'm always so amazed at how fast you work."

She shrugged. "I see something I want. I go after it."

Ray frowned. "Yeah, and that's gotten you into trouble in the past."

"Well, yeah, I get what you're saying sis, but this is different. This is a good thing. Not a dark, sinful thing. I feel it."

Ray nodded. "Okay. I believe you."

Kay sighed. "So, what are you gonna wear to the party?"

"I don't know. It's gonna be fancy. I might have to make a run to the Thrift store and

see what I can find. Wanna come?"

Kaylee nodded. "Yeah, I'll come. I hope we can find something decent."

"Don't worry. We'll find something and I can whip out the sewing machine and alter it and make it perfect."

Kaylee smiled. "You're so good at stuff like that."

She shrugged. "Well, when you're poor, you figure out that a girl's gotta learn to do what a girl's gotta learn to do."

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December 29th 12 AM Sunday Morning

Mark Adams Home, Newport Beach California

JoJo held his wooden skewer with a marshmallow on the end over the small flame of the concrete tabletop fire pit. Next to him Ryder twisted his marshmallow to brown it evenly. Logan was busy laying out graham crackers with pieces of chocolate.

"Yeah," Ryder continued. "And if I had a car and some money I would've actually asked her on a date."

"You'll have it soon," JoJo said. "Why don't we double? I mean, I have to go pick them up anyway. Come with me."

Ryder smiled. "That would be cool."

"Did you get her digits?" Logan asked.

"Yeah. It was so awesome to be able to pull out my phone and have her punch in the numbers, like old times. Guys, I can't thank you enough for all you've done."

JoJo shook his head. "It's no big deal. And actually you *can* thank us enough. It has been *enough*." He scraped his marshmallow off between the graham crackers and smashed them together, making the chocolate and marshmallow ooze out from the sides.

Logan chuckled. "Hey, Ryder, so, did your two friends over at Desi's and Alec's place, did they get in touch with you? Because they also have new phones."

He nodded. "Yeah, got 'em right here," he said, holding up his phone. "Both Zoe, and Brook. I almost feel like a real person again."

JoJo nodded. "What do you mean?"

"It's like, when you're homeless, and have no phone or way to communicate with the outside world, and no money and no job, it's like you don't exist. It's like you're in like, limbo I guess. But here I am, I can call people, I can interact with people. I'm not ashamed because I'm dirty or smelly. It's like, I was standing on the other side of a window looking in. I could see everyone, but I couldn't interact with them. Now it's like I stepped through the glass into the world and not only can I see them, but they can see me. That might not be the best explanation but..."

"I think it's perfect. I think I understand," Logan said. "I gotta say, JoJo and I, we're really glad he found you, Ryder. I can feel your relief and I'm really excited about how awesome your life is gonna be. And well, Ryder, ya know, as we've already talked about, I've been in the same place you've been. Not homeless, but with the abusive dad thing. There are scars and emotional issues that might well up every once in a while. Don't let them stop you from finding your happiness."

"I won't," Ryder said as he took a giant bite of his s'more.

"I think I believe you," JoJo said. "Since you've already got a date."

Ryder smiled and nodded. “Yeah, that’s pretty cool.”

“So, JoJo, speakin’ of dates, tell me,” Logan said. “How was it?”

JoJo nodded. “Raylynn is amazing. Being with her is amazing.”

Logan smiled. “Did ya kiss her?”

JoJo rolled his eyes. “Stop, bro. No, I didn’t kiss her. It was only our first date.”

Logan shrugged as he licked some marshmallow off his lips. “I kissed Melody on our first date.”

Ryder chuckled.

JoJo nodded. “Yeah, I get it, Logan, but you knew Melody a lot longer than I’ve known Raylynn.”

Logan smiled. “Okay, well, no pressure. I have faith in you.”

JoJo laughed. “Good to know.”

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December 29th, 10:30 AM Sunday Morning

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

JoJo smiled brightly at the congregation. “Wow, you guys, that was a rousing praise session. I could listen to you all sing like that forever! Logan, your band up here, you could go on tour!”

The entire congregation burst into applause.

JoJo nodded. “Yeah, let’s make that happen! A summer tour of the *Hopewood Church of Christ*! Wouldn’t that be awesome! Anyway, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it’s the last Sunday of the year and we have a treat in store for you. Before I tell you about that, I just want to let all of you young people from ages twelve to nineteen know that we are going to have youth classes every Wednesday evening. We will have refreshments, and songs, and classes about stuff you guys are facing every day and activities that are clean and wholesome and still fun. Imagine that. This first Wednesday of the month is New Year’s Day and I will be at the *Rose Bowl*, cheering my team to victory, so the following Wednesday, which is January 8th, be here at 5:00 PM and bring a friend.

“Okay, so, you might not know that our very own Reverend Clark is a very special man. God has chosen him for a special work and that work is taking place right here in this Chapel. That means God feels that you people are important. Who knows what you’re gonna accomplish in your lives. It must be something amazing.

“Now, Reverend Clark has had a pretty hard life. He’s suffered a lot of loss. And he thought he was all alone in this world. But we used Ameritech to find out that he did have some family left. We found out that his two sisters, who were sadly killed in a car accident, had children and those children had children. And two of those children became pastors. They are Reverend Clark’s grand nephews, and they are here visiting Reverend Clark and they have agreed to share a little of their story with us. And then, we’re gonna hear from Reverend Clark himself, who has decided that he is going to share with you something he usually keeps very secret. You see, he is a very special man, because he had a very miraculous thing happen to him. He’s gonna tell you about it. He’s shared his experience with my family and we call it, ‘The Miracle of the Mountain.’ So, listen up, awesome people, because God is showing favor to us by allowing us in on the secret of

The Miracle of the Mountain."

JoJo nodded. "Pastor Patrick, Pastor Harrison, come on up."

He applauded and so did the congregation.

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Raylynn and Kaylee sat near the back of the chapel, their hands clasped together, their eyes wide open as they listened to Reverend Ronald Clark share his miraculous experience on Mount Shasta from when he was just ten years old.

They'd been primed well by Pastor Patrick and Pastor Harrison. The two had not spoken separately. They spoke as a team. They didn't stand behind a pulpit but walked around freely, back and forth, playing off each other like a well-rehearsed act. They joked with one another, they corrected one another and then they would compliment one another, showing a united front. They told the story of a fifteen-year-old boy and his nineteen-year-old cousin whose mothers had left to buy some ice cream for their family on a sunny afternoon. Those two mothers, who were Reverend Clark's baby sisters, died on that innocent little excursion.

The Pastors had the congregation in tears as they spoke of their own fathers who were the sons of Reverend Clark's younger sisters. That story, of how Reverend Clark's sisters died senselessly, had the congregation's hearts open and sympathizing. Then, without yet disclosing the story of what actually happened on Mt. Shasta, they painted a picture of a young ten-year-old boy who'd been made to sleep in the attic, shut away much as Harry Potter had been in a cupboard. A young boy who thought his whole family hated him and disowned him and had no idea that his two baby sisters had been on his side. The young man thought he was all alone in the world.

Then, Dr. Frank Abbot, the man who owned the Hopewood Chapel, which was over one hundred years old, took young Ronny Clark in, helped him go to school, and allowed him to be the assistant minister of the Hopewood Chapel. Now, the current congregation was primed.

Reverend Clark came to the front. He no longer seemed like just a kind, doddering, elderly man. By this time, he had everyone's heart. Before he told the story of what happened on Mt. Shasta, he'd started where his grand nephews left off. He spoke of meeting the prettiest and sweetest girl in the world and they fell in love and that he married her, "right here, on this very spot." He pointed to the center front of the chapel. His voice broke a bit. He told them about his two beautiful babies, a boy and a girl. He told of the Vietnam War, and losing his son. He told of how he changed. How he became angry in his preaching and drove his own daughter away. He spoke about his sweet wife Connie getting sick and dying, leaving Ronny all alone or so he thought.

Then he went back in time, to when he was a boy of ten, and recounted the story. He spoke of a young boy on a boy scout camping trip at the foot of Mt. Shasta. He spoke of getting lost, of falling, of thinking he was dying. He spoke of an angel who came to speak to him only after he'd completely let go and resigned himself and submitted himself to the will of God. He told them all the things the angel said to him. And then how he miraculously was found three days later. He spoke of his father's anger and his brother's disdain. He told them how even his own mother just could not believe him. He then asked the congregation, why do we say we believe the Bible and all the things that

came to pass in the Bible, yet we cannot believe that an angel can come and speak to us.

Once he'd merged his tale from the past to the present day, he told how Grandmaster Kino and his friends and family not only came to the rescue of this church, but searched for and found his nephews and grand-nephews and their families. Then he smiled and told them that they also found his long lost daughter and she was here today in the congregation, along with her two grandchildren, which would be Ronny's great grandchildren. He was no longer alone in this world.

Ray and Kay had cried over the happy ending along with the rest of the congregation. But they were also astounded and confused. His tale was so very close to the tale their adopted father had just disclosed to them. A ten-year-old boy. Missing three days. An angel comes and speaks to him, but only after he's completely resigned himself to the will of God. Completely humbled. A complete letting go. It was a beautiful thing.

Logan stood and sang a beautiful rendition of Chris Tomlin's song, *Holy Forever*, bringing everyone to tears. JoJo prayed over the congregation and the meeting came to an end.

Ray and Kay remained seated in the back, whispering to each other and wondering if they should give their parents a call and tell them about what they'd just heard.

"Raylynn?"

She looked up to see JoJo standing by the pew where she sat. "Oh, hi, JoJo."

"Hi. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"What did you think about today's sermon?"

She nodded and looked at Kaylee. "Well, it was very interesting. JoJo, do you have time to talk?"

"I'll make time for you."

Kaylee giggled.

"But JoJo, don't you have a meeting to get to?" Ray reminded him.

He frowned. "Oh, yeah, I do, but it'll be over in two, maybe three hours."

"Can you come by the house after your meeting?" Ray asked.

"Oh, um, you know what, we're having Sunday dinner at the grands'. Will you and Kaylee come?"

Raylynn looked over at Kaylee who nodded.

"Yes, we'll come. What time should we arrive?"

"Anytime before 5:00."

"What time will you be there?"

"Shortly before 5:00."

She smiled. "I guess I'll see you then."

He nodded. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. I'm just confused about something and I want to run it by you."

He nodded. "Okay then. Tonight. I promise."

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December 29th 4:30 Sunday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Raylynn pulled up the long drive. There were so many cars in the driveway they

couldn't pull up to the front of the house. They pulled over to the side and parked. Ray smiled when she spotted JoJo's pickup also pulled over to the side of the driveway just a few cars in front of hers.

"There must be a whole lotta people here today," Kaylee said as they walked toward the door.

Ray nodded, feeling a little out of place. As they walked up the steps to the large front entrance, the red door with gold letters swung open. JoJo smiled at them. "Hello, beautiful ladies! So glad you could come."

Raylynn smiled nervously. "Looks like we've crashed a party."

"Well, you didn't crash it, you were invited."

"Hmm, only because I asked to speak to you."

"Well, the only reason I didn't invite you earlier was first, I didn't want to push it where you got tired of me too fast. And second, I knew there would be a lot of people here and thought you might feel uncomfortable."

Raylynn smiled. "Well then, I guess you're very insightful, JoJo, because that's exactly how I feel."

Kaylee grinned. "Not me. I feel right at home. Did the hottie come?"

JoJo laughed. "If you're talking about Ryder, yes, he's here."

"Cool."

JoJo held the door open. "Come on in. I think you actually know everyone here. It's just the Kino families, the Adams families, the Davis family, um, the Brooks family, and the Clark families, which is why there are like four extra cars in the driveway. The Lees are not here, the Keiths are not here, except for Melody."

They stepped through the doorway to a cheerful, exuberant group of people. There was music playing. Some children screamed and Taylor came flying down the front steps. "Hey, Raylynn and Kaylee! Coming through," she yelled as she ran past and ten little children came running down the stairs chasing her, screaming and laughing and trying to catch her. Two more brought up the rear, Amari and Jamie, who were there to catch any stragglers. Taylor cut through the giant living room, up the three steps leading to the dining room, turned left to head to the back staircase and ran up those steps.

Ray laughed as she watched the fun.

JoJo led them into the living room. "Hey, everyone, if you haven't met them yet, this is Raylynn and Kaylee Quinn. You might remember them from last night. Kaylee spoke at the event."

Patrick jumped up immediately to shake their hands. "Hello! I think I also saw you two in church this morning."

Ray nodded. "Yes, sir, we were there. That was a wonderful sermon. I really enjoyed it."

Kay smiled. "We did more than enjoy it. It was an amazing story."

They both walked over to shake hands with Reverend Clark, and then his daughter, Linda, and then Andrew and Nicole Hall. Andrew was the son of Reverend Clark's younger sister and he and Nicole were the parents of Harrison Hall and Camille Hall. Then they were introduced to Jesse and Becky Barnes. Jesse was the son of Reverend Clark's youngest sister, and he and Becky were Patrick's parents. It had been Andrew at

age nineteen, and Jesse at age fifteen who'd lost their mothers when they went to buy ice cream.

"So," Patrick said. "You thought the story was amazing?"

Raylynn nodded. "It was amazing yes, and sad in so many ways." She nodded at Jesse and Andrew. "I'm so sorry for the way you lost your mothers."

Jesse smiled. "Thank you, young lady. We know we'll see them again. And the way the world is, it might be sooner than we think. But what really helped us was knowing about what happened to Uncle Ronny on Mt. Shasta. I know it was a story that's really hard to believe, but our mothers taught us to take everything to the Lord, ask Him personally and He will let us know what is true. We did just that and we had it confirmed to us so many times now, that we can't deny it. When we can realize that God is real, that He really does have a plan for us, that He really does interact with us and yes, sometimes even sends His angels to help us, it makes everything better."

Ray nodded. She was about to let him know that it wasn't hard for her to believe at all, when Shelley Kino came into the room.

"Oh, hello there, Raylynn and Kaylee! It's so nice to see you again."

"Hello, Mrs. Kino," the girls said together.

"I just came in to let everyone know that dinner is running a little late but will be ready in about thirty more minutes."

"No worries, Shelley," Ronny said. "Are you sure one of us can't do anything to help?"

"I'm sure. Sit, relax. We already have almost too many hands. Jewell, Bree, Bella, Breez, Mickey and myself."

JoJo stepped forward. "Grandma, if you don't need me, Raylynn and I would like to go somewhere to have a little talk."

"Of course, sweetheart. Go talk. And Kaylee, the rest of the almost grown up people are out on the deck."

She smiled. "Thanks. I think I'll go check them out."

"She means, check him out," JoJo joked.

"Really? Who's the him, we're talking about? Ryder?" Shelley asked.

"Grandma, you're so smart."

Shelley giggled. "It's not that I'm smart. I'm just not blind."

They all laughed as Kaylee, JoJo and Raylynn headed out back. Kaylee joined the others, Logan and Melody, young Eric and Jordan, Ryder and she was introduced to Carson Clark, who was fifteen and Reverend Clark's great-grandson. On the next level down was another group, Josie Brooks, Daniel and Jeremy Davis, and Sydney Clark, Reverend Clark's great-granddaughter. JoJo greeted everyone on both levels and let them know that he and Raylynn were gonna go have a little talk and hinted to do not disturb. He walked her down to the pool area and they took seats at a round table with chairs.

He smiled at her and laid his hand on the table, palm up, and looked at her expectantly.

Smiling, she placed her hand in his.

He nodded. "So, Raylynn, it's nice to see you again today."

She nodded. "You too, JoJo. Really nice. I wish I didn't have to go back to work

tomorrow."

"I thought you liked your job."

"Oh, I do. It's just been so nice going to see my parents, and spending time with you and taking a break from everything. Tomorrow, it's back to the grind. What will you be doing tomorrow?"

"Oh, well, actually, first thing in the morning, I have physical therapy and then I have to stand on the sidelines and help the coaches any way I can. You know, uplift the team, spot any problems. That kind of thing."

She nodded. "Where do you have to go for PT?"

"It's the *West End Sports Medicine and PT Clinic*. It's actually not very far from the school."

Her eyes opened wide. "You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not kidding. Why? Do you know of it?"

She nodded. "Yeah, because I work there."

He smiled. "Really? I've been there several times. I've never seen you."

"Well, how long ago were you there? I'm new. Remember, I just got my certificate. I started there in August when I got back from getting Kaylee and getting her into school."

"Wow. I can't believe I never thought to ask you where you work. Maybe I can get you as my physical therapist."

She giggled. "They won't let me near you."

"Why not?"

"I'm new. I'm just out of school. You're a hot commodity. You're important. They'll have their best and most experienced person work with you. I work mostly with teen girls right now."

He nodded. "Well, anyway, I'll get to see you. There's that."

She nodded. "There's that."

When she didn't seem that enthused, he sighed. "Okay, so, whatever you wanted to talk to me about, it seems to be weighing on you."

She frowned. "I'm not sure if it's 'weighing' on me, but I feel like I really need to tell someone about this. It seems important."

Frowning, he nodded at her. "Maybe you'd better go ahead and just say it."

"Well, JoJo, remember I told you that my father told me something I never knew about him."

"Yes, and we didn't have time to talk about it last night."

"Right. So, after what I heard today, it kind of freaked me out."

"What did you hear today?"

"I mean, Reverend Clark's '*Miracle on the Mountain*' story."

"Oh, okay. So, Reverend Clark seeing an angel freaked you out?"

She shook her head. "No. Well, yes. Okay. Let me just tell you, the thing my father told me, it was about something that happened to *him* when he was also ten years old. And it was about an angel that came to see him, and it changed his life, and he too thought he was dying and he too said it was a big deal to let go and..."

JoJo's eyes opened wide. "Wait. Stop right there. Raylynn, I want you to tell me the

whole story in detail, but I want my family to hear this. And Reverend Clark too. This is important."

"It is?"

"Yes. Because, you see, my grandfather also had an angel come to him. We call it the 'Miracle of the Cave.' And my grandfather was also ten. And he too was missing for three days. And he too had to let go and accept death."

Raylynn blinked. "Really?"

"Really."

She shook her head. "This is all so strange. I feel so weird."

JoJo nodded. "Right? Like nothing is what you think it is. Like miracles really do happen. Like God is real. Like nothing will ever be the same. That must be how Granddad, and Reverend Clark, and your father must have felt, only maybe a hundred times greater."

She nodded slowly and tears welled in her eyes.

JoJo stood, pulled her up and held her against his chest. "Ray, you're shaking."

"I know. I'm not sure what's wrong."

"Maybe it's just an overload. Take a deep breath."

She nodded and breathed deeply.

He rubbed her back and pressed her head firmly against his chest. "Okay, I think we're gonna go up to the house and talk to Aunt Jeffy."

"Okay."

When she didn't argue, he knew he was right.

As he went past his brothers and their girls and Ryder and Kay and Carson, he stopped and spoke Korean for a minute.

Both Logan and young Eric looked at each other and then answered in Korean. He told them, "We have another miracle story about Ray's father and she's shaken up and I'm goin' in to talk to Aunt Jeffy and Granddad. Be ready, we might get the family together before dinner."

JoJo took Raylynn inside.

"Which language were you speaking?" Jordan asked.

Young Eric smiled. "Korean."

"Logan? You know Korean too?" Melody asked.

He shrugged. "Not as fluently as JoJo and young Eric but they've been speaking it since they were little. I didn't start until I was twelve."

"So, what did JoJo say?" Kaylee asked.

Young Eric smiled. "Well, since he spoke in Korean, I'm pretty sure he didn't think it was a good thing to disclose that information at this time. But if we get a call to come inside in a few minutes, then you'll know very soon what he said."

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the family was called together. Normally, they would have Taylor and Josie and the Davis boys take the little ones off to occupy them, but Shelley heard the gist of what was about to be said, and decided the young teens needed to hear this, so Shelley and Bella took the children back into the den to entertain them.

Jewell and Mickey stayed in the kitchen to finish up dinner, knowing they would be

filled in later. The rest of the family gathered in the living room.

The family listened intently as Raylynn and Kaylee retold the story that their father had just told them on Christmas Day. Then Ronny recapped his story. Then, Eric told his story. When they finished, it was Ray who asked a question.

"What does this all mean? I mean, why did three boys, all the same age, have an angel come to see them? They were all missing for three days. Well, my father was missing longer, but two of those days were just him running away. He was incapacitated for three days, like you guys. So what is this all about?"

Eric senior smiled. "You're looking to understand God's plan, Raylynn. Sometimes we don't know the whole plan. He illuminates one step and we take that step, not knowing what the next step is after that. But we keep taking the steps. That—is faith. If you keep trying to understand or know the whole plan, you'll only frustrate yourself."

"Okay, I get that, but surely there's something bigger coming, or something bigger at play," Raylynn said.

"Most certainly," Ronny put in with a smile. "One thing God told me once was that we humans, are on a 'need to know' basis."

Ricky nodded. "Maybe if we knew the whole plan, we'd be too overwhelmed to handle it."

Everyone nodded at that.

"You know," Eric began. "Not long ago I was praying out on the beach and I asked God, surely I'm not the only one that has had an experience like this. Shortly thereafter, I met you, Ronny. And now, we've found another one, Mr. Alo Quinn and he's coming here in a few weeks."

"I can't wait to meet him," JoJo said.

"Me too," both Eric and Ronny said.

"You remind me of him, Grandmaster Kino," Raylynn offered. "He has your same demeanor. I mean, he's very wise. He's very calm. He even kind of looks like you. I guess that's because you're native Hawaiian, right? And Dad is American Indian. And he has long hair too. But Dad's hair is all gray."

Jeffy, who'd been quiet the whole time suddenly sat up. "There's more."

Eric looked at his daughter. "More?"

"There are more people like you, and Mr. Clark and Mr. Quinn. There are twelve all together. Twelve."

"A biblical number," Harrison said.

"What does that mean?" Kaylee asked. "A biblical number?"

Grandmaster Kino smiled at his grandson. "So, Young Eric? Would you care to explain, since you're a numbers guy?"

Young Eric smiled. "Hmm, let's see, in the Bible, numbers are sometimes symbolic with significant meanings. For example, Jacob had twelve sons. These twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses sent out twelve spies to search out the promised land. Elijah built an altar of twelve stones. God specified that twelve unleavened bread cakes be placed weekly in the temple. The first words recorded that Jesus said were when he was twelve years old. When Jesus fed the five thousand, there were twelve baskets of leftovers. The new Jerusalem will have twelve gates and twelve foundations. There were

twelve apostles." He shrugged. "That's all I can remember."

"That was very good," Patrick said. "Another one is there were twelve minor prophets in the Bible."

"Who are they?" Logan asked. "I mean, which ones?"

Patrick smiled. "Harrison?"

Harrison nodded. "Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi."

Ronny smiled. "Very good!"

"So, Aunt Jeffy," JoJo said. "You just got a message that there are twelve people like Granddad and Ronny and Mr. Quinn?"

She nodded. "The voice in my head was very loud. Twelve. There are twelve."

Ronny looked the young girl over. "May I ask you, Dr. Wallace, do people give you a hard time?"

She narrowed her eyes. "In what way?"

"I mean about being what some call psychic. I mean, there are many Christians who believe that people who claim to be psychic are in league with Lucifer."

The room grew quiet.

Ronny sighed. "Please, don't get me wrong. I, of all people don't think that, but I wondered if life has been hard for you because of your connection to God and your psychic abilities."

"My life would be hard, if I wasn't surrounded by so many of God's warriors and people who support me and protect me. And yeah, people are gonna think what they wanna think. I can't let that bother me. I can assure everyone here, that I wake up daily in prayer. That I put on the armor of God daily. I read His word daily. Ya know, they accused Jesus of the same thing. They said he was only able to cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub, insinuating that He was in league with Satan. My answer to everyone is don't believe anything I say. Take it to the Lord. Ask Him. He will answer you, if you are listening."

"Well said," Ronny replied.

Jeffy went on. "And, usually, God gives me a confirmation of some kind, that confirms what I thought I heard."

"Interesting," Patrick said. "I'm learning so much."

"Well, dinner is ready," Mickey said as she walked into the room. "Shall I keep it warm, or are we ready to eat?"

"I believe we're ready," Eric said. "Let's get Shelley and the kids and we'll have a blessing."

While the kids were being summoned, Taylor answered her phone.

"Hey, Gabe!"

"Hey, are you all there?"

"Yes, we have a large group today. I'll put you on speaker."

"Cool. So, hey, everyone!"

"Hello, Gabe!" "Hi, Gabe!" "Hey, bro!" everyone yelled back.

"I called to wish you all a happy new year coming up, and because well, I got this prompting to call you."

"Happy new year to you and your family," Grandmaster Kino replied.

"Thank you, sir. So, like, I know this will sound crazy, but did you guys happen to be talking about Christmas songs to sing?"

"No," Taylor answered. "Why?"

"I don't know. I just got this strong urge to call you guys and tell you to sing the *Twelve Days of Christmas*."

The room went silent.

"Hello?"

Taylor sniffed. "Gabe. You are so... I can't even."

"What did I do wrong?"

"Not a thing, bro," young Eric said loudly. "As usual, you did everything right. You followed God's prompting to make this call and give us that message. You rock, my brother. I love ya, Gabe. Taylor will fill you in."

Taylor nodded. "Gabe. We're about to have a blessing. Then I'll fill you in while everyone is being served."

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John 8:47

"Whoever is of God hears the words of God.
The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

Chapter Thirty-Six

December 30th 12:30 AM EST Wee Hours Monday Morning
Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Melaynah's eyes flew open when her phone rang. She jumped from her bed and rushed to her computer and accepted the incoming call.

Her eyes filled with tears as Jake's gorgeous face filled the screen. "Jake," she said softly as the emotion clogged her throat.

He smiled. "Why are you crying, Bugs?"

She sniffed. "I was so worried. I didn't know it would take this long. I thought something bad had happened."

"Yeah, well, sorry about that. It took longer than we expected. We had some detours we had to take, but God blessed us with some miracles and we made it through with everyone intact."

"Can you talk about it yet?"

He shook his head. "No, babe, I still can't talk about it. *But* we will talk when I come home."

She sighed and counted on her fingers.

"What are you doing?"

"Counting. You've been gone over four months now."

"Yep. See how fast it's gone by?"

She frowned. "It has NOT gone by fast, you idiot."

He chuckled. "I love you, Bugs."

She sniffed. "I love you too."

"Your hair looks funny."

She turned and looked at the mirror over in the corner of her room. Giggling, she took the messy bun down and shook her hair out.

He nodded. "Better." He sighed. "Can't wait to see all that hair spread out over my pillow."

Her face crumpled. "Me too," she whispered.

He smiled. "It's gonna be so good, Bugs."

She nodded. "Describe it to me."

He laughed. "That's not a good idea, seeing as how I'm surrounded by a bunch of desperate guys right now. Instead, tell me all about what you did for Christmas, what presents everyone got, how are my parents and Hannah getting along, and what crazy things has Gabe done lately."

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December 30th 8:30 AM PST Monday Morning
West End Sports Medicine and PT Clinic, Los Angeles, California

Tony Mort scooted lower in his seat so she wouldn't see that there was anyone in his car. There were several other vehicles in the parking lot and he parked in between two parked cars. He'd already been there an hour, watching and waiting, because he didn't know what time she usually arrived at work. Finally though, her silver Toyota Corolla pulled in and parked on the far left side of the parking lot, toward the back. Now that he'd confirmed that she did indeed work here, he would have to wait in his car until she got off and follow her home. Sitting in his car, playing video games and snacking on junk food for the next several hours, was an easy two hundred bucks.

She got out of her car. She wore pink scrubs covered by a thick tan colored sweater. Her shoes were white. It was definitely her, he could tell because of the long, black ponytail that came to her waist. Besides all that, she was definitely the looker that had been described. Just looking at her, he wished he'd been told to do more than just find out where the girl lived. The guy who hired him, Ryan Nibbs, intended to shake up this girl's younger sister so that she'd be afraid to testify against his friend.

Tony didn't argue with what the guy wanted to do. He didn't tell him that it wouldn't matter if she testified or not. The state had a case against his friend *and* they had a completely credible witness, the USC QB. They didn't need the girl to testify. Tony smiled and shook his head. Still, as long as Ryan wanted to pay him for a day of sitting around in his car, he was game.

The story behind this was stupid. Some guy, Scott something, was in jail for beating up his girlfriend. His friend, Ryan Nibbs, was told to shake up Kaylee Quinn so she wouldn't testify against the Scott dude. Ryan went to her home, but she'd moved out, and then he got himself arrested. The Ryan dude was out now though, and he hired Tony to follow this girl home from work and find out where she lives with the sister. Easy. He wouldn't mind if they wanted his services for more, like roughing up the sister, or dealing with this girl. Though, they'd have to pay him a lot more than two hundred to do that, and he couldn't let them know that it wouldn't help them a bit.

Reaching into the small cooler on his front seat he pulled out a soda, picked up a bag of chips and settled in.

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December 30th 9:30 AM PST Monday Morning
West End Sports Medicine and PT Clinic, Los Angeles, California

JoJo Adams pulled up to the clinic. It was a large, square, stand-alone, tan brick building. The parking lot was full and JoJo ended up having to park in the very last row up closest to the street. Smiling, he made his way into the building.

As a medical facility, it was high end. The reception area was large, sleek, clean and modern, trimmed with wood and stone. Seating was plush. JoJo checked in and had a seat. Immediately, a young man sitting nearby struck up a conversation with him. When the people waiting realized he was 'the JoJo Adams,' everyone wanted in on the conversation. It wasn't long though before JoJo was called back.

His eyes scanned the large area, looking for Raylynn. He didn't currently see her, but there were several private type cubicles where she could be.

JoJo was approached by a thirtyish, athletic looking guy with a huge smile. "Hello, JoJo, I'm Lester Moore."

JoJo tried to suppress his smile.

Lester nodded. “Yes. I go by Les. And yes, my parents apparently have quite a sense of humor.”

JoJo laughed. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Les Moore.”

Lester held out his right hand to shake hands with JoJo. JoJo looked at the hand and back up at the guy. The guy raised his eyebrows and nodded. JoJo gingerly lifted his right hand up to be grasped by Les.

“Squeeze,” the man ordered.

JoJo did as commanded. It was actually difficult and he hadn’t realized his hand had become as weak as it suddenly felt.

“So, just to be completely honest, I’ve chatted with Dr. Kino Wallace and she’s let me know what you’ve been working on with her. She says to push you a little.”

JoJo nodded.

“So, let’s just step back here in the cubicle and get your shirt off and we’ll start from there.”

JoJo did as instructed. He took off his jacket and his shirt. Les examined him from every angle. He scanned his back, his shoulders, and finally stood back and looked him over from the front. His eyes narrowed and he reached out and touched JoJo’s chest.

“So, may I ask about this giant scar?”

JoJo nodded. “Nice, isn’t it?”

“I guess that’s one way to describe it.”

“When I was in high school, my brother and I were briefly abducted. They broke his arm. They beat me up pretty bad and they took a knife and cut a giant ‘X’ on my chest as a warning to my Aunt to discontinue her medical research.”

“Oh, wow,” Les muttered.

“Yeah, really the cut on my chest wasn’t nearly as bad as the concussion and the beating my face took.”

Les looked closely at JoJo’s face.

JoJo pointed to a tiny scar on his cheek just under his left eye. And another near the corner of his mouth. And two more along his hairline.

Les shook his head. “People are so freakin’ evil.”

JoJo nodded. “Some are. And some are good guys.”

Les sighed. “Well, let’s get to work. Come on out here and we’ll work on some warm-ups and loosen up that shoulder.”

JoJo followed him across the floor and this time he smiled when he spotted Raylynn. He drew a breath. Lord have mercy she was so beautiful. She was currently kneeling next to a teen girl, talking to her about her foot. The girl nodded and pointed her toes, then shook her head and grimaced in pain. JoJo’s eyes shifted to the woman standing on the other side of the girl, probably the girl’s mother. The woman looked angry. He shook his head and had to make himself focus on what Les was telling him to do.

“So, let’s go to the PROM,” Les said with a smile. “That’s P-R-O-M, passive range of motion exercises. Have a seat right here.”

JoJo took a seat on a table and Les began lifting JoJo’s arm.

“Relax your muscles. Let me do the lifting,” Les said.

JoJo wasn't paying much attention. He was watching Raylynn working with the girl. The girl was complaining a lot. But not at Raylynn. She was complaining at her mother.

Raylynn sighed and stood up and looked around. "Let's move over to the bars."

Raylynn pointed just past where JoJo sat, and he caught her eye.

She smiled at him and nodded slightly. He smiled at her.

Les worked on him for some time. Meanwhile, Ray worked on the young girl. From what JoJo could tell, the girl was in pain. He heard Raylynn tell her that she was not ready to go back to dance rehearsal for some big event, and the mother was insistent that Raylynn didn't know what she was talking about.

At first, only JoJo and Les, and a few others could hear what was being said. But the woman finally began to yell at Raylynn.

The young girl tried to intervene. "Mom, just stop," she pleaded.

"Don't you tell me to stop. You just don't want to put in the work because you're in a little bit of pain."

Raylynn sighed. "Mrs. Cofer, that pain should tell you that she's not ready to go back to rehearsals. Unless she goes back to just sit and listen."

"You just want to keep me bringing her back here as long as possible to make more money off of us."

Raylynn frowned. "Ma'am, that is not true. I get paid the same. If Lexi works her ankle too much before it's completely healed, it could do permanent damage. We can't put a time limit on her healing. I'm sorry, but if I sign off on her ankle, and something happens, it would be my fault."

"So, all you're concerned about is your own reputation?" the woman said loudly, gesturing wildly with her hands.

Raylynn shook her head and spoke very calmly. "No, ma'am, that's not it at all. What I'm concerned about is Lexi. Her ankle is not healed. And— I'm thinking maybe if you were as concerned about her an..."

Everyone turned at the loud sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Raylynn gasped as Mrs. Cofer's hand smacked her in the face. She lifted her own hand to her own cheek, her eyes wide with surprise.

JoJo found himself beside her in seconds. The woman was yelling at Raylynn and looked up at the large guy in surprise. He only said two words.

"Stop. Now."

The woman looked up at him. The entire place quieted.

"Who are you to tell me what to do?" she screamed at him.

JoJo spoke quietly. "I'm gonna be your worst nightmare if you don't stop." He looked over at Les. "Will you get a manager or supervisor over here, please?"

Les nodded and ran to do his bidding.

"That, that girl, has no business telling me to be concerned about my own daughter."

"Well, it probably appeared to her, as it did to the rest of us in here, that you care more about the prestige of your daughter dancing in the festival you've been spouting off about for the past thirty minutes than about her own well-being. So, she called it like we all saw it."

He looked at Raylynn. Her cheek was red. Her eyes were filled with tears. "Are you

okay?"

She nodded.

"What's going on?" an older woman asked as she approached.

"This, this, girl, accused me of not caring about my own daughter."

"That's not what I sa..." Ray began.

"She's rude and obviously doesn't know how to do her job and I want her fired, immediately."

Ray gasped. She turned fearful eyes on her employer.

"That's not the way it was at all," Ray began.

"And now, she's calling me a liar," Mrs. Cofer screamed.

"Raylynn, go to my office please."

Ray turned and left immediately.

JoJo stayed and addressed the manager. "I heard the whole thing and that's not how it was, and ya know what, I want the police called because this woman assaulted your employee."

"Young man," the manager began.

"Um, this is JoJo Adams," Les put in quickly.

The woman's entire demeanor changed. "You're JoJo Adams?"

"So? So, who cares who he is," the woman screamed.

"Lady," another patient on the other side began. "Do you know who JoJo Adams is?"

"No. Who are you?" she screamed at JoJo.

"Like I said. I'm your worst nightmare."

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JoJo sighed. He'd had to leave. He was required to be on the field with the team. He'd texted Raylynn and explained that he had to leave but that as soon as they took a break he'd call her.

He *had* placed a call to his father as he drove back to school, to see legally what could be done. Of course, Raylynn could press charges for assault, but JoJo felt fairly sure she wasn't gonna go that far, mostly because she felt her job was on the line. After hearing the manager of the facility, a woman named Melinda Fletcher, apologize all over herself to Mrs. Cofer and beg her to give *West End PT* another chance, JoJo felt like that could be a real possibility. So, he asked his dad if he could look into who this Cofer lady is and see if there was a way for JoJo to put some pressure on Melinda Fletcher.

If the Cofers were being catered to because they had money or prestige, JoJo was almost positive that the Kinos had more. But why did it always have to be about that? Why couldn't it just be about someone doing the right thing? This 'karen' Cofer woman thought she could treat someone like she treated Ray and get away with it. Well, JoJo just couldn't let it drop. It wasn't just because Ray wanted to keep her job. If JoJo had his way, she'd never need to work again. But that wasn't it. It was the principle of the thing. His competitive self was kicking in and he had to see this through.

Finally, the coach sent everyone to a late lunch and said they would meet in the locker room at 2:00 PM. JoJo immediately called Raylynn.

She picked up on the first ring. "Hello," she said softly.

"Hey, Ray, so, what happened?"

"Well, I explained to Ms. Fletcher, that's my boss, that it wasn't really like Mrs. Cofer said. I explained the whole thing to her. She pulled security video and was not happy with what the woman did, but she also said I shouldn't have provoked her."

"Since when is speaking the truth provoking someone to hit you? It's getting to where the whole world has gone insane. So, tell me, did you get fired?"

"Not yet. I was sent home."

He sighed. "Okay. May I come over to see you?"

"I don't really feel like company."

"I don't want to come over to be entertained. I want to come over and give you some support."

"Okay," she said listlessly.

He sighed. "Okay, listen. I have a meeting at 2:00. I can probably be at your house by 4:00. Hang in there."

"There's nothing else to do," she said.

"See you soon," he said before he hung up. Well, that didn't go well. His phone buzzed and he picked it up. "Hey, Uncle Joey."

"Hey, kiddo. So, your girl is having a hard day?"

"Well, she's not my girl. Yet. But yes. Do you know something?"

"Yep. Mrs. Cofer is Mrs. Lynn Cofer, wife of Baldwin Cofer, president of the Cofer Group, which is a philanthropic organization that contributes a lot of money to the arts. Their daughter, Alexis Cofer is a young ballet dancer who wants desperately to make it to the big show. She was injured earlier this year, when she broke her ankle playing on a pogo stick, of all things, at a summer party with some friends. It healed, but not all the way. She went to a little bit of PT and then went back to dancing. She broke it again during a rehearsal two months ago for some big winter dance competition. She's been out of a boot for four weeks. That's from her Instagram account. She's struggling with a lot of pain. Her doctor says she shouldn't dance on it at all for at least six months, but the mom is pushing it."

"Okay, the fact that the doc says six months is good."

"Yep, but that's only from Alexis' postings on social media. We'd have to get documentation of that. So far, we've captured all she's said. She also has expressed much disdain for her pushy mother. She may want to be a dancer, but she's also in a lot of pain and wants to really heal this time. On that matter, Raylynn is absolutely correct. And even better, Jeffy says she will back her up."

JoJo smiled. "Well, that will help her a lot. But tell me, Uncle Joey, why is this manager, this Fletcher lady, so desperate for the Cofers' business?"

"Because she sends all of the dancers in the area to *West End Sports PT."*

"Well, USC sends all of their athletes there too, right?"

"Right."

"Which one creates more revenue for the Clinic?"

"There are three clinics, and it's about equal."

"Hmm, okay. So, what if I gave West End a personal endorsement?"

"You have that power, JoJo. All the kids in rec ball who aspire to something big, all

the kids in middle and high school. You have the power to make or break this place. Of course, you wouldn't want to endorse them if they fire a completely competent and conscientious worker because some karen is butt hurt, if ya know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean. How do you recommend I go about using my power for good? What kind of action should I take?"

"Well first, we don't deal with the manager of this facility. If we have our way, her job might be in jeopardy too. We go to the owner of the three locations, which is Brian Canter."

"Brian Canter. Why does that name sound familiar?"

Joey smiled. "Because Brian Canter is the owner of Canter's football equipment center."

"Oh, yeah. Cool. So, is he a good guy? I mean, honest and such."

"Not sure about that yet."

"So, if he's not, I'm not interested in helping him out. I'll just concentrate on being a warrior in the media for Raylynn and pressure him that way. But, if he is a good guy, maybe we can swing a deal. I endorse him and he apologizes to Ray, brings her back, and makes a better effort to do the right thing in his facilities."

"Sounds good," Joey said. "That will achieve your objective of helping your girl. Then you'd just have to find a way to be Mrs. Lynn Cofer's worst nightmare."

JoJo drew in a sharp breath. "Shoot. Someone videoed me?"

"Very good. Your mind is still quick."

"She's such a bi... I mean, a piece of work, Uncle Joey. Someone needs to put her in her place."

"Well, don't let this be personal. Let God do that."

"It IS personal, Uncle Joey. She went after Raylynn. That makes it personal."

"Okay, so, what do you want to do about that?"

JoJo sighed. "Actually, I'd like to speak to her daughter. Maybe invite her out to the youth group. At least give her some positive input."

"Now you're talkin', buddy boy. I like it."

"Okay. So, do you think you can get me her number?"

"I'll see what I can do. Later, kiddo."

"Thanks, Uncle Joey."

"Yep."

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December 30th 5:00 PM PST Monday Evening
Quinn Sisters' Home, Los Angeles, California

JoJo pulled up behind Raylynn's Toyota, and glanced over at the blue house with the yellow door. That yellow door, for some reason, it always made him smile. Grabbing the two large bags that contained dinner, he jumped from his truck, nodding at the guy in an old green pickup who pulled away from the front of the neighbor's house. JoJo headed toward the yellow door and Kaylee answered almost immediately.

"Hi, JoJo, come on in," she said solemnly.

"Hey, Kaylee. So, how's she doing?"

"Not too good."

"Where is she?"

"She's in her room and says she has decided that she doesn't want to come out and to send you away."

He frowned. "Is she, I mean, is she dressed?"

Kaylee nodded. "Yes. Well, she was last time I peeked in."

"Do you mind if I go in and check on her?"

"No, I don't mind. I was hoping you would."

He set the bags down on the small kitchen table. "This is your dinner if you're hungry."

"Cool. Thanks."

He smiled. "It's actually *our* dinner."

She giggled. "Got it."

He nodded and headed down the hallway and knocked softly on her door. When she didn't answer, he peeked in. She was lying in her bed, her back to the door. She was still wearing her pink scrubs. She even still had her shoes on. Sighing, he came in the room, sat carefully on the side of her bed, and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Ray," he whispered.

She gasped and turned over.

"It's just me," he said softly. "Did you fall asleep?"

She sat up and scooted her back up against the wall and sniffed. "I guess I did."

He looked into her green eyes. "You look like you've been crying."

She shrugged. "Sorry. I guess that seems silly."

"No, it doesn't. It was an emotional experience. I understand."

She sniffed again as more tears tried to gather. "It's just that I worked so hard to get through school as fast as possible and I worked so hard to get that job. It wasn't easy. I had to go through a really hard recruitment process. Hundreds of people wanted that opening. There were so many tests and interviews and hands-on trials. And now, some woman who doesn't care about the well-being of her own child comes in and ruins my life without a thought. She didn't care about anything other than getting her way."

"People can suck," JoJo said softly. "Take a deep breath, Ray. It's all gonna work out."

"Sure. So, why did Mrs. Fletcher send me home then? She should have backed me up. I know I'm right. If Lexi starts dancing again on that ankle, it may never heal properly. She could do permanent damage."

"Does Fletcher have a DPT?"

"No, she isn't a therapist. She's a business manager."

He nodded in understanding. "Well, that's a problem." He sighed, looking into her teary eyes. He just wanted to cheer her up. "Ray, what can I do for you?"

"I don't know that you can do anything."

He smiled at that, because after his talk with his uncle, he was pretty sure that he could. He held his left hand out to her. When she placed her hand in his, he grasped it tightly and pulled her forward, careful to keep his right arm pressed against his own side. She gasped. With his left hand, he guided her around until she turned and settled comfortably in his lap. He wrapped his left arm around her, keeping his right arm close

to his side, and held her snugly against his chest.

She didn't fight. Leaning her head against his chest, she relaxed.

He used his right hand, lifted it carefully and brushed his hand over her head and down to her cheek that earlier had been red from being slapped. "It's gonna be okay," he said firmly.

She leaned her head back so she could see his handsome face. "You don't know that."

"I DO know that."

"How do you know?"

"Because, I know things you don't know."

She sighed.

"Come on, now. I brought some dinner."

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

He hugged her tightly. "I promise, it's gonna be okay."

She sat there silently, realizing that she was in her room, sitting on her bed, on JoJo Adams' lap, his one good arm snugly around her and really, it was the most incredible feeling. She sighed and then smiled up at him.

"That's better," he said.

"What's better?"

"You smiled." He glanced down at her mouth.

"I did not."

He grinned. "You did. I saw it. Do it again."

He watched her mouth and when she offered a slight smile, he touched her lower lip with the pad of his thumb.

She sighed. His eyes shifted from her mouth, to her eyes and back to her lips and he couldn't fight it. He lowered his head and lightly, ever so softly, touched his lips to hers. He kissed her gently, once, twice, and the third time, he kissed her like a girl ought to be kissed.

She gave a slight whimper as she lifted her arms up around his neck and held on for dear life. Twisting in his arms, she tried to get closer to him and ended up on the bed with him next to her. He covered her with his body and kissed her several more times, until he realized he was having very erotic thoughts. He raised up, moved aside and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry, Ray, if that was too much. I didn't mean to take advantage of you."

She giggled. "I didn't mean to take advantage of you either."

He chuckled. "Um, well, *you* can take advantage of *me* anytime you want," he said raising his eyebrows up and down.

She gave a slight laugh.

"Really, Ray, I hope you don't think that was too forward. It wasn't my plan."

"Your plan? Okay, then, what *was* your plan?"

He smiled. "I was gonna comfort you today and I was gonna kiss you *tomorrow* night at midnight."

She nodded her head. "So, is that plan scrapped now?"

"No."

She smiled. “Then I’ll accept the comfort now, and I’ll look forward to tomorrow night.”

“Sounds good.”

“So, how will you comfort me?”

He smiled. “Well, first, I’m gonna feed you, and then I’m gonna tell you all about what I’ve found out and the plans I have to make it right.”

“Have you found me another job?”

“You haven’t been fired yet, and you won’t be. I guarantee it.”

“Well, that actually IS comforting. You should’ve led with that.”

He chuckled. “Well, if I’d done that, you wouldn’t have been sad and in need of comfort and I might not have had the chance to kiss you.”

She nodded. He stood and pulled her up and took her in his arms. “Before we leave the privacy of your room, just once more.”

She stood on her toes, he tilted her face up and kissed her. When he pulled away, he shook his head. “Wow.”

She smiled. “Wow?”

“Yeah, wow. I won’t be able to get enough of that for a very long time.”

To Raylynn, that sounded like a very good thing, really, right now, the only good thing she could think of happening.

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JoJo shared dinner with the Quinn sisters and took an early leave, though it had been tempting to stay a little later and have some more alone time with Raylynn. His father had texted him with Brian Canter’s phone number and the message that preliminary investigations seemed to point to Brian being a good guy, but they would have to actually speak to him to make the complete decision. The man is forty-seven years old, married, has three children. Son, age twenty-three, son age eighteen, and daughter age sixteen.

His father then asked if JoJo wanted him to call or if JoJo wanted to do it himself. As tempting as it had been to let his father handle it for him, he decided he was supposed to be a man, and should act accordingly. So, he ate dinner with Ray and Kay, got in his car and drove home. But instead of going inside, he sat in his car to make the call.

JoJo frowned when the call went to message. Rather than leave a message, which almost no one ever takes time to check these days, he hung up and texted instead.

~~ Mr. Canter, my name is JoJo Adams and I am currently receiving PT at one of your facilities. I would like to speak to you about an incident that happened earlier today. Please call me ASAP.

JoJo sent the message and waited. The call came back almost immediately.

“Hello,” JoJo said.

“Hello,” a friendly voice said. “Is this really JoJo Adams?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your name doesn’t come up on the call.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry about that. My number is encrypted. Security reasons.”

“I understand. What can I do for you, JoJo?”

“Sir, have you heard about what happened at the *West End PT* clinic earlier today?”

JoJo asked calmly.

"Actually, I was *not* told of the incident, but right before you called my daughter was telling me about something she saw on social media about it."

"Yes, sir, it appears to be going viral."

"I'm sorry about that," Brian Canter said.

"Oh, that part is no problem. I'm used to it. What I'm calling about, Mr. Canter, is well, actually, I'm calling on behalf of the employee, Raylynn Quinn, who was the center of the altercation today."

"Well, if she was in the wrong, I promise you she will be disciplined or let go."

"That's why I'm calling, Mr. Canter. She was not in the wrong. I'm calling to defend her and to make sure she does not lose her job."

"Oh, I see. Well, since I haven't been filled in on this, maybe you should tell me what exactly happened."

JoJo went on to tell the man everything that happened. He told him to watch the security video and to see if he could find the full video from a teen boy who'd posted his own video online. After he finished the telling he went on to give his opinion. "Mr. Canter," JoJo started.

"Please, call me Brian."

"Yes, sir, I'll try, though I'm used to showing respect to people older than I am."

Brian chuckled. "That is wonderful, Mr. Adams. I've heard that about you, that you are respectful and well-mannered, except when you're on the field."

JoJo laughed. "Yeah, I might get a little exuberant when I'm on the field."

"So, JoJo, what is it you're asking of me?"

"Well, it's several things. First, I want to make this right for your employee."

"You say, she's being disciplined?"

"Yes, sir, I mean, not formally, but it seems she is because rather than giving her the benefit of the doubt, she was told to go home. Now, that might sound simply like a de-escalation type of move, however, it comes across as more of a punishment. The woman who actually assaulted the employee was catered to and apologized to, rather than having her removed from the facility. In my opinion, the manager, I understand her name is Melinda Fletcher, she should have backed up and supported her employee."

"I agree. The employee did not push or touch the client, correct?"

"Correct. I witnessed the entire altercation. Now, the woman who assaulted your employee is powerful. I had my Uncle do some looking into things. You know my Uncle is second in command at Ameritech Security."

"Yes, I do happen to know that."

"My uncle found that the woman, Lynn Cofer is the wife of Baldwin Cofer of the Cofer Group. They have a lot of money and power in the world of the arts and especially, dance. Their daughter, the one I told you this whole thing is about, who is not ready to get back on her feet, her name is Alexis Cofer, and goes by Lexi, she is a ballet dancer who has broken her ankle twice."

"Your uncle was able to get into private medical records?"

"Oh, no, sir, he got that off Lexi's social media accounts."

"Got it."

"Anyway, I believe your manager, Ms. Fletcher was catering toward Mrs. Cofer because the woman has some power to recommend your facility to any and all dancers who have injured themselves and need rehabilitation. That's a lot of business. She's making a business decision, that is, a decision based on money, based on a bottom line, rather than doing what is right in this circumstance. I understand trying to make wise business decisions, but never at the cost of one's integrity or at the cost of the integrity of your business. For how long would your good reputation last if an employee recommends a slower rehab period for someone and that employee is fired, and then your facility gives the green light to this dancer and she injures her foot for life?

"I know for sure that I'm depending on the expertise of my therapist at your center to help my shoulder rehab to where I can play again, if not for the pros then at the very least to coach. Will that therapist give me the treatment and the recommendations that are best for *me,* or for your bottom line? How could I know?"

"You are making a very good point, JoJo."

"Thank you, sir. May I ask, this Melinda Fletcher, I'm sure she has a reputation for making good business decisions that keep you in the black, but is she a physical therapist? Does she know anything about physical therapy? If she did, she would've known, as did we all, all who were present today, patients and therapists, we all knew, that what that woman was screaming and yelling about was not in the best interest of her daughter."

"What are you getting at?"

"Well, sir, just an outsider's point of view, but I'm thinking the manager who runs your facility should at least be a DPT and should have lots of experience in treating patients."

"Well, I once thought that too, but was convinced that the person running the business should be someone who knows business and how to increase it and that we shouldn't waste a good therapist behind a desk."

JoJo nodded as he thought.

"Hello?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Sorry. I was thinking. To me, the answer to that problem would be to have a business manager and a manager over the therapists and the business manager cannot fire a therapist, and the therapist manager cannot fire, let's say, the accountant, or like, the receptionist. Or at least they must both have power and they must both agree on the firing of a therapist.

"I mean, for example, the man who is my therapist, he is exuberant and friendly and obviously knows what he's doing and has a lot of experience. If you were to ask him what he thought of today's fiasco, I'm sure he would agree that the Cofer woman was way out of line and your employee, Raylynn Quinn, was exactly correct in what she said.

"And just another thought— as far as wasting a good therapist behind a desk, maybe as they get older and have more experience, they might want a break and work as a therapist supervisor. Maybe they might want to still work with patients but not as many so they can do a duo type of job. I mean, again, just as an example, my therapist, his name is Lester Moore, I sent him this morning to get a supervisor and he ran and got the manager. She immediately sent Miss Quinn to sit in her office and then straightaway

began apologizing to Mrs. Cofer who was demanding she fire Miss Quinn. Which is ridiculous.

"If for example, Lester had been a supervisor, he would have de-escalated the situation by explaining what could happen to her daughter if she gets back on her foot too early. He could give her a second opinion on the situation and maybe even simply offer to have her work with a different therapist. Mrs. Fletcher was unable to do that because she knew pretty much nothing about the rehabilitation of a dancer's broken ankle."

"Well, JoJo, it sounds like you've given this a lot of thought."

"I have. I don't like injustice, Mr. Canter, I mean, Brian." He sighed. "Sorry, sir, I can't do it. I'll have to go with Mr. Canter."

Brian nodded with a smile. "No problem."

"So, Mr. Canter, may I ask you a few questions?"

"Sure."

"You are the same Brian Canter who owns the football equipment company, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"What made you decide to go into that business?"

"Well, I had two sons who both played football. When those boys were little and playing peewee football, I found that one company had a monopoly of providing equipment for thousands of teams statewide. I thought I could provide a better, more organized situation for teams not only in our state, but as you probably know, I've grown to a national company. We provide good equipment and uniforms for all ages at *reasonable* prices and even offer discounts to poorer areas and help with fundraisers too."

JoJo felt encouraged by the information. "Well, sir, it sounds like you've done a magnificent job of increasing your business from a state level to a national level, unless you used any questionable business practices in order to do so."

"Thank you, I think. Though that sounded like a veiled insult."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean it as an insult. It was more like a veiled question I guess. I'm just trying to get the measure of who I'm dealing with."

"I see and I guess I understand. So, the answer is, no, I don't believe in dishonesty. I wanted to show my boys that it could be done in an honest and fair way. It took hard work and late nights, but I made it happen."

JoJo smiled. "That is awesome, Mr. Canter. And may I ask, when did you decide to go into the physical therapy business?"

"When my oldest son was injured in a high school football game. He ruptured his Achilles tendon. He had surgery and had twelve weeks of physical therapy. The therapy sessions were a nightmare. Waiting long periods of time in an uncomfortable waiting room, a therapist trying to work on two or three patients at a time and not really paying attention to each patient's needs. I said to my wife one day that someone needs to open a PT clinic and run it right. She dared me to make it happen. And so, I did. I try to make sure appointments are not scheduled too close together, that the facilities are bright, comfortable and not a stressful place to be, because the patients are already going

through a hard stressful time.

"I try to hire the best, the most knowledgeable, the most charismatic and confident therapists, because confidence instills confidence in the patients. I wasn't as worried about the money I would make as I wanted to see if it could be done with integrity and honesty. I thought I'd accomplished my goal. Apparently I have not."

JoJo grimaced. "Well, sir, what took place today wasn't actually a failure as much as a call to action. Mr. Canter, I'm young and obviously not in a place to offer business advice to anyone, however, I do know when I can make a difference. I asked you all those questions because I wanted to see where your head was at, what kind of businessman you are. I guess I wanted to know if your bottom line trumped your ethics. From what you say, it seems like ethics and honesty come first."

"I hope that's how I come across in the business world."

"I realize, Mr. Canter, if you go against your manager, Melinda Fletcher and against Mrs. Cofer, and keep your employee, Cofer might threaten to send the dance business elsewhere. You could lose business."

Brian sighed. "Yes, I could, and probably will, but I have to do what's right in this situation."

"I'm glad you think that, but I don't want you to take my word for it. Talk to the other therapists that were present there today. Ask them what they think. Do a little investigating."

"JoJo, your word is good for me."

"Well, I truly appreciate that, but I'm saying for you to not take my word for it because I may not be very objective. So, full disclosure, I know Raylynn Quinn personally. I want to be completely honest with you. You may have heard a few weeks ago when a man was beating a girl in the USC parking lot. I helped the girl. Her name is Kaylee Quinn. In helping Kaylee I met Raylynn Quinn at the hospital. She's Kaylee's sister. They both are really good girls, I mean, young ladies.

"I've gotten to know them both well. I asked Raylynn out on a first date just two days ago. I found out she worked where I would be going for my PT. So, when I saw her there this morning, I was very interested in what was taking place. The video you saw will show me stepping in after Mrs. Cofer hit Raylynn. Because, I'm sorry, it's not in me to stand by and watch some completely sweet and innocent girl get slapped across the face like that when it was obvious that no one was gonna step in. So, *that's* the situation. I thought about going on social media. I still could I guess to try to clear up this situation. I do have some influence. But I wanted to bring everything straight to you first."

"I see. Is that a veiled threat?"

"Oh! No, sir. I was just thinking out loud. So anyway, Mr. Canter, do your own investigation. And I hope you'll do the right thing. Make the right changes. If anyone should be called to account, it should be Fletcher and of course, Mrs. Cofer. I asked Raylynn to file assault charges against the Cofer lady, but she is afraid to do so because she thinks it will lessen her chances of keeping her job. She's probably right about that as it stands right now. And that's why I came to you. In hopes that right, truth and justice will prevail." He stopped and chuckled. "I realize that sounded cheesy."

Brian laughed. "Cheezy is always good."

"Yeah, on a pizza."

"JoJo, it has actually been a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you for taking the time to call me and explain the situation. I apologize that your first day of therapy began in such an unpleasant way. When is your next session scheduled?"

"Nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Okay then. I have some things to attend to. Thanks again, JoJo."

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Canter."

"You're welcome and goodnight."

"Goodnight, sir."

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December 31st 10 AM EST Tuesday Morning

Tanner Home Pine Forest, Georgia

"Higher, Gabe. Go higher," Iris screamed in delight.

"If I go any higher, you're gonna fall out of the swing."

"I don't care. I fink I gonna fwy!"

Gabe's eyes opened in horror as his sister let go of the swing.

He dove for her as she tumbled backward. He caught her, but then the wooden swing came back and bashed him in the side of the head. He grunted as he hit the ground, rolling to keep Iris from being hurt. He sprawled onto his back and lay there. Iris put her little hands on his cheeks. "Gabe, is you okay?"

He groaned.

"Gabe, is you hurt?"

When he didn't answer, she jumped up and went running into the house. "Daddy, Daddy, Gabe is hurt!"

Keegan looked up from his phone. "Hey, Dalton, check in later. Something's goin' down."

Keegan rose. "Where is he?"

"Outside. The swing hit him. I fink he's dead."

Keegan ran outside, and at the same time, Lizzy came running down the stairs and also headed out the back door. Gabe was sprawled on his back, now lying under the swing that had come to a halt. Keegan knelt next to his son. He was breathing. He checked his pupils and Gabe moaned and opened his eyes.

"What happened?" Lizzy said as she knelt down.

Gabe scooted out from under the swing and sat up. He put his hand to the side of his head and groaned. "What happened? That little munchkin happened. Iris, why did you do that?"

"What did she do?" Keegan asked.

"She let go."

"I was gonna fwy," she said, her little chin starting to quiver.

Gabe pulled his hand away from his head and Lizzy gasped.

"Oh my goodness, Gabe, you're bleeding," Lizzy said.

Keegan held out his hand. "Can you stand?"

Gabe nodded, took his father's hand and let him pull him up.

"Come in the house and let me see if you need stitches," Lizzy said.

He sighed and went inside. Keegan scooped up his daughter and carried her in. He took her to his office, sat her on his lap and played back the security camera.

He scowled. "Iris, what were you thinking?"

"I was gonna fwy," she said again.

He played it back and watched again. "Sweetie. You can't fly. We humans don't fly. If Gabe hadn't caught you, you could've been hurt. And now Gabe got hurt because he had to catch you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I sowwy, Daddy. It felt wike I can fwy."

"I understand that feeling. It's a nice feeling, but always remember, people don't fly. If we try, we will fall and get hurt."

She nodded. "Is Gabe gonna die?"

"No, he's not gonna die. But he's hurt."

"He got bwoody."

"That's right. He got bloody. And you need to go in the kitchen and tell him you're sorry, and tell him thanks for not letting you fall. Got it?"

She sniffed. "Yes, sir."

He hugged her. "I love you, Iris."

"I wove you too, Daddy."

"No more jumping out of swings."

"I didn't jump, Daddy. I wet go."

He tried to keep from smiling. "Well, no more letting go then."

"Yes, sir."

He stood and put her on the floor and offered his hand. "Come on, let's go see how he's doing."

They went to the kitchen. Gabe sat in a chair while Lizzy cleaned up the blood and examined the wound.

"Stitches?" Keegan asked.

Lizzy shook her head. "I think I can just clean it up real good and use some of the Dermabond. He'll be okay."

Iris put her hands on Gabe's thighs. "I sowwy, Gabe. I won't wet go anymore."

He smiled at her. "Good."

"Fank you for catching me."

"You're welcome."

Keegan chuckled. "Wait 'til you see what happened on the security footage, Lizzy. It was actually pretty impressive the way he dove in there to save her. He was the one flying."

Gabe smiled. But the smile only lasted a little while. He was a little down. He missed Taylor somethin' awful. This evening, everyone would be at the Kinos' plantation home, at a New Year's Eve ball. They would be holding the one they love. Only a few people wouldn't. Laynahbug. Lily. The younger kids. And him. He wasn't the type to walk around feeling sorry for himself. He was extremely blessed. And so today, he would be in service mode, doing what he can for the members of his family and his community. And tonight, after he helped with the setup, he'd dance with Lily and Laynah, and with Iris and would try to bless those he came in contact with. No big deal. It wouldn't always

be like this and he could handle it.

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John 16:22
"So also you have sorrow now,
but I will see you again,
and your hearts will rejoice,
and no one will take your joy from you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

December 31st 7:30 AM PST Tuesday Morning
West End Sports Medicine and PT Clinic, Los Angeles, California

Raylynn pulled into the parking lot. She'd been called and told to meet with the manager in her office at 8:00 AM. She hadn't been able to sleep and so she decided to get dressed and go on to work. She first saw Kaylee off, who was going with Melody over to the Kinos to find something better to wear to the dance tonight. They'd been able to find a few things at the thrift store, and Ray had worked tirelessly on making them age appropriate, but then Melody and Kaylee were chatting on the phone and they decided to go shop Jeffy's and Mrs. Kino's closets.

Right now though, Raylynn's heart was beating a mile a minute. This was it, she guessed. They were about to let her know if she would be fired. Looking around she thought there were an awful lot of cars in the parking lot for it being so early.

To waste some time she pulled out her phone and scrolled through the social media that Kaylee had pointed out to her this morning. "She was trending," Kaylee had said.

Of course, that wasn't true. It was JoJo who was trending. One video zeroed in on the fierce expression on his face when he'd said, "Stop. Now." There was a comment below that said, "When JoJo talks, even karens listen."

She'd already watched that one several times. He was really, Raylynn thought dreamily, about as masculine as a guy could get. There were other parts of the video too that had been re-posted. Like one of Mrs. Cofer slapping Raylynn over and over. The comments were mostly all in defense of Ray, though there were some wondering what she'd done to deserve the slap.

There was more full-length video of almost the entire exchange. Or at least, the exchange once Mrs. Cofer had become loud enough to get everyone's attention. Poor Lexi was humiliated. It was Lexi who Raylynn was most concerned about. The girl had gone onto her social media accounts and complained bitterly about hating her mother and "*did that just make her a horrible person*." Raylynn could see that the girl was torn up emotionally. This was not good for a girl her age.

She scrolled some more on YouTube and found other directions the videos had taken. Some comments were lewd sexual suggestions, saying Raylynn could come do physical therapy on them anytime, day or night, with hundreds of likes. She shook her head. Then she saw one claiming the entire thing was staged. It was so easy to see how those with weak minds will never know the truth of anything. Then she read one comment that took off on its own thread saying Mrs. Cofer was probably right and made to look like she's the bad guy, and that Raylynn was probably a diversity hire and incompetent.

She couldn't help it. The tears welled up and spilled over. She sniffed. "Oh good

grief," she said as she grabbed a fast food napkin she'd stuffed in her console, tilted her rearview mirror down and dabbed at her eyes.

She startled, gasping loudly when knuckles rapped sharply on her window. Heart pounding she looked out. "Oh, JoJo, you scared me."

He nodded. "I see that. Sorry. Unlock your door."

She did as asked. He immediately knelt down beside her, took her hands and looked into her eyes. "Don't cry, Ray. It's all gonna be okay."

She sniffed. "What are you doing here so early?"

"I came to support you."

"That's very sweet of you, but it's not like you can come in with me and hold my hand."

He smiled. "It's exactly like that."

She shook her head, thinking he was just being silly.

He reached out and used his thumb to wipe at the moisture under her eyes. It reminded her of last night when he touched her lips before he'd kissed her and she suddenly felt very self-conscious.

He smiled and offered his hand. "Come on, you don't wanna be late."

She glanced at the clock on her dash. It was almost eight. "How did you know I was supposed to be here by eight?"

He smiled. "Because I had a meeting here at seven."

"You did?"

"Yes. I've just come from a meeting with your old boss, your new boss, and several other people."

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll see. Cheer up, Ray. I told you it will all be okay." He offered his hand again. She took it and allowed him to pull her from the car.

She stood in front of him and looked up at his handsome face.

He smiled. "Good morning!"

She nodded. "Good morning to you," she said softly.

He squeezed her hand. "Um, so, grab your purse, take your keys from the ignition. Anything else you need?"

She nodded. "Water bottle. You're awfully bossy today."

He smiled. "Sorry. I'm used to bossing people around on the field and I'm in business mode right now. It looked like you forgot those two things and that would be understandable because your mind is a little distracted right now. Let's head in."

She walked beside him. He opened the door for her. She looked around the reception area and nodded at a few of her co-workers who were standing around talking. She felt embarrassed to see them, after being sent home the day before, but they greeted her cheerfully.

JoJo escorted Ray through the doors to the large PT area and then to the right toward the offices. They went into Mrs. Fletcher's office. Ray nodded at the woman. A man was there that Raylynn didn't know.

JoJo spoke up. "Raylynn, this is Brian Canter."

Ray offered her hand and nodded politely. Brian shook her hand and smiled warmly.

"I'm sorry for the hard day you had yesterday, Miss Quinn."

Ray nodded, not sure what to say.

"Ray, Mr. Canter is the owner of this facility," JoJo went on.

Ray's eyes opened wide. "Oh!"

"Everyone, please take a seat," Brian said as he seated himself behind Melinda Fletcher's desk. Melinda sat in one of the four chairs remaining.

"JoJo, will you ask Les to come in?" Brian said.

JoJo poked his head out and nodded at Les. He came in with a smile and sat in the chair next to Melinda. Those two chairs were against the wall in front of a window. JoJo and Raylynn sat in the two chairs in front of the desk.

"Okay, so, let me begin this meeting with the elephant in the room," Brian began. "Miss Quinn, I know you believe that your job is on the line and I want you to know right now that as long as you choose to do so, you will most definitely continue working here."

Her eyes opened wide and a beautiful smile bloomed across her face. JoJo smiled down at her and took her hand and squeezed it.

"I've looked into your records, Miss Quinn, and I understand you graduated early from high school, you were at the top of your class in an accelerated program to get your DPT. I've spoken with or texted with dozens of patients that you've worked with since you began here this past August. You've never called out of work, you've never been late and you left early only once and that is when your sister was assaulted at USC a few weeks ago. I've spoken with your co-workers. It is the consensus of those co-workers that you didn't say or do anything wrong to Mrs. Cofer yesterday. I apologize that she assaulted you."

"Well, she didn't really assault me, she only slapped me," Ray said, automatically reaching up to touch her cheek.

Brian nodded. "That is assault. No one is allowed to strike you."

She nodded.

"I am also sorry that no one, other than Mr. Adams, stepped forward to defend you, but, that is really *my* fault. They weren't quite sure how to handle that circumstance. It has now been addressed. Melinda has admitted to me that she had no idea if what you said or what Mrs. Cofer said was true. She only knew that the Cofers represent money to our facility. She now sees that sometimes money cannot be the motivating factor in a situation. She thought she was doing what I would want, and that is what makes it my fault. I have not been clear enough in stating the ethics upon which this business is based."

"I do apologize," Melinda said quickly. "I'm sorry I made it look like you were in the wrong, Raylynn. I realize that must have been embarrassing for you. I hired you because your credentials as a student were the top of your class and you have always been a hard worker. Your co-workers all have nothing but good things to say about you and I consider you a huge asset to our team."

"Thank you," Raylynn said softly, her heart already starting to heal.

"However, Ms. Fletcher did tell me that she thought you provoked Mrs. Cofer," Brian said. "So, we might need to talk about that."

Ray's brow creased as she thought. "She told me that yesterday and I was in such

shock I didn't question her, but really," Raylynn said as she turned to look at Melinda. "How do you think I provoked her?"

Melinda frowned. "You said she didn't care about her own daughter."

Ray shook her head. "I don't remember exactly what I said, but I'm sure that's not what I said."

"I listened to the security footage; it sounds like that's what you said," Melinda defended.

Ray looked up at Mr. Canter. "Would it be possible to listen to the tape, because I'm sure that's not what I said." She asked so meekly he could hardly turn her down.

Melinda went to the computer and played the footage.

It was hard for Raylynn to watch the video. She grimaced as she listened. Then she said, "Stop. Back it up. Listen right there."

They all strained to listen carefully. "What I'm concerned about is Lexi and I'm thinking maybe if you were as concerned about her an..."

"See," Ray said. "She cut me off. I didn't say if maybe you were concerned about your daughter. What I was going to say, and she cut me off, was if she were as concerned about her *ankle* as she was about the dance competition then she would try to understand that Lexi's ankle could be permanently damaged. Like, forever. That is what I was going to say."

They all listened again and realized, she did indeed cut her off.

"I stand corrected, again," Melinda put in with a smile.

Ray smiled at her. "That's okay. When things are crazy, it's hard to hear everything."

JoJo smiled. This girl kept showing Christ-like qualities and it was making his heart feel like she was the one. He snapped out of it when Brian spoke again.

"Okay then, moving on. Mr. Adams and I had a long talk last night and we brainstormed a little and came up with a solution to the way this business is structured. Ms. Fletcher is an excellent business manager and will remain so. I've decided, upon JoJo's suggestion, that we also need a manager and leader for the therapists, and have asked Mr. Moore to fill that position for now. He's gonna give it a try and help to carve out what his duties and requirements will be, so, we will give him some leeway, while he and I work this out. So, Miss Quinn, you will now answer to a new 'boss,' Mr. Lester Moore, who also has nothing but good things to say about you."

Ray glanced over at Les, who smiled and winked at her.

Brian went on. "From now on, if there is any trouble, call for Mr. Moore, who will try to always be available on the floor, though he will also be taking care of patients himself."

"Like me," JoJo added quickly.

Ray smiled at JoJo and then at Les.

"Now," Brian continued. "What's to be done about the Cofers? That is the question of the day. I've spoken to Mr. Cofer, because his wife refused to speak to me. I've also spoken to Alexis. Mr. Cofer actually apologized for his wife. He obviously doesn't know what to do about her. He says she is out of control and extremely obsessed with the dance world that Alexis is involved in. He thinks this obsession is not good for his daughter.

He says that he loves dance, and he loves when his daughter dances, but she is becoming sullen and he believes the dance world is quickly losing its luster for Alexis."

He stopped and smiled kindly at Raylynn. "So, my question for you, Miss Quinn, is what do you want to do?"

"Will Lexi be coming back here for her therapy?"

"Not sure. Mr. Cofer says she will. Mrs. Cofer says she will never step foot in here again, and as far as I'm concerned, I don't want *her* in my facility either."

Ray sighed. "Lexi is such a sweet girl. She knows her ankle was not allowed to heal properly last time. She wants it to heal all the way and rehab correctly, but the pressure from her mother is hard for her to stand up to, which is why she vents on social media."

"Okay, so, let's break this down. You'd like to continue working with her?"

"Yes, sir. If she still wants to work with me."

"And that would mean her father would have to bring her."

Ray nodded. "Or a friend."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Let me ask you this, Miss Quinn. Have you thought about pressing charges against Mrs. Cofer?"

Ray nodded.

"And, I guess you've decided that you don't want to go that route?"

"Actually, I *do* want to do that."

Everyone looked at her, surprise on their faces.

"You do?" JoJo asked.

Ray nodded. "Yes. I believe I do. I think something has to be done to help poor Lexi. You have all just talked about stepping in to help me yesterday. Well, who's gonna step in and help Lexi? Her mother is a bully and usually bullies are bullies because no one has ever dared to stand up to them. Not even Mr. Cofer. He just told you, he doesn't know how to handle her. Well, it may not be much, and she may not be too inconvenienced, but maybe, if I have her arrested for assault, she might think twice before she slaps someone else. And it occurred to me last night, that if she slapped me, a perfect stranger, right there in front of everyone, has she hit Lexi? I mean, I know Lexi is her daughter and that's different. Still, there's a difference between spanking a child for going in the street and slapping a grown person in anger because you can't have your way."

"I agree," JoJo said quickly before she had a chance to rethink it.

"Then, if you want to press charges, we'll handle that today," Brian said quickly. "And separately, you can speak to an attorney about bringing a civil lawsuit. That might hurt her in the pocketbook more than paying a fine to the court and being let go with a slap on the wrist."

Ray nodded thoughtfully, because she hadn't thought about that. "Thank you," Ray said quietly. "I'm actually surprised that you're being so helpful and understanding."

Brian laughed. "Well, that's not a good thing either. Maybe I need to be a little more accessible to my employees. I am willing to step up and do the right thing and I'm glad JoJo thought to bring this all to my attention."

"Mr. Canter," Melinda began. "We will lose some business over this."

He sighed. "I'm not as concerned about that as I am concerned about doing the right thing. I'm not concerned about losing the Cofers, but like Miss Quinn, I am concerned

about Lexi."

"That's good," JoJo said. "And now that I hear you say those words, I'm pretty sure that I can make up for any business lost."

"How?" Melinda asked.

He smiled. "With my charming personality."

They all chuckled.

"No, really, the Cofers have pull over the dance community. But I and my family have pull over the sports communities. Not just football, but most all sports, including martial arts. We have connections in baseball, in volleyball, we have millions of social media followers and we have our secret weapon."

"What's that?" Brian asked.

JoJo grinned. "My cousin, Taylor, and her boyfriend, Gabe Tanner."

"Ah yes," Les said. "The social media phenoms."

JoJo nodded. "Yep, but you know what else? We have an 'in' in the dance community too. Ever heard of Caro Smith, Toby Nash's wife?"

"Yeah, she's a judge on *America Can Dance*, right?"

"Well, actually, she used to be, but now she's a producer of the show. But what she actually is, is the director of the *New York School of Dance*. And there is a Los Angeles campus of the *New York School of Dance* I know, because my cousin dances there and Caro Smith is like family to us. So, what I'm saying is, you are not gonna be hurting for business, because we Adams and Kinos like to endorse businesses based in honesty and integrity and helping others. As a matter of fact, Mr. Canter, you may have so much increase in your business that you'll have to open a few more locations."

Brian raised his eyebrows and nodded with a smile.

Raylynn smiled. This day was turning out to be really awesome.

Brian thanked everyone and adjourned the meeting. They made their way out to the main area and Ray was surprised that the other therapists and office workers alike were there, applauding her. Her cheeks turned pink and JoJo put his good arm around her. She looked up at him. He'd done this for her. It was him who thought to call Mr. Canter and make everything right.

She turned to him. "Thank you, JoJo. I can't thank you enough, and I can't believe how you turned this all around."

"You're welcome. It really hurt seeing you suffer so much yesterday. It kinda broke my heart, so, really, I did this for me too. It's such a relief. Whew," he said with a laugh.

She giggled.

"Well, it's about time for me to start my therapy," he said.

"And I should have a patient coming in any moment," she agreed.

"And you get off at what time?" he asked.

"I get off at 1:00."

"What are you gonna do then?"

"Well, I mean, I didn't sleep at all last night, so I'm thinking, since I'll be out late tonight, I'd better go home and take a nap."

He nodded. "Good idea. But let me just say, I'm not gonna keep you out too late tonight. After all, the *Rose Bowl* is tomorrow!"

She nodded. “I know. I’m so excited. A night with you, and the *Rose Bowl*! And I still have a job! Right now, life is pretty darn good!”

He nodded. “It’s always good as long as we’re working for the Lord. Okay, so, I don’t wanna keep Les waiting. So, if I don’t see you before I leave, I’ll see you at six tonight.”

She smiled. “I’m very much looking forward to it.”

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December 31st 3:00 PM PST Tuesday Afternoon
Quinn Home, Los Angeles, California

Melody pulled up past an old green truck to right behind Ray’s car at the front of the little blue house. “Okay, Kay, you want me to help you get everything in?”

Kaylee shook her head. “Nope. I got it. Thanks, Mel, this was a blast.” She gathered up several dress bags from the backseat. As it turned out, Jeffy and Shelley decided they needed to clean out their closets and ended up giving Kaylee several dresses and pairs of shoes, and coats.

Melody watched her head toward the door and when Kaylee tripped over one of the longer bags, and dropped a bag full of shoes, Melody jumped from her car. Laughing, she helped pile things back into Kaylee’s arms and unlocked the door for her. Once she was sure Kaylee had all of the things inside, she waved. “Okay, Kaylee, see you in a few hours!”

“Byee,” Kaylee said as she kicked the door closed and took the load in her arms to her bedroom. She began unzipping dress bags and laying things out on her bed. In a few minutes she was gonna wake up Ray and see if she wanted to change her outfit for tonight.

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December 31st 3:00 PM PST Tuesday Afternoon
Ameritech Offices, Los Angeles, California

Kristy leaned forward to look closer at her screen and watched the man now leaning against the front of his truck, smoking a cigarette. She had a bad feeling. She clicked some keys and pulled up a better view, trying to get a shot of the license plate. She went backward in time to before the man was out of his truck, zeroed in and got the number. Immediately she sent the number to the ALPR. It came back to an Eloise Nibbs. Obviously, this guy isn’t Eloise. Also the address it came back to was over in Torrance.

Kristy hadn’t been personally monitoring the security cameras set up on the Quinn home. It was impossible to personally monitor every security camera in every place and every case that Ameritech was screening. It was AI that had alerted her to something out of place or not normal. She backed it up and found an old model green pickup two different times at the house next door. Further checking showed the pickup driving by several times.

She picked up her phone. “Agent Driver,” she said the moment he picked up. “I have a bad feeling about a guy who seems to be watching a home.”

“Which home?”

“The Quinn home, sir, and both girls are currently there.”

“I’ll be right there.” Senior Agent Driver came to see what Kristy was seeing and

almost instantly picked up the phone.

"Davis," Jeff said.

"Sir, there's someone watching the Quinn house. The plates on a green Ford pickup come back to Eloise Nibbs and Ryan Nibbs is the..."

Jeff interrupted. "Is the one who was arrested recently trying to get to Kaylee. Got it. Thanks. Good work. Stay on the line." Jeff clicked over and immediately called for agents in the area and then local police.

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Kaylee arranged all of the dresses and shoes, then headed to Ray's room and quietly opened her door. "Ray," she said softly, trying to not startle her.

Raylynn turned over and smiled. "Hey, Kay."

"How ya feelin'?"

"So good," she said as she stretched.

Kay smiled. "That JoJo, he's amazing, huh?"

Ray nodded with a sigh and a smile. "He is amazing," she agreed. "He must have been on the phone half the night to make happen what he made happen. Then he was at *West End* this morning before me, took care of business, had therapy, went to football practice. And he'll be here in a few hours. I guess I need to get up and eat something and get a shower and start getting ready."

"Yes, you do, but first, you need to come see what Dr. Kino and Miss Shelley sent home with me."

She sat up and smiled. "Oh, well, that sounds like fun. Let's go see."

She got out of bed and started toward the door.

Kaylee turned to head back to her room and gasped.

A man stood in the hall, smiling and holding a large knife in his hand. The man laughed. "Scared ya, huh?"

"Wha... who are you? Get out of my house!" Kay screamed.

Still inside her room, Ray instantly picked up her phone and sent the word 'help' to the one person she knew would do it immediately.

Kay ran back into Ray's room, slammed the door and locked it.

"Ya can't hide in there forever. I just wanna have a little conversation with you. That's all."

"Go to hell," Kaylee screamed through the door.

The large man shoved his weight against the door, once, twice and simply broke the door down. Both girls screamed.

The man laughed. "Let's see, which one of ya is Kaylee? Scott said it was the younger, sexy one, with shorter, lighter hair. Soooo, that would be you," he said, pointing at and walking toward Kaylee.

Kaylee turned and grabbed the small lamp off of Ray's bedside table and threw it at him. He knocked it aside and grabbed for the girl.

Ray ran at him. "You leave her alone," she yelled, reaching for his arm and grabbing his wrist with both her hands, trying to keep him from using the knife to hurt Kaylee.

He tried to make her let go but she wasn't budging, so he finally turned his attention completely on her, which was just what she wanted.

He wrestled her down onto the floor beside the bed, holding the knife over her. “I don’t want to have to hurt ya. Just want to have a conversation.”

“We don’t have anything to say to you. Now get off me,” she screamed.

“Scott told me you were all high and mighty. Looks like I’m gonna have to bring you down off your high horse a little bit.” He chuckled. “High horse. An Injun on a high horse, get it?”

Ray tried to knee him, but only got a glancing blow which did nothing but make him very angry.

“Oh, I see, ya wanna play rough? I’m happy to do that.” He started pressing the knife toward her chest as she tried to hold him back with both her arms.

Kaylee jumped on his back and put her small arm around his throat and tried to squeeze hard enough to cut off his air.

He did finally drop the knife so that he could pull her arm away from his throat.

Kaylee closed her eyes and squeezed as hard as she could.

“Okay, hon, I’ve got this,” she heard as she felt a hand on her back. She looked over her shoulder, saw an Ameritech patch on a jacket, let go of her hold and rolled off the man’s back.

The bad man reached for the knife he’d dropped the moment Kaylee let him go, but the agent merely kicked it away. The agent put his arm around the man’s throat just like Kaylee had done, jerked him up, spun him around, and pushed him against the wall. Another agent quickly cuffed him. The man turned around, screamed at the agent and tried to head butt him. The agent simply punched him, one time, and the man slipped unconscious to the floor.

One agent bent down to help Raylynn from the floor.

She was shaking and pale and trying to catch her breath. “Kaylee?” Ray said.

“I’m okay. I’m right here,” she said, poking her head out from behind the agent.

The agents looked the sisters over. “You ladies okay?” one asked.

Kay and Ray looked at each other and nodded and started to giggle.

The agents didn’t question that response. Many people came through a traumatic experience with that reaction. Some started shaking. Some cried. Some went very still and quiet. Some threw up. And some laughed. Though they knew it was a normal reaction, the girls’ laughter made the agents smile. They both nodded. “Okay, then. I’m gonna take that as a ‘yes’.”

The police arrived and while they and the agents hashed out what happened, Kaylee and Raylynn sat on Ray’s bed, holding each other’s hands and answering questions when asked.

It took JoJo fifteen minutes to arrive. At first the police weren’t gonna let him in, but he told them who he was and that he’d been involved in this case from the beginning and the agents vouched for him and he headed into Ray’s bedroom.

Both sisters looked up when he came into the room. He went to them, knelt down in front of them, took both their hands in his and looked into their eyes to satisfy himself that they were okay. He smiled. “You ladies okay?” he asked.

They both smiled and started to giggle again.

He gave a soft laugh. “Okay then.”

"You shoulda seen 'em, JoJo," one of the agents said. "They really didn't need any help."

"Uh, that's not true," Kay and Ray said at the same time.

"Uh, Mr. Agent, sir, if you hadn't come in when you did, Ray would've been stabbed in the chest," Kaylee argued. "Because I was running out of strength real fast."

"And I was too," Ray said.

The agents went on to explain to JoJo how they found Ray on the bottom doing all she could to hold the knife hand away from herself, and Kay on his back trying to choke him out.

JoJo nodded. "Good job, you two." He breathed deeply as he imagined that knife coming down into Raylynn's chest. He shook his head. "Thank you, Jesus," he whispered.

It was another thirty minutes before the police had gathered the evidence they wanted to gather, had everyone's statements and finally left with the perp.

JoJo looked out front to see his brother Logan, and Ryder and his father and Uncle Joey and Jeff Davis, all talking to each other and to the agents who'd been called to the scene.

Everyone took time to hug the girls and make sure they were okay and also make sure that they knew they were not alone and they had a huge group of people who would always protect them and see to their well-being.

JoJo pulled Ray close. "So, I'm guessing you no longer feel like going to the thing tonight?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Are you kidding me? Of course I want to go. I'm okay. Kay's okay. Everything is okay."

JoJo nodded. "Okay then. I'll run home and take a shower and get dressed."

She nodded. "I'll do the same. But, I'm starving. Is there gonna be food at the party, or ball, or whatever?"

He chuckled. "Yes. Lots and lots of food."

"Of course there is," she said with a laugh. "Your family knows how to party."

"Well, they know how to feed a bunch of athletic boys."

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December 31st 6:00 PM EST Tuesday Evening

Kino Plantation Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe watched as the DJ finished setting up and started playing some music. He looked around. The ballroom was actually a very pretty room. It was large, of course, and perfectly decorated. It had several large columns, two along each side and two at the front of the room. Tonight, it had a mirror ball and spotlights and very classy silvery decorations. There would be over a hundred people here. The guest list had grown as people thought of other people that shouldn't be left out. The Kinos had not only given access to their home as a gift for the families in Pine Forest, but they'd had the event catered, the room decorated and Gabe found he had very little to do as far as the setup.

Even though he didn't have a date, his sisters insisted he get all dressed up and look the part. Lots of people had come early, his family, the Appels, the entire Stewart family, which included the Carters, the Turners, the Rosses, and Ty and Jenny Stewart. The

Murphys were already here. Peyton had run into Avery because she'd come home to visit her family for Christmas, and she'd broken up with her boyfriend, so, she accepted his invitation to join him. Jericho and his guys were here and a few had brought dates. The mayor and his wife were already here and there were plenty more coming who hadn't arrived yet.

The lights were dimmed as the DJ wished everyone a happy new year and invited everyone to grab a person and pull them on out to dance. He said he was gonna start out the special night and play what he considered to be one of the greatest love songs ever written. Great, Gabe thought.

The music started and Gabe knew the song well. It was Ed Sheeran's *Perfect,* and he agreed with the DJ. Sighing, Gabe leaned back against one of the columns near the front of the room, his arms folded on his chest and he watched most everyone snuggle up to dance with their significant other. The words to the song actually choked him up.

[*Note: play this song while you're reading this. It will get to you.]

"I found a love, for me
Darlin', just dive right in and follow my lead.
I found a girl, beautiful and sweet.
I never knew you were the someone waiting for me.
'Cause we were just kids when we fell in love,
Not knowing what it was,
I will not give you up this time.
Darlin', just kiss me slow,
Your heart is all I own,
And in your eyes, you're holding mine.
Baby, I'm dancing in the dark
With you between my arms..."

Gabe's eyes wandered over the people in the room. His father holding his mother close, his hand on her hip, a little too low, almost on her backside. Uncle John and Aunt Jodi snuggled up close. Brody twirling Daisy, and then pulling her close. Vi and CJ barely moving as they swayed together.

Gabe felt the strong tug on his heart, blew out a breath and listened.

"Well, I found a woman, stronger than anyone I know.
She shares my dreams, I hope that someday I'll share her home.
I found a lover, to carry more than just my secrets,
To carry love, to carry children of our own.
We are still kids, but we're so in love,
Fighting against all odds..."

He wanted Taylor at this moment more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. His eyes shifted again. It seemed everyone had moved until there was a space to walk right down the middle of the floor, making a little corridor. His eyes followed the corridor to see a girl at the far end of the room, who looked like his girl. He blinked his eyes. He must be losing his mind because the girl had a gorgeous body and long, dark hair, just like Taylor. He stood up straight and rubbed his eyes and looked again. She was walking toward him, wearing a sparkly, silvery dress with tiny shoulder straps. It came

to mid-thigh and then had silvery fringe hanging from the hem.

He pushed himself off the column where he'd been leaning back and stood straight up, because she looked exactly like Taylor. Then finally, she was close enough to make eye contact, and his heart started beating harder. Taylor. How? He moved forward quickly, made his way through the corridor that had been formed, and she started running. He stopped, and she jumped into his arms.

"Gabe," she cried softly.

He hugged her tight. Was it really her, or had he died and gone to heaven? He buried his face in her hair. "It's really you," he half stated, half asked.

She giggled. "It's me. Surprise."

He squeezed her hard one more time and set her on her feet, cupped her face in his hands, bent his head and kissed her with all the love he felt.

There was applause and cheers and he looked up. Everyone was looking at him and Taylor, videoing them, cheering for them. Only then did it dawn on him that they all knew about this. Even the song, it was picked for this moment. He turned back to look into her eyes. "You're real, right?"

She smiled. "Daddy felt sorry for me cuz I was missing you so much and he flew me here."

"Alone?"

"Well, with agents, but yeah, alone."

They swayed together to the rhythm of the music. This song will be theirs forever. The song came to an end and everyone cheered again.

"Okay," the DJ began. "That was like freakin' awesome! So, Gabe and Taylor. Happy New Year to you!"

Everyone cheered again.

"And now, Gabe, Taylor, I've been told that if I play this next song, you won't disappoint us, so here it goes!"

The floor cleared immediately and the first strains of *Bruno Mars' Uptown Funk* began.

Gabe and Taylor both grinned and nodded and they swung into action, and indeed, they did not disappoint.

When the number ended, everyone crowded around to welcome Taylor back to Pine Forest. There was a lot of laughing over poor Gabe and how pitiful he looked when that first song was playing. Of course, Rose and Lily got everything on camera. They promised to edit it all together and give them a copy of the video.

Little Iris was one of the first to make it to them and Taylor knelt down and hugged her and exclaimed over how beautiful she looked in her pretty dress. Hannah finally got to Taylor. Taylor rose and looked into her big eyes. "Oh my goodness, Hannah, you look so beautiful tonight! Just look at you!" She placed her hand on Hannah's cheek. "You look so different. And your hair is so pretty all curled. And look at that dress! I bet when you spin it flies out. Tell me you've tried it."

Hannah giggled. "I tried it in my bedroom."

"Do it now!" Taylor said and grabbed her hand and spun her around.

Hannah laughed. Taylor had a way of making her feel so happy.

Charlie and Lucas and Matthew approached. Lucas had a girl by his side.

"Hey, Taylor," Charlie said.

She smiled brightly. "Hey, Charlie, hey, Matthew! It's so nice to see you guys."

"Taylor," Gabe began. "You remember Lucas? He's Peyton's brother."

"Yes, I do remember. But I don't know this pretty girl."

"Um, this is Abby. Abby, Taylor Kino," Lucas said.

"Hi," Abby said shyly.

"Hi, Abby, it's so nice to meet you. Are you a freshman too?"

She nodded.

Peyton and Avery walked up.

"Avery!" Taylor exclaimed. "Hey! I thought you two broke up."

She frowned. "Hey, Taylor! I wouldn't say we broke up, cuz, really, we weren't ever like, a thing. We just went our separate ways."

"But I heard you had a boyfriend now."

"Yeah, well, that didn't work out."

"I get it," Taylor said. "It's so nice to see you. You too, Peyton. How's it goin' up at UGA?"

Peyton nodded. "It's actually goin' really good."

They spoke a few more minutes and one by one, everybody went back out onto the dance floor.

"Finally," Gabe said. He grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the ballroom, through the large dining room that had three dining tables filled with every kind of goody. They went through the kitchen, turned right, went across the large foyer and into the back den where he took her in his arms and kissed her again. His hand went to her thigh and pulled her leg up toward his hip. She moaned.

He pulled her away. "I'd better stop. I just wanted, more like needed, to get you alone for a minute."

"Then don't stop," she sighed.

"I'd better because I'm thinking about dragging you up to your room and doing more than just kiss you."

She laughed. "I don't think you'd get past the agents."

"Oh, they're here?"

"Yes."

He touched her face. "I've missed you so much."

"I missed you too."

"I can't believe your dad let you come out here."

"Well, he can't stand to see me cry."

"Aww, Tay, what made you cry?"

She shrugged. "I had a bunch of guys calling me asking me to come to a New Year's Eve party with them and it made me cry because I missed you so badly."

He smiled, kissed her and sighed. "How long do you get to stay?"

"Well, I have to be back at school on Monday, and my dad would rather I don't travel on Sunday if I don't have to, so I'm leaving Saturday afternoon."

Gabe nodded. "Four days. That gives us four days together. And then, I'll be out

there a week later. We can handle that."

Taylor nodded. "And then, Gabe, I will get to see you before you report to the training camp, right?"

"Yes. This is it, Tay. I'll be training and going to school. You'll be finishing high school. We're actually moving forward toward our goals instead of in a holding pattern. It's gonna be so good."

She nodded and looked up at him. "Oh how I love you, Gabriel Tanner."

"Me too. I mean, I love you too, Taylor Kino, one day hopefully to be Taylor Kino Tanner."

"Ooo, say that again," she said.

"Taylor—Kino—Tanner."

She smiled.

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December 31st 6:30 PM PST Tuesday Evening

Golden Hotel Ballroom, Los Angeles, California

Logan, JoJo, young Eric, and Ryder Bell stood in a circle, watching the gorgeous departing scenery as the girls left to go to the ladies' room. Melody, Raylynn, Jordan and Kaylee were like something out of a fantasy, especially all dressed up in their New Year's evening finery. None of them were over-the-top, which the guys appreciated. They were all too beautiful to have to have some strange designer gown that called attention to them.

Melody wore a gold, sparkly floor-length dress with capped sleeves. The gold matched her caramel-colored hair. Jordan wore a silver dress with thin straps at the shoulders and a split to mid-thigh, showing off her long, muscular legs. Kaylee wore a floor-length bright pink sparkly A-line confection. She looked sweet and perfect and the pink contrasted against her thick, dark hair and her tan colored skin was mesmerizing. Raylynn wore a long, black, sequin-covered dress with a corset-like bodice. Her shiny black, waist-length hair complemented the dress perfectly. She wore her necklace, the one with the gold cross and teardrop crystals. JoJo had to tear his eyes away from the soft tan skin where it lay.

All four guys shook their heads as they watched them go, then looked up at each other and laughed.

"That's quite a spectacle," young Eric said softly.

Logan nodded. "Are we some lucky guys or what?"

"I'm feeling pretty darn blessed," JoJo agreed.

Ryder grinned. "I'm the one who's out of place here and I'm feelin' really, really grateful."

They all laughed. "You're not out of place, bro," JoJo said. "You're simply a latecomer."

They smiled at the group approaching them. It was Alec and Desi and Zoe and Brook. Desi, dressed in a frothy navy blue gown with lots of ruffles, looked like she was about to pop. Zoe and Brook looked like different people altogether. JoJo almost didn't recognize them. They both were blondes, something JoJo hadn't realized when he'd pulled them off the streets.

Zoe wore a strapless, silver and black dress that came to just above her knees. It had a black sash at the waist. Brook wore a teal-colored dress that had layers, gathered at the waist and also came to just above her knees.

JoJo smiled. “Hello, Zoe, Brook, you two look amazing.”

They giggled and looked up at the handsome guys with stars in their eyes.

“You guys look different all dressed up,” Zoe said.

“You do too,” JoJo countered. His eyes zeroed in on Brook, who’d earlier refused to talk about herself. Ryder had said she was seventeen, but she didn’t look seventeen tonight. She looked like she was twelve. Now that she was clean, she looked very young. She probably wasn’t twelve, but she did look very young.

“Alec, Desi,” Logan said. “It’s nice to see you guys. So tell us, how’s married life?”

Alec smiled. “It’s awesome, Logan. Life is really good right now.”

Desi nodded. “It really is, and it’s been great having these two stay with us.”

“Do you know how much longer they’re gonna be with you?” JoJo asked.

Desi frowned and shook her head. “No, but they have a meeting with your father and with Mrs. Lee coming up this next week.”

Young Eric nodded. “Well, I’m sure between Uncle Mark and Aunt Angel, they’ll get it all figured out.”

Brook and Zoe looked up at the handsome guy.

Zoe smiled. “We saw your movie.”

Eric smiled. “Cool. Did you like it?”

“They loved it,” Alec put in quickly. “They can’t stop talking about it.”

“Actually, they can’t stop talking about you, Eric,” Desi said.

The guys all chuckled.

“De—si,” Zoe complained.

Desi giggled. “It’s okay. You’re not the only ones who feel that way.”

“Hey, everyone,” Phillip said as he and Lyle came to join the group.

“Hi, Phillip,” Zoe said quickly. “You clean up real nice.”

He grinned. “Thanks. So do you.”

She giggled. “Right?”

Phillip laughed. “So, Zoe, would you like to dance?”

“Oh, wow! Yes, I’d love to.”

Phillip and Zoe started out to the dance floor.

Lyle took a deep breath and smiled at Brook. “And would you like to dance? I’m, uh, I’m Phil’s brother.”

Brook smiled. “Phil’s brother, what’s your name?”

“Oh, I’m Lyle.”

“I’m Brook.”

He smiled. “I know who you are.”

She laughed. “Yes, I’d like to dance.”

They watched them go.

Ryder watched for a minute and then looked back at Alec and Desi. “So, are they really doing okay?”

Alec shrugged. “Well, they’re doing pretty good considering where they were a

week ago. But Brook is gonna have a hard time coming up here soon."

"Why?" Ryder asked.

"Well, her story is not quite what she originally told everyone. First, she's not seventeen. She's fifteen. She just turned fifteen last week."

JoJo nodded. "Wow. Ya know, I was just thinking that she looks a lot younger than I thought."

Alec nodded. "So, listen to this; Brook is supposed to be a sophomore at *Huntington Beach High School*. I don't know if you know the story, but she says her mother kicked her out of the house because Brook refused to get along with her new stepfather. Well, that's not true. It was found that her mother and stepfather reported her missing and have been desperate to find her and bring her home. We were required to take both Brook and Zoe to a doctor's appointment and it was found out that Brook—is pregnant. She still won't come clean about everything, but what they're thinking is that she got pregnant and was afraid to tell her parents and then ran away from home so that they wouldn't find out that she'd been sleeping with her boyfriend."

JoJo frowned. "What won't she come clean about?"

"She refuses to tell the case worker or her mother or anyone who the father is."

"So, she doesn't want to get her boyfriend in trouble?"

"That's what they're thinkin'. Brook still refuses to go home and that's why they're meeting with a judge. In the meantime, yesterday, Brook's mom and stepdad tried to confront the boyfriend, who is sixteen, and got into a big battle with him and his parents. Cops were called. They're still trying to sort that all out. Meanwhile, they left Brook with us until she and her parents meet with Mr. Adams and Mrs. Lee and then they'll go before a judge. It's all pretty messed up."

"Wow, that is all messed up," Ryder mumbled.

"Brook seems to be okay right now," JoJo said.

"She might seem okay, but she cries a lot," Desi said. "And she talked about getting rid of the baby."

JoJo, Logan, young Eric and Ryder all sighed at that information.

"We'll just have to see what Mr. Adams and Miss Angel have to say," Desi said. "Meanwhile, I'm just trying to help any way I can. I mean, I've been there, pregnant and alone."

Alec raised his brows. "Excuse me?"

Desi giggled. "Right, I wasn't alone. I've had you and I'm so thankful for that, but all I'm saying is, I'm young and it would've been nice to be able to share with my mother what was going on with my pregnant body."

He put his arm around her and smiled. "I understand, and speaking of your mother, here she comes now."

Desi turned to smile at her mom and dad and sister, Charity. It was so weird. A few months ago, she and Alec were a couple of homeless kids, living in the woods behind a gas station, estranged from their parents, hungry and hopeless. Now they are married, they have a lovely home, they've been reunited with their families, Alec has a good job, he's goin' back to school in the fall and their lives seem magical. All because young Eric Kino and his father, Ricky Kino had asked God to place someone in their path. They

rescued them and turned their lives around. This place, this earthly life, can be so horrible and then it can be so awesome and both Alec and Desi are proof of that. Now, if somebody can just rescue the innocent young Brook, and her even more innocent child.

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Isaiah 43:2-3

"When you go through deep waters, I will be with you.
When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression,
you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.
For I am the Lord, your God."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

JoJo looked around. The only thing that could make this New Year's Eve party and ball any better would be if the east coast family were also here. Several people had mentioned the absence of Gabe and Taylor. They did play the video of Taylor surprising Gabe up on the large monitor. Whoever was videoing had gotten a close-up on Gabe's sad face when Ed Sheeran's song '*Perfect*' had begun playing. The way he blew out a breath and his eyes closed, and his head leaned back against that column in defeat, it had almost been comical, if JoJo didn't understand exactly how he felt. Gabe was pitiful for sure and was trying to tough it out. JoJo smiled. Then Taylor showed up and it was a beautiful moment. Those two were a bright light, and when they weren't around, they were sorely missed. Right now though, the place was packed with amazing family and friends.

The Keith family was here, David and Carol celebrating the changes in their family and in their own marriage since the Kinos had come into their lives. Their sons, Phillip and Lyle, were having a blast dancing with Brook and Zoe and being included in the group of older young people whom they admired, including young Eric, JoJo and Logan. They were also getting to know fifteen-year-old Carson Clark, Reverend Clark's great-grandson.

The Davis family was here. Jeff and Mickey were taking some time for themselves, while baby Scarlett was up in the suite on the second floor of the hotel along with babies Elijah Wallace, Jay Deal, and Chris Coley. Their babysitters were none other than Jordan's mom, Jewell Brooks, and Alec's mom, Ivana Morgan. Both women were very happy to use their evening to take care of sweet babies. Also in the suite were two highly paid agents protecting them all. The mothers of the babies arrived to nurse their little one whenever needed.

Not only were Jeff and Mickey Davis having a wonderful time, but their boys, Daniel and Jeremy, ages twelve and eleven were having a grand time too. In ten days those boys would be ages thirteen and twelve and they were thinking of themselves as very grown up. Jeremy invited Josie Brooks to dance several times. Josie would be eleven in February. He also invited Sydney to dance, who was Reverend Clark's great-granddaughter, who was eleven. Daniel had actually invited a girl from school to the dance. The boys were having a blast and the five, the two boys, Daniel's 'date', and Josie and Sydney pretty much all stayed together, dancing and talking and eating.

The Davis boys' aunt, their mother's sister, Marissa Coley, and her husband Chris, were truly enjoying themselves and the company. They'd been given a huge surprise, a gift really, when they'd looked up to see Hart Akins, Chris Coley's best friend come into the ballroom. The Senior Agent in Charge of Texas, he'd come a long way for the New Year's Eve event. Hart wasn't married, but he almost immediately had his eye on a few

of the young ladies here at the dance, one of them being Charity Copeland, Desi's older sister and another being Camille Hall, Reverend Clark's great niece.

Ronny Clark and his newfound family were all here. Ronny, his daughter, Linda, her grandchildren, Carson age fifteen, and Sydney age eleven. Also present, Andrew Hall, Ronny's nephew, and Andrew's wife, Nikki, and their children, Harrison, age twenty-eight, and his sister Camille, age twenty-four. Also present was Ronny's other nephew, Jesse Barnes, his wife, Becky and their son, Patrick, age twenty-seven.

Since both Harrison and Patrick were pastors and discovered that Charity Copeland was studying ministry in college, the three of them spoke together for a very long time.

The Lee families were also in attendance. Justin and his wife Lori, Jason and Angel, and of course, Kimmie and Jensen Deal, who spent most of their time with Rissa and Chris, Jeffy and Cam, and Hart.

Others present tonight were the Garcias from the apartments next to the Hopewood Chapel. Leonard, his wife, Paula and their son, Caleb. Caleb was having a blast with Amari Meeks and Jamie Brooks, mostly stuffing their bellies and running around being silly, and even dancing every once in a while.

Bristol was present, along with her grandmother, Christina Palma, who was given a chair of honor near Ronny. She and Ronny's daughter Linda were having grand conversations. Bristol had been asked out onto the dance floor by almost all of the guys, Logan, young Eric, Phillip, and also Patrick Barnes who seemed quite taken with the beautiful Filipino girl. Also present, were a few more of the elderly patrons of the Hopewood Chapel.

Likewise, in attendance at this assembly of fine people, were the three "daycare workers," Luciana, Lonnie and Camilla, who'd taken care of the Kino children before they'd been rescued. They were all there with their husbands and children.

Some of the youngest children included the Kino/Adams group; Angelina, Noah, Nate, Abe and Manny Kino, and, Sophia, Kelstyn, Ledger and Emily Adams, and also Brittney Meeks. Melody and Jordan, Eric and Shelley, Ricky and Bree, Joey and Breez, and Mark and Bella were all taking turns supervising that raucous bunch. They played with them, danced with them, helped feed them, and made bathroom runs.

Another family in the crowd tonight was Julian Washington and his wife and child. Julian had fought Gabe in the first Mini-MART and the family had grown quite fond of him.

Someone else the family had grown quite fond of and who'd been an integral part of their lives since the first Mini-MART was Isla August. She was here with her cameraman who was now her boyfriend.

Also in the crowd tonight were many of the agents who'd been involved with the family over the past year. Agent Brown and his wife, Agent Trout with a date, Agent Wyatt with a date, Agent Diaz with a date, and at least ten others. That didn't include the agents that were on duty tonight, who'd also brought their wives or dates or families, because they were working on a two-hour shift only.

Also present were Jordan's college roommates, Jackie and Colton who'd both brought dates with them. Jackie had been ecstatic to have been included in the invitation to hobnob with celebrities. At least, that was how she saw it.

It was an amazing event filled with love and honor and respect for each person present. Everyone, even those who usually stick together, made an effort to divide up and fellowship with everyone else which helped those outside the family to feel welcome and appreciated.

JoJo danced with Raylynn most of the night. Currently, the music was a slow one, *Take My Breath Away*, and Raylynn was simply enjoying the sway of her date's hard body as they moved in tandem. Sighing, she looked up at his face, taking time to study him. He had big brown eyes that seemed so gentle and compassionate, but she'd watched him play football and this guy could be fierce. His nose was straight, slightly turned up, which was extremely cute. His lips were full, and she realized, usually slightly smiling.

Her eyes moved to his hair, thick and brown and currently brushed back off his face, though that was not always the case. Looking closer, she could see a few scars just at the hairline and she wondered if that happened while playing football, or at a martial arts event. She lowered her eyes to his mouth again, thinking of the kisses they'd shared. She realized he also had a tiny scar near his upper lip. Then she remembered seeing him with his shirt off at the clinic. There'd been a giant scar on his chest and she wondered what that was all about. Unconsciously, her hand moved over his chest in a gentle gesture.

His arm tightened on her back and she looked up at him.

"What are you thinking about, Ray?" he asked softly.

She giggled. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was just thinking about you. Wondering about you."

"What about me?"

She sighed. "Well, like, I don't feel like you're some smooth pretty boy who is untested."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise at the words.

She smiled. "I mean, you *are* pretty, in a very masculine way. But I was referring to the scars you have on your face and on your chest."

"Pretty ugly, huh?"

"Not to me. Maybe it's part of my heritage, but scars are kinda sexy."

He laughed.

"No, I'm serious. In my culture, scars are evidence of being tested and therefore of being a man. Are you self-conscious about them?"

He thought for a minute and shrugged. "The ones on my chest are pretty noticeable and I admit, sometimes make me feel self-conscious. For most girls, they kind of gross them out."

"Not me. Do you mind if I ask about the scar on your chest?"

He shook his head. "Well, it's not a pretty story."

"Tell me," she encouraged.

He swayed to the music and ran his hand over her back, being very careful to lift his arm correctly.

"Well, I was sixteen. My Aunt Jeffy had just won a Nobel prize in medicine. Someone tried to kill her and someone tried to kidnap her. Two different groups."

"Wow."

"Yeah. They wanted her to stop because she'd declared that there was a line to curing every disease, and big pharma wasn't gonna allow that. They demanded she stop

her research, but she wasn't gonna let them deter her, and so, they went after her family. Logan and I had gone to a football meeting at school. They took us by gunpoint to some abandoned building. They were gonna cut up Logan, which absolutely terrified me."

"Why Logan?"

He chuckled. "I actually asked them the same question. The answer was he was the youngest and it always hurt worse to have the youngest kid messed up. So, I let them know that Logan wasn't even a Kino or an Adams. Even though he actually had been adopted by my dad so he technically was an Adams, but he wasn't blood related and I wanted them to think he wasn't related to Aunt Jeffy. And then I tried to challenge them. Tried to get them to focus on me, and, well, I succeeded." He sighed. "They still hurt him. They broke his arm. But they beat me almost to death and they took a knife and cut me open. A big 'X' on my chest. I remember after the initial pain, marveling that there was so much blood. I didn't realize a body can hold that much blood, and then lose that much blood, and still be alive."

Again, Raylynn ran her hand over his chest.

He placed his hand over hers. "It's okay. I'm okay. I just hope it doesn't gross you out."

"Not at all. Like I said, maybe it's my heritage, but scars are a sign of manhood. A sign of overcoming. A sign of toughness. A rite of passage."

He swallowed hard and nodded. "Thank you for that, Ray. You are truly unique. Most girls think it's ugly and are really put off when they see me without a shirt."

She sighed. "Well, I saw the scar, but not at first. The first thing I noticed were all the muscles. The pecs, the abs, but I eventually saw the scars. They aren't revolting to me. I'm sorry, JoJo, nowadays, there seems to be a lot of shallow females. I may not be perfect, but I'm not shallow. There is nothing about you that is ugly, JoJo. Not one thing. To me, you are the most remarkable guy I've ever known, and the most beautiful."

He snorted at that. The music stopped and they came to a halt on the dance floor. He cupped her face in his left hand. "Ray, you are the most incredible girl I've ever known," he mumbled as he lowered his head and kissed her. He raised his head, looked into her eyes, turned his head and kissed her again, from a different angle. Pressing on her back, he pulled her in even closer against him.

They both drew in a sharp breath as they felt an arm around both of their shoulders. Young Eric leaned close. "Get a room, Preacher."

JoJo chuckled. "Was thinking the same thing and I appreciate the reminder."

"Hey, what are brothers for?" Young Eric smiled at Raylynn. "Hello, beautiful. My brother is a very lucky guy."

JoJo nodded. "Go away, Eric."

"Sir, yes, sir."

JoJo escorted Ray off the floor. They went to sit at a table way off to one side.

"So, what's the reminder?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You told Eric, 'thanks for the reminder.' Is it that there are rooms right here in this very building?"

He shook his head. "No. He called me by my nickname, and that was to remind me

that I have values and commandments that I want to keep."

She smiled. "Oh, wow, I think that's awesome. You two are very close, aren't you?"

"Yes. We're only a few months apart in age. I took his spot."

"Took his spot?"

JoJo nodded. "See, everyone thought young Eric was gonna be the first grandchild born. But my father had a little— indiscretion. He and my mother had a one-night stand on his eighteenth birthday. She was staying at the Kinos. They'd taken her in off the streets. There's a lot more to it, but to keep it short, she went to his room and he took her up on her offer. He would learn later that she was dying of a brain tumor and she simply wanted to know love, to be close to someone intimately before she died. She went away, back to her home, a few weeks later. He never saw her again after that. He didn't know she was pregnant. Meanwhile, Uncle Ricky and Aunt Bree got married and got pregnant with Eric. So, they were like four months along when Beth's mom showed up at my grandparents' house with me."

Ray frowned. "Wait. Who's Beth?"

He smiled. "Elizabeth Carter. My mother. She passed away shortly after I was born. She'd made her mother, my maternal grandmother, swear to give me to the Kinos to raise."

"Oh wow. How sad for Beth's mom."

He nodded. "For her mom and dad. Joseph and Sandra Carter. I was named after her father, my Grandpa Joe. Anyway, it's so cool that you see immediately how hard that would have been for them."

He smiled. "So, anyway, the day I arrived there my father was leaving for college. I mean, that very day. It wasn't that he didn't want me. He wanted me. He wanted his son, but he didn't know what to do. He was a kid himself. He had a football scholarship. So, grandma and granddad kind of took over. First they said they would take me and take care of me for my dad while he goes to school and makes something of himself. Then they told Grandma Sandy that they would only do that, and honor Beth's wishes if the Carters would promise to be in my life."

"Oh, I'm so glad they said that," Ray said.

"Yeah, my grandparents are very insightful. But, the Carters were not well-off, so my grandparents fixed them up. Paid for all travels. Paid off all medical bills. Paid off the mortgage on their home and got them better cars. They even ended up paying for college for Beth's siblings and then helping with things when they got married. After all, they are my aunts and uncles on my mother's side, and that means they are family and the Kinos take care of family."

"JoJo, that is a beautiful thing."

He nodded. "They're the best. They also flew Grandma Sandy and Grandpa Joe out to most of my games, both high school and college. Whenever they wanted to come. But yeah, anyway, so, my dad and I, we're very close. He says we kind of grew up together. And young Eric and I are like brothers. Truly. Logan didn't come into our lives until we were almost twelve. Both Eric and I loved him like a brother before we knew he would legally become my brother, but that's another whole very long story. I'll tell you this; Logan too, is scarred. His scars came earlier in his life than mine did, and his scars stay

with him more, because his scars are more emotional than they are physical."

Ray nodded. "Wow, there is so much to ask. So much to learn about you and your family."

JoJo smiled and nodded. "Yeah, it will take a long time for you to know it all and for some reason, Raylynn, I want you to know it all."

She sighed. "How many girls have you said that to?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No one else, Ray. No one but you. That's the truth. I don't lie."

"Then why me?"

"I'm not sure. There's a pull. There's something about you. It's like a knowing, that, well, that you're one of us."

Her eyes opened wide.

He shrugged and sighed. "Sorry. I may have said too much."

She shook her head. "No, you didn't. I love that you think of me that way. Because JoJo, I think you are special. So special. I have to pinch myself to realize that you are in my life in any capacity. Even if you did simply rescue my sister from certain death and then asked me out."

He frowned. "There's nothing simple about it. I didn't just happen to rescue Kaylee. She was put in my path. And that means that YOU were put in my path. You, Ray. You are special and I didn't just happen to ask you out because, like, hey, why not? You have a light, Ray. Your name even says it. Ray. A Ray of light. And I'm attracted to that light like a moth to flame. I want to..."

"Why did you stop?"

"Because I was about to say something really cheesy *and* really forward."

She nodded. "Say it. If there's anything you need to know about me, it's that I believe in communication. You can say what you want, what you feel and I won't be offended or get all crazy. I'm pretty calm."

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I thought that about you when you didn't even hit Mrs. Cofer back. Because I would've taken her out. I mean, if I was a girl."

She giggled. "I was in too much shock. I couldn't believe she hit me. I guess my reaction time needs some work."

JoJo chuckled. "We can work on that."

"Okay, let's work on it. But tell me what you were about to say."

"Oh yeah." He smiled. "I think I'm stalling."

"I think so too."

He sighed. "Well, I was saying that I'm attracted to your light. I was gonna say that I want to bask in that light. I want to know everything about that light. And I want that light to be, only my light. Only for me. Exclusively for me. I don't want your light shining on anyone else."

"Not anyone?"

"Not any available guys."

She nodded. "I see."

He frowned. "I'm sorry. I know that's too forward of me. This is really only our second date."

"Well, it may only be our second date, but a lot more has happened. You saved my sister. You came to the hospital. You put us in touch with Miss Angel. You helped us move. You took me to help feed the homeless. You invited me to church. You preached at church. We've exchanged Christmas gifts. You totally went all out to help save my job and here we are, you want us to be exclusive. And really, JoJo, how could I say 'no' to something I want very much? How could I not be exclusive? I mean, you are the first person that I truly want to give the time of day to."

"Really? Are you saying that you haven't had any boyfriends?"

She shook her head. "There might have been a few guys I thought were cute, but the moment they laid eyes on my sister, that was over."

"You, Raylynn, are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

She gave a soft laugh.

"I'm not kidding. I mean, Kaylee, she is very pretty too. Of course she is, she looks a lot like you. But to me, there is no comparison. You take my breath away. Really. When that song was playing a little bit ago, that's what I was thinking. But like I said, I've known a lot of beautiful girls, but you, Raylynn, you top them all, and that's just the beginning, because of what a deep person you are. Like you said yourself, you're not shallow. Ray, I want to see where this goes."

She nodded. "Me too."

His heart sped up. "Then, that's it? That means we're exclusive?"

She nodded shyly.

He grinned. "So, you are now my girlfriend, Raylynn Quinn?"

She nodded. "And you are my boyfriend." She laughed. "It almost sounds funny to say that. I've never been able to say that before."

"You've really never had a boyfriend?"

She shook her head.

"Not one boyfriend, not ever?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Though, really, even if someone had been interested in me, there's been no time. I concentrated on school. Gettin' through it, gettin' out of it, and then I was totally focused on my job. I couldn't allow myself to be distracted."

He smiled and held his hand out to her. She took it. He squeezed her hand and didn't let go. They were distracted when Shelley Kino laughed. They looked over to see her playing with her littlest children and several others. They were playing duck duck goose. She hit one on the head as she said 'goose' and took off running and got back to the empty place and sat down.

Ray looked her over. She wore a pretty white and black shimmery dress. It had a full skirt that came to just below her knees. Her feet were bare. Her hair was down and was longer than Ray had realized. When she'd run around the circle of kids, she'd flown. She was really fast. Ray nodded. "Your family is indeed extraordinary. Your grandmother seems so young. Would it be rude for me to ask how old she is?"

JoJo shook his head. "Not rude at all. I get asked that a lot for the same reason you just stated. She seems so young. Grandma is sixty-five."

"Sixty-five, wow. You're kidding."

"She works out almost every day. She follows Aunt Jeffy's protocols. We all do. It

keeps her young and healthy."

Ray nodded. "Your Aunt Jeffy is her daughter, right?"

JoJo nodded. "Right. And if something was wrong with Grandma, Aunt Jeffy would know and would immediately fix her up."

Ray nodded. "That is so cool." She glanced over at Reverend Clark's table. "I mean, JoJo, look at the difference. Your grandmother is sixty-five. Reverend Clark's daughter is sixty-six. She's all hunched over and looks like an old woman. All wrinkled. Low energy. I'm not meaning to be mean. But there is such a marked difference, don't ya think?"

JoJo nodded. "A huge difference. Miss Linda has admittedly abused her body with drugs and alcohol when she was younger. I doubt she's ever exercised. You'd be surprised by the number of people who have never put forth any energy into making their bodies strong. Training. Pushing. For our family, it's a way of life."

Ray nodded. "I see that, but I have to say it's cool the way your family does all that but still keeps your priorities straight."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, yes, you train your bodies daily, you try to eat right, but you're not all about that. I mean, there are a lot of people who do that, but that's their thing. That's what they're all about. They focus solely on that. They eat, drink and sleep exercise or body building. Talk about it constantly. Make videos about it. But for you guys, it's like eating. It's just something you do every day to stay alive. But you're all about so much more. About doing good, doing God's will, taking care of business, righting wrongs, helping others. And then, like, oh yeah, but I also stay in shape, eat right, play football, and I fight in the Kino Challenge or I do all my own stunts when I make movies."

JoJo nodded. "When your priorities are God first and foremost, everything else falls into the right place, and again, Ray, it's so cool that you see that."

She smiled. "I think I'm gonna need to quote you on that."

"What?"

"When your priorities are God, first and foremost, everything else falls into the right place. I love that."

He reached out reverently and took a lock of her straight black hair between his thumb and forefinger, then ran his fingers down to the end, which was a considerably long way, and finally let go. "Your hair is beautiful, Ray."

"Thanks," she said shyly.

"Tell me about your cultural beliefs about hair."

Her eyes opened wide.

"Oh, well, I don't mean to pry or insult you. But don't the Indians have certain beliefs about hair being sacred?"

"Well, yes. I'm not insulted. It just surprised me. Many American Indians believe the hair is an extension of our spirit. Some also believe it holds our wisdom or knowledge. Traditionally, we let it grow long. But it's a personal choice thing. Like, Kaylee, she's cut her hair short a few times. I think for her it was a show of rebellion. I've cut my hair, trimmed it, for grooming purposes, like, to keep it healthy and neat. It's already past my waist since the last time I trimmed it, and I don't want it to get any

longer than that because it interferes with my work or I sit on it. But yeah, in answer to your question, traditionally, we grow our hair. The males too a lot of times, but not as many anymore."

He nodded. "My grandfather is native Hawaiian and has had long hair since he was a boy. Uncle Ricky also had long hair until he was in his twenties. The Hawaiians think along those same lines. I could add that they see hair as a spiritual connection to one's ancestors. All I can say right now is, Raylynn, I think your hair is exquisite and when I see your hair all down and flowing around you like tonight, it's a, well, an aphrodisiac." He grinned. "I guess I shouldn't say that."

She giggled. "You can always be free to say what you want or what you feel." Smiling, Ray looked around and focused over on the corner of the room close to where they were sitting. "So, what's with all that?"

JoJo glanced at the corner. There was a large area in the corner divided off with chairs that were draped with black tablecloths. On the inside of that area appeared to be bedding. "We pulled in soft mats and those are sleeping bags and pillows all in rows. It's for the little ones. Ya see, they were told that they could stay up until midnight if they want, but everyone knows they won't make it. So, they each have a sleeping bag and when they realize they can't make it, they have a place to cuddle up and go to sleep. That way my parents and my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles can stay and see in the New Year and not have to worry about the children."

She smiled. "You guys think of everything."

✞✞✞

Eric Kino watched as his wife played with their children and grandchildren and a few others. He couldn't keep from smiling. She was an amazing woman. An amazing wife. An amazing mother. His love. So full of life. A little mischievous. A little rebellious. With her, life was never dull. Not ever. From almost the moment he'd met her, life had changed. Knowing her has been a huge blessing and he will be eternally grateful for his sweet Shelley girl.

Shelley glanced over to see her husband smiling at her and smiled in return and blew a kiss, just before little Ledger smacked her hard on the top of the head and yelled "Goose!"

"Ow," she complained dramatically and jumped to her feet. She chased Ledger around but the three-year-old made it back to his place in time. Shelley made a silly face as she started around the circle tapping each child on their head. "You're a duck and you're a duck and guess what, you're all ducks! So there! Ya know why?" she asked as she kept going around the circle touching their heads. "I'll tell ya why. Because NONE of you can catch *me.* Not one of you. Not you, not you, not you," she said all the way around the circle. "So, I tell ya what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna say that all of you are gooses, hmm, I guess that means you are all geese, and when I count to three, you all have to try to catch me because I'm gonna run aaaaalllll the waaaayy to that far wall over there and all the way back and you won't be able to catch me. Whaddya think about that?" she said loudly.

"I bet we do catch you, Grandma," Sophia said, because she was the oldest that was playing.

"I bet you don't," Shelley continued. She went around the circle again. "Not you. Not you. Not you. Not you," she said until she touched them all.

The game had now gotten the attention of everyone in the vicinity who wasn't on the dance floor. They all smiled, and they started placing bets. A lot of them bet against Shelley, but not Eric.

"So," Shelley continued. "When I count to three, try to catch me. You have to touch the wall before you can come back. Are you ready?"

"Yes! Yes!" they all yelled.

"Okay then. One!" She waited a few beats. "Two!" She waited several more beats until she was closest to the far side of the circle. "Three!" she screamed and took off running.

The fourteen children screamed in delight, scrambled to their feet and took off after her. She kept pace, not going too fast but allowing them to stay within at least five feet of her. She glanced behind her and saw that Sophia and Brittney were catching up. "Oh, shoot," she giggled and turned and ran faster.

Shelley touched the wall and headed back. The problem was, some of the children didn't seem to catch the part about having to touch the wall and they cornered her as she came back toward them. So she then ran in a circle around them, but her circling around allowed Sophia and Brittney and the others who'd obeyed the rules to catch up and suddenly it was a free-for-all. They grabbed her dress and her legs and she tumbled down to roll on the floor and they all jumped on top of her. Ledger flew onto her abdomen, causing Shelley to grunt.

Joey stood up from where he sat. "Ledger, boy, you know better than that. You only do that to guys, not girls."

Ledger stood up and frowned. "She's not a girl. She's grandma."

"Oh yeah?" Shelley questioned as she sat up and grabbed Ledger. "Grandmas are girls too, silly head. And now, because you jumped on me, I'm gonna tickle you until—you—scream."

He took off running to the far wall again. Shelley was too tired to chase him down and let him go. She lay back, flat on her back. "Okay, kiddos. You all win. You caught me. Who's gonna help me up?"

"I am," Eric said softly.

She opened her eyes and peered up at her husband. Taking his offered hand, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. She smiled warmly at him.

He smiled at her and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "You are adorable, you know that?"

"Oh, yes, Eric, I know. I was just lying there thinking how adorable I must look, a grown woman, lying down on the floor in the middle of a fancy ballroom."

"Grown woman? Where?" he asked, looking all around.

"Very funny, Grandmaster Kino." She sighed. "I was trying to wear them all out and instead, I wore myself out."

He nodded. "Joey," he called.

"Sir?" Joey said immediately as he approached his mother and stepfather-father.

Eric nodded at the children. "Will you wear them out?"

Joey grinned. “Will do.” He looked around. “Mark, Logan, young Eric, a little help please.” He didn’t currently see JoJo.

They all came, thinking there was a problem with Shelley.

“The goal is—to wear them out.”

They all nodded with a smile and gathered all the children together.

Shelley watched as four men and all the children huddled up, clapped and cheered, nodded in understanding, and took off.

Shelley looked back at her husband.

“Dance with me,” he said. “Unless you’re too tired.”

She smiled. “Never too tired to dance with you, Grandmaster Kino. But you might have to hold me up.”

He nodded. “Challenge accepted.” Pulling her close, they barely swayed to the soft music that was currently playing which was apropos. Etta James’ *At Last.*

Shelley laid her head against Eric’s chest. “Hmm, this feels so good.”

He turned in a slow circle. “Yes, it does.” He looked past her head and over the crowd. “Ya know, we created this.”

“What?” she muttered.

He nodded around. “All of this. These people, this giant family. Well, I mean, with God we created it.”

She sighed. “How could I have known over thirty years ago that a sexual assault, my marriage ending, and signing up for a cheap YMCA Taekwondo class would lead to all of this?”

He smiled. “That really is the lesson, isn’t it? We don’t know God’s whole plan. We just take a step in the direction we think He wants us to go, and then He reveals the next part of the plan. Just like when I was a kid. I didn’t know how I was gonna ‘teach the world,’ even more, WHAT I was gonna teach the world. I could have questioned God and asked Him how teaching fighting skills to people is gonna help the world. I didn’t know or understand how. But God knew. He knew. He knew that sometimes, we don’t go at the enemy directly, and by that I mean we don’t preach at them. Instead, we approach from a back door. We teach them something else, and allow them to learn from our good example. The only hard thing is that our example must be exemplary.”

He sighed. “When Ricky had his indiscretions, he realized and understood that he could have messed everything up. Instead, he publicly confessed and repented and has more than made up for it. In a way, it’s even good that he showed that one can come back, no matter how bad it is. Jesus’ grace is sufficient.”

“Sometimes he really beats himself up over that,” Shelley said.

“He’s spoken to you about it?” Eric asked, a little surprised.

She shook her head. “No, but Bree has.”

Eric nodded and sighed. “Ah yes. Regrets, remorse, those are hard to live with. Unfortunately, there are some things we do that we can’t take back. What’s done is done. I too, have many regrets, but we have to let those go. God, Jesus, forgives us. If we continue to live in regret, the enemy gets into our heads. So, we have to let go and move forward and simply strive to do better.”

Shelley sighed with pleasure. “No matter what we talk about, Eric, you always make

the solution seem so simple."

He smiled. "It's not me that does that. It's God, because the solution IS simple. The gospel is simple. The rules God gives us are simple. The answer is simple. Grace is simple. To me, there is a clearly visible line between the darkness and the light, so the choice is simple. And the closer we are to Jesus, the more we see from His perspective and the clearer that line becomes."

Shelley sighed. "And when we clearly see that line, and choose the light, it brings nothing but pure joy."

He nodded. "It does indeed."

"Ya know, that's what I've felt ever since you came into my life, Eric, pure joy."

He sighed. "Well, babe, there's been our share of really hard times."

"Even those times, Eric, bring me pure joy, because the hard times make all the other times seem even brighter. Like right now, as this crazy year comes to an end, would I be this grateful, this happy, if I hadn't had to consider living without you? Would I be this happy if I didn't know that there were five children of my own blood who are now free of their captors and living a beautiful life filled with love and joy? I can't imagine being without them. And really, Eric, I can't wait to meet the ones who didn't make it."

He stopped and tilted her face up. "We'll wait," he said pointedly.

She laughed and nodded.

Eric ran his hand over her face. "We'll work hard until the very end, Shelley, being in service to our family, our friends, and strangers every day, listening to God speak to us and obeying His promptings. It's a joyous game we play, isn't it?"

She smiled contentedly. "It is. It's so much fun. I love you, Eric Kino. Thank You, God, for sending him to me."

"Thank you, Father, for bringing Shelley girl into my life and thank You for this large and amazing family You've blessed us with."

"Amen," Shelley whispered.

The music came to an end at the same time and Eric led Shelley off the floor. "Can I get you something to drink?"

She nodded. "That would be great."

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Over the next hour, one by one, the little ones started drifting off to sleep. Their parents would hold them a minute or two and then gently go lay them on their sleeping bag and tuck them in. Eric finally went back over and knelt down and prayed over the sleeping children. Many people got a photo of that because it was a beautiful thing to see.

Phillip and his brother Lyle, ages sixteen and fourteen, and Carson age fifteen, were grateful to be included in the older group of people. They sat around a table with Brook, Zoe, Ryder and Kaylee, young Eric and Jordan, Melody and Logan, JoJo and Raylynn and Alec and Desi. Phillip thought it was cool that the older guys didn't try to distance themselves from the younger people. Instead, they engaged them in conversation as if they too were important. Again, Phillip was struck by how differently these people operated. It wasn't just an act. They truly did God's work. To Phillip, they were inspirational and motivational.

They talked about the coming year. They talked about how Phillip will be a senior

and what position he played in football. They talked about how Lyle will be a sophomore and might be the quarterback and wants to attend a QB camp in the spring. JoJo surprised him by telling him that if his shoulder was doing well, he might spend a few weeks giving Lyle some personal coaching. That made both Phillip and Lyle very excited.

Sixteen-year-old Zoe and fifteen-year-old Brook excused themselves and headed to the restroom. "Are you okay?" Zoe asked Brook.

She nodded. "I think so. Just feelin' a little queasy."

"Ya mean like you might throw up?"

Brook nodded.

Zoe shook her head. "All this time, girl, you had me convinced that you had stomach issues. Why didn't you just tell me? I mean like, did you think I'd judge you or something?"

Brook frowned. "I don't know. I guess I was just trying to like, ignore it."

"Do you mean, like, you thought maybe if you didn't think about it, it will just go away?"

Brook sighed. "Maybe. And then when Desi told us we had to go to the doctor and make sure we're not sick or doing drugs, I thought about running away again. But then I thought, I can't hide this forever. And I've been feelin' kind of scared, like, what AM I gonna do, ya know?"

They went inside the large, luxurious restroom.

Zoe sighed. "I really shoulda known, or guessed. I mean, you never had your period for the two months I've known you."

Brook sniffed.

"Oh, sorry, Brook, I didn't mean to make you cry. Come on, cheer up. Remember you said tonight, you're gonna have a good time."

Brook nodded. Her face was pale. "Uh oh." She turned and ran into a stall, just as Jeffy Kino Wallace came into the restroom.

Jeffy immediately heard the retching. She glanced at Zoe. "Hello. Is Brook sick?"

Zoe's eyes went big. "You know Brook?"

Jeffy smiled. "My name is Jeffy. At least that's what everyone calls me. I'm a doctor and I'm a Kino. And I don't know her personally, but I know about her, and about you. I'm gonna go check on her."

She went back to the stall and knocked. "Brook? Are you okay?"

Brook sniffed as she flushed the toilet. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Will you come out here and let me check on you? I'm a doctor."

Brook slowly opened the stall door and peeked out. "You're a doctor? I mean, you look like a kid."

Jeffy smiled. "Thanks, but I'm twenty-eight."

"Well, anyway, there's nothing you can do, unless you do abortions."

Jeffy closed her eyes briefly at the evil that smacked her in the face and immediately rebuked it in Jesus' name. "No, I don't kill babies," Jeffy said softly. "But I can still help you. Come sit out here for a minute."

Brook went out and sat down on a padded bench and Zoe came to sit next to her. Jeffy knelt down in front of Brook and took her hand. She sighed and nodded. "It's not

really morning sickness anymore. You've had such poor nutrition, your body is weakened and trying to get stabilized now that you've had some good food. Let me help you a little bit. Just sit still a minute."

Jeffy breathed deep and looked into Brook's eyes. The emotional pain washed over Jeffy in waves, but she tried to not show it. She took it in and finally got to the nausea, and breathed calmness and told Brook's body to accept the nutrition. She calmed the hormones that were rushing through her system. Took away the nausea, and silently prayed for a blessing of health and more importantly, emotional healing and clarity of mind. She then spoke quietly, rebuking the darkness that was trying to take the girl over, in Jesus' name. Finally, she nodded and smiled at the young girl who had tears streaming down her face now.

"It's gonna be okay, Brook," Jeffy said. "God's got you now. He's healing you. You are His. He's telling me right now, that you are His daughter." She smiled. "Is the nausea gone?"

Brook's eyes blinked and then opened wide. "Oh! Yes, it actually is! How did you do that?"

Jeffy smiled. "God has given me a gift. That's why I became a doctor. He allows me to heal."

"So, you can just go around healing everyone?"

Jeffy shook her head. "Only the ones God asks me to heal, and only in the name of Jesus. I saw you and Zoe come in here and I felt God urging me to come in here and check on you. I can help take away pain or unease. I can help diagnose a problem fairly quickly, which really helped me when I was setting up medical clinics in Africa."

"You went to Africa?"

"Many times. The last time though, it was special. There was this little girl, Sanyu, and her brother Balon. Sanyu had malaria, and was very sick. I was able to diagnose her quickly and get her fixed up." She sighed. "She and her brother are coming to visit me sometime near the end of January. I'll introduce you."

Brook and Zoe nodded. "That would be cool," Zoe said. They all turned when Jordan and Melody came into the restroom.

"Hey!" Jordan said brightly. "Oh, did we interrupt?"

Jeffy rose. "No, I was just helping Brook a little bit."

Jordan nodded knowingly. "Cool." She smiled at Brook. "Whatever was wrong, I bet you feel a lot better. Dr. Kino works miracles."

"Did she cure you of something?" Brook asked.

Jordan nodded. "Yes. Several times now. She's the best. She's a famous doctor. Did you know that?"

Both younger girls shook their heads.

"She's won a Nobel prize. She's cured several diseases. She started the *Heal the World Foundation* when she was just a little kid. She's a genius. She even has her own line of medicines coming out that are very inexpensive and help heal the body and take away pain better than anything on the market."

"Wow," Zoe said.

Jeffy smiled. "Well, I'm gonna get back out there and find my husband, because

he's looking for me. He's on the way over here right now." She smiled and took Brook's hand. "Let's meet again soon and we'll talk about the baby and how I can help you. And make no mistake, Brook. It IS a baby. A complete whole person with her own DNA. If anyone tries to tell you that it's not a baby, that's Satan talking. Don't listen to him. He wants to destroy you. I want to help you. Did you feel the light? Do you believe me?"

Brook nodded.

Jeffy leaned forward and kissed her forehead and headed out. They could hear her as she opened the door. "Cam."

"I've been looking for you," he said.

She smiled. "I know. Sorry."

Jordan and Melody grinned.

"So, like, how did she know her husband was coming to find her?" Zoe asked.

"Well, Dr. Kino is psychic," Melody answered. "She knows a whole lot about everything and everyone."

Brook frowned. "Well, she helped my nausea to go away. And after she took my hand, I feel so much calmer. Really, almost happy or something. It was weird."

Jordan nodded. "Yep. That's Dr. Kino alright. I mean, Dr. Kino Wallace. Or actually, Aunt Jeffy. Since I'm marrying her nephew, I'm supposed to start calling her Aunt Jeffy."

Melody smiled at that. The way things were going between her and Logan, she was pretty sure that eventually, she too would be able to call Dr. Kino Wallace 'Aunt Jeffy.'

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A little before 11:00 PM a revved up, modernized version of the song, 'The Final Countdown,' came to an end. It'd been fast-paced and fun and almost everyone had been on their feet, dancing, some a little crazier than others.

The DJ spoke. "Well that was fun. So everyone, find a seat and relax for a few minutes. Grab a drink or something to eat if you want. We have a treat for you. So, let me invite Grandmaster Kino up here to tell you what's about to happen."

Everyone applauded as Eric stepped up onto the small stage and the DJ handed him a microphone. "Hello, everyone. I sure hope you're all having a good time. I know I am. How blessed are we to be able to come out here and enjoy each other's company to bring in the new year?"

He waited while everyone applauded and cheered.

"Well now, we do have a nice surprise. Ricky and Bree have worked very hard over this past week, and along with some of their friends, who just happen to be in post production film editing, they have put together a little short film of, well— of all of you. This is our past year cut down to a thirty-minute segment. There are lots of pics and video. By request, not everyone's birthdays are mentioned. We can make this video available to any of you who would like to have a copy, and there actually is a longer version for those who want more detail. I was told that it may or may not be in chronological order, because sometimes the subject matter takes precedence over the timeline. Without further ado, this is a snapshot of our year."

Eric stepped back down and took a seat at the table next to his wife. Several other people grabbed drinks or desserts and headed back to their seats, while others merely

turned their chairs around.

The two giant monitors in the large ballroom came to life. The first thing everyone saw was last year's New Year's Eve celebration, or New Year's Day, since it was just after midnight, right here at the Golden Hotel ballroom. As music played several pictures of last year's party flashed across the screen. One stood out of young Eric sneaking an alcoholic beverage which made everyone laugh.

Jordan looked up at him in surprise. He smiled and shrugged. "I told you I was a handful."

It moved to January birthdays and the music switched to *Happy Birthday* as pics of all the January people celebrating appeared. February began with a giant heart, and then showed a pic of Jeffy and Cam, kissing, celebrating Valentine's Day and then switched to a pic of his hand on her swollen pregnant belly. That got a laugh. Then there were a few pics of young Eric arriving at the movie studio for the first day of shooting his very first movie.

A February and March birthday montage had people laughing. Then it changed to a video montage of Ricky choreographing young Eric in a few fight scenes and the final results. Everyone applauded that.

April first began with a short video of Gabe teaching Taylor how to shoot to the music '*Bang Bang My Baby Shot me Down*.' Everyone chuckled. That morphed into pics of Jake's homecoming, then Gabe winning a little class tournament at Kino Martial Arts, then video of Gabe and Julian Washington fighting at the first ever Kino Mini-MART. Julian had been a worthy opponent. Several people leaned over and rubbed Julian's head affectionately. He smiled and nodded.

The music stopped and next was heard the video of Isla's interview with Gabe, calling him the "Ultimate Male." That got a laugh. The music and the mood switched. Andra Day's '*Rise Up'* came on as pics of their beloved Laynah Bug's bruised and beaten face appeared on screen. Several more of Jake holding her, or brushing a tear away, or of Laynah brushing down a horse, of her and Jake riding together, of her whistling at one of Gabe's baseball games, of Jake arriving at a game on his bike and Laynah jumping into his arms, of Jake's picnic proposal, and finally, of the wedding, which happened in June. The movie then went back in time to April.

It began with April birthdays and after that there was a pic of Robert Adams, showing his birth and death dates and a few pics from the funeral.

Then, as the music '*Glory Days'* by Bruce Springsteen played, they showed video of Gabe playing baseball, his hits, his steals, getting hit by pitches and all the pickoff attempts. Then it switched to actual footage of TV reports of the missing seventeen-year-old Gabe Tanner who'd been abducted from the roadside. It switched to '*Eye of the Tiger*' as it showed some video and pics of the time Gabe was held hostage, of his now famous prayer, of his fight to get away and then of Gabe on a gurney being loaded into an ambulance, Gabe in the hospital all beaten and bruised, and finally switched to the song, '*Centerfield*' known as *'Put Me In Coach*' showing Gabe back out on the baseball field, first on crutches and finally, actually playing again. The film then went back to May.

May was a difficult one. It began happy enough, different versions of the different

families singing '*Happy Birthday*' while they showed pics of people with May birthdays with the dates. But then the music changed to '*Million Little Miracles'* by Elevation Worship as it showed five more birthdays that they hadn't been able to witness. Emmanuel, May 2nd, Noah May 7th, Angelina May 10th, Abraham May 11th, and Nathaniel, May 27th.

The music changed to '*Tears in Heaven*' by Eric Clapton. It went to pics from the Memorial, and showed the birth and death dates of each of the five murdered children. What took everyone's breath away was it showed stills of each child taken from birth videos that were uncovered during the investigation. After that were the pics of the ten murdered women and their birth and death dates, which sadly all came one day after the birth of the child they'd carried.

Shelley broke down crying, and Eric had to put his arm around her and comfort her. Fortunately, the mood changed again when it showed Gabe's promposal and then actual footage of Gabe and Taylor at the prom. Then there were pics of Gabe's graduation and the parking lot fight that happened after the graduation and then an even better fight, video of the giant nerf gun battle at the graduation party.

May ended with another hard thing and another fun thing. They looked up at the big screen to see police photos of the aftermath of Taylor's attempted kidnapping from the beach and Gabe's throat having been slit. News articles about Keegan having to shoot a man right there in front of the family. That was the hard thing. The good thing was the very next day, the entire family played a pick-up game of football on the beach. It was like therapy for the family and was much needed. The video of the game offered a lot of laughter as the family watched their own antics on the beach.

June began again, with birthdays, then it switched to fun pics of Jake's and Laynah's wedding. That morphed into lots of pics of all the good food, and Maddie dancing with Jake and Gabe at the wedding, or Maddie being hugged and kissed on the cheek, or Maddie laughing and talking to so many different people, and then June ended with a giant portrait of Maddie, Madelyn Lewis, with her birth and death dates and then it showed a picture of her very old wedding portrait with her husband. Maddie was eighty-seven when she passed on June 18th.

July began again with the July birthdays. There was a bunch, and Brittney smiled so sweetly when she saw her own face appear on the screen. After that there was some hilarious footage of different July 4th antics. There was a little footage of the *Three Gun Quick Shot Contest* at the *Eagle Eye Gun Club* and of the *Gabe Tanner Martial Arts Tournament*, both events had been held to raise money for the Murphy family, though that was not made known in the video.

August began with only one birthday, Amari Meeks on the 7th and he too, was delighted to see his own face up on the screen. Next, were some beach parties and kids first day back to school photos, but then, it got serious. There was video of the Ameritech breakfast on the fateful Saturday and then the meeting that had begun at the Kinos' home. There were pics of their first meeting with Luciana, who'd been so brave to come and tell the Kinos about their children. Then it switched to a TV breaking news bulletin that Gabe Tanner had been shot while trying to rescue Taylor Kino from another kidnapping attempt. And then a second breaking news story, Grandmaster Eric Kino had been shot.

It goes on to tell the bizarre story of stolen eggs and sperm and the creation of what they thought was only four children.

The little movie went on to try to convey what the families of the Kinos and Tanners went through from that point forward. First Gabe was gonna be okay and there was hope for Grandmaster Kino. Then Grandmaster Kino was brain dead and Gabe was also dying. There were photos from the waiting room as the families grieved and tried to hold it together and accept God's will, holding each other, crying together. There were photos of an unrecognizable Eric Kino, and photos of Gabe unresponsive as he lay in a coma. A picture of Lizzy gazing out a hospital window with her husband's hand on her shoulder. A picture of Taylor curled up in a ball in a chair next to Gabe's bed.

There were photos from Shelley's first meeting with her children. There was video of a few conversations. One of the older grandchildren, speaking softly about being strong to honor their grandfather and their brother Gabe. Another of when Jeffy came into the waiting room after the surgery and was barely able to hold it together as she spoke of her father's dismal prognosis.

There were pics and video of Jake and Laynah and Gabe's sisters arriving and crying and praying over their brother. There was video of prayer circles and zoom meetings. There was video of Ricky reading Eric's letter to the family. There was video of the family accepting defeat and getting ready to turn off Eric's life support and Gabe miraculously interrupting the procedure. Ricky and Bree and their editor friends did a wonderful job of doing justice to the pain and fear and acceptance of God's will that went on during that time span.

Finally there was video of Eric waking and everyone coming in to see him and speak to him.

The word September flashed across the screen, and then there was birthday music as it showed the August birthdays. In particular they showed the surprise party given for Bree and Taylor that first Saturday in September. The movie showed their big birthday bash, a day that would show a new love beginning and make Gabe even more popular than he already was.

Live video of the little show that Logan, young Eric, JoJo and Gabe put on for the ladies was shown, and the dancing and the eating and the new children and a new young lady attending the party, Jordan Brooks.

Young Eric smiled and reached over and took Jordan's hand. "A fateful day," he whispered.

September on the video, surprisingly didn't contain any birthdays except one, Hannah Brown on the 18th. Most didn't even know who she was, but a few did. Ricky and Bree knew Hannah would see the movie and that it would make Hannah feel good to be included. September contained snippets of many talks and testimonies that Gabe and the Kino family were asked to share at different churches because of their big spiritual experience of being dead and talking to Jesus. September also had lots of footage of Taylor's only experience of playing a sport at high school. Everyone was duly impressed by her quickness and the power of her serve, and applauded her.

The September part of the video was smack full of life. Volleyball games. Young Eric training for the Kino Challenge. The announcements of the genders of seven of the

eight babies that would be joining the family. The viral pics of Taylor being kissed by the Brookside High QB. Jake has a big sendoff as he leaves for deployment. Ricky and young Eric speak to the UCLA softball team and the following week, the team comes to watch young Eric train. A news headline that said there is a fifth Kino child! And pics of the four hugging their newfound brother. Young Eric takes Jordan out and Jordan gets drugged and Eric gets arrested. They had video of his arrest, of his fight in jail, his beaten face, and Jordan's statement to the press, which everyone chuckled over.

"He wouldn't have to drug me to get me to go to his bed. I'd go willingly and often."

The September video ended with Gabe's, Taylor's, Brody's and Logan's acts of charity in Nashville and then finally, their performance. The audience watching this night applauded as they were reminded through snippets, of the amazing performances given.

October began with a list of the birthdays celebrated that month, then the movie concentrated mostly on volleyball and hard sparring days for Eric and Gabe as they continued to train. And then it showed live breaking news. *"Eric Kino, III was abducted from a gas station as he was giving food to the homeless."*

There are pics of the family as they wait for news and pics of Jordan as she prays for his return and of her sleeping in his closet.

Then the headlines again. *"Young girl's abduction from schoolyard is related to the kidnapping of Eric Kino."*

And finally, another headline. "*Found and alive! Eric Kino rescues his girlfriend's little sister*."

They watched pics and video of Eric's and Josie's ordeal.

The next thing on the video was Alec and Desi, when they first came to stay with the Kinos, including amazing before and after pics.

October ended with two things, one horrible, one good. The horrible one was pics and headlines of Jordan being attacked and her strong fight that aided in the capture of a serial rapist at UCLA. The good one was the Fall/Halloween event taking place at the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* in Pine Forest.

November was a month filled with life-changing events. A slew of births began on the first day of the month, the very next morning after the fall festival at the GTCC. The people at the New Year's Eve party looked up to see pics of a wrecked ambulance and emergency vehicles everywhere and the news report of a woman pregnant with twins and how her teen son, Charlie Stewart, crawled into a wrecked emergency vehicle to deliver his own baby brother and sister. There was a lovely welcome to Lachlyn and Jonathon Jones Stewart.

Next was shown pics and video of another birth, when Elijah Cameron Kino Wallace was born at a restaurant shortly after the Kino Challenge, and after that there were pics of Lizzy Tanner being placed in an ambulance with little Isaiah and Gentian on her chest. Scarlett Davis was born and only a few hours later, Christian Coley was born. Little Jay Deal was born just before Thanksgiving. So many new babies born in November plus at least eight other birthdays were celebrated. Once the November birthday montage finished, they watched a news story about a stalker ex-boyfriend who fought with and injured and tried to kill his ex-girlfriend's brothers.

"That's you?" Brook whispered to Phillip.

He smiled and nodded. "Yep that's me, and Lyle got hurt too. But I ended up with a brain injury."

Next, through pictures and music and live video, they were reminded of four giant events. Gabe winning the second ever Kino Mini-MART, young Eric Kino III, winning his first Kino Challenge, the beautiful wedding of Alec and Destiny Morgan, which included video of the Johnny B. Goode number, and finally, the giant Pine Forest event, the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*.

They also were shown video and pics of all of the attacks that took place to keep the big Thanksgiving event from happening, from Rose being stabbed, young Eric and Jordan being attacked behind the Inn, a gunman trying to shoot Gabe at breakfast, to the all out attack in front of the GTCC where Gabe fell from the ladder and was shot at point blank range. Then pics and video showed just some of the amazing things that took place, miracle healings, celeb singers, amazing choirs, delicious food, and of course, the great water case competition.

Before the movie headed to December it went all the way back to New Year's Day of the past year and to the Trojans winning the *Rose Bowl*. The next several minutes was all JoJo. His amazing showing at last New Year's Day game, and then a montage of his entire season, showing highlights and final scores of every game. The crowd cheered for JoJo. Seeing how good he was and knowing that it was all over for him was bittersweet. Still, they celebrated his wins with him and moaned over the two losses with him as they watched the montage.

Raylynn looked up at her guy. Her guy, she reminded herself. At least for now. Slipping her hand into his, she squeezed it. He looked down at her and smiled, and made an "oh well" shrugging kind of gesture. She wanted to hug him, to hold him, comfort him, kiss him. Her heart swelled toward this fine son of God. He almost didn't seem real. She remembered seeing him at the last game, being put on a gurney and placed in an ambulance. The camera zoomed in on his face. He wiped his face with a towel. Just for a moment, he appeared to be crying. Then he smiled and raised his thumb in the air.

Everyone laughed now, as they watched the final hit over and over and over, because Ricky thought it would be good to get it all out of their system. JoJo shook his head and laughed. Ricky went to him and put his arms around him and hugged him hard, then mussed his hair before he went back to his seat. Everyone applauded JoJo again, and some stood and whistled.

The movie switched to December birthdays which again, was an extensive list, with five of them coming from the Tanner household. The movie then discreetly and briefly covered the finding and rescue of a sweet little thirteen-year-old girl named Hannah Brown. There were pics of Taylor and Hannah and Gabe, and pics of her currently doing Christmas things with the Appels. It showed her holding puppies with Charlie and Matt Stewart. The healing taking place was beautiful.

Rather than the movie showing photos or videos of all the family Christmas celebrations, it went to the first time Logan saw the Hopewood Chapel Community Church of Christ. There was a montage of all of their work, and amazing before-and-afters. They showed the martial arts demo they gave for the people in the apartments.

They showed the Garcias and Caleb always around, helping wherever they could. They showed Amari and Brittney coming to live with the Kinos.

Jamie Brooks had enjoyed seeing his own face up there several times so he reached over and nudged Amari whenever his face was up there on the screen. Amari grinned. Brittney was asleep, but the little ones would see the video tomorrow.

The movie showed clips of the tree decorating pizza party outside of Hopewood Chapel and the whole crowd singing and playing the drums to '*Praise*' by Elevation Worship. It showed the new stained glass window. It showed the newly formed Hopewood Chapel Choir singing and Logan singing 'O Holy Night,' which made everyone still with the shock of just how beautiful his voice sounded.

That beautiful moment shifted to young Eric and Jordan and the rest of the family walking the red carpet at Eric's movie premiere with music from the soundtrack of the movie. There was instant applause. It then shifted to Taylor being lifted in the air by Lance White at the high school Christmas dance. It followed the rest of the dance.

Next on the big screen, was a news story of how a gang was robbing a church and the elderly members and how that gang attempted murder of a grandmother, her daughter and her daughter's friend. Logan looked over at Melody and took her hand. She smiled up at him.

Right after that news story, was another one about the USC quarterback who rescued a girl being beaten in her car on campus. It showed pics of Kaylee shortly after the attack. Several people reached over and patted her head. "So glad you're okay, now," Ryder said softly.

She smiled.

The next treat was showing Reverend Clark being surprised by presenting his family to him. That brought tears to people's eyes. Then it showed the most recent church service, Patrick and Harrison preaching and then Reverend Clark telling his story. They listened as the movie showed the part where Ronny broke down. "My father turned his back on me. My brother hated me. My mother was ashamed of me. No one believed me. My baby sisters were just babies. I learned last Sunday that those sisters had been told the story, and they believed me. They believed me. They'd been filled with the Holy Spirit. My sisters passed away many years ago, but I just found out that they taught their families that God is real. That He hears us. He answers our prayers. I learned that they did this because they actually believed my story. I didn't know I had a family. I thought I was all alone. But I have a beautiful, wonderful family!"

There were some sniffles as they neared the end of the short movie. It showed the day Ryder, Zoe and Brook got off the streets, eating dinner with JoJo. Then there were pictures of them all dressed nicely sharing Christmas, Ryder with the Adams/Kinos and Zoe and Brook with the Morgans and Copelands. They also had pictures of a Christmas party held in Quapaw, Oklahoma, showing Ray, Kay, Dani and Alo and many others in the small town.

Then there was a long montage of pics of Ameritech Agents, one after the other who had worked with the families on each coast, to serve and protect. Then there was a section of several agents who'd been wounded in the line of duty this year including Division Chief Jeff Davis, Deputy Director of Special Operations, Cam Wallace, Agent

Jon Key who'd been shot in front of the GTCC protecting Gabe, and lastly, two who had died. They all got a standing ovation.

The memoriam portion continued with again showing the five murdered children, the ten murdered women, Miss Maddie Lewis and Robert Adams.

Finally, beautiful Bree and Ricky appeared on screen.

"Hey, everyone," Bree began. "I have to tell you that I cried so many times as Ricky and I worked to find the videos and pics of all the things, or many of the things, that happened this year, and really, we didn't include many things because we'd be sitting here for hours."

Ricky nodded. "Putting this together has definitely been cathartic for us. I guess we hope it has the same effect on you. A cleansing of sorts, because, it has been one heck of a year."

Bree smiled. "It has, and I'm so grateful to be able to see all of you here tonight. I'm grateful that my daughter and Gabe are both alive and well, even though they aren't here right now."

Ricky smiled. "And I'm grateful that others came through and are still with us. Bristol and Christina, Melody, Jordan, young Eric, Josie, Phillip, Lyle, and—my father," he said as his emotions welled up.

Bree nodded. "And our five beautiful new siblings, and thanks to Luciana, Camilla and Lonnie, for taking care of them and especially Luciana, who bravely risked her life to save the children. We will be forever grateful to you."

They raised champagne glasses filled with water with a slice of lemon. "Here's to you, our amazing family. That includes all of you. We love you and wish you a very happy new year!" They clinked glasses and drank and the movie ended.

Everyone stood and applauded. The DJ put on '*Johnny B. Goode*' as a tribute to the film and everyone jumped up to dance. In thirty minutes, the new year would be here.

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During the last thirty minutes of the year, couples danced, people hugged and loved on each other. Ricky and Bree were congratulated hundreds of times for the work put into the film and how it was poignant and wonderful.

The young couples paired off; Young Eric and Jordan, Logan and Melody, JoJo and Raylynn and Ryder and Kaylee. Patrick Barnes decided to get a last dance in with Bristol Palma, Harrison Hall got a last dance with Charity Copeland, and Hart Akins got a last dance with Camille Hall.

Daniel and Jeremy Davis stood in a circle with Daniel's friend from school and Josie Brooks and Sydney Clark. Phillip and Lyle Keith and Carson Clark chatted with a group that included Zoe and Brook and a few other young teens who were children of Ameritech agents that were in attendance.

Young Jamie Brooks, Amari Meeks and Caleb Garcia were obviously getting tired because they sat down at a table and simply watched everyone else.

Ricky and Bree, Eric and Shelley, Jason and Angel, Mark and Bella, Joey and Breez, Jeff and Mickey, Justin and Lori, Alec and Desi, Andrew and Nikki, Jesse and Becky, Chris and Marissa, Jeffy and Cam, and many other couples simply swayed softly to the slow, romantic music playing.

Jordan looked around and smiled. “Isn’t it nice to see all these men being so sweet and loving with their wives?”

Young Eric nodded and pulled Jordan up against him. “Yes, it is.”

“Is this how we’re gonna be when we’ve been married thirty years?”

He smiled. “Yes, ma’am. I will love you and cherish you forever.”

She sighed. “What if I disappoint you somehow?”

“That’s impossible.”

“It’s not impossible.”

“Okay, I’ll play the game. Name something you think you might do to disappoint me.”

“Hmm, what if I have a horrible softball season?”

He laughed. “Well, we can’t have that, so I guess you’d better train extra hard.”

She giggled. “Oh, Three, really though, I have to say, I never thought in a million years that I could feel this happy.”

He hugged her tight. “I’m really glad that you’re happy, babe, because you make me happy.”

The song ended. The DJ spoke. “Okay, everyone, let’s get ready to count this thing down. Wave at the cameras!”

The large monitors sprang to life again, showing live video of their own party and everyone waving to the cameras. When it was time, they all started counting down from ten. When it hit one, people yelled and cheered, “Happy new year!”

Then almost all at once, the couples came together in deep, heartfelt and some very passionate kisses.

Phillip smiled at Zoe. “Well, I want us to have good luck this year too, so,” he bent down and kissed her cheek.

Zoe smiled at him. “Thanks. We need some good luck.”

“Well, you don’t even know how lucky you have it, being found by the Adams slash Kino families. They will make sure your life from now on is blessed.”

Lyle had the same type of interaction with Brook, only he simply raised her hand and kissed it. “Hey, I know we don’t know each other very well, and I’m younger than you, but, it’s tradition and I want us to have a blessed year.”

Brook smiled. “Thanks. Me too.”

Cam pulled away from kissing his wife and looked into her worried eyes. “What is it, baby? Or should I ask, who is it?”

She sighed. “It’s Brook. Oh, Cam, I’m so upset by what I saw. I don’t think I’m gonna be able to rest tonight at all. I need to go talk to Daddy, and my brothers.”

“Right now?” Cam asked.

She nodded. “Yes, now. I am so sorry. I feel her trauma so much, it’s making me sick.”

Cam frowned. “Jeffy, when you went to the restroom to help her, did you take her pain into yourself?”

She sighed. “I guess I did.”

“You’re usually pretty careful about not taking it into yourself. You haven’t done that for years.”

Jeffy nodded. “I didn’t mean to take it in. I opened myself to read her condition and it came at me so strong, I wasn’t able to block it. I’m thinking that maybe if I tell what I saw, it will help. I need relief.”

“Okay, let’s do it. Your dad, and brothers or everyone?”

“Let’s not bother the women right now. Just Dad and my brothers.”

Cam nodded, took out his phone and sent texts to Grandmaster Kino, Mark, Joey and Ricky.

~~ Jeffy needs to speak with you for a few minutes. Meet me in fifteen near the elevator lobby.

Fifteen minutes later, Jeffy, Cam, Eric, Ricky, Mark and Joey stood together in a tight circle.

“I’m sorry everyone. Not a good way to bring in the new year I guess, but I need to tell you this,” Jeffy said.

“No worries, sweetie,” Eric said calmly. “If the Lord presents a new problem to us first thing, then we handle it first thing. And if you felt like it couldn’t wait, then He’s trying to tell us to take action quickly.”

Jeffy sighed with relief. Her father always helped to put things into perspective. His calmness represented strength to her and was a salve to her soul. She nodded and looked up at the strong men in her life. “Mark, I know you have an appointment to speak to Brook soon, right? And then you have to go before a judge, right?”

Mark nodded. “Yes. Aunt Angel and I have an appointment to speak to Brook Friday morning. We have an appointment with a judge the following Tuesday morning.” He looked around. “In case any of you don’t know the story yet, Brook is not seventeen like she said and her mother did not throw her out of the house because she couldn’t get along with her new stepfather. Brook is actually only fifteen as of December 22nd. And she left home because she didn’t want her parents to find out that she’s pregnant. Her mother reported her missing and is elated that she’s been found safe and sound. Her mother wants her back, but Brook is refusing to go, so we have to go to court to get a judge’s decision. Also, the mother and her husband confronted Brook’s boyfriend about her being pregnant and there was an altercation and police were called. No charges have been filed. Aunt Angel and I were meeting with Brook to see if we can get her to come clean and tell us why she’s so adamant about not going back home since her parents know about the pregnancy now, and are completely willing to support her.”

Jeffy nodded, but swayed, as her stomach roiled.

Cam reached up and steadied her.

Jeffy drew a deep breath. “Well, you can’t send her back to their home, Mark. I felt like Jesus asked me to go see her in the restroom. She was throwing up. I opened myself to her so I could read her body so I could help her and I-I saw the whole thing. I know what happened.” She took several more breaths. “The child she’s carrying is not her boyfriend’s child. Brook was raped—by her stepfather.”

She stopped at the heavy sighs that came from all of the men.

Jeffy went on. “About three months ago, Brook’s mom and stepfather went to a party. They came home very drunk. Brook’s mother went straight to bed. Her stepfather came to her room. He was very intoxicated. He put his hand over her mouth, held her

down, and took her. Brook was afraid to tell her mother. The next week, Brook felt so much fear of him, the stepfather, and so much anger, directed mostly toward her mother, that she and her mother had a couple of huge fights. After one fight, her mother punished her by restricting her to her room and while in her room, Brook heard her mother tell her stepfather to please go up and have a talk with her because her mother wasn't able to get through to her.

"Brook was terrified of him and before he could get to her room, she climbed out of her window and ran away. Then the first person she met, a woman she thought would help her, instead tried to turn her over to the police so, Brook went farther away and she finally ran into Zoe and they stuck together. She's suffering terribly, Dad. She's playing what happened to her over and over in her mind. It makes her sick. She throws up often. Her emotions," she stopped. "I can feel them so strong. I can't stand it a minute longer. Someone has to help her. Someone has to speak to her and let her know that we know what happened to her and it's gonna be okay and no one is gonna make her go back to live in that home, at least not as long as he's living there."

Eric nodded. "No one is gonna make her go back. I guarantee that. She's about three months along, right?"

Jeffy nodded.

"Mark, we can order a prenatal paternity test, correct?" Eric asked.

He nodded. "Yes but only with Brook's permission."

Eric nodded. "Let's work on that. It'll prove the stepfather is the father of the child. What's his name?"

"Stepfather's name is Darrin Hopkins. He's a real estate agent in the greater Los Angeles area," Mark supplied.

Joey nodded. "I've actually heard of him, or like, seen his face on those real estate signs."

Mark nodded. "Brook's surname is Tattersall. Despite what she told Ryder about her father dying of cancer, her biological father, Vance Tattersall, is alive. He's only been allowed visitations with her every other weekend."

"Do you know why so limited?" Ricky asked.

Mark shook his head. "Not yet, but we'll find out."

"What will happen to her, I mean, once we show why it is that she can't go back?" Jeffy asked.

"Well," Mark began. "Emancipation isn't a realistic option for her right now, so we need to look into a safe placement. It could be a member of her family. We'll have to look into why her real father was allowed only visitations instead of joint custody. If that doesn't pan out, and there are no other relatives, she'll go into the system."

Jeffy sighed and shook her head as the tears began to fall. "Is there a possibility she could go back to live with her mother?"

"Are you asking because you want her to, or because you don't want her to?" Joey asked.

Jeffy shook her head. "I don't want her to unless Brook wants that and right now she doesn't want that. She feels betrayed by her mother. And I don't blame her. Her mother failed to protect her."

Eric held up his hand. “Well, let’s not judge. The mother could be neglectful, or simply naive, or could even be a victim herself. Let’s see how she handles the information. It will all come clear when she’s told what happened and see who she tries to protect, her daughter or her new husband.”

Ricky nodded. “How long have her mother and Hopkins been married?”

“Almost seven months now,” Mark said.

“I’m wondering if there was any hint of intentions, or if it was a mistake brought on by the alcohol.”

“Either way,” Eric said, “the damage has been done. Brook’s life, her mental health and the baby’s life are all at risk.”

Joey sighed. “You know, as far as her mental health, Jordan could be brought in on this information and she could talk to Brook and get her to talk about it. I mean, since she’s been in that boat, Brook might trust her and open up. Unless you think Jordan’s not ready for something like that.”

Eric nodded. “That’s a good idea, and Jordan is very strong. I’ll speak with her and test her out.”

Ricky nodded. “If that’s your intention, also speak to young Eric.”

Eric nodded. “Absolutely.”

Jeffy heaved a sigh of relief.

Cam smiled down at her and put his arm around her. “So, Dr. Wallace, my love, do you feel better now?”

Jeffy nodded. “Yes. So much better.” She looked up at her father and brothers. “I took her pain into myself and I was struggling, and I thought if I told you all, I’d be able to discharge the feeling.” She smiled. “It feels like it worked. I didn’t want Eli to pick up on his mommy being in so much turmoil.”

“Well, I’m so glad you feel better, squirt,” Mark said. “Now, who’s gonna make me feel better?”

The men smiled. They were guys. They were supposed to be strong. They knew that they had to show strength, especially in crucial situations. But that didn’t mean that things like this didn’t hurt them too. They just bore it for the sake of the family members they protect, because the men breaking down doesn’t help anyone. If the men broke down, no one in the family would feel secure. Now, it was time to go back to their families and get them home and tucked in safe and sound. They needed to rest, because today was game day!

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1 Peter 3:7

“Likewise, husbands, live with your wives
in an understanding way, showing honor to
the woman as the weaker vessel, since they
are heirs with you of the grace of life,
so that your prayers may not be hindered.”

Epilogue

New Year's Day was a beautiful thing in so many ways. A fresh start. A new beginning. Another chance to get things right. That's how God's warriors looked at it. It was actually how they looked at each new day, but on the new year, it was on a larger scale.

On the east coast on New Year's Day, there were two wedding anniversaries, Toby and Caroline Smith and Keegan and Lizzy Tanner. Both anniversaries were celebrated by the families of the couples. The nods given were heartfelt, the children mostly hoping that one day they would be able to celebrate their 27th and 19th anniversaries with as much love and success as their parents.

Gabe and Taylor spent a lot of that day watching bowl games. Brody and Daisy joined them. Daisy always loved sharing sporting events with her brother, and now having Brody beside her, it made it very exciting.

Taylor was extremely interested in the whole process and in learning about stats for each team and picking who she wanted to win. The four of them talked about people who put too much importance on the games and their priorities getting out of whack. Even though Gabe had compared football to life, in that it was young men, getting strong, preparing for battle, learning to think fast on their feet, becoming warriors, it was still only a game, and it was only one aspect to becoming a warrior. JoJo's injury, and JoJo himself, were teaching the world that perspective.

They stayed up late on New Year's Day to watch the *Rose Bowl* over at the Inn with the Appels, Stewarts, and Murphys. After the game Gabe walked Taylor to Hannah's bedroom and reluctantly kissed her goodnight. Hannah had been so very delighted when she found that not only was Taylor coming to surprise Gabe, but she would be staying the nights with Hannah. Gabe, on the other hand, was bound and determined to have Taylor stay at his house the night before she left, which would be Friday.

Keegan's parents went home on Thursday morning, January 2nd, after a lovely family breakfast which Taylor attended. Then, Gabe and Taylor spent Thursday and Friday joined at the hip. They visited the Center and talked about and compared it to the one Taylor had visited in Compton. They went to visit some of the people that the Tanners had taken on as a project from the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*.

Accompanied by Peyton and Avery, they went riding, then out to lunch at Joe's where they played some games. Of course, they went to the DQ, where they'd gone after Prom. They had dinner with the Tanner family both nights, because the Tanners knew their time too with Gabe was getting short.

Taylor asked Gabe to let her watch him chop wood in person, because she'd only seen it on a video call. She was duly impressed. He was duly tired. They went shooting on Friday at the Stewarts' and played with puppies. The day was cold and gray and

drizzly, so they had a game day at the Inn with everyone invited. They gorged themselves on snacks and goodies and played and laughed. They laughed a lot. Especially when a wrestling match broke out between Gabe and Iris first, and then others decided to defend Iris, and then some decided to help Gabe. It was a fun free-for-all, for sure. Iris finally won, as Rose and Brody and Taylor and Matt Stewart and Daisy and Lily all pinned Gabe, and then Violet set Iris on Gabe's chest. Gabe promised that the only reason they'd been able to pin him was he was being very careful not to hurt anyone.

Hannah did not participate in the wrestling, but she did cheer everyone on. She turned to see Charlie smiling at the group. He'd helped for a minute, but then simply stood back and watched the commotion. Sighing, Hannah stepped away and tried to take it all in. Taylor was leaving the next afternoon and instead of staying with Hannah again, she was gonna stay the night tonight at the Tanners' home. Hannah couldn't blame her for that. Taylor had stayed with Hannah Tuesday night, Wednesday night, and last night. They talked and whispered and laughed and shared some of their innermost thoughts. Hannah loved Taylor like a sister. Taylor told Hannah that she loved her and that made her feel so good. Taylor told her to call her anytime, even in the middle of the night, though Hannah thought she would probably never do that.

Hannah understood that Taylor wanted to stay with Gabe tonight. She missed him when she wasn't with him. She understood it full well, because Hannah had started to feel that way about Charlie, not that she would ever admit that to anyone, ever. Charlie made her feel safe. Hannah wished she'd been put into high school so she could be near Charlie. Instead, she would be starting at *Pine Forest Middle School* on Monday. At least she had Matt. Matt was about to be thirteen in a few weeks. He was in the seventh grade. She would be in the eighth grade. She might not see him very much. She wasn't sure, and not being sure of how things would be was what was making her so nervous.

Sighing, she tried to calm her nerves. Charlie and Matt had been kind enough to introduce her to their cousin, Dave Turner. He was thirteen and in the eighth grade and he was nice, just like Charlie and Matt. Dave had an older sister, Riley, who was in the tenth grade. They were the kids of Miss Lisa's little sister, whom Charlie and Matt called Aunt Megan. Miss Megan was the owner of *The Ritz*, a fancy place that was in town. Miss Megan's husband, Mr. Josh, Charlie's and Matt's Uncle, helped run *Joe's Bar and Grill*. Hannah had been to *Joe's* a few times. She hadn't been to *The Ritz*, but Miss Jodi, whom Hannah thought of as her mother, said they would get all dressed up and go there when the teen band, *Brite Lite,* was performing in February.

Dave had been over here at the Inn for a little while, earlier today. He'd also been at the Stewart ranch when everyone went to shoot this morning. Hannah watched. She was impressed that Taylor knew how to shoot. Hannah's dad, Mr. John, asked Hannah if she would like to learn and she'd said maybe. He didn't pressure her. She did think it was cool when Charlie and Dave and Matt and Gabe took their turns. It was obvious, Gabe was the best. He did it so fast and they said he hit every bullseye, though Hannah didn't know how they could even tell.

Hannah had admitted to Dave that she was nervous about going to school, but he promised her that he would take care of any problems, and for Hannah to let him know if anyone was mean to her, boys or girls, and he would take care of it. Charlie had also

chimed in and told her that pretty much everyone in both middle and high school already knew her story and felt only kindness toward her. He'd said, "not like you wanna be like, oh look at poor little me, and play victim, but they know that a man held you hostage and they will want to be kind to you." But then he also said, "though not everyone in Pine Forest is nice. Some of the girls can be catty, ya know? But hey, we all deal with that stuff."

In a way, Hannah just wanted to hurry and get it over with. She *wanted* to go to school. She *wanted* to experience school. She remembered school from when she was young. It was fun. She'd had lots of friends. She wanted that back. She wanted to have back what her birth mother had taken from her.

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Over on the west coast, New Year's Day at the *Rose Bowl* had been an experience Raylynn, Kaylee and Ryder would never forget. First, there was a huge tailgate party before the game. Everyone was having such a good time, being silly, having school spirit, it was a blast.

Once inside the stadium, the spirit of excitement combined with the history of the actual stadium made it special indeed. Raylynn had been told that it was bench seating by a few people when she'd told them she was going to the *Rose Bowl*, and to be prepared to be uncomfortable. But the Kinos/Adams family had seats in the middle that were regular seats with backs. The family sat in different rows in front of each other. Ray sat in the highest row with Melody on her right, then Logan, Ryder, Kaylee, Jordan and young Eric. On Raylynn's left was Breanna Adams Kino, Ricky Kino and then people she didn't know. She did know that in front of her was Mr. Davis, and his two boys, and Jordan's little brother and sister, and a foster child of the Kinos', Amari, and a boy named Caleb who was a friend of Amari's and then JoJo's parents.

Farther down, in front of JoJo's mom and dad, was Joey Adams and his wife, a few men that Raylynn didn't know and Grandmaster Kino and Miss Shelley, and Dr. Kino's husband, Cam, and the Lee brothers. All the new moms and babies had stayed at home as well as the Kino and Adams younger children.

The game itself was spectacular because USC was playing Ohio State and not expected to win. But they did win, in the last seconds of the game. A lot of that had to do with JoJo helping the QB with confidence issues and rousing the players to not give up and reach for heights to prove everyone wrong. He refused to give up and they rallied. A defensive touchdown brought them within two points. A blitz produced a fumble, a few ten-yard passes with great blocking got them closer, the kicker made the field goal. The place went berserk. It was awesome, though perhaps a little bittersweet for JoJo and his family.

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After Jeffy's talk first thing New Year's Day with her father and brothers, as usual, the Kino/Adams men went straight to work.

The women were filled in. Mickey Davis and Jordan Brooks, who both had to deal with being assaulted by their stepfathers, were briefed on how they could speak with Brook. Jordan spoke with her privately before Friday's meeting. She shared enough of her own experience to let Brook know she wasn't alone, then simply listened to her.

Brook began to feel more at ease and to believe that these people would understand. They wanted to help her feel safe enough to tell the detectives what had happened. They also needed to get Brook's consent to do a paternity test.

That same Friday morning, Eric, Jeffy, Angel and Mark met with Brook at the law offices of *Lee and Adams* and let her know that Jeffy was psychic and had been able to read Brook accidentally, and that they knew the truth. At first Brook didn't believe them. Then Jeffy gently told her the story of how it went down. Brook had a good hard cry and came to terms with the fact that they knew how she became pregnant. Jeffy helped her with the pain. Eric counseled her a bit, helping to get some clarity and Mark and Angel informed Brook of her options.

She decided two things. First, she did not want to go back home to live with her mother. Not now anyway, though there was a chance for forgiveness and healing down the road. Second, yes, she would testify against the man in court. Brook also agreed to prenatal paternity testing, and Mark began making the arrangements. With support, she gave the detectives her account of the assault. Their investigation established enough probable cause to obtain an arrest warrant without waiting for the test results.

The next question was an important one. Someone's life depended on it, a tiny, innocent, human being, who couldn't help who his or her father was and what he'd done. They didn't want to gang up on her. So they gave her information from both sides of the aisle and then told her to ask friends and acquaintances for their thoughts. Then, she was urged to speak to adults she trusted. Those adults turned out to be Mrs. Angel Lee, Mrs. Bella Adams, and Dr. Jeffy Kino Wallace.

Those women explained that the moment Brook conceived the child, it was a human life. The moment of conception. If left alone and not tampered with, that tiny human would grow from a zygote, to a fetus to a baby. It was human life. And though it may be more convenient to kill it, do we take a human life because it's convenient? Because keeping it alive is less convenient?

All three women prayed with Brook over it. They didn't ask God to make her think the way they thought. They asked God to give her peace of mind, to give her clarity of mind, and to let her know that He loved her and she is His beautiful daughter.

Brook cried a lot. They all did. Brook had decided almost immediately that she would not kill the baby. She would give birth to it, but she wouldn't keep it. She would give the child to someone to be raised. She made that decision final after Mrs. Lee put her in touch with several children of rape victims who were very happy and very blessed and very glad that they were alive.

All of this only took Brook a few days of contemplation.

By Monday, the sixth of January, everything came to a head when Brook's mother heard pounding on the front door of her large home in Palos Verdes Estates while having breakfast with her husband.

"Who in the world would be knocking on the door this early in the morning?" Naomi Hopkins asked as she put her coffee down and headed to the front door.

Darrin Hopkins only shrugged. "Whatever they're selling, we're not interested."

She saw through the glass sidelight of the door that it was two men in suits with police badges hanging on lanyards around their necks. She opened the door quickly, her

eyes wide. “Did something happen to Brook? Is she okay?”

The officer nodded. “Hello, are you Naomi Hopkins?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Detective Stanley and this is my partner, Detective Arnold.”

She nodded, the panic rising. “Has something happened to my daughter?” She became angry immediately. “I told those people that she needed to be at home. And now, what’s happened? Did she run away again?”

The detective sighed. “Ma’am, is your husband home?”

“Yes, he’s home.”

“May we come in?”

“Yes, come in,” she said. She looked past the two detectives standing on the large porch to two more officers on the walk. She frowned. The two on the sidewalk didn’t look like regular police officers. They both wore black suits with some kind of eagle emblem on the breast pocket. Past them, there was another set of police officers in uniform, standing by a patrol car.

She backed up and allowed the men to enter.

They came in. “Where is your husband?”

“He’s in the kitchen.”

“What’s Brook gone and done now?” Mr. Hopkins asked as he entered the front foyer.

One detective moved forward. “Are you Mr. Darrin Hopkins?”

He smiled and nodded. “Yes. I guess you know me, because my picture is up everywhere you look.”

The officer nodded sternly, moved forward and grabbed the man by the wrist. “Mr. Hopkins, we have a warrant for your arrest.”

“What?” He tried to pull away but the officer spun him around.

“Don’t try to resist. You’ll only make it harder on yourself.”

“What are you talking about?” Naomi yelled. “What’s going on? Why are you arresting him?”

Darrin grunted as the officer pushed him against the wall. He tried to turn back around to argue, and the officer slammed him to the floor and cuffed him.

Darrin Hopkins sat on the floor, anger flashing in his eyes. “What’s the charge, you idiots?”

“You’re under arrest for sexual assault of a minor, child endangerment, and child cruelty.”

He sighed and shook his head. “Sexual assault? Is she claiming I raped her?” he asked quietly.

“What are you talking about?” Naomi yelled. “This is impossible. Who did he rape? Darrin, who are they talking about?”

Darrin looked up at his wife. “This is your daughter’s doing, Naomi.”

“What? Brook? Why would she say you raped her?”

He shook his head. “She’s never liked me. She’s always wanted to get me out of your life.”

“No, I can’t believe she would do this. This is crazy,” Naomi shouted, her voice

high-pitched and panicked. She began screaming at the detective. “You have to listen to reason. She’s making this up. She didn’t want me to marry him. She’s lying. You have to believe me.”

“Naomi, stop screaming. They’re not gonna listen to you. Call my lawyer. He’ll get me out. They have no proof. No cameras. No physical proof. They only have her word. You’ll see.”

“Wait a minute, Darrin, Brook is pregnant. So, she went and got herself pregnant and now she’s trying to say that you’re the father of the baby?”

He swallowed hard a minute. It had never occurred to him. When he learned she was pregnant he truly believed she was pregnant from her boyfriend. However, Darrin did have the foggy memory that he’d gone into the bedroom to see Brook that night a few months ago. He’d been very drunk. He’d gone in to check on her. He did have some flashes of him holding her down. But— his face went pale. Did he actually force her and completely black out? Did he actually rape his own stepdaughter? He thought the flashes he’d been having were like, his own deep sexual fantasies. But did he really do it? If he did, he was in big trouble. If he did, his life was over. Ruined. His heart raced. He had to get control. What should he do? Call his attorney first, and until then, he needed to act like he didn’t know anything about it. He didn’t remember anything. That might be his only hope of a defense.

He looked at his wife as the officer pulled him to his feet. He began giving her commands. “Listen, Naomi, call my lawyer. This is ridiculous and impossible. I’ve never touched her other than giving her a fatherly hug. They’ll have no proof.”

“I’m sorry, Darrin. I can’t believe Brook is doing this. I never knew she was such a vindictive, hateful child.” Naomi turned to the detective. “Officer, please, she’s making this all up. This is totally ridiculous,” Naomi pleaded.

The officer looked at her. “Yeah, you’re right, it *is* pretty ridiculous. But you’re wrong about what you said a minute ago, Mrs. Hopkins. Your daughter didn’t get herself pregnant.”

The detectives ushered Darrin Hopkins out to the waiting patrol car.

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January 6th 6:30 PM PST/9:30 EST Monday Evening

South Kino Estate → Tanner Home

Gabe quickly rose from his knees and grabbed up his phone from the nightstand. He smiled and answered the video call. “Hey, Tay!”

“Hi, Gabe.”

“What’s wrong, babe?”

“Nothing’s really wrong I guess. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Anything I can help with?”

She smiled at her guy. She’d heard him say those exact same words maybe hundreds of times. “Well, that’s why I called. To talk things over with you.”

“Okay, hold on.” He pulled the blankets down on his bed, arranged the pillows against the headboard, sat on the bed against the pillows, and pulled the blankets up to his waist. “There. I’m ready.”

She giggled. “You look very warm and comfy.”

"Yep, I am, except there is one thing missing."

"Me?"

"Very good." He smiled at her. "Whatcha got, Tay?"

She sighed. "Well, remember when you asked me what I want to do?"

"You mean, like, a career path?"

"Yes, I guess. But I mean, I'm not really thinking about a career path, because, well, you know what I want to do."

He nodded. "Marry me and have my babies," he said with much satisfaction.

She nodded her head and smiled. "Yes. But I'm feeling like there is something maybe God is calling me to do."

"Awesome! What do you think He's saying to you?"

"I'm not sure yet."

Gabe's brow furrowed.

"It's something about teenage girls," she said quickly.

"Okay. What about them?"

"Well, I mean, look at what happened to Hannah. And now look at what's goin' on with Brook. Oh, and by the way, they arrested her stepfather today."

Gabe nodded. "Good. How'd that go down?"

She shrugged. "I don't know everything, like if he fought the cops or stuff like that. I heard Dad and Mom talking about it, and from what I heard, the cops and two AMT agents went to their house this morning to arrest the man and Brook's mom was screaming, like saying Brook was lying and she was begging the cops to not arrest him."

Gabe sighed. "So, I guess that means she took her husband's side and not her daughter's side."

"Right. And like, I guess I understand a little bit, because it would be hard to believe your husband could do such a horrible thing. But, it would be nice to see if she calms down and thinks about it and maybe feels a little worried about Brook. Ya know?"

Gabe nodded. "Yep. I get it. So, let's go back to what you were gonna tell me. Something about teen girls."

"Oh yeah. So, I started thinking about Hannah and Brook and Zoe, remember I told you that Zoe was in foster care and the boys there ganged up on her?"

He nodded.

"And of course, Jordan," Taylor went on, "with her stepfather and also with that serial rapist guy. And then, Mika, and Melody and Kaylee, and don't forget Laynahbug. And even Raylynn was attacked. I mean, no offense, Gabe, but no wonder women say they hate men."

Sighing, he nodded. "I get ya, babe. I really do. I hate it."

"And like, I guess what I'm trying to say is, I want to do something. I mean, I want to do something to try to help teen girls."

"What do you want to do?"

"That's just it. I don't know. I don't know what to do. I don't know how I can make a difference, but Gabe, something has got to change. And one thing I do know is that the feminist movement hasn't helped at all. It's done the opposite. Because of feminists, men are less likely to step up and help protect a woman. It's become like a 'them' versus 'us'

kind of thing. We don't work together. I don't know how to help, but I do know that a bunch of girls crying, 'woe is me, some man did something to me,' that's not gonna change anything.

"I think the only thing that's gonna help is when *men* stand up and rebuke other men and get *men* to teach their sons that women should be protected and cared for and not abused because guys can't control their sex drive. And in order to teach their sons that, they have to set a good example in their own homes. But also, girls should be like, I don't know how to say it, but they should be nicer and more honorable too, so that men *want* to protect them. I mean, when women come across as cranky karens, or shallow shoppers or nag and gripe all the time, it probably makes men *want* to hurt them."

"Well, it would be nice if some women were nicer, but either way, men shouldn't hurt women and should always protect them. Even the naggy karens. It's not conditional."

Taylor nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's right, but I still think women should try to be nicer, sweeter, ya know? And here's another thing, a big thing, is girls should be made to understand a guy's sex drive, like when you told me those things I didn't understand. Girls just think of it as flirting. I promise you that girls don't realize that how they dress, how they move, how they touch guys, they don't realize that it affects guys a whole lot stronger. Well, I think it does anyway."

"It does," Gabe assured her. "But I have to say, I think a lot of girls know that it does."

Taylor shook her head. "They know they're looking sexy. They know it's kind of provocative to touch men's chest or waist area, but, they don't really know. How could they? They're not men."

Gabe nodded. "Good point. They don't know what they don't know."

Taylor sighed. "So, Gabe, to me, this is a serious problem. I did some research about this and found out that roughly one in ten high school girls have said that they've been forced to have sex. I mean, I call that rape. But this report was just like a survey, not actual police reports. So then, how many more were afraid to report it, or just didn't want to talk about it? I feel like I want to do something about this. But not like that stupid 'Me too' movement which didn't help anything, in my opinion. I think it made it worse, because it was an attack on all men. I want to go about it a different way, because I don't want to attack men. I love men. I love my dad and my grandfather. I love my brother. I love my uncles and cousins. I love Mr. Davis and Mr. Keith and Phillip and Lyle. I love your dad and Mr. Appel and Mr. Stewart. And I love you.

"See, I don't want to attack men, but I want to ask men to help us. To protect us. To stand up for us and to teach boys to do the same. I know I'm goin' on and on, and I don't know what to do about all of this but I know God is urging me to do something. I feel so strongly about this. I just don't know how to go about it. And I hope I'm not hurting your feelings, but there must be something that can be done. I mean, Jesus could come back that would do it, but until He does, what can I do? What do you think, Gabe? I really want to know your opinion on all of this."

Gabe sighed.

"Hello? Are you still there?"

He chuckled. “Yep, still here. I’m wishing I was smart enough to tell you what direction to head with this. I’m thinking you need to speak with your mom and dad and grandparents. Have you spoken to them?”

“Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Why?”

“Because *you* are gonna be my husband, Gabe, and that’s the way it should be, right? I should talk things over with you.”

He smiled and his emotions welled up. “Wow, that was a beautiful thing to say, Tay. And it was also like, heavy, ya know? Like I’m feelin’ the responsibility.”

She sighed and shrugged. “It’s the truth. If we’re gonna get married, I need to make sure you’re with me on this.”

“Well, if God is urging you to do this, I am totally on board. Whatever is God’s will, I’m in. And that’s what we’ll always do, Taylor. We’ll ask God to guide us. So, I’m in. We’ll pray together about this and ask God to lead us and guide us to our next step. And that is where I think you’re feeling a little stressed or upset.”

“Because I’m not asking God? I assure you I am.”

He shook his head. “No, not because you’re not asking God. I’m sure too that you’re doing that. What I meant was, instead of asking God what we can do to tackle this giant problem, we need to simply ask Him for the next step. To guide us to the next step. We might not see the whole picture or how to do this thing, but God could make known to us the next step. I mean, it’s kind of like when Grandmaster Kino was a kid.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, remember, he said he was gonna teach the world and then God showed him that the next step was seeing that he had a gift for the martial arts and he felt strongly that he needed to work hard at that?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“So like, he had no idea that learning martial arts would eventually lead to him teaching martial arts in his backyard, or that it would lead to him opening a school, and that would lead to more schools and that would lead to much acclaim and people would pay attention to the example he set as a follower of Jesus Christ and suddenly we realize, he IS teaching the world, both about martial arts and more importantly, about Jesus.”

Taylor nodded. “So, we just need to know the next step I need to take, and you’re right, cuz, just saying that feels like a weight being lifted off my shoulders. I just need the Lord to guide me to the next step. One single step.”

Gabe nodded. “And be sure to look for the signs.”

Taylor smiled. “I will. Thanks, Gabe. Ya see? That’s what I mean. I knew talking to you would help me.”

“Well, glad I could help. It’s just what came into my head. I guess that was Jesus telling us to slow down and have enough faith to simply take one step without knowing the whole plan.”

“Oh, wow, I love you, Gabe.”

“I love you, Taylor. Would you like to pray together?”

“I would love that.”

“You wanna go first?”

She shook her head. “You go first.”

He smiled, bowed his head and closed his eyes. “Our Father in heaven, hey, it’s me and Taylor coming at ya....”

✝✝✝

Matthew 7:7-8
“Ask, and it will be given to you;
seek, and you will find;
knock, and it will be opened to you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and the one who seeks finds,
and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”

#14 Such a Time as This-In Jesus’ Name is next!

What happened with Brook? How’s school going for Hannah? How’s Gabe’s training with AMT coming along? Gabe’s training turned out to be really fun to write! I thought #14 would head in one direction, but the Lord led me in a completely different direction and He blew me away with what happened. Like in *#9 Circle of Life*, He brought me to a place where I cried and didn’t want to write what Jesus was giving me. But I obeyed and I wrote and I was so very rewarded and you will be too!

The world is winding down. Prophecy is being fulfilled. Hopefully, we are going home soon. If you haven’t read the Word Jesus gave me about why these books are important for you to read, go and do it now at mccartneygreen.org and look for Exclusive Word from Jesus.

Can’t wait for you to see what God has whispered to me, what He put on my heart and in my head, and what visions and dreams He gave me. He always surprises me with the wisdom and lessons He teaches me. Oh, how I love Him. My love grows as I go back and reread the books. Each time I get something new, another layer, another beautiful lesson that brings me so close to Him. Even though I wrote the book, I’m surprised at how much more I glean after reading them a second, third and even fourth time. There are so many deep principles and inspirations and motivations. The way the Kinos, Adams, Wallaces, Lees, Davises, Tanners, Stewarts, Appels and Nashes live, is an example of how the strongest of us will be on the “New Earth.”

✝✝✝

A Prayer

Dear Father in Heaven,

I come before You humbly, first to express my gratitude for my life, for my family, for these books and for interacting with me. Thank You. Thank You. My heart is so full. I will continue to obey and do this thing. I once turned my back on You, Jesus, but I will never do that again. Thank You, Father, thank You, Jesus, for the gift. As You told me that day in the park, “The gift is real and the gift is free. I don’t have to jump through hoops. I only have to accept it.” Oh, how I accept it and am so grateful for it. I love You,

Lord. Please, Father, bless all who have read the words in these books. Bless them, comfort them, fill them, heal them and bring them peace. In the mighty and powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

✞✞✞

****Note: A little about the Quapaw and Christmas**

"Many Native American people found that the story of Christmas and Christ's birth fulfilled tribal prophecies and found the message to be consistent with the truth that was handed down by their ancestors.

Over time other social customs, that were introduced to them by the European missionaries have become adapted to the native cultures and are an integral part of Tribal Christmas traditions today, just as they are in most non-Indian homes."

"Within a lodge of broken bark, The tender Babe was found, A ragged robe of rabbit skin, Wrapped His beauty 'round; But as the hunter braves drew nigh, The angel song rang loud and high: Jesus, your King is born, Jesus is born, In excelsis gloria."

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.

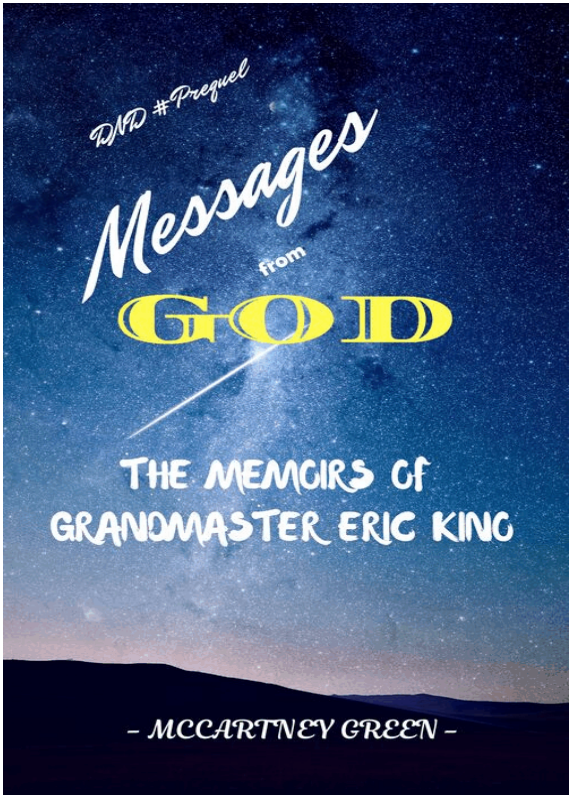
Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

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)"

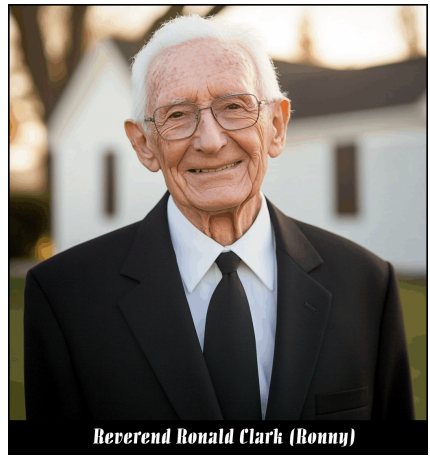
"Just wanted you to know I loved all your books. Now, I am doing something I only do with my all time favorites. I am going back and reading them again. Thanks for sharing your gift. P.S. You are the real deal!"

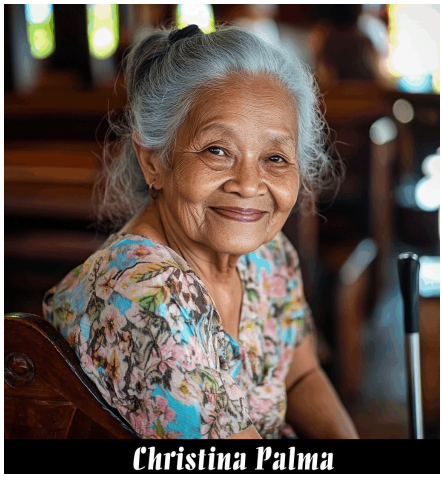
"Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another one of your books soon. Hugs!"

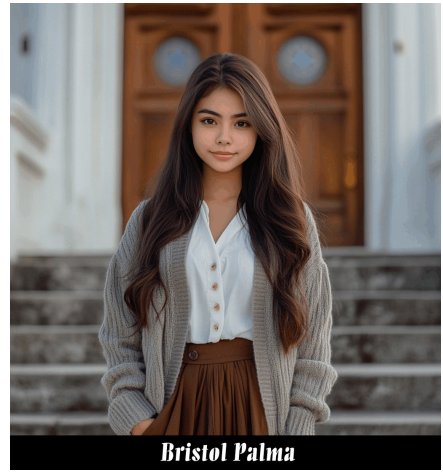


Hannah Brown

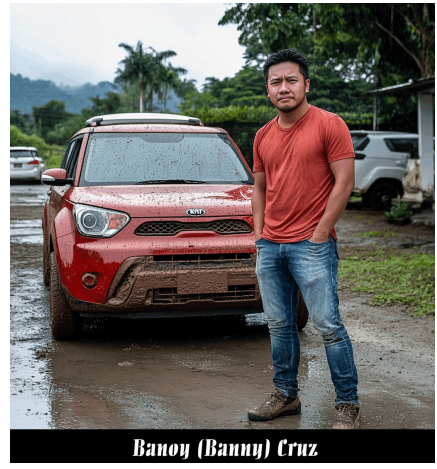



Reverend Ronald Clark (Ronny)


Christina Palma


Bristol Palma


Deuce Perry Dax Williams Red Thorton


Banoy (Banny) Cruz



Kaylee Quinn



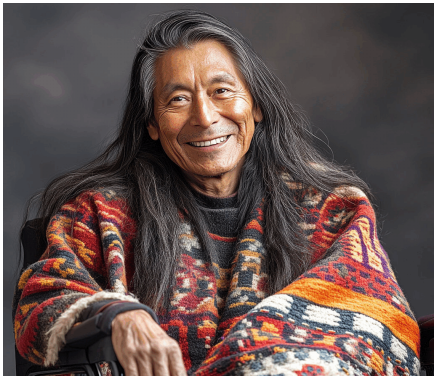
Raylynn Quinn



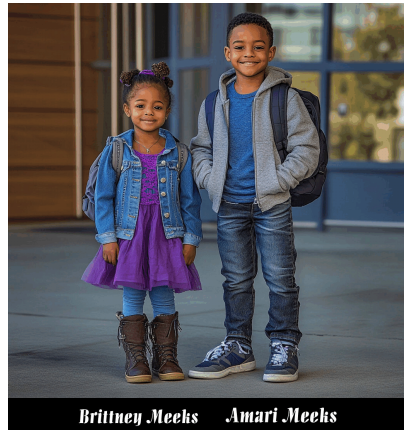
JoJo Adams



Dani Quinn



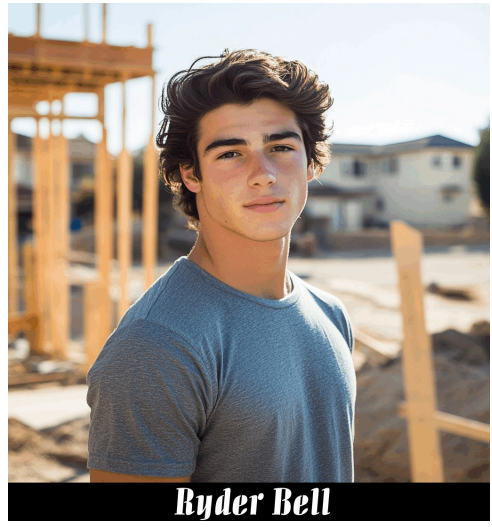
Alo Quinn







[Lots more pics at mccartneygreen.org and go to Photo Album]



Continue with DND #14 Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

Sneak Preview...

Esther 4:14
"For if you remain silent at this time,
relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise
from another place, but you and your
father's family will perish. And who knows but
that you have come to your royal position
for such a time as this?"

Chapter One

January 8th Wednesday Evening
Hopewood Chapel Church of Christ

Taylor smiled as Agent Wyatt pulled into the freshly painted parking lot next to the church. It was clean. The layout was much more organized thanks to her brother. The lot looked so much better. It had new lampposts with pretty lights. The landscaping hadn't been put in yet. That wouldn't happen for a few months. Still, it was very nice now, except for the construction on the other side.

Just this week the designers and construction crews had swooped in and begun the demolition of parts of the motel, so they could build a youth center for the church, which would include a large gym that would double as an auditorium. Right now, there was orange construction netting surrounding the old motel area.

"I can't wait to see how that turns out," Taylor said as she nodded toward the old motel.

Agent Wyatt glanced up at the place. "I have no doubt that it's gonna be amazing." He smiled at her as she took a huge bite of her sandwich. "Ya know, we're a little early, Taylor. You can slow down and take time to eat. You'll make yourself sick."

She giggled, drew a breath and chewed slowly. "So, Agent Wyatt, who's watching over Jordan now?"

"Agent Kim."

Taylor frowned. "I don't think I know him."

"Yu-Joon Kim. He goes by Joon. He just came to the states from South Korea. He's actually a cousin of Director Lee."

"June, like my Aunt?"

"Yes, except it's spelled J-O-O-N."

"So, he's a new agent?"

"Nope. He's not new at all. He's been with Ameritech's Korean division for five years. Director Lee made him a promise to bring him to America if he served for five

years in Korea. So, Director Lee made good on his promise and now Joon is learning the ropes here in the states."

"Does he speak English?"

"He speaks it well."

"Jordan didn't say anything to me. That's strange."

"He only met with her this morning. School doesn't start back for another week, but Jordan's practice started Monday. Agent Ward was with her Monday and Tuesday and turned her over this morning to Agent Kim. So, he's there to accompany her from her apartment to practice and back. Not too heavy of an assignment. Especially because your brother has been with them most of the time. It'll be a little more involved when school starts back next week."

Taylor smiled as she pulled out a stem of grapes. "Want some?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I'm gonna go grab dinner with a friend after I walk you into the church."

"A friend, huh?"

He smiled. "For now."

"Who is it?"

"Nunya."

Taylor sighed.

He eyed her. "Tired?"

"Yes, and I have a bunch of homework, and my dance teacher, Miss Janine, wore me out at class today."

"Maybe you should have gone home after dance."

She shook her head. "There's no way. There are people depending on me being here at the very first youth meeting for the church and I have to think of them and not how tired I am."

Wyatt smiled and nodded in understanding, because he knew that was how the Kinos rolled.

Taylor packed up her food bag and grabbed her backpack and dance bag. Wyatt went around to open her door for her. "Let me take your bags."

She allowed it and they walked slowly from the lot to the church. Taylor gazed up at the building. It looked a lot different than the first time she'd seen it. It was now clean and landscaped and had beautiful white ramps, lit with gorgeous old-fashioned looking solar lamps. The two giant Christmas trees had been taken down and replaced with large pots filled with greenery and flowers. It was lovely.

She'd just started up the steps, but stopped when she heard her new friend Mika, arguing loudly with someone. Taylor glanced at Agent Wyatt, then turned and went back down the steps and over to look down along the drive that led to the apartments on the right side of the church.

Mika was talking to a guy, a cute guy, with brown and blonde curls.

The conversation was hard to miss since they were both shouting.

"You think you can just dis me like that?" the guy yelled.

"I told you, Teo, it's over. You don't own me. I don't want to do this anymore. Let go of my arm. I'm goin' to church and you can't stop me. Now—let—go." She tried to

pull her arm free.

"You got the hots for that choir boy, is that it?"

"That's just stupid," she said. "Let go!" she screamed at him.

"Hey, Mika," Taylor suddenly called brightly.

Both Mika and Teo looked up at the beautiful girl as she approached.

Teo immediately dropped Mika's arm. Not because he was afraid of the girl, but because the man behind her looked threatening.

Relieved and grateful for the interruption, Mika smiled and hurried toward Taylor. "Hi, Taylor."

Taylor smiled and looked at the boy. "Hi, I'm Taylor."

Teo nodded. "Yeah, you're like Ricky Kino's kid sister, right?"

She laughed. "I'm his daughter. So, are you two coming up to the big first youth meeting of the church?"

"Yes," Mika said quickly.

"Naw, I got some stuff to do," Teo said.

"Aww, that's a shame," Taylor replied. "They're gonna have some great snacks and some music and play some games and stuff. It's better than sittin' around doin' nothing."

Teo looked the girl over. She was simply stunning. Beautiful face, long, wavy dark hair, nice mouth, tight body. He looked her up and down and he wasn't being discreet about it.

Agent Wyatt's eyes narrowed, his stance tensed.

Teo glanced up at the man, then back at Taylor. "Naw, maybe next time," he said casually. He nodded at Mika. "See ya soon, Meeks, cuz we ain't finished."

"Yes we are," she said back as she watched him walk away.

Taylor linked her arm in Mika's. "Come on, let's go up and see who else is here."

Mika walked along with her.

"So, is that your boyfriend?" Taylor asked.

"Used to be up to about ten minutes ago."

"Oh, no, I'm sorry."

"*I* broke up with *him*."

"Oh. Well, do you wanna talk about it?"

Mika shrugged.

"So, why did you break up with him?"

Mika sighed. "It's personal."

"Okay, I get it. I just thought you might wanna talk about it."

Mika shrugged. "Teo, he's just, uh, I don't know. I mean, yeah, it's personal." She glanced at the agent next to Taylor as they walked up the steps to the church.

Taylor finally understood. She wanted to talk, but not in front of Agent Wyatt. "Well, we're pretty early," Taylor said. "Agent Wyatt is leaving and we could sit out here on the steps and talk if ya want."

"No, you can't," Agent Wyatt said quickly.

Both girls looked up at the agent.

"Taylor, you know I have to deliver you safely to your brother before I can leave. If he wants to allow you to come back out here, fine, but I won't recommend it and he'll

follow my advice. If you ladies want to talk privately, you can go into one of the classrooms."

Taylor sighed. "You're right, I'm sorry, Agent Wyatt."

"No problem."

He held the door open for them and they headed in. They found young Eric in the chapel with Logan and JoJo and Reverend Clark's grandnephew, Patrick Barnes, setting up for the meeting. Agent Wyatt spoke briefly to Eric and turned Taylor's care over to her brother and took his leave.

Young Eric smiled at both girls. "You two are looking pretty glum."

Taylor sighed. "So, since Agent Wyatt has already told you to not let us go back out, where do you want us to go to talk?"

✝✝✝

Continue the story in DND #14
Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

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;) Pi anyone?

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745028410270193852110555964462294895493038196428810975665933446128475648233786783165271201909145648566923460348610454326648213393607260249141273724587006606315588174881520920962829254091715364367892590360011330530548820466521384146951941511609433057270365759591953092186117381932611793105118548074462379962749567351885752724891227938183011949129833673362440656643086021394946395224737190702179860943702770539217176293176752384674818467669405132000568127145263560827785771342757789609173637178721468440901224953430146549585371050792279689258923542019956112129021960864034418159813629774771309960518707211349999998372978049951059731732816096318595024459455346908302642522308253344685035261931188171010003137838752886587533208381420617177669147303598253490428755468731159562863882353787593751957781857780532171226806613001927876611195909216420198938095257201065485863278865936153381827968230301952035301852968995773622599413891249721775283479131515574857242454150695950829533116861727855889075098381754637464939319255060400927701671139009848824012858361603563707660104710181942955596198946767837449448255379774726847104047534646208046684259069491293313677028989152104752162056966024058038150193511

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.”